

JESUS CHRIST' NATIVITY STORY**Lehel LÉSZAI¹****ABSTRACT:**

MATTHEW AND LUKE PRESENT US JESUS' GENEALOGY IN THE BEGINNING OF THEIR GOSPEL. MATTHEW'S BOOK OF GENEALOGY OF JESUS CHRIST BEGINS WITH ABRAHAM AND FINISHES WITH JESUS (MT 1,1–17). MATTHEW FOLLOWS THE GENEALOGY OF JOSEPH, WHO IS MENTIONED AS MARY'S HUSBAND.

MATTHEW AND LUKE TELL US THAT JOSEPH'S FIANCÉE IS MARY. A YOUNG GIRL AND A CARPENTER ARE CHOSEN BY GOD TO BE THE EARTHLY MOTHER AND FOSTER-FATHER OF HIS ETERNAL SON. GOD CHOOSES SIMPLE AND POOR PEOPLE FOR JESUS AS EARTHLY PARENTS. WE CANNOT READ TOO MUCH IN MATTHEW'S GOSPEL ABOUT THE BIRTH ITSELF, IT IS JUST MENTIONED THAT IT HAPPENED IN BETHLEHEM OF JUDEA DURING THE REIGN OF HEROD THE KING.

CONTINUING MATTHEW'S STORY THE LORD'S ANGEL INSTRUCTS JOSEPH IN DREAM TO MAKE THEIR ESCAPE WITH JESUS AND MARY IN EGYPT FROM THE MURDEROUS ANGER OF HEROD. THIS IS ALSO A FULFILLMENT OF AN OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY: "OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON" (HOS 11,1).

HEROD THE GREAT, THE BLOODTHIRSTY KING DIES AND THE ANGEL OF GOD APPEARS THIS TIME IN EGYPT TO JOSEPH IN HIS DREAM TO DIRECT HIM TO RETURN HOME. MT 2,20 REMINDS US OF THE SAME EPISODE IN MOSES' STORY (EX 4,19).

JESUS RETURNS FROM THE EXILE TO THE PROMISED LAND, BUT HE CANNOT SETTLE DOWN IN JUDEA, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE COUNTRY, IN HIS NATIVE VILLAGE, BUT HE HAS TO GO TO THE BORDER OF THE COUNTRY, TO THE HALF PAGAN GALILEE. IN THE MIDST OF HIS PEOPLE AND IN HIS OWN LAND THE MESSIAH WILL BE ALWAYS A STRANGER, AND HE WILL LIVE AS AN OUTCAST.

KEYWORDS: JESUS, CHRIST, NATIVITY, PROMISE, FULFILLMENT.

Among the four gospels which are parts of the Holy Scripture the gospel according to Matthew and Luke relate in more details about the birth of Jesus. As a short parallel to these can be mentioned the prologue of John, which sets in a whole different dimension the origin of the Messiah. According to my best knowledge from among the mentioned three gospels Matthew's gospel is the oldest one, therefore I will follow the guide of his story mentioning along the lines the similarities and differences with the description of Luke. We should remind ourselves very briefly that Matthew is a Christian with Jewish background, who

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according to tradition is identical with Levi, the tax collector, with the disciple and apostle of Jesus. He writes first of all to Israelites. Luke is a Christian doctor with pagan background; he is not one of Christ's disciples, but fellow worker of Paul. John is a Christian Israelite, according to tradition the youngest disciple of Christ.

1. THE ORIGIN OF JESUS

Matthew and Luke present us Jesus' genealogy in the beginning of their gospel. Matthew's book of genealogy of Jesus Christ begins with Abraham and finishes with Jesus (Mt 1,1–17). For him it is important that Jesus is the son of Abraham and David. Matthew follows the genealogy of Joseph, who is mentioned as Mary's husband. This is interesting because Joseph was not Jesus' blood father, therefore according to Ulrich Luz we may speak about Jesus' origin from David because Joseph adopted him. In Matthew's gospel in the book of genealogy of Jesus are mentioned four women (if we not count Mary as the fifth one), and two of them are not Israelites (Rahab and Ruth), the other two are regarded as sinners (Tamar and Bathsheba). For Matthew it is important to mention these four women because in this way he indicates from the very beginning that Jesus gives hope to the non-Israelites and sinners in the same time. The basis of this genealogy is the symbolic of figures. In the Hebrew language every letter has a numerical value as well. Counting the numerical value of the letters from the name "David" it will result 14. The 3 times 14 division in the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel shows us already that in Christ appeared the promised descendant of David, the promised Savior of Israel.

