

The Life of Jesus, the Christ



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The Life of Jesus, the Christ

Earlier Scenes

Henry Ward Beecher



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*And as they were eating, Jesus took bread and
blessed it, and brake it, and gave it
to the disciples.*

Matthew, Chapter 26, Verse 26. (The Supper at Emmaus.)
The National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C.
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P R E F A C E.

I HAVE undertaken to write a Life of Jesus, the Christ, in the hope of inspiring a deeper interest in the noble Personage of whom those matchless histories, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are the chief authentic memorials. I have endeavored to present scenes that occurred two thousand years ago as they would appear to modern eyes if the events had taken place in our day.

The Lives of Christ which have appeared of late years have naturally partaken largely of the dialectic and critical spirit. They have either attacked or defended. The Gospel, like a city of four gates, has been taken and retaken by alternate parties, or held in part by opposing hosts, while on every side the marks of siege and defence cover the ground. This may be unfortunate, but it is necessary. As long as great learning and acute criticism are brought to assail the text of the Gospels, their historic authenticity, the truth of their contents, and the ethical nature of their teachings, so long must great learning and sound philosophy be brought to the defence of those precious documents.

But such controversial Lives of Christ are not the best for general reading. While they may lead scholars from doubt to certainty, they are likely to lead plain people from certainty into doubt, and to leave them there. I have therefore studiously avoided a polemic spirit, seeking to produce conviction without controversy.

Joubert¹ finely says: "State truths of sentiment, and do not try to prove them. There is danger in such proofs; for in arguing it is necessary to treat that which is in question as something problematic; now that which we accustom ourselves to treat as problematic ends by appearing to us as really doubtful. In things that are visible and palpable, never prove what is believed already; in things that are certain and mysterious, — mysterious by their greatness and by their nature, — make people believe them, and do not prove them; in things that are matters of practice and duty, command, and do not explain. 'Fear God' has made many men pious; the proofs of the existence of God have made many men atheists. From the defiance springs the attack; the advocate begets in his hearer a wish to pick holes; and men are almost always led on from a desire to contradict the doctor to the desire to contradict the doctrine. Make Truth lovely, and do not try to arm her."

The history of the text, the authenticity of the

¹ As quoted by Matthew Arnold, *Essays in Criticism*, p. 234 (London ed.), 1865.

several narratives, the many philosophical questions that must arise in such a field, I have not formally discussed; still less have I paused to dispute and answer the thousands of objections which swarm around the narrative in the books of the sceptical school of criticism. Such a labor, while very important, would constitute a work quite distinct from that which I have proposed, and would infuse into the discussion a controversial element which I have especially sought to avoid, as inconsistent with the moral ends which I had in view.

I have however attentively considered whatever has been said, on every side, in the works of critical objectors, and have endeavored as far as possible so to state the facts as to take away the grounds from which the objections were aimed.

Writing in full sympathy with the Gospels as authentic historical documents, and with the nature and teachings of the great Personage whom they describe, it is scarcely necessary to say that I have not attempted to show the world what Matthew and John *ought* to have heard and to have seen, but did not; nor what things they did *not* see or hear, but in their simplicity believed that they *did*. In short, I have not invented a Life of Jesus to suit the critical philosophy of the nineteenth century.

The Jesus of the four Evangelists for wellnigh two thousand years has exerted a powerful influence upon the heart, the understanding, and the imagination of

mankind. It is *that* Jesus, and not a modern substitute, whom I have sought to depict, in his life, his social relations, his disposition, his deeds and doctrines.

This work has been delayed far beyond the expectation of the publishers, without fault of theirs, but simply because, with the other duties incumbent upon me, I could not make haste faster than I have. Even after so long a delay the first Part only is ready to go forth; and for the second I am obliged to solicit the patience of my readers. But I aim to complete it within the year.

The order of time in the four Evangelists has always been a perplexity to harmonists, and it seems likely never to be less. But this is more especially characteristic of details whose value is little affected by the question of chronological order, than of the great facts of the life of Jesus.

I have followed, though not without variations, the order given by Ellicott,¹ and especially Andrews.² But a recent "Gospel History Consolidated," published in London by Bagster,³ so generally accords with these that I have made it the working basis; and, instead of cumbering the margin with references to the passages under treatment, have preferred to reproduce at the end of this volume a corresponding portion of the text of the "Gospels Consolidated," by

¹ *Historical Lectures on the Life of Our Lord Jesus Christ.* C. J. Ellicott.

² *The Life of Our Lord upon Earth.* Samuel J. Andrews.

³ Imported and sold in the United States by John Wiley and Son, New York.

a reference to which, chapter by chapter, those who wish to do so will find the groundwork on which this Life is founded.

