

# **SIMPLIFYING FAITH LECTURE SERIES**

By His Eminence Metropolitan Bishoy

## **# 2 Fulfillment of the Prophecies**

*In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, One God, Amen.*

### **Why Was Christ the Lord Born Among Cattle?:**

Many people ask why the Lord Jesus Christ was born among cattle and placed in a manger in a stable, since He is the “*King of kings and Lord of lords*”? (see 1Tim 6:15, Rev 17:14, 19:16). The birth of Christ occurred in this manner, simply because He wanted to teach us humility, and that real honor originates from within.

To be full of love means to have inner glory, while to hate is to have inner disgrace and reproach. Glory is not attained by wearing gold, or expensive and valuable clothing. Real glory is the inner glory of a simple heart which is more precious than gold.

This is the first lesson that the Lord Jesus Christ taught us by being born in a stable and placed in a manger; but there are more important lessons that we can learn from the events of the nativity.

### **The Lamb of God:**

The Lord Jesus Christ was born among cattle because He is, “...*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*” (Jn 1:29), as John the Baptist said. It was natural for the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world and be slain for our salvation, to be born among sheep and lambs, especially in Bethlehem where pastures grew.

We know that David the Prophet was a shepherd, and the son of Jesse the Bethlehemite (1 Sam 17:58). Cattle were bred and herded in Bethlehem which was near Jerusalem, where the temple of Solomon was erected. There, sacrifices were offered for the forgiveness of the sins of the people of Israel in the Old Testament.

Forgiveness through animal sacrifice was a symbol of the true forgiveness which was achieved through the blood of the sacrifice on the cross. When the blood of Christ was shed and flowed from the cross, when He died for our sin, and when He was resurrected and ascended into heaven, then real forgiveness was attained.

It was not unusual for the Lamb to be born among lambs. This was a very clear prophecy by John the Baptist, “*Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*” (Jn 1:29).

God commanded Abraham to slay his son Isaac. Consequently, Abraham bound his son on the wood over the altar in order to fulfill the command to slay him. But God prevented him, and sent “...*a ram caught in a thicket by its horns.*” (see Gen 22). Abraham then offered the ram instead of Isaac his son according to the commandment of the Lord. Therefore the ram replaced Isaac; this is what redemption means.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to offer Himself as a sacrifice and as an offering. His love was the motive for offering Himself as a sacrifice, in order to pay the ransom that was due for our sin.

When our Lord was born among lambs, He demonstrated that from the first moment of His birth into the world, He was not coming for His own pleasure or comfort; rather He came in order to offer Himself as a sacrifice.

So, we observe the cross in a clear and symbolic manner through the incidents that coincide with His nativity. The cross is not something that occurred after 33 years; it was present during all stages of His life.

### **The Lord is My Shepherd:**

We also realize that the Lord Jesus Christ is also the shepherd, and not only the lamb. He is both the shepherd and the lamb, so it is normal for the shepherd to be among sheep. If He was not born among the sheep, then who would have pastured them. His presence among sheep and lambs declares from the beginning that He is the true shepherd. David the Prophet said, “*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake.*” (Ps 23:1-3).

It is interesting to note that those to whom the angels announced the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ on the night of His birth, were the shepherds. The Wise Men (Magi) came later; they started their journey after they saw the star in the East and came to offer their gifts. However, the shepherds were the only people who celebrated the birth of the Lord on the same day on which He was born.<sup>1</sup>

The shepherds were vigilant and watchful. Saint Luke writes, “*Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone*

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<sup>1</sup> Besides the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph her betrothed (whom the Lord appointed to guard her with the newly born child) who were the very first celebrants of the child's birth, the shepherds were the only people present. Certainly, Saint Joseph was not married to the Virgin Mary physically, but he was only a guardian and servant to the born Child fulfilling his role until the Child grew up, and until His service for the salvation of the world began.

*around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"*" (Lk 2:8-14).

Those to whom the birth of Christ was announced, who saw these great heavenly scenes and heard the joyful announcement of the Savior's birth, were shepherds. Since they were Christ's colleagues, he liked to celebrate his birth among them as most people like to celebrate among their colleagues.

He was born among the sheep because He is the great shepherd of the sheep and the shepherd of shepherds. So those who came to offer congratulations for His birth were the shepherds who were from the same social group.