The genealogy of Jesus in Luke's gospel (Lk 3,23–38) goes back to Adam, the 'first' son of God, in order to arrive to the 'last' Son, to Christ. The symbolic of figures is obvious here as well: Luke depicts the history of humankind and Israel during 11 times 7 generations, tracing it back to its origin, God himself. According to this Jesus is the head of a new generation, the 12th generation.

John does not present us a genealogy of Christ, but in his gospel Jesus is from the very beginning with God and he is in the most intimate way one with Him. Jn 1,1 reminds us of Gen 1,1, the beginning of creation.

2. THE CONCEPTION OF JESUS

Matthew and Luke tell us that Joseph's fiancée is Mary. Who are chosen by God to be the earthly mother and foster-father of his eternal Son? A young girl (in that time in Israel the girls married at the age of 12–14) and a carpenter. God chooses simple and poor people for Jesus as earthly parents. This leads us to the Bible verse: "My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2Cor 12,9). We may know that Jesus' parents were poor because in the temple their offering was "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (Lk 2,24b) and according to Lev 12,8 this was the offering of the *poor* ones.

We learn about Mary that she is pregnant, which in terms of the Mosaic Law meant fornication and that aftermath were stoning to death. We are told by Matthew that Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit, but Joseph does not know anything about this. Matthew's perception of the nativity story brings forward the character of Joseph, because after this news he writes about him that "being a just man" (Mt 1,19) he did not want to put her to shame. Although he had the right to ask even for her execution, he could feel offended in his self-respect and honor, but he took the decision to let her go away secretly. Examining the situation from Joseph's point of view and according to his actual information, he is a generous, ready to forgive, not easily offended, tender loving man. He will not appear for too long in any of the gospels, which leads us to the conclusion that he died at an early age.

We can read just after his kindhearted decision that God's angel appears in his dream and shares with him the secret which had not occur until then in the history and neither from that moment on. This phrase "which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 1,20b) is such a secret that we cannot understand it since, our intellect cannot comprehend what happened in reality, but we can reiterate what was told by the mystics in this situation: "Where I do not understand you, o Lord, I worship you."

In Luke's gospel God sends Gabriel to Nazareth to a virgin named Mary, who is engaged to Joseph of the house of David. Gabriel greets Mary who is puzzled by the angel's words. In this story Gabriel announces the birth of Jesus to Mary, and not to Joseph, as in Matthew.

In Matthew's gospel the revelation continues with intelligible and incomprehensible parts: Mary will give birth to a boy (today sophisticated equipment is available for establishing the gender of the fetus, but in Mary's case that became obvious by revelation), his name will be Jesus (in those times that was a fairly common name – as John is today –, but it had the same root as the Hebrew Jehosua from the Old Testament, which means 'savior'). Now comes the incomprehensible part: he will deliver his people from their sins. This is the first characteristic of Jesus presented here. Joseph was a faithful Israelite, who grew up with messianic expectations, but I suspect that neither then nor later he did understand fully that the long expected Messiah was born and will be raised right in his own family, and he was granted the worldwide unique privilege of being the foster-father of Messiah, and to take care of him for a while. The angel comments on this revelation and explains that all this happened because in this way was fulfilled a prophecy from the Old Testament. Here comes the quotation of Is 7,14 ("Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel"). We do not have time to discuss in detail this quotation, but I want just to indicate that the Hebrew text of Is 7,14 does not mention a virgin, but a young girl, and only the Greek translation of the Septuagint uses the 'virgin' word, which is now common in all of our translations. I do not wish at all by this to question the fact of Mary's virginity, but I mentioned just as a linguistic curiosity. Matthew translates the Hebrew word Immanuel and explains it in Greek: "Meth hemon ho Theos", which means "God with us" (Mt 1,23b). This word translated into Greek can be used as an argument for the presumption that Matthew wrote his gospel in Greek, against those who suppose that it was written in Aramaic and later on was translated into Greek (you may observe the fluent Greek). It is a not so good argument against those who presume the existence of a proto Matthew gospel written by the apostle, because in this case the Greek translation of the Immanuel word may be the question of later development of the gospel. I do not wish to become immersed in form criticism at this point.