Although the general arrangement of the "Gospels Consolidated" has been followed,¹ it will be seen that I have frequently deviated from it in minor matters. For example, believing that the reports of the Sermon on the Mount, as given in Matthew and in Luke, are but two separate accounts of the one discourse, I have not treated Luke's account as the record of a second delivery of the same matter, as is sometimes done. The two narrations of the discourse and uproar at Nazareth I have regarded as referring to but a single transaction, while the "Gospels Consolidated" treats them as separate events. But such differences in mere arrangement are inevitable, and not important. No two harmonists ever did agree in all particulars, and it is scarcely possible that any two ever will. The very structure of the Gospels makes it wellnigh impossible. They are not like the "dissected maps," or pictures, whose severed parts can, with some patience, be fitted together into the original whole, a hundred times exactly alike. They are little more, often, than copious indexes of a voluminous life, without dates or order. It is not probable

¹ I would not be understood as recommending the "Gospels Consolidated" as a substitute for the four Gospels, but as an auxiliary. The fulness with which transactions are there made to stand out will help the common reader to attain conceptions to which scholars come by a laborious intercomparison of the four narratives.

that a single note was taken, or a line written, in Christ's lifetime. The Gospels are children of the memory. They were vocally delivered hundreds of times before being written out at all; and they bear the marks of such origin, in the intensity and vividness of individual incidents, while chronological order and literary unity are but little regarded. In the arrangement of particulars, therefore, when no clew to the real order of time could be found, I have felt at liberty to select such order as would best help the general impression.

That this work may carry to its readers the richest blessing which I can imagine, a sympathetic insight into the heart of its great subject, Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of the world, and a vital union with him, is my earnest wish and devout prayer.

HENRY WARD BEECHER.

BROOKLYN, N. Y., August, 1871.

CONTENTS OF PART I.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY	PAGE 1
------------------------	-----------

CHAPTER II.

THE OVERTURE OF ANGELS	11
----------------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

THE DOCTRINAL BASIS	44
-------------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

CHILDHOOD AND RESIDENCE AT NAZARETH	54
---	----

CHAPTER V.

THE VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS	82
---------------------------------------	----

CHAPTER VI.

THE TEMPTATION	114
--------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VII.

JESUS, HIS PERSONAL APPEARANCE	134
--	-----

CHAPTER VIII.

THE OUTLOOK	156
-----------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOUSEHOLD GATE	181
------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

THE FIRST JUDEAN MINISTRY	200
-------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XI.

THE LESSON AT JACOB'S WELL	229
--------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XII.

EARLY LABORS IN GALILEE	253
-----------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIII.

A TIME OF JOY	280
-------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT. — THE BEATITUDES	305
---	-----

CHAPTER XV.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (<i>continued</i>)	331
--	-----

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BEGINNING OF CONFLICT	364
-------------------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XVII.

AROUND THE SEA OF GALILEE	399
-------------------------------------	-----



APPENDIX	433
--------------------	-----

INDEX	513
-----------------	-----

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

ENGRAVING ON STEEL.

- HEAD OF CHRIST. Restored, painted, and engraved by W. E.
MARSHALL Frontispiece.
After photograph of the rapidly decaying Supper Scene of LEONARDO
DA VINCI, at Milan.
-

ENGRAVINGS ON WOOD.

1. *Scene on the Upper Jordan. A SWAMP OF PAPYRUS REEDS.*
(Full page.) 96
The idea and general view were taken from MacGregor's most interesting "Rob Roy on the Jordan"; but the scene is worked up anew, and the *reeds* are studied from both the Syrian and the Egyptian papyrus. The view is found among the upper sources of the Jordan; looming above the horizon, to the north, is the "rounded head of splendid, glittering Hermon," while, to the left, is seen "the far-off snow on the sharp indented Sunnin, chief of the Lebanon range."
2. *HEADS OF CHRIST.* (Full page.) 134
Out of the multitudes of heads giving artistic fancies as to the personal look of Jesus, six have been selected as representative. First is that of Leonardo da Vinci (b. 1452, d. 1519), reproduced in the frontispiece. On the page facing p. 102 are five: No. 1. From the earliest picture of Christ that is known, a fresco in the Catacombs of St. Calixtus, near Rome, fourth century; No. 2. From an emerald intaglio of the sixth century, now in Rome, given out of the treasury of Constantinople to Pope Innocent VIII. for the redemption of the brother of the Emperor of the Turks, then a prisoner of the Christians; No. 3. From a *Pietà*, or "Dead Christ," by the Italian painter Raibolini of Bologna, known as Francesco Francia (b. 1450, d. 1517); No. 4. From a crucifix by Albrecht Dürer, the great German painter and engraver (b. 1471, d. 1528); No. 5. From a painting by Paul de la Roche, the French painter (b. 1797, d. 1856).

