

“Matthew 1-2 as Infancy Narrative: History, Theology and Midrashic Interpretation”

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ABSTRACT. This study aims to analyze chapters 1 – 2 of the Gospel of Matthew, focusing on the historical and theological dimensions of the accounts of Jesus’ “childhood”. The text argues that these pericopes function as a Christological “prologue”, in which the genealogy and childhood epiphanies underscore Jesus’ messianic identity as the “son of David” and the “son of Abraham.” It is argued that the material reflects a “historical-artistic-midrashic” literary-theological composition: historical elements are theologized through the reuse and reinterpretation of Old Testament motifs (Moses, the Exodus, the prophets).

The historical-critical method, which has characterized biblical research in the past, has in recent times been joined by a synchronic reading of the Gospel texts, which is better suited to narrative texts, such as the accounts of the Savior’s childhood. We will use the synchronic method, but without excluding the diachronic reading, which is fundamental for texts laden with theological meaning, such as those about the childhood of Jesus.

The first two chapters of the Gospel according to Matthew are closely linked to the ancient Scriptures and the religious literature of Israel, yet at the same time they refer specifically to the events that took place at the “fullness of time”, particularly to the Paschal event, and anticipate the mystery of the Cross and the rejection of the Lord’s Messenger. In other words, the Paschal event is already contained in the initial texts and woven “like a watermark” into the narrative of the Gospel according to Matthew.

Keywords: Midrash, Christology, Genealogy, Historicity, Epiphany

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Introduction

Because the history of our salvation has known the wonderful moment —the only new one under the sun¹— of the Incarnation of the Lord, difficult to accept and understand for Greek philosophy and for Jewish theology, that is, the coming of God in the flesh: “the mystery of the ages hidden and unknown by angels”, “the great mystery of Christianity” (Col 1: 26; Eph 3: 9; Rm 16: 25), I have considered it appropriate to approach in this study the Gospel of Jesus’ “childhood” in the version of Saint Matthew —which presents us with the Messiah as a child— and to try to discover and present to readers the theological richness of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. My invitation to them, from the very beginning, is to go beyond the shell of the two chapters and try to unravel the underlying meanings that the Evangelist Matthew has hidden in his text.

The designation of the first two chapters of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke as the “Gospel of Jesus “childhood”² is relatively recent. This name was born with the emergence of a new method of interpreting the biblical text: the well-known “Formgeschichte Methode”.³ This method of interpreting the revealed text states that from the monolith of the Gospel tradition, prior to the appearance of the first New Testament writings, materials (longer or shorter) began to emerge that had as their object the Passion and Resurrection of Christ the Savior, then materials containing “that Jesus began to do and teach” (Acts 1: 1) and, finally, materials that referred to the years of His early childhood. The organization and ordering of these materials led to the formation of the New Testament Gospels. Along with the material that presents the Savior’s Passion and His Resurrection, the material that presents His childhood appears much more homogeneous than the rest of the Gospel, but also different or different from the rest of the Gospel of which it belongs, although it presents us with the same character and the same work of salvation.

¹ “Behold, I am doing a new thing, he is giving buds; Don't you see him?” (Is 43: 19).

² Two of the four Gospels (those after Matthew and Luke) begin with stories about the conception and birth of Christ the Savior. Both stories consist of two chapters, although the Lucanian story (Lk 1-2) is twice as long as the Matthew story. The first two chapters of the two Gospels have been called the “Gospels of the Infancy,” although this term is not entirely accurate. And precisely because of the lack of perfect accuracy of these names, we prefer to put “of childhood” in quotation marks. Cf. Vasile Mihoc, „Cuvânt înainte,” to Alexandru Moldovan, “*Evanghelia «copilăriei» lui Iisus; Luca 1-2. Exegeză și Teologie*”, (Cluj-Napoca: Mega, 2011), 11.

³ Ortensio da Spinetoli, “*Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*” (Trapani: Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, 2018), 15.

This finding has led exegetes and commentators to ask questions about the origin of these materials: "Are there pre-existing texts that were later added to the Gospel, or were they part of it from the very beginning?"; "If they are pre-existing materials, then who is their author?"; "In what environment did they appear?"; "In what language were they written?". These are some questions that exegetes have asked themselves, but they have not yet found pertinent and viable answers. Since the Gospel material on the Savior's childhood has only recently begun to attract scholars' attention, the solutions they propose to the questions raised can be neither definitive nor exhaustive.

If we look at the first chapter of the Gospel according to Mark, we will see that the Gospel plot begins with the presentation of the Forerunner of the Lord, a fact also confirmed by the brief discourse of the St. Apostle Peter in Acts 1: 22⁴. Even the Gospel of Matthew could have begun very well without the first two chapters, and thus its presumptive beginning (Mt 3: 1-12) would have strikingly resembled the beginning of the Gospel of Mark.

The Book of Acts unequivocally confirms that early Christian preaching (the apostolic kerygma) focused on the essential, on what Jesus "did", that is, on His Passion and Resurrection. It was only in a second phase of Christian preaching that questions began to arise concerning His origin and identity, even though the Passion, but especially His Resurrection, fully revealed the mystery of His Person and mission.

We do not know who was the first to ask questions about Jesus' origin and the deep identity of His Person. We do not know the environment of origin—or what exegetes call *Sitz im Leben*—of the Gospel of "childhood". It is quite possible that the current compositions (Mt 1-2 and Lk 1-2) have gathered and preserved older traditions, or even direct eyewitness testimony, even if this is not easy to demonstrate. The exegetes have identified and outlined the profile of circles of possible witnesses of the events related in the Gospel of "childhood", among them, a privileged place occupying the "brothers of the Lord", mentioned in the text of Acts 1: 14, a circle which, in the person of James "the brother of the Lord"⁵, dominated the Jerusalem Christian community. In the ancient Church,

⁴ St. Apostle Peter speaks of the need to replace Judas Iscariot with another disciple of the Lord who was with the Savior "from the baptism of John until the day that [the Lord] ascended from us" (Acts 1: 21-22).

⁵ James, the one called "the brother of the Lord" (Gal 1: 19), is different from James the apostle, son of Zebedee and brother of John, and different than James of Alphaeus. He was also called "James the Little" (Mk 15: 40) and was the son of Cleopas and Mary (Jn 19: 25). The Judeo-Christian historian Hegesippus, a former bishop in the Holy Land, records the tradition according to which Cleopas was the brother of the righteous Joseph, the fiancé of the Blessed Virgin. Hegesippus' information was

Jesus' "brothers" were a well-recognized group (cf. 1 Cor 9: 5 – ESV) and enjoyed a special position in the Church for a long time, as relatives of her Founder⁶. Even though a long time has elapsed between the event of the Lord's birth and the New Testament texts that relate it, we can assume that the Gospel material comes from well-informed sources. Anyway, the language of this evangelical material makes us think of Judeo-Christian circles⁷.

The most debated issue was that of the literary genre adopted by the Evangelist Matthew in his presentation. The precise establishment of the literary genre, according to the exegetes, represents the surest way to understand the text in question. In short, the literary genre is the relationship that exists between truth and the way it is expressed. Without knowledge of the language used, any text and any book, not only the biblical books, remain misunderstood or, even worse, can be misinterpreted. Determining the literary genre of the text helps to determine the strength of the discourse, the point of view from which the author of the text looks or speaks, the degree of veracity he has, and the role that his imagination and freedom of expression have in his work. The divine message is not to be confused with the word of man, with the erudition of the hagiographer, or with his literary art. Scripture and the divine message do not coincide perfectly, for the language and the message it conveys are not the same thing. The divine meaning remains profound, and for this reason, the exegete and biblical commentator— as well as the reader of the text— are invited not to stop at its surface. The temptation to stop at the surface, at the first layer, at appearances, is the most damaging temptation to which the exegete is exposed. He risks considering culture, literary artifices, and even the defects of the human author of the biblical text as a divine proposal⁸.

The determination of the literary genre and the language used by the hagiographer is indispensable for the exegete in understanding the book's content and its theological significance. What the hagiographer has tried to convey to

taken up by the historian Eusebius of Caesarea in his work "Church History" III, XI, 1. Therefore, Mary of Cleopas was the sister-in-law of the Mother of God, which explains the name "brother" (i.e. cousin) of the Lord given to James. This explanation covers, in fact, the whole problem of the "Lord's brethren. *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură*, "Introducere la Epistolele Sobornicești" (București: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2018), 1510.

⁶ Craig Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 315. Apud Ioan Sorin Bora, "Ce spun Sfinții Părinți despre «Frații» și «Surorile» Domnului (Mt 13, 55)?", în *"Studii Teologice"* 3 (2017), 191–210.

⁷ The French exegetes A. Robert and A. Feuillet proposed the hypothesis of an Aramaic or Hebrew original, although the proposal has not been accepted by all exegetes and biblical commentators. Cf. *Introduction à la Bible*, (Paris: Cerf, 1959), 194-195.

⁸ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *"Bibbia, parola umana e divina"* (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1968), 45-50.

his recipients by means of words cannot be identified by means of grammar or philology alone or deduced from the context. The exegete must go back in his mind to those distant times and, with the help of history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, identify the literary genre (or genres) the hagiographer used in his writing. To express their ideas and concepts, ancient authors used literary genres specific to their time. "What were these genres?" is another question that the biblical scholar must answer. He cannot do this *a priori*, but only after a careful study of the literature of the Ancient East.