### **I Am the Good Shepherd:**

The notion of being a shepherd is very serious and significant. The Lord Jesus Christ said, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.*" (Jn 10:11). He also said, "*Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.*" (Jn 10:17). He repeated that He is good shepherd and emphasized that He came to offer true shepherding, since He is the incarnate God and God is the real shepherd. As David the Prophet said, "*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want...*" (Ps 23:1).

Christ the Lord had to be *the Shepherd* because the shepherds, the priests of Israel, neglected their role, so a new high priest that would become the real shepherd, had to emerge.

The shepherds of Israel crucified the Lord Jesus Christ, and so the Old Testament priesthood of Aaron was replaced by the New Testament priesthood of Melchizedek; that is of Christ. Christ offers His body and blood as bread and wine on the altar to His people for the remission of sins and to receive eternal life. Christ Himself established the sacrament of the Lord's Supper on the eve of His crucifixion, and gave it to His disciples saying, "*This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me.*" (Lk 22:19). This sacrament is a living memory of the Lord's death on the cross, and of His resurrection from the dead.

When contemplating on the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, and in particular on the events that occurred on the day of His birth, it is important to highlight that He is a shepherd. He was born among cattle and the shepherds who were "*...keeping watch over their flock by night...*" They were the people who went to offer their congratulations on the day of the Lord's birth in spiritual joy.

## **The Shepherds Were Looking for Redemption:**

There is a difference between a shepherd who keeps watch over his flock and another who scatters his flock. Moreover, the angel chose the shepherds of the nativity in particular because besides being watchful, they were searching for salvation.

The proof for this is that when Saint Mary went into the temple in Jerusalem in order to present Jesus forty days after His birth, Anna the Prophetess the daughter of Phanuel “...spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.” (Lk 2:38). The spirit of the Lord had revealed to her that this was the Savior. The moment in which the Lord entered the temple, the spirit of the Lord prompted her to declare that He was the Savior of Israel and of the world; the One whom they were awaiting.

## **The Holy Spirit:**

On the occasion of the nativity of our Lord, the Holy Spirit moved in the hearts of certain people, including Saint Mary whom the Holy Spirit came upon, and Elizabeth who was filled with the Holy Spirit and said to Saint Mary, “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*” (Lk 1:42-43). Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, was also filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of John’s birth, and prophesied saying, “*Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people.*” (Lk 1:68).

## **God Remembers His Promise:**

The Holy Spirit worked in many people before, during, and after the time of the nativity, because the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and His coming to the world was the beginning of the fulfillment of God’s promise for the salvation of the world. Zacharias said, “*Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people.*” God remembered his promise, thus he was named ‘Zacharias’, meaning ‘God remembered’; Zacharias named his son ‘John’, meaning ‘God was compassionate’; and Christ was named ‘Jesus’, meaning ‘God is Savior’. So we see that God remembered, God was compassionate, and God saved.

Zacharias also said, “*Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, For He has visited and redeemed His people, And has raised up a horn of salvation for us In the house of His servant David.*” (Lk 1:68-69). He then continued saying, “*To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to **remember** His holy covenant.*” (Lk 1:72).

God did not forget His covenant, but He waited for the time when everything was prepared. Many prophecies were written in order to present and introduce the Savior, and many symbols had to be fulfilled before the incarnation of the Word of God. In other words, the Word of God being manifested in the flesh was not a simple issue, and one that was difficult for man to comprehend; this is why God was required to introduce it.

Likewise, He waited until He found a very blessed woman who deserved to become the mother of God (this woman was Saint Mary). There were many reasons why humanity was required to wait thousands of years before God fulfilled His promise.

Furthermore, Zacharias said, *“To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, The oath which He swore to our father Abraham...”* (Lk. 1:72-73). Since the oath was made to Abraham, God had to wait until Abraham came; this period of time was thousands of years. Likewise, there were stages that had to be achieved so that when salvation was accomplished, it would be a fulfillment of God’s promises and the prophecies that the saintly fathers recorded in the books of the Old Testament.

### **Waiting for Christ the Savior:**

The Holy Spirit worked in many individuals. Among them were the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flocks by night. We have already said that the angels announced to them the birth of Christ not only because they were watchful, but also because they were waiting for the Savior and seeking redemption.