3. GENERAL MAP OF PALESTINE. (Two pages.) 160
4. PLAN OF THE TEMPLE, according to Fergusson's restoration . 204
The ground plan is given below, and above is a longitudinal section, on
an east and west line, showing the elevation of the different portions.
5. *Map.* VICINITY OF NAZARETH AND CAPERNAUM, GALILEE . 305
6. THE LAKE OF GENESARETH, or Sea of Galilee 416
Northeasterly view, from the northwestern shore of the lake across to-
wards Bethsaida and Tell Hum, or Capernaum.

MAPS.

Constructed by A. L. RAWSON. — *Engraved by* G. W. & C. B.
COLTON & Co.

In preparing the Maps, use was made of the latest works of Van de Velde and of the French and English surveys, these being corrected by every means of later information accessible.

The GENERAL MAP comprises the whole country visited by Jesus (except the journey in infancy to Egypt), giving but a few of the most important names.

The VICINITY OF NAZARETH AND CAPERNAUM is quite full in detail, showing how many towns there are or were in this region (though nearly one half of the whole have been omitted, to avoid crowding).

The PLAN OF THE TEMPLE of Herod is after Fergusson.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

How well the Hebrew Priest, but especially the Prophet, had done his work, may best be seen in that moral element which made Judaism to religion what the Greek spirit had been to the intellectual life of the world. Nowhere out of Judæa were to be found such passionate moral fervor and such intense spiritual yearnings. But this spirit had spent itself as a formative power; it had already overshot the multitude, while higher natures were goaded by it to excess. There was need of a new religious education. This was the desire and expectation of the best men of the Jewish Church. How their spiritual quickening was to come, they knew not. That it was coming was generally believed, and also that the approaching deliverance would in some mysterious way bring God nearer to men. "Of the day and of the hour" knew no man. The day had come when a new manifestation of God was to be made. A God of holiness, a God of power, and a God of mercy had been clearly revealed. The Divine Spirit was now to be clothed with flesh, subjected to the ordinary laws of matter, placed in those conditions in which men live, become the subject of care, weariness, sorrow, and of death itself.

The history of this divine incarnation we are now to trace, in so far as the religious knowledge which has sprung from it can be carried back to its sources, and be made to illustrate the sublime truths and events of the Lord's earthly mission.

Since there are four inspired lives of our Lord,—two of them by the hands of disciples who were eye-witnesses of the events recorded, namely, those by Matthew and John, and two, those of Mark and Luke, by men who, though not disciples, were yet the companions of the Apostles, and derived their materials, in part, from them,—why should it be necessary to frame other histories of Jesus, the Christ? Since the materials for any new life of Christ must be derived from the four Evangelists, is it likely that uninspired men, after a lapse of nearly nineteen hundred years, can do better than *they* did who were either witnesses or contemporaries of the Lord, and who were appointed and guided by the Divine Spirit to make a record of truth for all time?

The impression produced by such suggestions will be materially modified upon a close examination of the Gospels.

1. The very fact that there are *four* lives, which strikes one as a fourfold blessing, and which surely is an advantage, carries with it also certain disadvantages. For a clear view of the life and teachings of our Lord, four fields are to be reaped instead of one.

The early ages needed testimony; our age needs teaching. Four witnesses are better for testimony. But for biography one complete narrative, combining in it the materials of the four, would have given a pic-

ture of our Lord more in accordance with the habits and wants of men in our day.

This diversity of witnesses subserves other important ends. No single man could have represented all sides of the Saviour's teaching. A comparison of Matthew's Gospel with that of John will show how much would have been lost, had there been only a single collector and reporter of Christ's discourses.

It is not easy, even for one trained to investigation, to gather out of the four Evangelists a clear and consistent narrative of our Lord's ministry; and still less will unstudious men succeed in doing it.

No one will deny that every Christian man should seek a comprehensive, and not a fragmentary, knowledge of his Lord. In other words, every Christian reader seeks, for himself, out of the other four, to weave a fifth life of Christ. Why should not this indispensable work be performed for men, with all the aids of elaborate investigation?

2. The impression derived from this general view is greatly strengthened by a critical examination of the contents of the Gospels.

It is one of the striking facts in history, that One whose teachings were to revolutionize human ideas, and to create a new era in the world's affairs, did not commit a single syllable to paper, and did not organize a single institution. An unlimited power of acting upon the world without these subsidiary and, to men, indispensable instruments,—viz. writing and organization,—and only by the enunciation of absolute truths in their relation to human conduct, is one of the marks of Divinity.

There is no evidence that Jesus appointed any of his

disciples to perform the work of an historian. None of them claim such authorization. Only Luke¹ makes any reference to the motives which led him to undertake the task of writing, and he claims no other than a personal desire to record a knowledge which he deemed fuller than that of others.

The four Gospels are evidently final and authoritative collections of oral histories and compilations of narratives which were already circulating among the early Christians. In the cases of Matthew and John, these materials were wrought upon the fabric of their own personal observation and experience.