Recent commentaries and studies of biblical theology show that the life and teaching of the Savior Jesus Christ were not preserved in writing in the Gospel only to preserve the memory of the "Christ event". They were preached (preached) in such a way as to give the Church the basis or foundation of the faith. For this reason, the exegete, by scrutinizing the testimonies of the Evangelists very carefully, will be able to present to us competently and pertinently the perennial theological value of the Gospels.

Jesus is not just any character in history, He is the "Saviour" of the world (Jn 4: 42; 1 Jn 4: 14); knowing Him, accepting and fulfilling His commandments, does not mean a vain and sterile erudition, an experiment or a test (such as sports), but represents the way to access to the "life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10: 10), to salvation. The Savior Christ is "the Prophet par excellence", He is "the fulfillment of the Law and of the Prophets", He is the Prophet "one who is to come" (Mt 11: 3 – ESV) and the "Lawgiver" of the last times, the One Who has shown man a new way of relating to God and his fellow men⁹. These references or notes of a preparatory nature are indispensable for a correct approach to the study of the Holy Gospels—and especially the study of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood"—material that has a very special character in the content of the Gospel and among the writings of the New Testament.

Modern biblical research proposes a radical renewal of theological study. The times we live in impose or demand this. Time (someone said) is the best critic in this regard. Time will reveal "with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw" (1 Cor 3: 12 – ESV). From the confrontation of ideas, sincere and honest, from the different proposals of interpretation, what has no consistency will fall, and the thought of the Lord enclosed in the "sealed book" of divine Revelation will be more clearly outlined. There is no error that does not contain a small part of truth, just as there is no truth whose formulation does not have gaps, obscure sides, or imprecisions. Inspired writing, even so, is full of difficulties,

⁹ Ortensio da Spinetti, "Matteo. Il vangelo della chiesa", (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1998), 15.

because it is a divine-human work; It is not a book that fell from the sky and was not written because of an automatic dictation from above. No exegete can immediately and infallibly follow the most suitable path for a correct interpretation, but only after repeated attempts, assumptions, and hypotheses.

To stop at the first hypothesis hinders the natural path of biblical research. Biblical exegesis is an art and not just a theology; biblical exegesis is also a given, a gift of God: “Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24: 45 – ESV) or “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God” (Mt 13: 11; Mk 4: 11; Lk 8: 10 – ESV). If hypotheses, suppositions and speculations are not allowed to the theologian, they are indispensable to the exegete in his attempt to discover the intentions of the hagiographer. The theologian has safer methods of research, but even he must carefully check the extent to which the traditional interpretation renders the intentions of Christ the Savior and translates His message or preaching into words.

The exegete does not question the truth revealed and expressed through a dogma or historical fact, but the literary fact itself (the biblical text or pericope). The theologian works on Revelation as a whole, a revelation contained in several sources or documents. The exegete, even if he recognizes the rule of faith and the Tradition of the Church, limits himself to the text he analyses, which is limited, partial, and conditional. Serious exegetical research is within the reach of those who know the classical languages and the cultural environment of the ancient world well, and who know how to approach the biblical text as inspired “in the Spirit” in which it was written. There are no “special charisms” that can take the place of this preparation! We must look carefully at the structure that the hagiographer (evangelist) has imprinted on his work and the methods he has resorted to identify his theological goal. If we consider these things, the structure of his work, his biblical erudition, and his apologetic concern, then we will better understand his theological intentions and intuit the ultimate purpose of his work.

Matthew 1-2: Literary Structure and Genre

The text of Matthew 1-2 reveals before the biblical researcher features that do not fit a “historical” work in the narrow sense of the word: frequent angelic apparitions, a star that follows an unnatural path on the celestial vault of the night, a conception and a birth that respects the dignity of the woman, showing her to be Virgin and Mother at the same time, the miraculous is everywhere. All

this appears to the modern reader as things that go beyond the natural and the normal, much closer to the legend than to the historical fact. It is difficult for the human mind and reason to accept such facts. He is not even asked to do so! Such a judgment reflects, first, a general skepticism before the mystery, the miraculous, or the supernatural, a skepticism that does not resist rationalist criticism either, just as the faith to which it has taken its place has not. Second, this skepticism fully reflects the observations of the critical analysis to which the biblical texts have been subjected¹⁰.

The studies on the text of Matthew 1-2 are more recent than those on the parallel text of Luke 1-2, but these, equally, have led to solutions different from those of rationalist criticism, but also to the obstacles of excessive conservatism¹¹. The first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew consist of two main sections of different lengths. The first section contains the genealogy of the Savior and is distinguished from the other successive narratives (Mt 1: 18-25; 2: 1-12; 2: 13-23). The latter are of the same kind, and in their composition, there are themes and words that appear, almost exclusively, only in the pericope of Matthew 1: 18 - 2: 23¹².

The literary genre of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew can be summarized in the trinomial: "historical-artistic-midrashic". It should be noted that the terms "history" and "historical literary genre" do not correspond or are not identical. This means that the facts presented by the author of the text are not grounded in rigor and historical precision. The biblical author does not present us with the "outline of events" (i.e., a precise or exact chronological account of what happened). His concern is theological: he theologizes the event he recounts. Within his story, polemical and apologetic tones and nuances can be glimpsed, as well as parenetic concerns. The text he proposes does not want to be a "document of the past", but "a testimony of the present". If for a historian the facts (as they happened) are important, for an apologist or for a catechist, for a pastor of souls, pathos, imagination, and persuasion matter more than the coherence and logic of the facts he relates. The evangelist's main concern was not to seek objective and precise details about the events he relates, but to find

¹⁰ For exegetes and commentators who have a religious faith, Sacred Scripture is open to modern methods of study, and this does not imply diminishing the conviction that Scripture is "the word of God", nor denying that Scripture is an inspired work. Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *La nascita del Messia secondo Matteo e Luca* (Assisi, Cittadella Editrice, 2002), 18. The original title: *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993).

¹¹ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 22.

¹² Ulrich Luz, *Vangelo di Matteo* (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 2006), 139. The original title: "Das Evangelium nach Matthäus" (2002).

the most appropriate ones to attract and hold the readers' attention to his theological message, or to stimulate their reflection¹³ and faith.

In the pericope of Matthew 1: 18 – 2: 23, it is surprising that the story of Jesus' birth is missing, even though it is announced in Matthew 1: 18-25 and implied in Matthew 2: 1. The narrative cycle is not complete: it seems that the readers of the Gospel know more than the author told them. This fact indicates that the hagiographer did not seek to give them a complete account of the Savior's childhood but rather pursued a precise theological goal that the interpreter and exegete must identify¹⁴.

It is very likely that the stories in the pericope of Matthew 1: 18 – 2: 23 circulated orally before St. Matthew wrote them down in his Gospel and belong to a typology already found in the pages of the Old Testament: the announcement of miraculous births, the persecution of the one who is born, are themes encountered in the case of famous personalities of the history of the biblical people. We can easily see that Matthew and Luke were inspired by Old Testament theological episodes and motifs. St. Matthew does so explicitly¹⁵, quoting such texts and introducing them into his story with the help of the fulfillment quotations and formulae: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..." (Mt 1: 22; 2: 5-6; 2: 15; 2: 17; 2: 23).

The similarities between the story of St. Matthew and the Haggadic account of Moses' childhood are obvious. The analysis of the literary motifs presents in the two episodes attracted the attention of commentators and exegetes. Some commentators have looked for similarities to legends about the birth of pagan heroes¹⁶. It is true that the text of St. Matthew is difficult, but it cannot be compared with the texts of other religions. However, modern exegesis refuses to consider the Matthew text as belonging to the legendary genre. Modern theories —says Willoughby C. Allen— tell us that "the story of St. Matthew cannot be a literary fiction, based exclusively on legendary motifs and folkloric analogies. Taking into account the features of the author of the first Gospel, it is almost certain that he was convinced that he was telling real facts and not pious legends [...] Some descriptive details could be taken from the pages of the Old

¹³ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 24.

¹⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Vangelo di Matteo*, 139.

¹⁵ Constantin Preda, "Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos" (București: EIBMBOR, 2006), 221.

¹⁶ The motif or theme of the "virginal birth" in the myth of Castor and Pollux (the twin brothers in Greek mythology), the legend of Hercules, the legend of Romulus and Remus, or the legend of the "star" in the case of the birth of Alexander the Great and in the case of Octavian Augustus, are not sufficient to compare them with the biblical story of St. Matthew. Cf. Salvador Muñoz-Iglesias, "Los evangelios de la infancia e la infancia de los héroes", *Estudios Bíblicos* 16 (1957), 5–36.

