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**THE INFANCY NARRATIVES OF JESUS AND
THEIR REINTERPRETATION IN THE LIGHT
OF THE RESURRECTION**

SUMMARY

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The Holy Gospels, especially the narratives about the Savior's childhood, have always captivated me, even during my university studies in Sibiu. This fascination arises for several reasons: first, these stories possess a unique character that is challenging to categorize within a specific literary genre; they are not primarily historiographical but rather theological and spiritual in nature. Additionally, their exceptional qualities and the connection they share with the rest of the Gospels enrich their meaning. Lastly, these texts are imbued with charm, poetic depth, and profound theological insights.

For a long time, the passages in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 were overlooked by biblical scholars and commentators, as they were deemed to have limited theological significance. However, beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, studies focusing on the "childhood" narratives of the Gospel started to emerge and have since increased in number. Despite this growing interest, the opinion of American exegete Raymond E. Brown remains relevant, as expressed in his work *La nascita del Messia secondo Matteo e Luca* ("The birth of the Messiah", 1976). The author wrote: "We can say that, in biblical research, the ongoing process of advancing in the study and understanding of the Holy Gospels has identified the last frontiers to be overcome: the stories surrounding the birth and childhood of Jesus" (p. 9). He continued, "These captivating narratives—such as the arrival of the Magi from the East to Bethlehem, the miraculous star that guided them, and the angelic messengers conveying God's will—suggest that we may be dealing with pious legends. These tales do not contribute to the genuine theological message of the Gospel of Christ and support the idea that this folklore, lacking profound theology, could primarily engage only the more pietistic individuals and simple people. This perspective has had a negative impact on the theology of the Incarnation. The stories about the Savior's childhood have often been overlooked or approached superficially in theology courses at seminaries and faculties. This is concerning, given that graduates of these institutions are meant to serve the Church and will encounter these Gospel passages every year at Christmas" (p. 10).

This situation occurs universally, both in Western theological education and in Romanian theological education, where these pericopes are often overlooked or only briefly addressed: *Studiul Noului Testament. Introducere generală. Evangheliile după Matei și Marcu* (Guide for the Theology Faculties of the Romanian Patriarchate, I). București, Ed. Basilica, 2022, 412-431; and *Sudiul Noului Testament. Evangheliile după Luca și Ioan. Problema sinoptică. Faptele Apostolilor* (Guide for the Theological Faculties of the Romanian Patriarchy, II). București, Editura Basilica, 2023, 98-100.

There are limited research and biblical commentary on this topic; however, it is not entirely absent. Professors Constantin Preda (from Bucharest), Ilie Melniciuc Piucă (from Iași), and Ioan Voineag (from Brașov) have approached it from both exegetical and theological perspectives. Their works reference a wide range of sources, including modern and contemporary exegetes, but most notably draw from patristic literature.

One aspect that modern biblical exegesis has increasingly focused on is the distinction between the historical event itself and its narrative representation. This is particularly relevant for the Gospel accounts of the "childhood" of Christ the Savior, which are not written in a historiographical style but rather in a spiritual and theological one. However, interest in the historical facts is not entirely absent; it exists, but it is not the primary focus. During my research, I have made a concerted effort to emphasize the formation of biblical and evangelical writings—especially the Gospel of John, which is often referred to as the Gospel of "childhood." In these writings, the historical event is presented at the beginning (in chronological order). It is understood more deeply at the conclusion, with the event itself becoming accessible through the text and the biblical tradition that informed its composition.

The extra-biblical literature that contains stories about the birth of notable figures is crucial for analysing the Gospel accounts of Jesus' childhood. Rabbinic and Targumic literature reflects the context in which these stories about the Savior's early life were developed. While this Gospel has deep roots in the ancient Scriptures and the sacred texts of Israel, it also compels us to view the "Christ event" as a whole, with a particular focus on the central event of His saving work—the Resurrection. This event casts light on the place where Jesus was born. The narratives of the Savior's childhood foreshadow the overarching plot of the entire Gospel, which includes the Messiah being rejected by the Jewish people and accepted by "a small remnant" or "a holy remnant." They also touch upon the mystery of the Holy Cross, reflecting themes of rejection, persecution, and the crucifixion of the Son of Man. In this sense, the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection is already present in the accounts of Jesus' childhood, leading some scholars to regard the Gospel of childhood as a "miniature Gospel." Understanding the connection between the first two chapters of Matthew (1-2) and Luke (1-2) and the rest of the Gospel is fundamental to grasping the meaning and theological significance of these accounts. Like the entire Gospel, the narratives of the Savior's childhood are based on both oral and written sources. What has come down to us represents the inspired work of the hagiographer in compiling these sources.