We realize that Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, in his prophecy, mentioned things that were written in the holy scriptures. He said, *“To perform the mercy promised to our fathers And to remember His holy covenant, The oath which He swore to our father Abraham...”* (Lk 1:72-73) *“As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets”* (Lk 1: 70). Zacharias was a person who lived the scriptures of the prophets, and had studied their prophecies concerning the coming of the Savior.

Furthermore, Anna, a saintly widow aged about eighty-four years, lived with a husband for seven years in virginity; and after becoming a widow did not depart from the temple<sup>2</sup>, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. She listened to the daily prayers and readings, studied the holy scriptures, and consecrated her life to worship. Therefore, the Holy Spirit worked within her and revealed to her the events that would take place. In her mind’s eye, she had lived the events before they occurred. She spoke of the coming of the Savior and of Christ. Thus, what she observed with her eyes on the day when Christ was brought onto the temple, she had already anticipated in her heart. In other words, she had seen the event in her heart, before seeing the real event unfolding before her eyes. Consequently, the Holy Spirit spoke on her mouth, and she knew of all that was occurring without being told what was taking place.

Likewise, the shepherds, also guided by the Holy Spirit, were probably speaking about the prophecies and the holy scriptures during their night watch. Maybe they were discussing how they were keeping watch over the cattle that were to be offered as sacrifices in the temple. These numerous sacrifices were a symbol of the salvation that God had promised, but they were probably wondering, ‘When will the Savior come?’

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<sup>2</sup> In the section where women were allowed.

Anna the daughter of Phanuel “...spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem...” (Lk 2:38), meaning that God reveals Himself to those who wait for Him, but to those who are indifferent, God will reveal nothing. The shepherds were awaiting the coming of the Savior. Thus, it is written that they were, “...shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” (Lk 2:8). These shepherds watched over their flocks in Bethlehem of Judea, the city of David. It is known that Christ the Lord is the son of David, from the seed of David according to the flesh.

### **Praising the Lord:**

The psalms were most likely the entertainment of the shepherds during their watchful nights. During the Midnight Psalmody, which is sung in the church every night, many segments of the psalms and prophecies concerning salvation and the work of God in the life of humanity, are recited. The Midnight Psalmody itself is composed of parts from the holy scriptures. The First Canticle, for example, is the song of Moses the Prophet and his sister Miriam the Prophetess, together with the people of Israel when they crossed the Red Sea. This event is considered a symbol of salvation, and of Baptism.

The shepherds were singing and praising the Lord at night. While there were praises on earth, simultaneously there were praises in heaven. After the angel had announced the joyful tidings to the shepherds, we read, “*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!*” (Lk 2:13-14).

The phrase, “*goodwill toward men*” in the Greek language means, ‘goodwill within the hearts of the good people’. The angels were happy to recognize the joy in the hearts of the shepherds when they heard the announcement of salvation.

The angels also declared, “...*on earth peace*”, because the Lord Christ is the King of Peace. He is the peacemaker, since He reconciled God with humanity, man with his brother in manhood, and man with himself. He said, “*Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.*” (Mat 5:9).

### **Contemplation:**

The shepherds were most definitely praising, contemplating, and praying; this is why the angels appeared to them. If a person desires a close friendship and association with the angels, his life should be occupied with praises, prayers, and contemplation on the holy scriptures.

In the Book of Isaiah it is written, “...*He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, And as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.*” (Is 53:7). In the Liturgy of Saint Gregory the Theologian, the priest says, “You came to the slaughter as a lamb even to the cross...” Moreover, in the book of Isaiah we read, “...*When You make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong His days, And the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand.*” (Is 53:10). It also says, “...*He bore the*

*sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors.” (Is 53:12); and also, “...He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.” (Is 53:5).*

The shepherds memorized these words, contemplated on them, and asked God when He would send the real lamb who would carry the sins of the whole world.

### **The Importance of Being Vigilant:**

Watchful, waiting, and expectant hearts are those to whom God sends His angels. He did not approach those entertaining themselves in luxury in their homes, but He came to those in the wilderness, in the open air, keeping watch over their cattle. This is the importance of being vigilant and watchful in our spiritual life, and when praising the Lord in the church.

### **Genuine Shepherds:**

The shepherds were faithful shepherds of cattle, but God was longing to see faithful shepherds for His people. He was longing for the genuine care of true shepherds for His people.