Immanuel = "God with us" is the second information about Jesus (the first is that he will save his people from their sins – Mt 1,21) and this is important because in the end of the gospel, in Mt 28,20 we can read its parallel as a promise: "I am with you always, even to the end of the age". Here we may observe the thoughtfulness of the Holy Spirit and Matthew in redaction.

I consider this quotation from the Old Testament as of paramount importance, for examining Jesus' nativity story in the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel there are six occurrences of such cross references (1,22–23; 2,5–6.11.15.17–18.23). These references on the one hand show the importance of close connection with the Old Testament, on the other hand exhibit that for Matthew these were very significant, and for him was essential to remember his readers of the promises made centuries ago and their fulfillment in the present age.

Joseph wakes up and although he could not understand most of the revelation, he is still obedient to it; he does not send away his wife but takes her to him. This is the point where it becomes clear beyond any doubts that Mary was a virgin, because Matthew mentions that Joseph did not know her until she gave birth to her firstborn son (1,25) conceived by the Holy Spirit. Until that moment, she had no sexual contact with a man, as it is obvious from Mary's question noted down by Luke: "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Lk 1,34).

Matthew emphasizes Joseph's obedience, while Luke underlines Mary's obedience: "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1,38). As an addition Luke mentions the name of the angel (Gabriel) who makes the announcement. For this revelation Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, who is six months pregnant. Lk 1,36 mentions that Mary and Elizabeth are relatives, therefore Jesus and John the Baptist are relatives too. When Mary greets Elizabeth, the babe leaped in her womb and she is filled with Holy Spirit. In Lk 1,46–56 we read Mary's song of praise, and verse 48b contains the biblical foundation of the correct Mary-veneration (2,28.30.42f and 45).

3. THE BIRTH OF JESUS

We cannot read too much in Matthew's gospel about the birth itself, it is just mentioned that it happened in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of Herod the king. There is no time to discuss about the issue of place and time of Jesus' birth but it would be interesting to do that. Right after he announces the birth of Jesus Matthew mentions stories which are recorded only by him. The first of these stories is written about the wise men from the East (Mt 2,1–12). This story heralds the impact caused by Jesus' birth. Here it is not mentioned even the number of the magi, Matthew only uses the plural form and at the end of the story he speaks about three gifts. The Holy Scripture calls them wise men, who came from the East – most likely from Babylon – because they saw the bright light of a star. We may conclude from this that they were scientists preoccupied with astronomy. There are similar stories in the Old Testament: the story of Balak and Balaam (Num 22–24), or the story of the queen of Sheba visiting Solomon (2Chron 9,1–12). The English version translates the Greek "magos" word as wise men, and so does the Hungarian and the majority of Bible translations. The Greek word used means in the same time magi, sorcerer, wise man and priest, who were expert in astrology, interpretation of dreams and various other secret arts. You might have noticed that first I mentioned the word astronomy and now astrology. In the Holy Scripture the discussed word occurs in negative connotation as well, for instance when Luke speaks about Elymas (Acts 13,6.8). The wise men are to all probabilities pagans, who are interested in Jesus' birth, and according to Matthew they are the first ones who show their respect at the cradle. The wise men traveled approximately 1 000 kilometers to Jerusalem in order to worship the "King of the Jews". This king was born recently and we may think that the appearance of the star and the long journey was made before Jesus was born. This idea is not supported by the fact that according to Mt 2,16 Herod executes the children of two years of age and younger on the grounds of the information received from the wise men, therefore we may assume that between the appearance of the star and the massacre of the innocents passed maximum two years. It is certain from Matthew's account that in the Israelite capital, in the kingly palace Herod does not know anything about the fact of which the wise men from the East are already informed.