There is in none of them any consistent regard to the order of time or of place. The principle of arrangement evidently is to be found in the moral similarities of the materials, and not in their chronological sequences. Different events are clustered together which were widely separated. Whole chapters of parables are given as if they had been delivered in a single discourse. We should never have known from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, that our Lord was accustomed to go up to Jerusalem to the great Jewish feasts; but we do get it from John, who is mainly concerned with the history and discourses of his Master in Judæa. Matthew, on the other hand, bestows his attention upon that part of the Saviour's life which was spent in Galilee. Moreover, he seldom enters, as John does,

¹ Luke i. 1-4. "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed among us, even as they delivered them unto us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word; it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write unto thee in order, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest know the certainty of those things wherein thou hast been instructed."

upon interior and profoundly spiritual experiences. John almost as little notices the merely external facts and events of the Lord's life, which Matthew habitually regards.¹

In their structure the Evangelical narratives have been well compared to Xenophon's *Memorabilia* of Socrates. They are clusters of events, parables, miracles, discourses, in which the order of time is sometimes obscure, and sometimes wholly inverted.

In every age of the Church it has been deemed wise to attempt to form a harmony of the four Gospels. Since the year A. D. 1500, there have been more than *fifty* harmonies made by most eminent Christian scholars. Of *Lives of Christ and Harmonies* there have been more than *one hundred and fifty*.

But for some such help, the difficulties arising from a comparison of the different narratives would be insoluble. Many obstacles are thus removed, many apparent contradictions are congruously explained, many apparent inconsistencies are harmonized; and it is shown that, of the inexplicable facts remaining, none are important, — certainly not as respects the great truths or the essential events of the narrative.

3. It is probable that no equal amount of truth was ever expressed in a mode so well fitted for universal circulation. And yet, as the Gospels were written by

¹ "The first three Evangelists describe especially those things which Christ did in our flesh, and relate the precepts which He delivered on the duties to be performed by us, while we walk on earth and dwell in the flesh. But St. John soars to *heaven*, as an eagle, above the clouds of human infirmity, and reveals to us the mysteries of Christ's Godhead, and of the Trinity in Unity, and the felicities of Life Eternal, and gazes on the Light of Immutable Truth with a keen and steady ken." — *St. Augustine, translated by Dr. Wordsworth*. Introduction to Commentaries on the New Testament.

Jews, and with primary reference to certain wants of the age in which the writers lived, they are full of allusions, references, customs, and beliefs, which have long since passed away or have become greatly modified. There are also in the New Testament allusions to customs of which there is no knowledge whatever preserved.

But far more important is it to observe the habits of thought, the whole mental attitude of the Apostolic age, and the change which has since come upon the world. Truths remain the same ; but every age has its own style of thought. Although this difference is not so great as is the difference between one language and another, it is yet so great as to require restatement or, as it were, translation. The truth which Paul argues to the Romans is as important for us as it was for them. But we are not Jews.¹ We care nothing for circumcision. The Hebrew law has never entangled us. We have our prejudices and obstinacies, but they are not the same as those which the Apostle combated. The truth of the Epistle to the Romans, when separated from the stalk and ear on which it grew, is of universal nutriment. But in Paul's own day the stem and the husk also were green and succulent ; they were living and indispensable parts of his statement of the truth. Far less is this distinction applicable to the Gospels, and yet it is, in a measure, true of them.

Our age has developed wants no deeper, perhaps, nor more important, than those in the Apostolic age,

¹ Jews were dispersed through all the civilized world, and in general, both in Greek and Roman cities, there were synagogues, in which the Old Testament Scriptures were read, and in which the Apostles made known to their own countrymen the fulfilment of those Scriptures in the history of our Lord. See Acts 28 : 16 - 24.

but needs essentially different. We live for different ends. We have other aspirations. We are plagued with new infidelities of our own. We are proud in a different way, and vain after our own manner. To meet all these ever-changing necessities of the human heart and of society, men are ordained to preach the gospel. If merely reading the text as it was originally delivered were enough, why should there be preachers? It is the business of preachers to re-adapt truth, from age to age, to men's ever-renewing wants.

And what is this, but doing by single passages of Scripture what a Life of Christ attempts to do systematically, and in some dramatic form, for the whole? Some have said, almost contemptuously, "The only good Lives of Christ are those by the four Evangelists." And yet these very men are so little content with these same Evangelists, that they spend their lives in restating, illustrating, and newly applying the substance and matter of the Evangelical writings,—thus by their own most sensible example refuting their own most foolish criticism!

4. But there are reasons yet deeper why the Life of Christ should be rewritten for each and every age. The life of the Christian Church has, in one point of view, been a gradual unfolding and interpretation of the spiritual truths of the Gospels. The knowledge of the human heart, of its yearnings, its failures, its sins and sorrows, has immensely increased in the progress of centuries.