God spoke on the mouth of His prophet Ezekiel saying, *“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them.” (Ez 34:2-6).*

God was saddened when the shepherds of the sons of Israel neglected the flock and sought after personal luxuries. They did injustice to the sheep, and consequently Saint Peter the Apostle advised the shepherds saying, *“Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2-3).*

The Lord told the unfaithful shepherds, *“...therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep...” (Eze 34:9-10).* The Lord said that He would cause them to cease feeding the sheep, because Christ, the real shepherd, would come. He also said this because the shepherds of Israel did not shepherd the flock in green pastures, or direct them on the straight paths of the Lord. God sent to

them John the Baptist, who reprimanded them for their sins in order “...to make ready a people prepared for the Lord...” (Lk 1:17), and to pave the way for the real shepherd who would give His life for the sheep.

The Lord continues, “...for I will deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them. For thus says the Lord God: Indeed I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on a cloudy and dark day.” (Eze 34:10-12). He then continues saying, “I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God.” (Eze 34:15). Therefore, the Lord is the true shepherd.

### **The Good Shepherd:**

The Lord Jesus Christ said: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” (Jn 10:11). He also said, “I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down...” (Eze 34:15); and also, “...`I Myself will search for My sheep and seek them out.” (Eze 34:11); and, “I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away.” (Eze 34:16). Consequently, Christ came in order to seek the lost, and thus He told us the parable of the prodigal son.

In the Old Testament, God said, “Seek them out.” In the New Testament Christ said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” (Mat 9:12). He also said, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Mat 11:28).

In the Book of Ezekiel God said, “...bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick...” (Eze 34:16). Consequently, Christ came to heal the injured, raise humanity from its fall, restore Adam to his rank, and return him to paradise once more. Those people who recognized His love, also recognized His salvation. For this reason it is written, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become Children of God.” (Jn 1:12).

At this point, we recognize the relationship between the night on which the Lord Jesus Christ was born, and between the Lord’s declaration that He is the Shepherd. The Lord made this declaration in the Old Testament where it says, “I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord God...” (Eze 34:15), and later in the New Testament when the Lord Jesus Christ started His saving ministry and said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” (Jn 10:11).

### **The Shepherds Were Guided by the Holy Spirit:**

One piece of evidence which confirms that the shepherds were being guided by the Holy Spirit is that they responded to the declaration of the angel. The angel told them, “...I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Lk 2:10-11). He was telling them that what they were waiting for became true. He also said, “And this will be

*the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”* (Lk 2:12). A Child was never placed in a manger where the food of the cattle is found, and from which they are fed; it was a very unusual location.

Jesus was laid in a manger because the Virgin did not find a place in any house. It is written, *“So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”* (Lk 2:6-7). Christ did not find room for Himself among men. So by finding a place in a manger, it was as though He was telling men that since they rejected Him from their lives, maybe the animals would be more willing to accept Him among them. Despite this fact, Christ came in order to transform man’s nature from that of a beast to that of a human being, since man was created in the image of God.

God wanted this stable to become a church in the New Testament, and it indeed happened. The present Church of Bethlehem was built in the exact place of the manger where the Lord was born. Now it is a great cathedral in Bethlehem; it is no longer a stable for sheep or wild beasts, but a place for humans who are the people of God.

It also important to note that it is written, *“So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”* (Lk 2:15). This means that the shepherds wanted to go quickly to see the event that had occurred, and so *“...they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.”* (Lk 2:16).

At this point, a question emerges: How did the shepherds know in which stable the babe was born? The entire city of Bethlehem was a city of cattle. It was chiefly the city of David<sup>3</sup>, whose job it was to shepherd cattle. So how did the shepherds find the stable? No star appeared to them; and no angel accompanied them, since we read that the shepherds started their journey, *“...when the angels had gone away from them into heaven...”* (Lk 2:15).

The wise men needed the star to guide them to Jesus. By the time they reached the city, the holy family had moved from the stable to a house, and so the star guided them to the place where the babe was. The wise men reached Bethlehem a long time after Christ’s birth. The proof is that when Herod calculated the time from the day when the star appeared, to the time when the Wise Men left Jerusalem, he found that it was around two years. Therefore, Herod *“...put to death all the male Children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.”* (Mat 2:16).