Testament (with which St. Matthew and his readers were familiar) or even from popular literary stories of other cultures and religions, but these were used to embellish the story, with a view to its subsequent transmission in the preaching of the Church."¹⁷

Perhaps the first impression when reading the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew is that you are in front of a legendary story, says Pierre Bonnard in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. There is, however, in the Matthew story, an unparalleled historical verisimilitude in almost every detail. There is nothing suspicious in St. Matthew's account; we are no longer in a time when a slight reference to the supernatural casts suspicion on the entire pericope."¹⁸ For his part, J. Schmid states that the story of St. Matthew "unfolds entirely within the limits of historical verisimilitude and differs from the fantastic and mythological elements."¹⁹ We have in Matthew 1-2 "a free way of telling history, weaving picturesque details into the story to bring out even more the theological message of the facts told."²⁰ The historical basis of the Matthew story, the central themes of the Gospel of "childhood", the names of the characters (Jesus, the Righteous Joseph, the Blessed Virgin, King Herod), the Davidic lineage of the Savior are not "fabrications" of the Evangelist.

Xavier Léon-Dufour states that the use of a particular literary form (or literary genre) is not enough to deny the historicity of the narrative. Those who argue and affirm the contrary must prove to us that the account is historically impossible, or that it was entirely invented by its author. However, the studies published so far have not brought this demonstration²¹. Elio Peretto distinguishes between "the realities to which the evangelist wishes to draw the attention of his readers and the literary way he uses to do so. Saint Matthew has his own way of interpreting the facts he relates, and a story that is also theological does not exclude their objectivity."²²

The second term of the trinomial is the "artistic" one. The Gospel of Matthew's account of Jesus' "childhood" is not a biography (in the sense we give to the word today). Therefore, the evangelist did not follow a precise chronology

¹⁷ Willoughby C. Allen, "A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew, in *International Critical Commentary*" (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 14.

¹⁸ Pierre Bonnard, "L'Évangile selon saint Matthieu", (Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1963), 23-24.

¹⁹ Joseph Schmid, "L'Évangélio secondo Matteo", (Brescia: Morcelliana Editrice, 1957), 70-73. The original title: "Das Evangelium nach Matthäus" (Regensburg, 1956).

²⁰ Salvador Muñoz-Iglesias, "El género literario del Evangelio de la Infancia en San Mateo", in "Estudios Bíblicos" 17 (1958), 272.

²¹ Xavier Léon-Dufour, "Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus" (Paris: Seuil, 1963), 348.

²² Elio Peretto, "Ricerche su Mt 1-2" (Roma: Editrice Marianum, 1970), 78.

in his account. The red thread of his story is harder to identify. For example, it is not clear whether St. Matthew intended to present us with a diptych or a triptych, a plot or a theological and apologetic treatise. The hypotheses put forward are multiple. The simplest view considers the first two chapters of the Gospel to be a kind of “overture,” a “prologue,” or a “posthumous introduction” to the whole Gospel, but the solutions are much more complex²³.

The first part of the Gospel (Matthew 1: 1 – 4: 17) was called by the exegetes: “Jesus, the Messiah according to the Scriptures”. This first part can be considered, as we have seen, a true “Prologue” of the Gospel of Matthew, like the much better-known one of the Gospel of John. This “overture” presents us with the person of the Saviour and His destiny (the purpose of His incarnation), beginning with His origin: “Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1: 1) and culminating with the beginning of His public activity (Mt 4: 17). If the Johannine “Prologue” is, from a literary point of view, a Christological hymn, the Matthew Prologue is a story that wants to present to us the identity of the Savior and His mission in the light of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Genealogy of the Savior shows us His connection to the heavenly Father and to men (humanity). Presenting the genealogy of the Savior (Mt 1: 1-17), St. Matthew tells us that Jesus represents the “culmination” of the history of salvation; He is “Immanuel” (Is 7: 14; Mt 1: 18-25), He is the “Lord” to whom all nations look (Mt 2: 1-12); He is the “Only-begotten Son”, who retraces or relives the history of his people, Israel (Mt 2: 13-23).²⁴

Therefore, the first part of the Gospel of Matthew (1: 1 – 4: 17) speaks of the identity of the Savior; Of course, the entire Gospel speaks to us about this, but in the “overture” of the Gospel of St. Matthew, this stands out. We have eleven texts in the Gospel of Matthew that affirm that the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Christ, and of these, five are in the Gospel of Jesus’ “childhood” (Mt 1-2), which clearly attest to the fact that Jesus is the Messiah according to the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the “overture” that St. Matthew offers to his readers to help them understand the story of Jesus of Nazareth. The Messiah Christ can only be understood from the Holy Scriptures, which speak of Him. The first part of the Gospel ends with the formula: “From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, ...” (Mt 4: 17 – ESV), which highlights not only the peak or narrative climax of the “overture”, but also constitutes the beginning of the public activity of Christ the Savior in Galilee.

²³ Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*, 364.

²⁴ Massimo Grilli, “*Vangeli sinottici e Atti degli apostoli*”, (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 2016), 174–175.

A structure based on the theological content of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew allows us to divide the following: 1) the origin of Jesus (ch. 1); 2) the manifestation of Jesus (ch. 2). The first chapter, on the divine-human origin of Christ the Savior, can be subdivided into two parts: a. The human origin (Mt 1:1-17) and b. The divine origin (Mt 1: 18-25): the key word of the first chapter being "genesis" (a word that translates as "birth", "origin") is found in verses 1 and 18 and forms an inclusion that delimits the literary unity of the first chapter, offering us a narrative diptych about the two natures or the two natures of the Savior (divine and human). The Evangelist Matthew points his readers to the beginning of a new creation in Jesus Christ. In the second chapter, St. Matthew describes the messianic epiphany of Jesus, which reveals itself, not to the Jews, but to strangers (the Magi of the East), while it remains hidden from the Jews and, at least suspiciously, from their political leader²⁵.

A bipartite division is also proposed by K. Stendhal²⁶. According to this exegete, the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" is built on a double question: "*Quis et unde?*" The first chapter of the Gospel introduces us to the Person (identity) of the Messiah, the "Son of David" (*Quis* = who is Jesus?) and the "Son of God" (*Where* = where does Jesus come from?). He is at the same time a "Bethlehemite", a descendant of the prophetic king David, and a "Nazarene", called by God to live and grow "in wisdom and in age" (Lk 2: 52 – ESV) in a modest (almost unknown) city in Galilee²⁷. For A. Voegtle, too, the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" represents a "prologue" in two stanzas, which correspond to the first and second chapters. The first stanza indicates to the reader the messianic nature of Christ the Savior, based on His wonderful origin, while the second stanza demonstrates this with the wonderful events of His early childhood²⁸.

The structural parts of the first chapter are clearly indicated by St. Matthew by the title in verse 1: "Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham", by the genealogy of Jesus, which is more than a simple reproduction taken from a register, by the commentary that the evangelist Matthew makes on this genealogy (v. 17) and

²⁵ Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 217-218.

²⁶ Krister Stendhal, "*Quis et unde? An Analysis of Mt. 1-2*", in Walther Eltester (ed.) "*Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche*", Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias (*Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*) (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1960), 94-105. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 27.

²⁷ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 27.

²⁸ Anton Vögtle, "*Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheitsgeschichte*", in "*Biblische Zeitschrift*" 8 (1964), 258-260. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 27-28.

by the appendix attached to the genealogy (v. 16): “and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ”, an appendix which, according to the exegetes, represents the “critical point” or “nerve point” of the Savior’s genealogy.

The scene of the birth of Christ the Savior, which marks the transition to the second chapter, is not an episode but an explanation and additional proof for the summary proposed by the evangelist in verse 17. Indeed, the scene of the Savior’s birth does not end with a scriptural quotation (as St. Matthew has accustomed us), but with a repetition of the title stated in verse 1: “And Joseph did not know her, but Mary gave birth to her only begotten Son, to whom she named Jesus” (v. 25 – ESV). “The book of the genealogy (births = γενέσεως) of Jesus Christ” we have at the beginning of the chapter (v. 1), “Now the birth (ἡ γένεσις) of Jesus Christ took place in this way” (v. 18a), the Evangelist repeats at the beginning of the story of the Savior’s birth and concludes: “she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.” (v. 25). In this way, Chapter 1 is, from a thematic and structural point of view, concluded or closed²⁹.

The second chapter presents the “demonstration” of the statement in the first chapter through four scenes (episodes) from early childhood. Each episode of the four is constructed with the help of a prophecy (2: 5) or concluded with the help of a scriptural quotation (2: 15, 18, 23). The few events, from the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem to His return to Nazareth, demonstrate that He is “the Messiah promised by the Lord through His prophets.” But this fact remains, however, a secondary aspect of the Matthew account. Jesus relives the experiences of His people (Israel): the saving flight into Egypt and the Exodus. The similarities between Jesus and the Patriarch Jacob/Israel present the former to us as the true “Israel”, the true “Son of God”, a truth already formulated by the Evangelist in the first chapter. In doing so, the Evangelist Matthew intentionally seeks to correlate the beginning of the history of Christ the Savior with the history of Israel³⁰.

For the evangelist Matthew, Christ the Savior is a full-fledged member of the people of Israel; he is not “a child of haste,” as some opponents of early Christianity blasphemed to discredit the gospel message. This is the meaning of the pericope in Matthew 1: 18-24, which recounts the proclamation the angel of the Lord makes to the righteous Joseph (Mt 1: 19). We see in this case the apologetic concern of St. Matthew, a concern that shines through in his story. The fact that in the second chapter we see the Magi of the East (the pagans)

²⁹ Anton Vögtle, “Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheitsgeschichte”, 255.

