

CHAPTER VI.
THE NATIVITY OF JESUS THE MESSIAH.
(St. Matthew i. 25; St. Luke ii. 1-20.)

SUCH then was 'the hope of the promise made of God unto the fathers,' for which the twelve tribes, 'instantly serving (God) night and day,' longed - with such vividness, that they read it in almost every event and promise; with such earnestness, that it ever was the burden of their prayers; with such intensity, that many and long centuries of disappointment have not quenched it. Its light, comparatively dim in days of sunshine and calm, seemed to burn brightest in the dark and lonely nights of suffering, as if each gust that swept over Israel only kindled it into fresh flame.

To the question, whether this hope has ever been realised - or rather, whether One has appeared Whose claims to the Messiahship have stood the test of investigation and of time - impartial history can make only one answer. It points to Bethlehem and to Nazareth. If the claims of Jesus have been rejected by the Jewish Nation, He has at least, undoubtedly, fulfilled one part of the Mission prophetically assigned to the Messiah. Whether or not He be the Lion of the tribe of Judah, to Him, assuredly, has been the gathering of the nations, and the isles have waited for His law. Passing the narrow bounds of obscure Judæa, and breaking down the walls of national prejudice and isolation, He has made the sublimer teaching of the Old Testament the common possession of the world, and founded a great Brotherhood, of which the God of Israel is the Father. He alone also has exhibited a life, in which absolutely no fault could be found; and promulgated a teaching, to which absolutely no exception can be taken. Admittedly, He was *the One perfect Man* - the ideal of humanity, His doctrine the one absolute teaching. The world has known none other, none equal. And the world has owned it, if not by the testimony of words, yet by the evidence of facts. Springing from such a people; born, living, and dying in circumstances, and using means, the most unlikely of such results - the Man of Nazareth has, by universal consent, been the mightiest Factor in our world's history: alike politically, socially, intellectually, and morally. If He be not the Messiah, He has at least thus far done the Messiah's work. If He be not the Messiah, there has been none other, before or after Him. If He be not the Messiah, the world has not, and never can have, a Messiah.

To Bethlehem as the birthplace of Messiah, not only Old Testament prediction, but the testimony of Rabbinic teaching, unhesitatingly pointed. Yet nothing could be imagined more directly contrary to Jewish thoughts and feelings - and hence nothing less likely to suggest itself to Jewish invention - than the circumstances which, according to the Gospel-narrative, brought about the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem. A counting of the people, of Census; and that Census taken at the bidding of a heathen Emperor, and executed by one so universally hated as Herod, would represent the *ne plus ultra* of all that was most repugnant to Jewish feeling. If the account of the circumstances, which brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, has no basis in fact, but is a legend invented to locate the birth of the Nazarene in the royal City of David, it must be pronounced most clumsily devised. There is absolutely nothing to account for its origination - either from parallel events in the past, or from contemporary expectancy. Why then connect the birth of their Messiah with what was most repugnant to Israel, especially if, as the advocates of the legendary hypothesis contend, it did not occur at a time when any Jewish Census was taken, but ten years previously?

But if it be impossible rationally to account for any legendary origin of the narrative of Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem, the historical grounds, on which its accuracy has been impugned, are equally insufficient. They resolve themselves into this: that (beyond the Gospel-narrative) we have no solid evidence that Cyrenius was at that time occupying the needful official position in the East, to order such a registration for Herod to carry out. But even this feeble contention is by no means historically unassailable. At any rate, there are two facts, which render any historical mistake by St. Luke on this point extremely difficult to believe. First, he was evidently aware of a Census under Cyrenius, ten years later; secondly, whatever rendering of St. Luke ii. 2 may be adopted, it will at least be admitted, that the intercalated sentence about Cyrenius was not necessary for the narrative, and that the writer must have intended thereby emphatically to mark a certain event. But an author would not be likely to call special attention to a fact, of which he had only indistinct knowledge; rather, if it *must* be mentioned, would he do so in the most indefinite terms. This presumption in favour of St. Luke's

statement is strengthened by the consideration, that such an event as the taxing of Judæa must have been so easily ascertainable by him.