My research primarily focuses on a deeper understanding of the passages in the Gospels that describe Jesus' childhood. Most people are somewhat familiar with these texts through the

Christmas services they attend, the verses of carols, and sacred art. However, these passages should not be viewed as mere "children's literature" or as sentimental "pious legends" meant only to enhance the devotional life of believers. They are not folklore filled with romantic or tragic elements, intended merely to satisfy our curiosity about the wondrous origins of Christ the Savior. Indeed, it is rare to find a theology presented in such a concise and yet richly imaginative manner elsewhere in the Gospels. The first two chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke hold significant persuasive power, comparable to the final chapters that narrate the Passion and Resurrection of the Savior (Raymond E. Brown, *La nascita del Messia secondo Matteo e Luca*, 37).

Saints Matthew and Luke each began their Gospels with theological reflections on the "Christ event," which had developed over several decades of living or experiencing the Christian faith, ecclesial life, and missionary preaching (Mt 28:19). From the very beginning of evangelical history, the religious experiences of certain individuals and the Christian community were passed down through oral traditions and, later, written texts. These traditions were more than simply memories; they were "updated" or revitalized for the present within the early Christian worship practices.

Before the coming of Christ into the world, a similar dynamic was at play. The old traditions that nurtured the faith of the ancestors were continuously supplemented by newer ones. This ongoing process enabled the events of ancient history—such as the Exodus and the Babylonian exile—to be reinterpreted and updated, considering more recent circumstances. This trend intensified after the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile, a period during which the historical phenomenon known as "Judaism" was established. During this time, the ancient traditions and texts were revisited, reinterpreted, and transcribed to preserve the historical and religious identity of Israel. The ancient Jews and the early Christians understood that God is always faithful to His words and promises (see Lk 1:54-55). Remembering the deeds of the Lord in the history of His people allowed them to recognize what He fulfilled "in these last days" (Heb 1:2). This deep conviction that God fulfils His promises adds meaning to present contradictions and sufferings, while also nurturing hope for a decisive event in which God will completely fulfil His promises, leading to humanity's ultimate liberation from sin and death.

In my research, including my studies and writings, I have sought to engage in dialogue with past exegetes, particularly the Church Fathers, as well as with modern and contemporary scholars and commentators. My aim has been to discover new meanings in the sacred texts where applicable. I believe that a researcher and professor of Biblical Theology has a duty to uncover the intentions of the hagiographers—specifically, Saints Matthew and Luke—and to

understand their theological purposes. This represents the historical component of biblical exegesis. However, it is even more critical that biblical scholars do not allow the text to remain a relic of the past, merely archived among historical events. Instead, they should strive to reveal its living connection to the present and the concrete lives of the faithful. Given that the ultimate author of these texts is God Himself, exploring the connection between past and present is not only necessary but also essential. The insights gained from this approach are integral to interpreting the biblical text. Far from diminishing biblical research, this perspective adds significant meaning to it.

The second area of research focused on the themes of the solemn years proposed by the Holy Synod of our Church. This research culminated in studies that were prepared and published for the International Symposium (ISSTA), which is organized annually by our faculty. Although some of these studies did not directly relate to my specific research niche, they still referenced the Holy Scriptures, particularly the writings of the New Testament, as their main point of focus.

We focused more intently on the activities of the Society of Romanian Orthodox Biblical Scholars (SBOR) by developing studies in biblical theology and participating in its annual meetings. We were fortunate to organize the fourth meeting in Alba Iulia. The studies published as part of these conferences addressed significant issues in biblical theology, while also considering the two other branches of biblical discipline: Isagogy and Biblical Exegesis. These studies have been published in specialized journals recognized within the academic community (ERIH+).

I have been told, at times with a hint of reproach, that my writing has too many pastoral concerns. This is true, and I am not ashamed of it. Anyone interested in my theological work—up to this point—will clearly see that it is not lost in overly pious homiletic considerations and cannot be classified as mere "pulpit preaching." As a priest and professor of Theology, I value both roles highly and have made considerable effort to honour them properly. I understand, as the Holy Fathers taught, that "a theologian prays," maintaining a living relationship with God, who has "the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68) and who "opens our minds" to comprehend the Scriptures (Lk 24:45). I hope I have succeeded in making this truth "living and active" (Heb 4:12) in the hearts of my students and the faithful. I strive always to be ready to provide a thoughtful answer to anyone who asks me to account for the faith I profess and preach.