The wise men did not reach Judea on the day of the nativity of the Lord, although they are frequently depicted in icons of the nativity. The reason is that artists want to include

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<sup>3</sup> Bethlehem was the city where David composed tunes using his harp, and also where he prayed the prophecies and the words of prayer that God put in his mouth.

all of the events surrounding the birth of the Lord in one icon. Likewise, some people who make a model of the stable<sup>4</sup> of the nativity, try to present all of the events in one scene.

But how did the shepherds know where the stable was? The answer is that since the Holy Spirit was guiding them, “...*they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child.*” (Lk 2:16-17). In other words, they retold the entire story of the angel and the announcement.

### **Other Sheep Not of This Fold:**

The shepherds represented the people from among the children of Israel whom God was able to deal with. They represented those who were awaiting salvation. So, just as the Lord declared the birth of His Only Begotten Son to the shepherds, He also started to deal with the gentiles. The Lord Jesus Christ said, “*And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.*” (Jn 10:16). Here He is speaking of Himself as the good shepherd.

When Christ said, “...*other sheep I have which are not of this fold...*”, He was referring to the gentiles and not the Jews who were of the seed of Jacob, who was the father of the twelve tribes, and the seed of Isaac and Abraham. The gentiles were all other nations; as Simeon the Elder said, “*A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.*” (Lk 2:32).

The salvation which the Lord came to fulfill was not intended only for the people of Israel, despite the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ said, “...*salvation is of the Jews...*” (Jn 4:22). This is because God promised Abraham saying, “*And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*” (Acts 3:25). Therefore, salvation was from the seed of Abraham because Christ is from the seed of Abraham; but the blessing is for all families of the earth.

### **A Light to the Gentiles:**

In the Book of Isaiah the Father says to the Son, “*I, the Lord, have called You in righteousness, And will hold Your hand; I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the Gentiles, To open blind eyes, To bring out prisoners from the prison. Those who sit in darkness from the prison house.*” (Is 42:6-7).

Concerning the Lord Christ, the Father said, “*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” (Mat 3:17); and also, “*Behold! My Servant whom I have chosen, My Beloved in whom My soul is well pleased! I will put My Spirit upon Him, And He will declare justice to the Gentiles.*” (Mat 12:18, see also Is 42:1-4). Similarly, in the Book of Acts, Saint

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<sup>4</sup> NB: Those who make a stable model to entertain children, should not put it inside the church. It can be displayed in a room or a hall outside the church, because no statues are permitted in the Coptic Orthodox Church. We only place icons in our churches, but never statues.

Paul said, “...*signs and wonders may be done by the name of thy holy Child Jesus*” (Acts 4:30).

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is “...*a covenant to the people...*” This is the New Testament, and the “...*light to the gentiles...*” Therefore, salvation was not only for the people of Israel as the Lord mentioned in the Old Testament, although the people of Israel considered themselves the private people of God. Even God considered the people of Israel His people. In Isaiah, we read, “*But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, And He who formed you, O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you. For I am the Lord your God, The Holy One of Israel, your Savior;*” (Is 43:1-3).

From the words, “...*The Holy One of Israel*” and “*O Israel: Fear not, for I have redeemed you*”, we understand that the Lord was addressing Israel. However, in the previous chapter, the Father tells the Son concerning the things which were to come, “*I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people, As a light to the Gentiles,*” (Is 42:6). Similarly, when Simeon the Elder took up Christ the babe in his arms, he said, “*Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, According to Your word; For my eyes have seen Your salvation Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, And the glory of Your people Israel.*” (Lk 2:29-32).

It is clear from the abovementioned verses that God intended to call the gentiles to inherit eternal life and become His flock, along with the people of Israel who would accept Him and believe in His Christ. God said that “...*there will be one flock and one shepherd.*” (Jn 10:16).

### **The Magi:**

After the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, God began to deal with the gentiles in a very nice manner. An example is the way in which He dealt with the wise men of the East, near Persia, who were known as the Magi. The Magi were astronomers; they observed the orbits of the stars, calculated periods of time, and some were also astrologers.

Daniel the Prophet lived in the time when the people of Israel were captured by the kingdom of Babylon, which was followed by the rule of the Persian Kingdom. The king chose him for service, because he found that, “...*in him is the Spirit of the Holy God...*” (Dan 4:8). He appointed him “...*chief of the magicians...*” (Dan 4:9, 5:11), meaning chief of the wise men.