³⁰ Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 220.

worshipping the newborn Child (Mt 2:11) shows us that the Evangelist wanted to present to us not only the "founder" of the New Israel or of the new people of God, but also that his intention was to show us that this new people of the Lord includes within himself and the pagans³¹.

The last term of the trinomial is the Jewish midrash, a word that comes from the verb "darash", which translates as "to seek", "to investigate", "to study", or "to explain". Even if the meaning of this term is somewhat known, the midrash retains its valences and meanings that are completely unknown. The noun "midrash" indicates a form of exegesis. In a general or improper sense, the midrash indicates any free commentary on the texts of Scripture, and in a technical sense, it indicates an edifying reworking of Scripture. Addison G. Wright called it "a reading within a reading."³² The Book of the Wisdom of Jesus Sirah mentions a so-called "Beth hammidrash" (house of study and exegesis), one of the schools in which traditions were born about the important characters in the history of Israel (Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Moses) and about the most important events of this history: the Exodus and the feast of the Passover³³.

The Jewish Midrash was considered a literary genre consisting of reflections on Scripture, interpreting and updating past events and teachings to fit the present situation in which Israelite believers found themselves. The midrash, in turn, is differentiated into the "halakah midrash" (or moral), if the biblical interpretation aims to update moral norms, and the "midrash haggadah" (or historical-narrative), if the updating reflection concerns characters and stories of facts contained in Scripture, but amplified on the basis of the oral traditions it enriches³⁴. In addition to the official commentaries on Scripture (classical exegesis of the synagogue or the various rabbinical schools), subjective embellishments circulated within Israelite communities that exaggerated the details of the ancestors' experiences in the biblical narrative. The Midrash appears—the exegetes believe—also in the New Testament, and in a very special way in the Gospel of the Savior's "childhood", both as a literary genre and as an approach to some episodes within it.

The five episodes of the story of Matthew 1-2 refer to a precise biblical model: the Pentateuch of Moses³⁵. The author's "midrashic" tendency is already

³¹ Anton Vögtle, "Die Genealogie Mt 1, 2-16 und die matthäische Kindheitsgeschichte", 256.

³² Addison G. Wright, "The Literary Genre Midrash", in "The Catholic Biblical Quarterly" 28 (1966), 137.

³³ Ortensio da Spinetti, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 32.

³⁴ Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 221.

³⁵ The division of the Gospel of Matthew into five parts is old (dating back to 1918) and is attributed to the American exegete Benjamin Bacon. This "classical" division formed the basis for understanding St. Matthew's theology. Benjamin Bacon, followed by George D. Kilpatrick, presents

observed in the Savior's genealogy. The list of names that appears in chapter 1 of the Gospel of Matthew is a form very often used in the Old Testament and in Jewish texts. The division of this list into "three" groups of "fourteen" names, contrary to that adopted by Saint Luke in his genealogy (Lk 3: 23-38), has a precise theological purpose. The number 14 is symbolic³⁶. The number 14 resembles the letters that make up the name of the prophetic king-David (D = 4, W = 6, D = 4 = 14). Both numbers (7 and 14) are repeated three and six times, respectively, in the genealogical list, highlighting the symbolism of the number 6 (the six days preceding the beginning of the Messianic era).

An apocryphal writing (well-known at the time St. Matthew was writing)—called "The Book of Enoch"—divides history into 10 weeks of years³⁷. The rabbis, speculating on these numbers, assigned three weeks to the period before Abraham and seven weeks to the period following the patriarch Abraham (the Israelite period), the last of the seven to be "of the Messiah". In the synthesis of three times fourteen (3 x 14) that St. Matthew made to the genealogical list of the Savior, he encompassed the 6 weeks of Israelite history, stopping at the threshold of Christian history (the seventh week).³⁸ Given that the ancient Hebrews were very attentive to the symbolism of numbers and to calculations, even these details can help in understanding the theological message of St. Matthew.

Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew as a "new Moses" and as the "giver of a New Law" (*nova lex*), and the Gospel of Matthew was seen as a kind of "replica" or "copy" of the Pentateuch of Moses. This understanding and presentation of the Gospel of Matthew made history, but it also allowed or facilitated confusing and uncertain interpretations. Indeed, we have in the Gospel of Matthew five sermons separated by a stereotyped formula which, with slight differences, highlight the end of the five sermons of Christ the Savior, known by these titles: "The Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5: 1-7, 29); "The missionary discourse" (Mt 9: 35-11, 1); "Discourse in parables or parables" (Mt 13: 1-53); "The Church Discourse" (Mt 18: 1-19, 1) and "The Eschatological Discourse" (Mt 24: 1 – 26: 1). The stereotypical formula is as follows: "And when Jesus finished these words..." and appears in Matthew 7:28; 11, 1; 13, 53; 19, 1 and 26, 1 – ESV. Based on these literary clues, the Gospel of Matthew, just like the Hebrew Torah (the Pentateuch of Moses), would consist of five parts (books), each with a narrative section and a discursive section. Cf. Massimo Grilli, *I Vangeli sinottici e Atti degli apostoli*, 171. See also George D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 107-108.

³⁶ The number 14 consists of 7 x 2. The number 7, in turn, is loaded with symbolism: it is the number of perfection or fullness. The number 7 seems to be the "key number" of the Gospel according to Matthew: the Gospel itself has 7 parts, 7 are the requests of the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6: 9-13), 7 are the parables about the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt chapter 13), 7 are the "woe" addressed to the scribes and Pharisees in chapter 23.

³⁷ Hence, this work is also called "The Apocalypse of the 10 Weeks".

³⁸ Chaim Kaplan, "The Generation Schemes in Matthew 1: 1-17; Luke 3: 24s", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 87 (1930), 465-471.

The announcement of the birth of the Savior, which in St. Matthew, unlike St. Luke, is made by the angel of the Lord to the righteous Joseph, refers to similar episodes in the Old Testament³⁹. Comparing the Matthew text with those texts will help us to clarify the literary genre of the pericope Mt 1: 18-25, which could be defined as a "Christological midrash".⁴⁰ Xavier Léon-Dufour identified the elements that make up the scheme of the wonderful news: the appearance of the angel (1: 20), the disturbance of the human subject (1: 20), the message of the angel (1: 20-21), the objection of the human subject (1: 21), the sign given by the angel to the human subject, and the indication of the name of the one who is born (1: 21).⁴¹

Another Old Testament literary (and theological) motif that appears in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" is the "dream". The Lord spoke to His elect, repeatedly, in/through a dream; he does it even now in the case of the righteous Joseph, the fiancé of the Blessed Virgin. The dreams of righteous Joseph remind us of the dreams of the righteous Joseph in the Book of Genesis. Sofia Cavalletti says that the dreams of the biblical patriarchs "are rather words and not visions or visions. These people of God are brought into a state between wakefulness and sleep, during which they receive a message from God. Eve was created from Adam's rib, in such a state; Patriarch Abraham is promised in his sleep (Gen 15: 12), and the patriarch Jacob finds out his future in his sleep (Gen 28: 10 ff.). In these cases, sleep is the most appropriate means by which God makes His will known; sleep and dreaming are "the ineffable vehicle of the voice of God."⁴²

The arrival in Jerusalem of the Magi from the East who were looking for "the One who was born King of the Jews" seems to evoke the visit that the Queen of Sheba made to King Solomon to admire his wisdom (1 Kgs 10: 12). And she was an illustrious representative of paganism, she came from the East and brought with her "gifts" (not tribute) and was impressed and conquered, Like the Magi, by the Jewish monarch⁴³. The veiled allusions of Matthew's painting

³⁹ Gen 17-18; Ex 3-4; 1 Kgs 1-2.

⁴⁰ The angel of the Lord appears to Hagar, the servant of the patriarch Abraham (Gen 16: 7-12); he appears to Abraham (Gen 17: 15-22; 18: 4-14; he appears to Gideon (Jdg. chap. 6). The purpose of these stories is to highlight the future mission of the child whose birth is announced. This future mission is expressed by the indication of the name, as is the case in the text of Matthew 1: 18-25. Cf. J. Ponthot, "L'Évangile de l'Enfance selon S. Matthieu: Doctrinal Perspectives of Mt 1-2," *Revue Diocésaine de Tournai* 19 (1964), 628.

⁴¹ Xavier Léon-Dufour, "l'Annonciation à Joseph", in *Études d'Évangile* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), 76-78.

⁴² Sofia Cavalletti, "I sogni di Giuseppe", in *Bibbia e Oriente* 2 (1960), 149-151.

⁴³ Edgar J. Brun, "The Magi Episode in Mt 2", in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 23 (1961), 32-39.

refer to the wonderful event of the Exodus. The scene in which King Herod summons “all the chief priests and scribes of the people” (Mt 2: 4 – ESV) evokes the meeting that the king of Egypt had with the Magi and his astrologers (Exd 7: 11). King Herod’s insane command to kill the Messiah (Mt 2: 13), and then the order to kill the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings (Mt 2: 16-18) evoke, first, Pharaoh’s order against Moses (Exd 2: 15) and against the children of Israel (Exd 1: 15-17). Herod “seeks” (gr. ζητεῖν), and Pharaoh “when he heard of this deed, he sought (gr. ἐζήτην) to kill Moses” (Exd 2: 15).