Herod the Great (37–4 B.C.) loved the pomp. He made prestigious buildings (the temple, the harbor city of Caesarea, palaces, public baths, water-pipes, etc.), he even sold out his treasures in 23 B.C. in order to help his starving people, but he did not manage to gain the sympathy of his subjects. He was a bloodthirsty tyrant who murdered rivals, high priests, one

of his wives out of jealousy (he married ten times), the relatives of his wife and even three of his own children. With such a background it is not hard to believe what we read about him in this chapter. Now he asks for high priests and scribes who are able to tell him based on a quotation from the Old Testament (Mic 5,2–4) that Christ has to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. We learn from this quotation a third characteristic of Jesus: “who will shepherd My people Israel” (Mt 2,6b). Herod finds out from the wise men the time of the star’s appearance exactly, and this can be regarded for the moment as a positive inquiry. It becomes suspicious only when Herod the king does not accompany the wise men to worship the new king. His real intention comes to light when on the one hand the angel reveals to Joseph that Herod intends to kill, on the other hand in the verse 16, when the king worried for his power takes action and slaughters the infants in Bethlehem and around the village.

Let’s turn back to Matthew’s thread. Herod sends forth the wise men and expects them to turn back and tell him, where is the king of the Jews, because he – lies – would also like to worship him. The wise men sought the king of Jews in the capital, in the pomp, at the kingly residence but they had to continue their journey because he was not to be found there. They were at the right spot during their search for it was confirmed the place of birth of the new king. They continue on their way and the star leads them until it stops above the place where Jesus is in Bethlehem of Judea. Matthew relates that Mary and Jesus are in the house. The wise men fall down and worship him. Instead of the capital they arrive in a small village, instead of the kingly palace they find the newborn king of the Jews in a modest house, wrapped in nappies and clothes. In this infant they recognize and worship the king of the Jews and they present him their gifts brought from far away: gold, frankincense and myrrh. In Psalm 72,10–11 is a prophecy telling that every king has to fall down before *the* king presenting their gifts, and Is 60,1–6 relates that kings are coming to the brightness of his rising bringing gold and incense as their worship. The wise men at the cradle of Jesus are not kings, but through them it begins to be fulfilled these prophecies. It is sad that the first ones who come and worship Jesus are pagans, while his own people are indifferent.

The wise men were lead by the star until this moment, but now they are also revealed in dream not to return to Herod. It is most likely that they promised Herod to go back to him but now they obey the revelation and therefore it is probable that they gain their lives as a reward.

Luke’s account is different from that of Matthew’s. According to Luke there takes place the census of Augustus and therefore Joseph travels from Nazareth of Galilee to Judea, to the city of David, Bethlehem (because he was of house and lineage of David – Lk 2,4) with his wife, Mary, who is pregnant. Mary gives birth to Jesus in Bethlehem in a manger, which is a cave, where the domestic animals and their fodder are kept. In Matthew the wise men from the East bow before Jesus, in Luke the shepherds do the same (2,8–20). The verses that relate the story of the shepherds usually are degrading to commonplaces on our Christmas cards. Israel at his early period were nomadic people, just think for instance of Moses or David (1Sam 16,11; 17,15.28.34f; 2Sam 7,8; Psalm 78,70–72). According to Luke it is very important that God after Mary reveals to shepherds the birth of Jesus, the savior. In Jesus’ time the shepherds were despised in the same manner as the tax collectors were. We do not mention this truth very often to the children when we tell Jesus’ nativity story. Later on it is related that Simeon and Anna also meet Jesus when he is presented in the temple.

Jesus’ distinguishing marks are the “swaddling cloths” and the “manger”, which refer to the childish helplessness and poverty. Later on it will be added to these distinguishing marks the cross, and then it becomes obvious why the saving gospel is stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks (1Cor 1,23). Here can be sensed Luke’s social sensitivity towards the poor, the mean, the outcasts of the society, the afflicted ones, and later on

towards the women, sinners and pagans. The shepherds go and become convinced about the revelation's truthfulness, they believe, they do not stumble regarding what they see (just like the wise men), they pass on the good news and they rejoice.