We are, however, not left to the presumptive reasoning just set forth. That the Emperor Augustus made registers of the Roman Empire, and of subject and tributary states, is now generally admitted. This registration - for the purpose of future taxation - would also embrace Palestine. Even if no actual order to that effect had been issued during the lifetime of Herod, we can understand that he would deem it most expedient, both on account of his relations to the Emperor, and in view of the probable excitement which a heathen Census would cause in Palestine, to take steps for making a registration, and that rather according to the Jewish than the Roman manner. This Census, then, arranged by Augustus, and taken by Herod in his own manner, was, according to St. Luke, 'first [really] carried out when Cyrenius was Governor of Syria,' some years after Herod's death and when Judæa had become a Roman province.

We are now prepared to follow the course of the Gospel-narrative. In consequence of 'the decree of Cæsar Augustus,' Herod directed a general registration to be made after the Jewish, rather than the Roman, manner. Practically the two would, indeed, in this instance, be very similar. According to the Roman law, all country-people were to be registered in their 'own city' - meaning thereby the town to which the village or place, where they were born, was attached. In so doing, the 'house and lineage' (the *nomen* and *cognomen*) of each were marked. According to the Jewish mode of registration, the people would have been enrolled according to *tribes* {hebrew}, *families* or clans {hebrew}, and the *house* of their fathers {hebrew}. But as the ten tribes had not returned to Palestine, this could only take place to a very limited extent, while it would be easy for each to be registered in 'his own city.' In the case of Joseph and Mary, whose descent from David was not only known, but where, for the sake of the unborn Messiah, it was most important that this should be distinctly noted, it was natural that, in accordance with Jewish law, they should have gone to Bethlehem. Perhaps also, for many reasons which will readily suggest themselves, Joseph and Mary might be glad to leave Nazareth, and seek, if possible, a home in Bethlehem. Indeed, so strong was this feeling, that it afterwards required special Divine direction to induce Joseph to relinquish this chosen place of residence, and to return into Galilee. In these circumstances, Mary, now the 'wife' of Joseph, though standing to him only in the actual relationship of 'betrothed,' would, of course, accompany her husband to Bethlehem. Irrespective of this, every feeling and hope in her must have prompted such a course, and there is no need to discuss whether Roman or Jewish Census-usage required her presence - a question which, if put, would have to be answered in the negative.

The short winter's day was probably closing in, as the two travellers from Nazareth, bringing with them the few necessaries of a poor Eastern household, neared their journey's end. If we think of Jesus as the Messiah from heaven, the surroundings of outward poverty, so far from detracting, seem most congruous to His Divine character. Earthly splendor would here seem like tawdry tinsel, and the utmost simplicity like that clothing of the lilies, which far surpassed all the glory of Solomon's court. But only in the East would the most absolute simplicity be possible, and yet neither it, nor the poverty from which it sprang, necessarily imply even the slightest taint of social inferiority. The way had been long and weary - at the very least, three days' journey, whatever route had been taken from Galilee. Most probably it would be that so commonly followed, from a desire to avoid Samaria, along the eastern banks of the Jordan, and by the fords of Jericho. Although passing through one of the warmest parts of the country, the season of the year must, even in most favorable circumstances, have greatly increased the difficulties of such a journey. A sense of rest and peace must, almost unconsciously, have crept over the travellers when at last they reached the rich fields that surrounded the ancient 'House of Bread,' and, passing through the valley which, like an amphitheatre, sweeps up to the twain heights along which Bethlehem stretches (2,704 feet above the sea), ascended through the terraced vineyards and gardens. Winter though it was, the green and silvery foliage of the olive might, even at that season, mingle with the pale pink of the almond - nature's 'early waker' - and with the darker coloring of the opening peach-buds. The chaste beauty and sweet quiet of the place would recall memories of Boaz, of Jesse, and of David. All the more would such thoughts suggest themselves, from the contrast between the past and the present. For, as the travellers reached the heights of Bethlehem, and, indeed, long before, the most prominent object in view

must have been the great castle which Herod had built, and called after his own name. Perched on the highest hill south-east of Bethlehem, it was, at the same time magnificent palace, strongest fortress, and almost court-city. With a sense of relief the travellers would turn from this, to mark the undulating outlines of the highland wilderness of Judæa, till the horizon was bounded by the mountain-ridges of Tekoa. Through the break of the hills eastward the heavy molten surface of the Sea of Judgement would appear in view; westward wound the road to Hebron; behind them lay the valleys and hills which separated Bethlehem from Jerusalem, and concealed the Holy City.