The relationship between Matthew 2: 20-21 and Exodus 4: 19-20 confirms this parallelism. Joseph “rose and took the Child and His Mother by night and departed (ἀνεχώρησεν) to Egypt” (Mt 2: 14 – ESV). Beyond that, Moses “fled (ἀνεχώρησεν) from Pharaoh and settled in the land/land of Midian” (Is 2: 15 – ESV). In the midrashic texts on the Exodus, these details about Moses’ childhood appear even closer to St. Matthew’s account of the Savior’s childhood. In the Jerusalem Fair, it is said that Pharaoh dreamed of a scale that had on one plate “the whole land of Egypt”, and on the other plate a ring that weighed heavier than the whole land of Egypt. Pharaoh immediately summoned all the Magi, Jannes and Jambres, “the chiefs of the Magi”, who explained to Pharaoh that “a son will be born in the community of the children of Israel, and that child will destroy Egypt”.⁴⁴

The Jewish historian Joseph Flavius, in his well-known work “Jewish Antiquities” speaks of “a scribe of holy things (the scribes were skilled in predicting what was to happen) announced to the king that at that time a child would be born of Jewish blood who, left to grow up, would remove the Egyptians from the reign, making the Israelites stronger; His virtue will be unsurpassed and his memory will endure forever. Frightened by the scribe’s prediction, the king commanded that all the boys brought into the world by the tribe of Israelites should henceforth be thrown into the river and killed.”⁴⁵

According to the interpretation proposed by the Magi Jannes and Jambres (in *the Jerusalem Fair*), a court eunuch (in *Sefer ha-Zikronoth*), a prince (in *the Chronicle of Moses*) or a scribe of the holy place (in *Jewish Antiquities*), summoned or accidentally come before the king, the birth of a child who “will destroy Egypt” is announced (in *the Jerusalem Fair*), or which would have brought misfortune upon Egypt (in *the Chronicle of Moses*). The one who will be born “is the one who will destroy Egypt” and “the one who will humiliate the Egyptians

⁴⁴ Renée Bloch, “*Quelques aspects de la figure de Moïse dans la tradition rabbinique*”, in “*Cahiers sioniens*” 8 (1954), 224.

⁴⁵ Flavius Iosephus, *Antichități iudaice, Cartea a II-a, IX, 2*. Traducere și note de Ion Acsan (București: Editura Hasefer, 2000), 100.

and exalt his fellow Jews” (in *Jewish Antiquities*). This news filled the king and his people with fear and terror (as happened in the case of Herod and Jerusalem, in Mt 2: 3). The king of Egypt, “frightened by this announcement,” ordered the killing of the male children of the Jews (in *Jewish Antiquities*), but the deliverer miraculously escaped this persecution. The disturbance of Herod the Great and the inhabitants of Jerusalem over the birth of the “King of the Jews” can be explained in the light of these extra-biblical references⁴⁶.

St. Matthew, being a Jew and writing to Judeo-Christians, certainly conformed to rabbinic techniques and appealed to Old Testament models; but while the rabbinic midrash was the centre of interest in the Torah, in the Gospels the focal point is the Christ event. However, there is a reversal of perspective. While in the rabbinic interpretation Scripture was the measure of the event, the Savior Jesus Christ became, for St. Matthew, the measure of Scripture. We no longer start from Scripture to apply it to the current life of the people, but from the life of Christ the Savior, to see in it the fulfillment or perfection of the word⁴⁷. In any case, the sapiential character of Matei’s writing is obvious. Therefore, more than the search for historiographical accuracy or the singularity of detail, it is important to receive the theological message, sometimes clothed in symbolic and dramatic imagery, in accordance with the literary technique common in the Jewish environment⁴⁸.

The most surprising detail in the episode of the worship of the Magi is the star that appeared to them in the East and led them first to Jerusalem, then to the place of the Lord’s birth. The appearance of a star in the vault of the night sky is a common motif in biblical and extra-biblical literature⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Judah David Eisenstein, “*Hagadah shel Pesah*” (New-York, Hebrew Publishing Company, 1928), 355. in Renée Bloch, «Quelques aspects de la figure de Moïse», 224. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell’infanzia*, 38-39.

⁴⁷ René Laurentin, “*I Vangeli dell’infanzia di Cristo. La verità del Natale al di là dei miti*” (Cinisello Balsamo: Edizioni Paoline, 1986), 66. The original title: “*Les Évangiles de l’Enfance du Christ. Vérité de Noël au-delà des mythes. Exégèse et sémiotique, historicité et théologie*” (Paris: Desclée, 1984²). Raymond E. Brown, “*The Birth of the Messiah According to Matthew and Luke* (Assisi, 1981). The original title: “*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*” (New-York: Doubleday, 1977).

⁴⁸ Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 222.

⁴⁹ In the old mentality, the birth of an important character was accompanied (in the biographical reconstruction of that person) by the appearance of a sign in the sky. On the occasion of the birth of Alexander Severus, a “*stella magnitudinis*” was seen in the sky; for Mithriades, the great king of the Parthians, a star shone in the sky for 70 days, and at the death of Julius Caesar a star shone in the sky for a week. Cf. Suetonius, “*Viețile celor doisprezece Cezari*”, (București: Gramar, 2005), 88.

In our case, St. Matthew most likely had in mind the text of Numbers 24: 17. Like the pagan prophet Balaam (Num 23: 7), the Magi also come from the East (Mt 2: 1-2). The connection between the Matthew text and the Numbers text has been observed since antiquity by St. Irenaeus⁵⁰, Origen⁵¹, Ignatius Theophorus⁵², and St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher⁵³. Jean Daniélou directs our attention to Genesis 37: 9 and to the “star” of Joseph, who, in a dream, announces his future greatness. This Old Testament text has been interpreted messianically, in relation to Christ. The disciple of St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Hippolytus the Roman, in his work entitled “The Blessings of Isaac and James,” comments on Joseph’s dreams. “He (Joseph) saw the Word of God in anticipation.”⁵⁴

This detail of St. Matthew’s account also has resonances in rabbinic traditions: in the *Mekhilta* of Rabbi Simon B. Jochai, we read that “when Moses was born, his house was filled with light like that of a star, like the light of the sun or like the light of the moon.”⁵⁵ Much more obvious similarities in this regard are found in two accounts of Abraham’s birth: “Sefer ha-Yashar” and “Ma’asé Abraham.”

The murder of the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings (Mt 2: 16-18) has resonances with the story of Moses’ childhood and the grand event of the Exodus, but St. Matthew associates this event with the prophetic text of Jeremiah 31: 15. That text, while “justifying” the mourning that struck the biblical people, casts on the event the sinister shadows of exile and, at the same time, the joy of repatriation and restoration.

These stories centered on or oriented on/towards the event of the Exodus were reread and reinterpreted annually on the Passover feast and were even known at the popular level. M. Daube and C. H. Cave consider that the “bridge” of these Jewish traditions in the popular environment and in Christian circles was the celebration of the Passover feast. On this occasion, not only were these events recounted, but also other pious stories that served to edify the listeners. Therefore, the Jewish Passover meal (*Seder* or *Pesach Haggadah*) was the source of these midrashim, or at least those we have evoked earlier. Like any

⁵⁰ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, III, 9, 2, in “Sources chrétiennes”, vol. 100 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1965), 34.

⁵¹ Origen, *Împotriva lui Celsus* 1, 59, în *PSB* 9, (București: EIBMBOR, 1983), 83.

⁵² Sf. Ignatie Teoforul, *Epistola către Efeseni XIX*, 2, în “*Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*” (București: EIBMBOR, 1995), 196.

⁵³ Sf. Iustin Martirul și Filozoful, *Dialogul cu iudeul Trifon*, CVI, în *PSB* 2, (București: EIBMBOR, 1980), 218.

⁵⁴ Jean Daniélou, “*La teologia del giudeo-cristianesimo*”, (Bologna: Centro Editoriale Dehoniano, 1980), 308. The original title: “*Théologie du judéo-christianisme. Histoire des doctrines chrétiennes avant Nicée*, I”, Desclée & Co., Tournai, 1958.

⁵⁵ Renée Bloch, “*Quelques aspects de la figure de Moïse dans la tradition rabbinique*”, 206.

liturgical text, the Hebrew *Seder* was susceptible to appropriate developments and additions. On the other hand, it was not difficult to evoke, during the commemoration of the Passover, the biblical episodes from the lives of Moses and Jacob/Israel, which occurred at the beginning and end of Israel's Egyptian period⁵⁶.

In this light, the cry of Rachel (considered the mother of the biblical people) and the prophetic text of Jeremiah take on new meanings: Rachel weeps, being the mother of Jacob/Israel, the persecuted father of the biblical people, not for the children of Bethlehem, but for her “children”. Joachim Gnilka considers that for the Evangelist Matthew, Rachel's cry refers to the unbelieving destiny of Israel, and the killing of the children of the Jews becomes an anticipation or a prefiguration of the future judgment on Jerusalem⁵⁷. D. Daube considers that the παῖδας in Matthew 2: 16 embraces, at the same time, both boys and girls, that is, all the children of Bethlehem, as verse 18 seems to suggest (gr. τέκνα). In the prophetic text of Jeremiah, we have υἱοί (in the Septuagint), the same word in Jeremiah 31: 15, and “banim” (in the Masoretic text). From a philological point of view, D. Daube's assumption is quite unclear, because in Matthew 21: 28 and 22: 24 the meaning of the word τέκνα does not refer to both sexes, but only to the male sex. However, the connection of the text of Matthew 2: 13-18 with the midrashic texts is obvious⁵⁸.