4. THE FLIGHT OF JESUS

Continuing Matthew's story the Lord's angel instructs Joseph in dream to make their escape with Jesus and Mary in Egypt from the murderous anger of Herod. Joseph does not ask questions, he is not at a loss but leaves behind Bethlehem, his house, his workshop, his living, his relatives that very night and flees abroad with his family. A lot of faith and obedience is needed to carry out this instruction, because seemingly at this point no danger hangs over Jesus. Joseph obeys the command and lives abroad until the death of Herod. This is also a fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy: "Out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos 11,1). Egypt was a refuge place many times in the Old Testament for the Israelites – we may think of Jacob and the famine, the land of Goshen, the flee of Jeroboam, the people's flee after Ishmael kills Gedaliah, Jehoiakim's flee, etc. (Gen 42,1–3; 46,28; 1Kings 11,40; 2Kings 25,26; Jer 26,21).

Jesus is a small child, but he has to flee already. In his fate repeats itself in a concise manner the chosen people's whole history of sufferings. This is valid also for the return from Egypt.

Herod realizes that the wise men outmaneuvered him and he was unable to deceive them. He sends his soldiers to massacre the boys of two years old and younger. He wishes to get rid of his rival; he is not prepared to lose his throne. Here another Old Testament prophecy is fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more" (Jer 31,15). Here we have to point out the Moses-Jesus parallel. According to an Israelite tradition, a piece of news about Moses' birth caused the Egyptian child murder (Ex 1,15–22) and the aim of annihilation was his death.

5. THE RETURN OF JESUS TO NAZARETH

Herod the Great, the bloodthirsty king dies and the angel of God appears this time in Egypt to Joseph in his dream to direct him to return home. Mt 2,20 reminds us of the same episode in Moses' story (Ex 4,19). Meantime there have passed away more years, Joseph and his family settled down in Egypt. It is most likely that Joseph opened a new workshop in order to provide for his family, they might have attended the local synagogue (according to my knowledge in Egypt lived many Israelites), and now all these have to be left behind and they have to move once again according to the direction of God. They could not enjoy a quiet life but for Joseph it is important the obedience, the life lived according to the will of God at any price. Joseph, Mary and Jesus return to Israel, but the head of the family is afraid to settle down in Judea. God understands his fear and in dream reveals him to go to Galilee, where he will settle down in Nazareth. The last verse mentions that the prophets already foretold, "He shall be called a Nazarene" (Mt 2,23). Nazareth is so insignificant that it does not even occur in the Old Testament. In Hebrew the name of the sprout or branch is *nezer*. It is an ancient Christian tradition to reckon the name "Nazarene" as the fulfillment of Is 11,1 and Zech 6,12.

Jesus returns from the exile to the Promised Land, but he cannot settle down in Judea, in the middle of the country, in his native village, but he has to go to the border of the country, to the half pagan Galilee. In the midst of his people and in his own land the Messiah will be always a stranger, and he will live as an outcast.

This is the biblical foundation of Jesus' nativity story, the raw material from the Holy Scriptures. It is important to decide and determine how to apply this material, how to present

it for the children and adults in order to achieve the best (most adequate) results. That may not be what we think of importance in each case. Some ascertain that it is enough to tell the story; you do not have to explain it, because the story itself has an impact on the people's life. Others say that you have to interpret the biblical stories, because the people lack the basic training and they cannot understand the message. My opinion is that we should avoid both extremes. Jesus also sometimes just simply told a story, and other times he explained it to his disciples. We should avoid the sentences that begin with: "The meaning of this story is...". Every story's sense has a circle, a ring or a space, and during the explanation, we have to be careful to stay in that circle or ring. A story may have more messages and it is most likely that we will never understand all the messages, therefore before and during the explanation of a story we should reach out for the text with maximum humbleness. A story can have a literal sense, a spiritual sense, a moral sense, an allegorical sense or all the senses at the same time (polysemic sense). It is better during one occasion to expand thoroughly only one or two messages of a story, than to touch superficially upon more messages. It is not advisable to tell a biblical story (even the nativity story) without a lot of praying, then more reading and studying, and finally even more praying. When we discuss about promises and fulfillments regarding Jesus' nativity story, we have to start from the Scriptures, but is not irrelevant to search how God's promises become reality in our everyday life.