But for the present such thoughts would give way to the pressing necessity of finding shelter and rest. The little town of Bethlehem was crowded with those who had come from all the outlying district to register their names. Even if the strangers from far-off Galilee had been personally acquainted with any one in Bethlehem, who could have shown them hospitality, they would have found every house fully occupied. The very inn was filled, and the only available space was, where ordinarily the cattle were stabled. Bearing in mind the simple habits of the East, this scarcely implies, what it would in the West; and perhaps the seclusion and privacy from the noisy, chattering crowd, which thronged the khan, would be all the more welcome. Scanty as these particulars are, even thus much is gathered rather by inference than from the narrative itself. Thus early in this history does the absence of details, which painfully increases as we proceed, remind us, that the Gospels were not intended to furnish a biography of Jesus, nor even the materials for it; but had only this twofold object: that those who read them 'might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,' and that believing they 'might have life through His Name.' The Christian heart and imagination, indeed, long to be able to localise the scene of such surpassing importance, and linger with fond reverence over that Cave, which is now covered by 'the Church of the Nativity.' It may be - nay, it seems likely - that this, to which the most venerable tradition points, was the sacred spot of the world's greatest event. But certainly we have not. It is better, that it should be so. As to all that passed in the seclusion of that 'stable' - the circumstances of the 'Nativity,' even its exact time after the arrival of Mary (brief as it must have been) - the Gospel-narrative is silent. This only is told, that then and there the Virgin-Mother 'brought forth her first-born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger.' Beyond this announcement of the bare fact, Holy Scripture, with indescribable appropriateness and delicacy, draws a veil over that most sacred mystery. Two impressions only are left on the mind: that of utmost earthly humility, in the surrounding circumstances; and that of inward fitness, in the contrast suggested by them. Instinctively, reverently, we feel that it is well it should have been so. It best befits the birth of the Christ - if He be what the New Testament declares Him.

On the other hand, the circumstances just noted afford the strongest indirect evidence of the truth of this narrative. For, if it were the outcome of Jewish imagination, where is the basis for it in contemporary expectation? Would Jewish legend have ever presented its Messiah as born in a stable, to which chance circumstances had consigned His Mother? The whole current of Jewish opinion would run in the contrary direction. The opponents of the authenticity of this narrative are bound to face this. Further, it may safely be asserted, that no Apocryphal or legendary narrative of such a (legendary) event would have been characterised by such scantiness, or rather absence, of details. For, the two essential features, alike of legend and of tradition, are, that they ever seek to surround their heroes with a halo of glory, and that they attempt to supply details, which are otherwise wanting. And in both these respects a more sharply-marked contrast could scarcely be presented, than in the Gospel-narrative.

But as we pass from the sacred gloom of the cave out into the night, its sky all aglow with starry brightness, its loneliness is peopled, and its silence made vocal from heaven. There is nothing now to conceal, but much to reveal, though the manner of it would seem strangely incongruous to Jewish thinking. And yet Jewish tradition may here prove both illustrative and helpful. That the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, was a settled conviction. Equally so was the belief, that He was to be revealed from *Migdal Eder*, 'the tower of the flock.' This *Migdal Eder* was *not* the watchtower for the ordinary flocks which pastured on the barren sheepground beyond Bethlehem, but lay close to the town, on the road to Jerusalem. A passage in the Mishnah leads to the conclusion, that the flocks, which pastured there, were destined for Temple-sacrifices, and, accordingly, that the shepherds, who watched over them, were not ordinary shepherds. The latter were under the

ban of Rabbinism, on account of their necessary isolation from religious ordinances, and their manner of life, which rendered strict legal observance unlikely, if not absolutely impossible. The same Mishnic passage also leads us to infer, that these flocks lay out *all the year round*, since they are spoken of as in the fields thirty days before the Passover - that is, in the month of February, when in Palestine the average rainfall is nearly greatest. Thus, Jewish tradition in some dim manner apprehended the first revelation of the Messiah from that *Migdal Eder*, where shepherds watched the Temple-flocks all the year round. Of the deep symbolic significance of such a coincidence, it is needless to speak. I