The last episode of the Gospel of Jesus' “childhood” in St. Matthew's version is the Holy Family's settlement in Nazareth (Mt 2: 22-23). The reader of the Gospel is surprised by the formulation of the reason for his return, which the angel gives to Joseph: “Arise, take the Child and His mother, and go into the land of Israel, for those who sought to take the Child's soul have died” (Mt 2: 20). The plural used in the text “they died” does not correspond to the situation just described in verse 13, according to which Herod alone sought to suppress the life of the Infant Jesus. Some exegetes have noted that the text of Matthew is an almost literal reproduction of Exodus 4: 19b (in the Septuagint), where God commands Moses to flee from Pharaoh's threats. This literary contact could confirm the influence of the Mosaic narrative cycle (*Moses' Haggadah*) on the evangelical tradition composed by St. Matthew⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Roger Le Déaut, “*Liturgie juive et Nouveau Testament: le témoignage des versions araméennes*” (Roma, Institut Biblique Pontifical, 1965), 7-16.

⁵⁷ Joachim Gnilka, “*The Gospel of Matthew*” (Brescia: Paideia Editrice, 1990), 94. The original title: “*The Gospel of Matthew*” (Freiburg: Herder, 1974).

⁵⁸ David Daube, “*The Earliest Structure of the Gospels*”, in “*New Testament Studies*” 5 (1959), 184.

⁵⁹ Rinaldo Fabris, “*Matteo: traduzione e commento*” (Roma: Edizioni Borla, 1982), 69; see Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 311-312.

However, the Infant Jesus cannot settle in Judea, which, for St. Matthew, symbolizes unbelieving Israel and is opaque to the message of Christ, but must head for Galilee, a region with a mixed population, inhabited by many pagans. Christ the Savior will begin His mission and His public activity here in Galilee, shining the light of salvation amid a people who “dwelt in darkness” (Mt 4: 16).⁶⁰

The choice of Nazareth as a homeland was not accidental. The Evangelist reproduces in his text a final prophetic reference that put the exegetes in difficulty, since nowhere in the prophetic pages do we find the reference “that he shall be called a Nazarene” (Mt 2: 23). Nazareth is part of a divine plan, summarized in the title by which Jesus is designated as a “Nazarene”. I think that St. Matthew also pushes the note a little, because he expresses himself slightly evasively, speaking, generically, of “prophets”, and not of a specific “prophet”, as he had accustomed us until now in the previous quotations.

It is possible that St. Matthew made a reference to the vow of the Nazirite (evoked in the case of Samson, in the Book of Judges 13: 5-7, but also in other cases), but also to the word “nēzer” in Isaiah 11: 1-3⁶¹. As we have seen, verse 23 perplexed all exegetes. Blessed Jerome in his commentary on the book of the Prophet Isaiah, written around 390 A.D. Commenting on this verse, he states: “In connection with what all scholars seek and do not find, that is, where (in the prophets) it is written, ‘Nazorah shall be called’ (Mt 2: 23), the Jewish scholars are of the opinion that this quotation is taken from the text of Isaiah 11: 1⁶². The same is done by K. Stendhal⁶³.

And yet, Alfred Loisy and Stanislas Lyonnet consider that the text of Matthew 2: 23 must be related to the text of Judges 13: 3-7⁶⁴. The words that the angel of the Lord addresses to Manoe’s wife are similar to the words of Matthew 1: 21 and 2: 23: “for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines” (Jdg 13: 5).

Certainly, the messianic interpretation of the name “nazoreu” is easily forced; it is based on the phonetic affinity of this name with the word “nēter” (which translates as “shoot” or “branch”). Of course, the term “Nazarene” in Matthew 2: 23 and Mark 1: 24; 10, 47; 14, 67; 16: 6, is not the same as the term

⁶⁰ Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 312.

⁶¹ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell’infanzia*, 44.

⁶² Blessed Hieronymus, “In Isaiah 11:1”, in PL 24: 144–148. Apud Constantin Preda, *Cartea neamului lui Iisus Hristos*, 314.

⁶³ Krister Stendhal, “*The School of St. Matthew and Its Use of the Old Testament*” (Uppsala, 1964), 103.

⁶⁴ Matthew Black, “*The Scrolls and Christian Origins*” (London: Nelson, 1961), 83.

“Nazir”, but we are talking about two terms that, phonetically, are very similar. The Evangelist Matthew most likely wanted to highlight an aspect of the person and mission of Christ the Savior. In the Septuagint, the term “nazir” is identified with the Greek term ἅγιος (*holy*), which is used quite often in place of the other. We can say that “Jesus of Nazareth” evokes in the mind of Saint Matthew both the institution of the Naziriate and the figure of one of the most famous consecrated figures in the Jewish tradition.

E. Schweizer considers that Jesus was first designated as a “Nazarite” and as a “(consecrated) Saint of God” and that the translation of the term into Greek evoked Jesus’ relationship with the city of Nazareth, a fact that suggested the formation of the adjective “Nazorean”, a word translated by us as “Nazarene”. This hypothesis seems to be supported by the text of Mark 1: 24, in which the two designations given to Christ the Savior appear together: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.”⁶⁵

For modern exegesis, the Jewish midrash is in no way synonymous with legend or myth. More than a free composition, the midrash is a personal reconstruction of the Gospel deeds, aided by and attentive to the biblical, canonical, and extra-canonical tradition. St. Matthew recounts the Nativity of the Lord by looking to the history of the people of Israel and finding in past events the prefiguration or anticipation of the new. Caught up in this theological endeavour, he loses sight (we believe intentionally) of the real details of the events he relates or replaces them with other features of the events that he has in his mind or before his eyes.

If the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew represent a midrashic story, this means that they do not represent an “exact reconstruction” or a simple collection of information related to the Savior’s childhood, but a “meditation” or “theological reflection” of the events of the beginning of the earthly life of Christ the Savior in the light, reflected or direct, of biblical history.

The references to the past of the biblical people are not a display of the hagiographer’s erudition, but a necessary tactical device designed to make known, enrich, and deepen the significance of facts which, at least on the surface, do not exclude the common dimensions of an anecdote. In this hypostasis, the holy

⁶⁵ Eduard Schweizer, “*Er wird Nazoräer beissen (zu Mc 1, 24; Mt 2, 23)*”, in Walther Eltester, “*Judentum – Urchristentum – Kirche*” (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 26; Berlin, 1960), 90–93; pe aceeași linie de interpretare, vezi James A. Sanders, “Nazoraios in Matthew 2, 23”, in “*Journal of Biblical Literature*” 84 (1965), 169–172. Apud Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell’infanzia*, 45.

author is more of an exegete than a historian, because his main concern is that the narrated episode is better linked to pre-existing models than to historical reality (which he does not exclude).

The old texts and traditions, connected with and in contact with the new events that took place on the scene of the history of salvation, acquire a new understanding and are enriched with a new content, and the new events that have taken place, connected with the old shadows and prefiguration's, real or apparent, acquire the proportions of the entire preparatory phase of salvation. Understood in this way, the Jewish midrash can be linked to the edifying, homiletic, catechetical, theological, and folkloric exegesis of the ancient Jewish writers, the Holy Fathers of the Church, and later with that of the medieval biblical commentators⁶⁶.

Alfred Loisy's assertion that the text of Matthew 1-2 "is composed according to the model of rabbinic commentaries on the Old Testament"⁶⁷ does not sound today, after more than a century of exegesis, as a denial or a challenge to the historicity of the facts related in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood". The Jewish Midrash is not a genre that contrasts with the dignity of the holy book and does not compromise the reality of the facts it recounts. The term "midrash" means "study", "reflection," or "exegesis" and is used in a generic sense.

Its differences depend on the type of commentary or the nature of the books chosen. In addition to devotional or parenetic readings (*Haggadoth*) of the sacred text, we have biblical updates (*Pesharim*) and legal commentaries (*Halakoth*). In Matthew 1-2, we find, at the same time, the edifying story (*haggadah*) and the actualization (*peshet*) or the updated or Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, or, if you like, the rereading of the Old Testament in the light of Christ⁶⁸.

This brief presentation of the substance of the first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew might surprise some biblical scholars⁶⁹, raising questions about them, but it cannot be dismissed a priori.

⁶⁶ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 46.

⁶⁷ Alfred Loisy, *Les Évangiles synoptiques* (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1971), 331.

⁶⁸ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 47.

⁶⁹ Not all exegetes and commentators agree on the presence of the Jewish midrash in Matthew 1-2. These authors prefer to speak of "a mere scriptural illustration of the acts of the New Testament". Addison G. Wright, in his work *The Literary Genre - Midrash*, denies the midrashic elaboration of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood", "because," he says, "we do not find in the two chapters of the Gospel the technical procedure of the genre in question." We do not start with the Old Testament episodes to arrive at a theological re-elaboration, but rather with the person of Christ.