Has nothing been learned by the Christian world of the methods of moral government, of the communion of the Holy Ghost, of the power of the Divine Spirit to cleanse, enrich, and fire the soul, after so many centu-

ries of experience? Has this world no lore of love, no stores of faith, no experience of joy unfolded from the original germs, which shall fit it to go back to the truths of the New Testament with a far larger understanding of their contents than *they* had who wrote them? Prophets do not always understand their own visions; Apostles deliver truths which are far deeper, and more glorious in their ulterior forms, than even their utterers suspect.

It is both a privilege and a duty of the Church of Christ to gather up, from time to time, these living commentaries upon divine truth,—these divine interpretations, by means of human experience, of the truth as it is in Jesus,—and carry back this light and knowledge to the primal forms and symbols. Our Lord himself declared that his kingdom of truth was as a seed. But what shall interpret a seed like its own growth and harvest? To us the narratives of the Gospel ought to mean far more than to the primitive disciple, or they have been germs without development, seed without a harvest.

All critics of the Gospels, though, in each group, differing by many shades among themselves, may be reduced to two classes:—

1. Those who believe that the writings of the Evangelists are authentic historical documents, that they were divinely inspired, and that the supernatural elements contained in them are real, and to be credited as much as any other parts of the history; and,—

2. Those who deny the inspiration of the Gospels, regarding them as unassisted human productions, filled with mistakes and inaccuracies; especially, as filled with superstitions and pretended miracles.

These latter critics set aside all traces of the supernatural. They feel at liberty to reject all miracles, either summarily, with "philosophic" contempt, or by explanations as wonderful as the miracles are marvelous. In effect, they act as if there could be no evidence except that which addresses itself to the material senses. Such reasoning chains philosophy to matter: to which statement many already do not object, but boldly claim that, in our present condition, no truth can be *known* to men except that which conforms itself to physical laws. There is a step further, and one that must soon be taken, if these reasons are logically consistent; namely, to hold that there is no evidence of a God, unless Nature be that God. And this is Pantheism, which, being interpreted, is Atheism.

We scarcely need to say, that we shall take our stand with those who accept the New Testament as a collection of veritable historical documents, with the record of miracles, and with the train of spiritual phenomena, as of absolute and literal truth. The miraculous element constitutes the very nerve-system of the Gospel. To withdraw it from credence is to leave the Gospel histories a mere shapeless mass of pulp.

What is left when these venerable records are stripped of the ministry of angels, of the mystery of the divine incarnation, of the wonders and miracles which accompanied our Lord at every step of his career? Christ's miracles were not occasional and occult, but in a long series, with every degree of publicity, involving almost every element of nature, and in numbers so great that they are summed up as comprehending whole villages, towns, and neighborhoods in their benefactions. They produced an excitement in the public

mind so great that oftentimes secrecy was enjoined, lest the Roman government should interfere.

That Christ should be the centre and active cause of such stupendous imposture, on the supposition that miracles were but deceptions, shocks the moral feeling of those even who disbelieve his divinity. Widely as men differ on every topic connected with the Christ, there is one ground on which all stand together, namely, that Jesus was good. Even Infidelity would feel bereaved in the destruction of Christ's moral character. But to save that, and yet to explain away the miracles which he wrought, has put ingenuity to ludicrous shifts.

RENAN, to save the character of his poetic hero, is obliged to depict him as the subject of an enthusiasm which grew upon him until it became a self-deceiving fanaticism. It seems, then, that the whole world has been under the influence of one who was not an impostor, only because he was mildly insane !

That such a conclusion should give no pain to men utterly destitute of religious aspirations may well be conceived. But all others, looking upon this wanton and needless procedure, will adopt the language of Mary, and say, "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him."

CHAPTER II.

THE OVERTURE OF ANGELS.

HAD it been the design of Divine Providence that the Gospels should be wrought up like a poem for literary and artistic effect, surely the narrative of the angelic appearances would have glowed in all the colors of an Oriental morning. They are, indeed, to those who have an eye to discern, a wonderful and exquisitely tinted prelude to the dawn of a glorious day. It is not to be supposed that the earth and its dull inhabitants knew what was approaching. But heavenly spirits knew it. There was movement and holy ecstasy in the Upper Air, and angels seem, as birds when new-come in spring, to have flown hither and thither, in songful mood, dipping their white wings into our atmosphere, just touching the earth or glancing along its surface, as sea-birds skim the surface of the sea. And yet birds are far too rude, and wings too burdensome, to express adequately that feeling of unlabored angelic motion which the narrative produces upon the imagination. Their airy and gentle coming would perhaps be better compared to the glow of colors flung by the sun upon morning clouds that seem to be born just where they appear. Like a beam of light striking through some orifice, they shine upon Zacharias in the Temple. As the morning light finds the flowers, so found they the mother of Jesus. To the shepherds'

eyes they filled the midnight arch like auroral beams of light; but not as silently, for they sang, and more marvellously than when "the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy."

