

The nativity of Jesus, nativity of Christ, birth of Jesus or birth of Christ is described in the biblical gospels of Luke and Matthew. The two accounts agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea, his mother Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph, who was descended from King David and was not his biological father, and that his birth was caused by divine intervention. Many modern scholars consider the birth narratives unhistorical because they are laced with theology and present two different accounts which cannot be harmonised into a single coherent narrative. But many others view the discussion of historicity as secondary, given that gospels were primarily written as theological documents rather than chronological timelines.

The nativity is the basis for the Christian holiday of Christmas, and plays a major role in the Christian liturgical year. Many Christians traditionally display small manger scenes depicting the nativity in their homes, or attend nativity plays or Christmas pageants focusing on the nativity cycle in the Bible. Elaborate nativity displays featuring life-sized statues are a tradition in many continental European countries during the Christmas season.

The artistic depiction of the nativity has been an important subject for Christian artists since the 4th century. Artistic depictions of the nativity scene since the 13th century have emphasized the humility of Jesus and promoted a more tender image of him, a major change from the early "Lord and Master" image, mirroring changes in the common approaches taken by Christian pastoral ministry during the same era.

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Early Christians viewed Jesus as "the Lord" and the word Kyrios appears over 700 times in the New Testament, referring to him as such.[112] The use of the word Kyrios in the Septuagint Bible

also assigned to Jesus the Old Testament attributes of an omnipotent God.[112] The use of the term Kyrios, and hence the Lordship of Jesus, pre-dated the Pauline epistles, but Paul expanded and elaborated on the topic.[112]

Pauline writings established among early Christians the Kyrios image, and attributes of Jesus as not only referring to his eschatological victory, but to him as the "divine image" (Greek εἰκών, eikōn) in whose face the glory of God shines forth. This image persisted among Christians as the predominant perception of Jesus for a number of centuries.[113] More than any other title, Kyrios defined the relationship between Jesus and those who believed in him as Christ: Jesus was their Lord and Master who was to be served with all their hearts and who would one day judge their actions throughout their lives.[114]

The lordship attributes associated with the Kyrios image of Jesus also implied his power over all creation.[115][116] Paul then looked back and reasoned that the final lordship of Jesus was prepared from the very beginning, starting with pre-existence and the nativity, based on his obedience as the image of God.[117] Over time, based on the influence of Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux and others, the Kyrios image of Jesus began to be supplemented with a more "tender image of Jesus", and the Franciscan approach to popular piety was instrumental in establishing this image.[116]

The 13th century witnessed a major turning point in the development of a new "tender image of Jesus" within Christianity, as the Franciscans began to emphasize the humility of Jesus both at his birth and his death. The construction of the nativity scene by Francis of Assisi was instrumental in portraying a softer image of Jesus that contrasted with the powerful and radiant image at the Transfiguration, and emphasized how God had taken a humble path to his own birth.[118] As the Black Death raged in Medieval Europe, the two mendicant orders of Franciscans and Dominicans helped the faithful cope with tragedies. One element of the Franciscan approach was the emphasis on the humility of Jesus and the poverty of his birth: the image of God was the image of Jesus, not a severe and punishing God, but himself humble at birth and sacrificed at death.[119] The concept that the omnipotent Creator would set aside all power in order to conquer the hearts of men by love and that he would have been helplessly placed in a manger was as marvelous and as touching to the believers as the sacrifice of dying on the cross in Calvary.[120]

Thus by the 13th century the tender joys of the nativity of Jesus were added to the agony of his Crucifixion and a whole new range of approved religious emotions was ushered in, with wide-ranging cultural impacts for centuries thereafter.[120] The Franciscans approached both ends of this spectrum of emotions. On one hand the introduction of the nativity scene encouraged the tender image of Jesus, while on the other hand Francis of Assisi himself had a deep attachment to the sufferings of Jesus on the Cross and was said to have received the stigmata as an expression of that love. The dual nature of Franciscan piety based both on joy of nativity and the sacrifice at Calvary had a deep appeal among city dwellers and as the Franciscan Friars travelled these emotions spread across the world, transforming the Kyrios image of Jesus to a more tender, loving, and compassionate image.[120] These traditions did not remain limited to Europe and soon spread to the other parts of the world such as Latin America, the Philippines and the United States.[121][122]

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