Charles Perrot, along the lines of Addison Wright, has the same opinion: "We are not in the presence of the Jewish midrash, neither the exegetical nor the homiletic one carefully elaborated in the Jewish synagogues, but we are before narrative traditions of a popular character in which Scripture is, in a certain way, rewritten for the better edification of the people."⁷⁰

The midrashic literary genre used in Matthew 1-2 is recognized today by many exegetes and commentators. Renee Bloch states that "The Gospel of Matthew makes use of a little bit of all the procedures of the Jewish midrash. We can cite, in this regard, as an example, the text of Numbers 24:17, whose echo is heard in Matthew 2:1-12, or the text of Hosea 11:1, which resonates with the text of Matthew 2:13-15, but also the text of Jeremiah 31:15, whose echo is heard in Matthew 2:16-18"⁷¹.

René Laurentin, in his work "*Structure et Théologie de Luc I-II*" (p. 93-100), offers an "Excursion" on the midrashic literary genre, applicable to both versions of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood". R. Laurentin agrees with Renee Bloch's statement. Xavier Léon-Dufour asks rhetorically: "Can we consider the stories in Matthew 1-2 a midrash?" and answers: "Without a doubt! Moreover, these stories belong to this edifying and parenthetical genre, closely linked to biblical history."⁷² Regarding the affinity between the childhood of the great Moses and the childhood of Christ the Savior, as proposed by the authors quoted above, Xavier Léon-Dufour clarifies his own point of view by saying: "Without fear of being wrong, we can affirm that the midrash about the childhood of Moses had a clear influence on the Matthew story"⁷³.

Jewish exegesis played an intermediate role between the two Testaments. Many traditions, which have not been preserved in the pages of Scripture, owe their origin to the synagogue readings, places where the interpretations of the teachers of the Law reflected the different tastes of the listeners. The Old Testament was not simply handed down to posterity but was accompanied by its interpretation⁷⁴. The authors of the New Testament took over a Scripture that had already been commented on, developed, illustrated, embellished, and, we could say, "mythologized".⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Charles Perrot, "*Les récits d'enfance dans la Haggada antérieure au IIe siècle de notre ère*", in "*Recherches de Science Religieuse*" 55 (1967), 304-305.

⁷¹ Renée Bloch, *Midrash*, in "*Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*" V (Paris, 1957), 1263-1281.

⁷² Xavier Léon-Dufour, "*Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*", 344.

⁷³ Xavier Léon-Dufour, "*Les Évangiles et l'histoire de Jésus*", 347.

⁷⁴ Roger Le Déaut, "*Tradition juive et exégèse chrétiennes*", in "*Jalones de la Historia de la Salvación en el Antiguo y Nuevo Testamento*", in "Proceedings of the 26th Spanish Bible Week, II" (Madrid, 1969), 7-33.

⁷⁵ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell'infanzia*, 50.

Historical Values of the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood" in Matthew's Approach

In the previous pages, we have spoken of the literary genre used by St. Matthew in the account of the first two chapters of his Gospel, but I have not specified which are the elements that belong to his inventive freedom or his literary-theological genius and which of them belong to historical reality. The answer to this question is not simple or easy at all. We need to draw a line of demarcation between the different layers of the writing of the first two chapters of the Gospel. From the beginning, we will say that any attempt in this regard (which has already been made, or which will be made in the future) will remain at the stage of mere hypothesis. Rudolf Bultmann and his disciples considered the accounts in Matthew 1-2 to be mere "legends": pious legends with no historical foundation, but only a religious or edifying one. Legend and historical narration, though distinct, are often conflated in the art of storytelling in Antiquity. We cannot distinguish them from each other. Within Western theology, the traditional interpretation no longer has many followers⁷⁶.

As for the Davidic lineage of Christ the Savior, the Matthew genealogy of Jesus is incomplete, imprecise, and approximate. Biblical genealogies are a legal and literary expedient rather than an archival element. Secondly, the Matthew genealogy differs from that which St. Luke gives us (ch. 3); he flies over some reigns (three between King Jehoram and King Uzziah); confuses the name of Ammon with that of Amos, King Asa, and Asaph; it covers the post-exilic period that lasted about 538 years with 15 kings; affirms that Jeconiah, contrary to historical truth, had brothers (Mt 1: 11); assigns each group of the three 14 names, whereas in reality the first and third groups contain only 13 names; makes Zerubbabel a Davidic descendant, although no biblical text explicitly states this⁷⁷.

⁷⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Göttingen, 1931), 260. Evaluation of this theme, see the clarifications given by Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Matteo: Il Vangelo della Chiesa* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1998), 28–61.

⁷⁷ The difficulties related to the historicity of the Savior's genealogy in the version of St. Matthew were highlighted by Alfred Loisy, at the beginning of the twentieth century. Loisy believes that the issue of the Savior's Davidic lineage arose during the anti-Jewish polemic. Jesus' family could not possess noble titles. The first Christian apologists said that the family tree of the righteous Joseph was burned by King Herod the Great, who, wishing to hide his own past and his modest lineage, ordered the archives to be destroyed: "Herod, who was not at all interested in the Jewish nation, but who was embarrassed by his modest origin (Herod was not a Jew), he ordered the registers of these genealogies to be burned, imagining that in this way he would increase the fame of the nation by the fact that no one could henceforth ascend the fame of the nation through public

The Savior’s Galilean provenance led Christian apologists to inquire about His birthplace and lineage, and the usual answer to the question, “Where did He come from?” was, “He came down from heaven!”

These statements indicate that the author’s historical mindset differs from our modern mindset regarding this fact, but this is not enough to call into question the substantial value of the document (genealogy). If the Savior Jesus Christ was a historical figure, we cannot believe that the evangelist Matthew would have put Him on an imaginary pedestal by inventing His genealogy! No matter how many question marks the genealogical list of St. Matthew may raise, it cannot be said that we have before our eyes a simple literary expedient.

On the other hand, the belonging of Christ the Savior to the family of King David is an indisputable truth, often repeated in the pages of the Old and New Testaments and in Holy Tradition, and is not based on a simple literary artifice.

After the genealogical preamble, the Evangelist Matthew concretely introduces us to the wonderful event of the Savior’s Birth. Perhaps in this case too, an important role was played by the dramatization or romanticization of the event, but not so much that it can be said that the entire story is a “literary fiction” or “an invented story”. The miraculous birth of the Messiah is clearly emphasized (Mt 1: 16; 1: 18), and the context in which it is recounted is as real as possible: Joseph’s crisis and the Lord’s intervention through his angel. St. Matthew is concerned about this event, which he mentions several times (Mt 1: 16, 18, 20, 23, 25) and for which he brings all the evidence at his disposal: the experience of the righteous Joseph, the prophetic text of Isaiah 7: 14 – ESV, and the dates of tradition (Mt 1: 25).

The historical content of the second chapter is even more problematic. Certainly, the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is the richest in romanticized details. The unexpected appearance of the Magi in Jerusalem and then in Bethlehem, the unusual movement of the star on the celestial vault of night, the dreams of Joseph, and the apparitions of the angel make this chapter a narrative rather than a historical one. Alfred Loisy states that “a historian could not easily recognize himself in the midst of these events”.⁷⁸ The coming of the Magi to Jerusalem illustrates in advance the “pilgrimage of the peoples to Mount

registers to the patriarchs or to the relatives of proselytes or foreigners with whom they had become acquainted” Cf. Eusebiu de Cezareea, “*Istoria Bisericească*”, *Cartea Întâia, VII, 13*, în *PSB* 13, (București: EIBMBOR, 1987), 50.

⁷⁸ Alfred Loisy, “*Les Évangiles synoptiques*” (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1971), 389.

Zion”⁷⁹, the conversion of the pagan world to the Christian faith, which was already taking place at the time when Saint Matthew was writing his Gospel. The gifts that the Magi bring to the Child (Is 60: 6) emphasize their submission to the King of Israel, who, in the biblical tradition, is Jehovah and, for Saint Matthew, is the Messiah Christ⁸⁰.

Of course, we can still believe that the coming of the Magi to Jerusalem represents a real fact that happened then, at the birth of the Savior, and not just an anticipation of an event that will happen only later, but this fact is too unlikely. It is surprising that the Messiah was recognized at His birth by prominent representatives of paganism and rejected and persecuted by His countrymen. On the other hand, it is surprising that such an important and wonderful event had no echo in the historical sources contemporary to the New Testament. Historical and literary models existed, and they could have inspired St. Matthew in the elaboration of the episode of the worship of the Magi. For example, at the inauguration of the city of Caesarea, nobles from all over the Near East came to Palestine. The historian Suetonius says that a large delegation of King Tiridates of Armenia arrived in Rome on Nero’s coronation⁸¹. It is well known in Jewish history the visit to the city of Jerusalem of Queen Helena of Adiabene (sometime between 40-50 AD), then, in the biblical tradition, the famous visit that the queen of Sheba made to Jerusalem to King Solomon (1 Kgs 10: 1-13).