The new era opens at Jerusalem. The pride with which a devout Jew looked upon Jerusalem can scarcely be imagined in our prosaic times. Men loved that city with such passionate devotion as we are accustomed to see bestowed only on a living person. When the doctrine of immortality grew more distinctly into the belief of holy men, no name could be found which would make the invisible world so attractive as that of the beloved city. NEW JERUSALEM was the chosen name for Heaven.

Upon this city broke the morning rays of the Advent. A venerable priest, Zacharias, belonging to the retinue of the Temple, had spent his whole life in the quiet offices of religion. He was married, but childless. To him happened a surprising thing.

It was his turn to burn incense,—the most honorable function of the priestly office. Upon the great altar of sacrifice, outside the holy place, the burnt-offering was placed. At a signal the priest came forth, and, taking fire from this altar, he entered the inner and more sacred place of the Temple, and there, before the altar of incense, putting the fragrant gum upon the coals, he swung the censer, filling the air with wreaths of smoke. The people who had gathered on the outside, as soon as the smoke ascended silently sent up their prayers, of which the incense was the symbol. "And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord, standing on the right side of the altar."

That he trembled with fear and awe is apparent from the angel's address,—“Fear not!” The keynote of the new dispensation was sounded! Hereafter, God was to be brought nearer, to seem less terrible; and a religion of the spirit and of love was soon to dispossess a religion of ceremonials and of fear.

“Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard;
And thy wife Elisabeth shall bear thee a son,
And thou shalt call his name John.
And thou shalt have joy and gladness;
And many shall rejoice at his birth.
For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord,
And shall drink neither wine nor strong drink;
And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his mother's
womb.
And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their
God.
And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias,
To turn the hearts of the parents to the children,
And the disobedient to the wisdom of the just;
To make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

If this address, to our modern ears, seems stately and formal, it is to be remembered that no other language would seem so fit for a heavenly message to a Jewish priest as that which breathed the spirit of the Old Testament writings; and that to us it savors of the sermon because it has since been so often used for the purposes of the sermon.

But the laws of the material world seemed to the doubting priest more powerful than the promise of that God who made all physical laws. To this distinct promise of a son who should become a great reformer, and renew the power and grandeur of the prophetic office, he could only say, “Whereby shall I know this?” His doubts should have begun earlier, or

not at all. He should have rejected the whole vision, or should have accepted the promise implicitly; for what sign could be given so assuring as the very presence of the angel? But the sign which he asked was given in a way that he could never forget. His speech departed; silence was the sign;—as if the priest of the Old was to teach no more until the coming of the New.

When Zacharias came forth to the people, who were already impatient at his long delay, they perceived by his altered manner that some great experience had befallen him. He could not speak, and could dismiss them only by a gesture.

We have no certainty whether this scene occurred at a morning or an evening service, but it is supposed to have been at the evening sacrifice. In that case the event was an impressive symbol. The people beheld their priest standing against the setting sun, dumb, while they dispersed in the twilight, the shadow of the Temple having already fallen upon them. The Old was passing into darkness; to-morrow another sun must rise!

Elisabeth, the wife of Zacharias, returned to the "hill-country," or that region lying west and south of Jerusalem. The promise had begun to be fulfilled. All the promises made to Israel were pointing to their fulfilment through her. These promises, accumulating through ages, were ample enough, even in the letter, to fill a devout soul with ardent expectancy. But falling upon the imagination of a greatly distressed people, they had been magnified or refracted until the public mind was filled with inordinate and even fantastic expectations of the Messianic reign. It is not probable

that any were altogether free from this delusion, not even the soberest and most spiritual natures. We can therefore imagine but faintly the ecstatic hopes of Zacharias and Elisabeth during the six months in which they were hidden in their home among the hills before the history again finds them. They are next introduced through the story of another memorable actor in this drama, the mother of our Lord.

It is difficult to speak of Mary, the mother of Jesus, both because so little is known of her and because so much has been imagined. Around no other name in history has the imagination thrown its witching light in so great a volume. In art she has divided honors with her divine Son. For a thousand years her name has excited the profoundest reverence and worship. A mother's love and forbearance with her children, as it is a universal experience, so is it the nearest image of the divine tenderness which the soul can form.

In attempting to present the Divine Being in his relations to universal government, men have well-nigh lost his personality in a sublime abstraction. Those traits of personal tenderness and generous love which alone will ever draw the human heart to God, it has too often been obliged to seek elsewhere. And, however mistaken the endeavor to find in the Virgin Mary the sympathy and fond familiarity of a divine fostering love, it is an error into which men have been drawn by the profoundest needs of the human soul. It is an error of the heart. The cure will be found by revealing, in the Divine nature, the longed-for traits in greater beauty and force than are given them in the legends of the mother of Jesus.