Daniel in his book, mentioned many prophecies concerning the coming of the Lord Christ. One example is his interpretation of the king’s dream about a stone which was cut without hands, and “...*which struck the image on its feet of iron and clay, and broke*

*them in pieces...the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth.” (Dan 2:34-35).*

God also declared the date of Christ’s birth in the book of Daniel. It is written, *“Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy. Know therefore and understand, That from the going forth of the command To restore and build Jerusalem Until Messiah the Prince,” (Dan 9:24-25). “Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; But in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering.” (Dan 9:27).*

When Daniel wrote, *“Seventy weeks”* he meant 70 years multiplied by seven, because one week was counted as seven years. If 70 is multiplied by seven, the answer is 490 years. If ‘one week’ is subtracted from 490 years, the answer is 483, and the Bible says, *“...in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering.”* This is because Christ is the true sacrifice.

According to the law, Christ was to start His priestly ministry at 30 years of age, so if we subtract 30 from 483 we are left with 453 years. Thus we know the exact date of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The Star:**

According to the prophecy of Daniel, the magi were expecting a sign, and so an angel appeared to them in the form of a star.

What appeared to them was a heavenly creature that moved and stopped irregularly, unlike stars which have regular orbits. The star that appeared to the magi moved and stopped, ascended and descended. For instance, when the magi reached Bethlehem, if this star had been very high up in the sky, they would not have been able to determine over which house it had stopped. If we look up into the sky at night, it is impossible to identify which stars rest directly above each house. However, it is written that this star, *“..came and stood over where the young Child was.” (Mat 2:9).* This means that the star descended until it stood over the house where the Child was. Therefore, this star was an angel.

Since the magi were accustomed to observing the movements of the stars, they realized that this star was peculiar. It had particular qualities which enabled them to understand that it belonged to a great king, or to the king of all kings on earth.

The reference to the magi can be found in the prophecies of Daniel, and it was not stated by Zarathustra the worshipper of fire, as some incorrectly say. Daniel was the chief of the magi in his time, and he had disciples for several generations after him; so when they observed the star, they realized that the prophecy had been fulfilled.

The Holy Spirit did not deal with the magi in the same way that He dealt with the shepherds. He dealt with the magi in stages, and through things that they could comprehend. To them, the Book of Daniel was one of the books that they owned and highly regarded, because it contained wise sayings. They also considered Daniel the wisest of wise.

Daniel interpreted the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar, and as a result, he was appointed chief magi. This was written in the history books of the kingdom; and all of his great deeds and prophecies were recorded in the chronicles of the kingdoms where he lived. This made the magi confident in his sayings, and some of them sensed that they contained extraordinary declarations.

### **Reaching Jerusalem:**

God dealt with the magi according to their way of thinking, and so He sent an angel to appear to them in the shape of a star. After this angel guided them to Judea, they entered the capital, Jerusalem, and the star disappeared. In Jerusalem, they went about inquiring of the Child's whereabouts, until they reached Herod. They said to him, "*Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.*" (Mat 2:2).

Here, matters started to become complicated, since Herod the king "*...was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*" (Mat 2:3). Consequently, he "*...gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. So they said to him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.*" (Mat 2:3-6). This prophecy was well known, and everyone knew that Christ was to be born in Bethlehem.

Herod wanted to know where the babe was born because he was troubled, and decided to kill Him. According to Herod's perspective, this Child was to take over his kingdom; however, the Lord Christ said, "*My kingdom is not of this world.*" (Jn 18:36).

When the magi departed from the king's presence, the star appeared to them again; heaven started to guide them once more. Once they arrived near the house where the young Child was, the star descended and stood directly above the house. Thus they understood that the Child - the King of Israel, the King of all kings in heaven and earth, or the Lord of Lords - had been born in this city according to the dream of Nebuchadnezzar which Daniel wrote of in his book.

### **The Gifts:**

When the magi started to organize their journey, they selected certain gifts that they would present to the newly born King of Israel. They chose gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Myrrh tastes bitter but it has a pleasant fragrance; and some people like to offer it as a present. However, the gifts presented to the Lord Jesus Christ were of doctrinal,

theological, prophetic, and has deep spiritual significance. It is evident that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired the magi to choose these presents in particular.