It is possible that Saint Matthew influenced this painting, the setting, the details, the shades, or the colors a little. Before the first conversions to the Christian faith, St. Matthew appealed to his literary talent and to historical-literary reminiscences to give this biblical episode its due importance. The current composition of the text, in which the faith and piety of some pagans are in obvious contrast with the unbelief of the Jewish authorities and in which the tension is suspended until the guests from the East fall on their knees before the Child, responds to an apologetic and pastoral intention, more than historical⁸².

The Savior’s flight to Egypt, due to the persecution of Herod, has echoes in biblical and extra-biblical stories (Moses, Romulus, and Sargon), but this does not mean that it was not a real historical fact. In the case of Herod, the Great, an excessively suspicious and suspicious king, a quick spiller of innocent blood, the

⁷⁹ See the following texts: Is 2: 1-5; 60: 1-22; Ps 71: 9-11.

⁸⁰ Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell’infanzia*, 58-59.

⁸¹ Suetonius, *Viețile celor doisprezece Cezari*, 230.

⁸² Ortensio da Spinetoli, *Introduzione ai vangeli dell’infanzia*, 60.

persecution of the newborn Child is as real as possible⁸³. It is possible, however, to see in the attitude of the insane king an anticipation of future persecutions that will befall, first on the Messiah, then on Christians, a fact that was already happening at the time when St. Matthew was writing his Gospel. Even if the environment in which Herod moved was made up more of superstition than of legitimate belief, the word “Messiah” could have a magical resonance; nevertheless, his gesture remains unspeakable and absurd.

The last episode of the Gospel of Jesus’ “childhood”: his return from Egypt and his settlement in Nazareth did not create any problems of a historical nature. It is the point on which the Holy Evangelists Matthew and Luke agree, and, together with them, the entire evangelical tradition holds that Jesus is known as a “Nazarene” and a “Galilean”.

The Theological Message of the Gospel of Jesus’ “Childhood”

The last point on which we will dwell in this study is the content or theological message of the Gospel of Jesus’ “childhood.” Clearly and clearly, St. Matthew wanted to present to his readers (then and today) the person of the Savior Jesus Christ, God Incarnate, and His connections with the history of salvation and its characters. His coming into the world was welcomed by the representatives of paganism and rejected by “His own” (Jn 1: 11 – ESV). As King of the Jews, he was crucified on the Cross (Jn 19: 19), becoming, in fact and by right, the “King of the pagans” who had come to worship Him. For this reason, the Matthew account is a work, with its own thesis and demonstration.

The development of this work was gradual: the author argues that it is based on historical facts (the first layer), scriptural references (the second layer), and, finally, the rabbinic traditions of the time (the third layer). It is an explicit and clear theology. The content of the first two chapters of the Gospel is Christological: Jesus is “Son of David”, “Son of Abraham”, “Immanuel”, “Savior”, “King or King of the Jews”, and “The Nazarene”. These Christological titles already highlight His saving mission or work.

Among its titles, the Davidic lineage stands out, and the genealogy St. Matthew offers attests to Jesus’ belonging to the lineage of King David. Christ the Savior is the rightful heir of the promise that the Lord God made to His ancestor, King David.

⁸³ King Herod's cruelty remained proverbial: he killed his family, some of his children, exterminated groups of subjects, especially his opponents. Cf. Flavius Josepus, *Antichitãți iudaice*, 15-17.

The episode of the Magi's worship is linked to what St. Matthew told us in the first chapter of his Gospel. The story in the second chapter affirms Jesus' messianic status as clearly and obviously as possible. The messianic status of Jesus is questioned by the religious authorities of Israel and confirmed by the prophecy of Micah 5: 1, and accepted by prominent representatives of paganism.

The Savior's Davidic lineage emphasizes His messiahship, and the Abrahamite lineage emphasizes His ties to the people of Israel and to all humanity. Being the last of Abraham's family, Christ the Savior is the descendant who carries within Himself the promises of His distant ancestor. For this reason, Christ the Savior is the "true Israel", the Only begotten Son of the heavenly Father, the subject of divine goodwill (Mt 3: 17).

The first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew present us with the Person of the Savior, but also give a glimpse of His future mission. The Messiah will restore the throne of His father, David, and will be the heir to the promises that the Lord God made to the patriarch Abraham. The Messiah Christ has a precise mission for Israel and for all nations.

The little city of David—Bethlehem—stands in stark contrast to the holy city of Jerusalem. The believers (those who have adhered to the Christian faith)—as always—will see all the forces of power (secular and religious) united against them, but these forces will not win. Religious power and authority, instead of putting themselves at the service of God's plan, will submit to political power. This is on the side of the insane king, as are all the organs of power.

The work of the Messiah is threatened from the very beginning, but His star rises high in the sky of history, attracting the attention of distant peoples. The persecution of Herod, the murder of the infants in Bethlehem and its surroundings, and the rejection of the Messiah by the political and religious leaders show clearly what dangers and difficulties His work (mission) will face. The shadows may fall upon the Messiah, but God's plan will not be thwarted. If Herod's gesture caused tears and pain in Bethlehem and evoked the weeping of Rachel (the mother of the biblical people) on the occasion of the Babylonian exile (Jer 31: 15), the words that the prophet of the Lord continues to utter herald the end of the period of sorrow: "Thus says the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears, for you will have payment for your work (your trouble), says the Lord, they (the Jews) will also return from the enemy's land" (Jer 31: 16 - ESV).

If the evangelist Matthew also considered the second part of Jeremiah's prophecy, then he looked not only at the affliction of his people but also saw "in the Spirit" and its restoration. In fact, Jeremiah's prophecy is part of a larger

discourse by the prophet, in which optimism prevails over pessimism. Rachel "weeps" for her children and does not want to comfort herself, but the prophet urges his contemporaries to look to the future with confidence, because the people's trouble will turn into joy! It seems to St. Matthew that the coming of Christ represents the moment seen only "in the Spirit" by the prophet Jeremiah: the time of suffering is about to end, and every form of slavery (especially spiritual and moral) is about to end.

The Evangelist Matthew concludes the Gospel of the Savior's "childhood" with a (vague) reference to the figure of a great liberator from Israel's distant past: Samson. Settling in Nazareth, Jesus begins His vocation as a Nazarite (or consecrated to the Lord).

Concluding considerations

The theology St. Matthew expounds in the first two chapters of his Gospel is polemical. The author of the Gospel does not present us with any "savior", but the Savior of Jews and pagans, the Savior of sinners. The summoning of the Magi to Jerusalem, and then to Bethlehem, is in manifest opposition to the stubbornness and unbelief of the Jewish authorities. The chief priests and scribes of the people know how to pronounce theoretically on the place of the Lord's birth, but they do not move to seek Him and to adore Him. And they do not do this even in the wake of the pagans or in imitation of their gesture. On the contrary, while the Magi come from far away to worship the Child, they plot against His life. This episode serves as a prophecy of the turnaround that will occur during the Savior's preaching. Today, the Jews do not bother to take an interest in the identity of the Child born in the manger of Bethlehem; tomorrow, the same Jews will refuse to discover and recognize it in His wonderful deeds. And in the future, it will also be the pagans who will believe instead of the Jews (Mt 27: 54).

Along with pagans, sinners have a privileged place in the theology of St. Matthew. In Jesus' genealogy, there were common sinners: Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba (women of loose morals), along with the Moabite Ruth (a stranger to the Jewish lineage), taking the place of Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, or other illustrious figures in Judaism.

Major personalities and events in the history of Israel take on new and complete meanings in the Gospel of Jesus' "childhood": Moses and the event of the Exodus, the period of the charismatic Judges, the brilliance of the kingdom and wisdom of Solomon, the Babylonian exile, and the hope of restoration. All

this is related to the “Christ event” and, precisely for this reason, the evangelist Matthew wanted to present us with the Gospel of Jesus’ “childhood” in this light.

In the years of His early childhood, Jesus accomplished nothing of the vast “program” that St. Matthew I attributes, but the Evangelist anticipated—through his writing—the news of salvation, giving impetus to the history of salvation (the theological-apologetic intention) and explicitly reaffirming the insufficiency of the Old Testament economy through an open condemnation of Jewish opposition to the Christian faith.

This multifaceted vision of the Gospel of Jesus’ “childhood” helps us better understand the content of this Gospel material, rather than dwelling on the surface of the biblical text, and to strive to discern the evangelist’s hidden theological allusions and intentions. If St. Luke prepared for the readers of his Gospel “a small biblical gallery” in which he exposed seven paintings to their eyes, St. Matthew sketched “an apologetic and theological diptych” in which he presents the first moments of the life of Christ the Savior, which are, at the same time, an “overture” of the life of the Church.

Future exegetical research will further highlight the theological content contained in the first two chapters of the Gospel of St. Matthew, but this does not prevent us from believing that the path taken so far is the right one.

One important thing must always be kept in mind: the mystery of the Lord’s Incarnation is unfathomable to us; Greek philosophy and Jewish theology could not accept or accept it. Beyond our research, the faithful are left with the feeling of wonder or wonder that will always accompany this wonderful event in the history of salvation, the only new one under the sun: “Behold, I am doing,” says the Lord, “a new thing, it gives buds; Don’t you see him?” (Is 43: 19 – ESV).

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