Meanwhile, if the doctors of theology have long

hesitated to deify the Virgin, art has unconsciously raised her to the highest place. There is nothing in attitude, expression, or motion which has been left untried. The earlier Christian painters were content to express her pure fervor, without relying upon the element of beauty. But as, age by age, imagination kindled, the canvas has given forth this divine mother in more and more glowing beauty, borrowing from the Grecian spirit all that was charming in the highest ideals of Venus, and adding to them an element of transcendent purity and devotion, which has no parallel in ancient art.

It is difficult for one whose eye has been steeped in the colors of art to go back from its enchantment to the barrenness of actual history. By Luke alone is the place even of her residence mentioned. It is only inferred that she was of the royal house of David. She was already espoused to a man named Joseph, but not as yet married. This is the sum of our knowledge of Mary at the point where her history is introduced. Legends abound, many of them charming, but like the innumerable faces which artists have painted, they gratify the imagination without adding anything to historic truth.

The scene of the Annunciation will always be admirable in literature, even to those who are not disposed to accord it any historic value. To announce to an espoused virgin that she was to be the mother of a child, out of wedlock, by the unconscious working in her of the Divine power, would, beforehand, seem inconsistent with delicacy. But no person of poetic sensibility can read the scene as it is narrated by Luke without admiring its sublime purity and serenity.

It is not a transaction of the lower world of passion. Things most difficult to a lower sphere are both easy and beautiful in that atmosphere which, as it were, the angel brought down with him.

“And the angel came in unto her and said, Hail! thou that art highly favored! The Lord is with thee!”

Then was announced the birth of Jesus, and that he should inherit and prolong endlessly the glories promised to Israel of old. To her inquiry, “How shall this be?” the angel replied:—

“The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee,
And the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee;
Therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee
Shall be called the Son of God.”

It was also made known to Mary that her cousin Elisabeth had conceived a son. And Mary said: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord! Be it unto me according to thy word.”

Many have brought to this history the associations of a later day, of a different civilization, and of habits of thought foreign to the whole cast of the Oriental mind. Out of a process so unphilosophical they have evolved the most serious doubts and difficulties. But no one is fitted to appreciate either the beauty or the truthfulness to nature of such a scene, who cannot in some degree carry himself back in sympathy to that Jewish maiden's life. The education of a Hebrew woman was far freer than that of women of other Oriental nations. She had more personal liberty, a wider scope of intelligence, than obtained among the Greeks or even among the Romans. But above all, she received a moral education which placed her high above her sisters in other lands.

It is plain that Mary was imbued with the spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures. Not only was the history of her people familiar to her, but her language shows that the poetry of the Old Testament had filled her soul. She was fitted to receive her people's history in its most romantic and spiritual aspects. They were God's peculiar people. Their history unrolled before her as a series of wonderful providences. The path glowed with divine manifestations. Miracles blossomed out of every natural law. But to her there were no laws of nature. Such ideas had not yet been born. The earth was "the Lord's." All its phenomena were direct manifestations of his will. Clouds and storms came on errands from God. Light and darkness were the shining or the hiding of his face. Calamities were punishments. Harvests were divine gifts; famines were immediate divine penalties. To us God acts through instruments; to the Hebrew he acted immediately by his will. "He spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast."

To such a one as Mary there would be no incredulity as to the reality of this angelic manifestation. Her only surprise would be that *she* should be chosen for a renewal of those divine interpositions in behalf of her people of which their history was so full. The very reason which would lead us to suspect a miracle in our day gave it credibility in other days. It is simply a question of adaptation. A miracle as a blind appeal to the moral sense, without the use of the reason, was adapted to the earlier periods of human life. Its usefulness ceases when the moral sense is so developed that it can find its own way through the ministration of the reason. A miracle is a substitute for moral

demonstration, and is peculiarly adapted to the early conditions of mankind.

Of all miracles, there was none more sacred, congruous, and grateful to a Hebrew than an angelic visitation. A devout Jew, in looking back, saw angels flying thick between the heavenly throne and the throne of his fathers. The greatest events of national history had been made illustrious by their presence. Their work began with the primitive pair. They had come at evening to Abraham's tent. They had waited upon Jacob's footsteps. They had communed with Moses, with the judges, with priests and magistrates, with prophets and holy men. All the way down from the beginning of history, the pious Jew saw the shining footsteps of these heavenly messengers. Nor had the faith died out in the long interval through which their visits had been withheld. Mary could not, therefore, be surprised at the coming of angels, but only that they should come to her.