It was, then, on that 'wintry night' of the 25th of December, that shepherds watched the flocks destined for sacrificial services, in the very place consecrated by tradition as that where the Messiah was to be first revealed. Of a sudden came the long-delayed, unthought-of announcement. Heaven and earth seemed to mingle, as suddenly an Angel stood before their dazzled eyes, while the outstreaming glory of the Lord seemed to enwrap them, as in a mantle of light. Surprise, awe, fear would be hushed into calm and expectancy, as from the Angel they heard, that what they saw boded not judgment, but ushered in to waiting Israel the great joy of those good tidings which he brought: that the long-promised Saviour, Messiah, Lord, was born in the City of David, and that they themselves might go and see, and recognize Him by the humbleness of the circumstances surrounding His Nativity.

It was, as if attendant angels had only waited the signal. As, when the sacrifice was laid on the altar, the Temple-music burst forth in three sections, each marked by the blast of the priests' silver trumpets, as if each Psalm were to be a *Tris-Hagion*; so, when the Herald-Angel had spoken, a multitude of heaven's host stood forth to hymn the good tidings he had brought. What they sang was but the reflex of what had been announced. It told in the language of praise the character, the meaning, the result, of what had taken place. Heaven took up the strain of 'glory;' earth echoed it as 'peace;' it fell on the ears and hearts of men as 'good pleasure:' And upon earth peace - Among men good pleasure!

Only once before had the words of the Angels' hymn fallen upon mortal's ears, when, to Isaiah's rapt vision, Heaven's high Temple had opened, and the glory of Jehovah swept its courts, almost breaking down the trembling posts that bore its boundary gates. Now the same glory enwrapped the shepherds on Bethlehem's plains. Then the Angels' hymn had heralded the announcement of the Kingdom coming; now that of the King come. Then it had been the *Tris-Hagion* of prophetic anticipation; now that of Evangelic fulfilment.

The hymn had ceased; the light faded out of the sky; and the shepherds were alone. But the Angelic message remained with them; and the sign, which was to guide them to the Infant Christ, lighted their rapid way up the terraced height to where, at the entering of Bethlehem, the lamp swinging over the hostelry directed them to the strangers of the house of David, who had come from Nazareth. Though it seems as if, in the hour of her utmost need, the Virgin, Mother had not been ministered to by loving hands, yet what had happened in the stable must soon have become known in the Khan. Perhaps friendly women were still passing to and fro on errands of mercy, when the shepherds reached the 'stable.' There they found, perhaps not what they had expected, but as they had been told. The holy group only consisted of the humble Virgin-Mother, the lowly carpenter of Nazareth, and the Babe laid in the manger. What further passed we know not, save that, having seen it for themselves, the shepherds told what had been spoken to them about this Child, to all around - in the 'stable' in the fields, probably also in the Temple, to which they would bring their flocks, thereby preparing the minds of a Simeon, of an Anna, and of all them that looked for salvation in Israel.

And now the hush of wondering expectancy fell once more on all, who heard what was told by the shepherds - this time not only in the hill-country of Judæa, but within the wider circle that embraced Bethlehem and the Holy City. And yet it seemed all so sudden, so strange. That such slender thread, as the feeble throb of an Infant-life, the salvation of the world should hang - and no special care watch over its safety, no better shelter be provided it than a 'stable,' no other cradle than a manger! And still it is ever so. On what slender thread has the continued life of the Church often seemed to hang; on what feeble throbbing that of every child of God - with no visible outward means to ward off danger, no home of comfort, no rest of ease. But, 'Lo, children are Jehovah's heritage!' - and: 'So giveth He to His beloved in *his* sleep!'