In icons of the nativity, three magi are depicted. The Bible does not mention that they were three, but it does mention that three kinds of gifts were presented. Maybe the magi were more than three; they were most likely a group of wise men travelling on a long journey from Persia carrying presents, but only three of them presented the gifts.

Because the gifts were three, this signifies that the Child is One of the three Persons of the One God - the triune God Who is One in essence. So, firstly, the number of gifts was symbolic and pointed to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Secondly, the types of gifts were symbolic: the gold symbolized Christ as a king, the frankincense was a symbol of His priesthood, while the myrrh symbolized His suffering for the salvation of the world. The gold symbolized that He is a king, the frankincense that He is a priest, and the myrrh that He was a prophet.

### **A King, a Priest, and a Prophet:**

As a king, the Lord Jesus Christ is no ordinary king, but the King of Kings. And so when a song is sung for Him it is no ordinary song, but the 'Song of Songs'.

As a priest, He is the greatest high priest, whose unchangeable priesthood will continue forever (see Heb 7:24).

As a prophet, Christ is different from all of the prophets who preceded Him. He is the Lord of the prophets. In spite of "...*being found in appearance as a man...*" (Phi 2:8), simultaneously, He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

### **A Prophet:**

Christ is no ordinary prophet, even though He prophesied of His death, His resurrection on the third day, and the destruction of Jerusalem; and all of His prophecies were fulfilled in their due time. Furthermore, He prophesied of events pertaining to the end of the world which have not yet been fulfilled, but we believe that they will occur exactly as the Lord Christ has said.

The most important prophecy He made concerning His life was, the following: "*Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death and deliver Him to the Gentiles; and they will mock Him, and scourge Him, and spit on Him, and kill Him. And the third day He will rise again.*" (Mk 10:33-34).

This was the most important prophecy relating to His suffering. Thus we say that the myrrh symbolized that Christ was a prophet, since He prophesied of His death and suffering.

When we say that the Lord Jesus Christ prophesied, we should always remember that He is not an ordinary prophet; but that He is God the Incarnate Logos, the Only-Begotten Son of God. Although being found in appearance as a man, Christ prophesied of some events; and when they occurred, the listeners were assured that He was speaking the words of God, and not of a common person.

Christ's prophecy concerning His death on the cross and His resurrection was of great importance to the church, because after the resurrection when the Lord Christ appeared to His disciples He said, "*Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?*" (Lk 24:26). It is as though He wanted to tell them, 'Why do you consider the crucifixion something unusual? Why are you sad?'

### **A Priest:**

The frankincense symbolizes the priesthood of Christ, since a priest raises the incense offering. Not only Christians, but even heathens raise incense to idols. Furthermore, the relationship between incense and priesthood is well known in the Old Testament. In Christianity however, the raising of incense has a particular spiritual significance.

The Lord Jesus Christ was a pleasant fragrance of incense: "He who offered Himself, as an acceptable sacrifice, upon the Cross, for the salvation of our race. His Good Father, smelled Him in the evening on Golgotha."<sup>5</sup>

Through His complete obedience and His pleasant life, the Lord Jesus Christ offered Himself as a sweet-smelling aroma for the pleasure of His Father. He is the High Priest who presented an incense offering which was accepted by the heavenly Father. This offering was for remission of the sins of all people who believe in His name, accept His salvation, and accept His death and resurrection<sup>6</sup>.

### **The Holy Spirit and the Magi:**

The Holy Spirit worked with the magi in stages. In the beginning, He guided them when they were deciding what gifts to present; He then sent them an angel in the shape of a star to guide them on their journey. However, after they worshiped the Lord Jesus Christ, God the Logos, the Savior of the world, their relationship with God became stronger. God then started to deal with them with heavenly declarations. It is written, "*Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.*" (Mat 2:12).

Herod wanted to kill the young Child, so they were divinely warned in a dream not to return to Herod, but to depart for their country another way. At this point, it became clear

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<sup>5</sup> These are the words of *Vai è taf enf* which we sing on Covenant Thursday, Good Friday, and during the weekly Sunday Theotokia.

<sup>6</sup> In baptism we are buried with Christ, and we are also resurrected with Him.

that the Holy Spirit started to work in their lives in a more powerful way. This means that the gentiles were called to recognize God through the coming of the Lord Christ to the world.

May the Lord grant us to live the events of the nativity, and meditate on them so that they may be a blessing to our lives.

*Glory be to God forever, Amen.*