It may seem strange that Zacharias should be struck dumb for doubting the heavenly messenger, while Mary went unrebuked. But it is plain that there was a wide difference in the nature of the relative experiences. To Zacharias was promised an event external to himself, not involving his own sensibility. But to a woman's heart there can be no other announcement possible that shall so stir every feeling and sensibility of the soul, as the promise and prospect of her first child. Motherhood is the very centre of womanhood. The first awaking in her soul of the reality that she bears a double life — herself within herself — brings a sweet bewilderment of wonder and joy. The more sure her faith of the fact, the more tremulous must

her soul become. Such an announcement can never mean to a father's what it does to a mother's heart. And it is one of the exquisite shades of subtle truth, and of beauty as well, that the angel who rebuked Zacharias for doubt saw nothing in the trembling hesitancy and wonder of Mary inconsistent with a childlike faith.

If the heart swells with the hope of a new life in the common lot of mortals, with what profound feeling must Mary have pondered the angel's promise to her son !

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest ;
And the Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David ;
And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever,
And of his kingdom there shall be no end."

It is expressly stated that Joseph was of the "house of David," but there is no evidence that Mary was of the same, except this implication, "The Lord God shall give him the throne of his father David." Since Joseph was not his father, it could only be through his mother that he could trace his lineage to David.

There is no reason to suppose that Mary was more enlightened than those among whom she dwelt, or that she gave to these words that spiritual sense in which alone they have proved true. To her, it may be supposed, there arose a vague idea that her son was destined to be an eminent teacher and deliverer. She would naturally go back in her mind to the instances, in the history of her own people, of eminent men and women who had been raised up in dark times to deliver their people.

She lived in the very region which Deborah and Barak had made famous. Almost before her eyes lay

the plains on which great deliverances had been wrought by heroes raised up by the God of Israel. But that other glory, of spiritual deliverance, was hidden from her. Or, if that influence which overshadowed her awakened in her the spiritual vision, it was doubtless to reveal that her son was to be something more than a mere worldly conqueror. But it was not for her to discern the glorious reality. It hung in the future as a dim brightness, whose particular form and substance could not be discerned. For it is not to be supposed that Mary — prophet as every woman is — could discern that spiritual truth of the promises of the Old Testament which his own disciples did not understand after companying with Jesus for three years, nor yet after his ascension, nor until the fire of the pentecostal day had kindled in them the eye of flame that pierces all things and discerns the spirit.

“And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill-country with haste, into a city of Juda, and entered into the house of Zacharias and saluted Elisabeth.”

The overshadowing Spirit had breathed upon her the new life. What woman of deep soul was ever unthrilled at the mystery of life beating within life? And what Jewish woman, devoutly believing that in her child were to be fulfilled the hopes of Israel, could hold this faith without excitement almost too great to be borne? She could not tarry. With haste she trod that way which she had doubtless often trod before in her annual ascent to the Temple. Every village, every brook, every hill, must have awakened in her some sad recollection of the olden days of her people. There was Tabor, from which came down Barak and his men.

And in the great plain of Esdraelon he fought Sisera. The waters of Kishon, murmuring at her feet, must have recalled the song of Deborah. Here, too, Josiah was slain at Megiddo, and "the mourning of Hadad-Rimmon in the valley of Megiddon" became the by-word of grief. Mount Gilboa rose upon her from the east. Ebal and Gerizim stood forth in remembrance of the sublime drama of blessings and cursings. Then came Shechem, the paradise of Palestine, in whose neighborhood Joseph was buried. This pilgrim may have quenched her thirst at noonday, as afterwards her son did, at the well of Jacob; and farther to the south it might be that the oak of Mamre, under which the patriarch dwelt, cast its great shadow upon her.

It is plain from the song of Mary, of which we shall speak in a moment, that she bore in mind the history of the mother of Samuel, wife of Elkanah, who dwelt in this region, and whose song, at the presentation of Samuel to the priest at Shiloh, seems to have been the mould in which Mary unconsciously cast her own.

Thus, one after another, Mary must have passed the most memorable spots in her people's history. Even if not sensitive to patriotic influences,—still more if she was alive to such sacred and poetic associations,—she must have come to her relative Elisabeth with flaming heart.

Well she might! What other mystery in human life is so profound as the beginning of life? From the earliest days women have called themselves blessed of God when life begins to palpitate within their bosom. It is not education, but nature, that inspires such tender amazement. Doubtless even the Indian woman in

such periods dwells consciously near to the Great Spirit! Every one of a deep nature seems to herself more sacred and more especially under the divine care while a new life, moulded by the divine hand, is springing into being. For, of all creative acts, none is so sovereign and divine. Who shall reveal the endless musings, the perpetual prophecies, of the mother's soul? Her thoughts dwell upon the unknown child,—thoughts more in number than the ripples of the sea upon some undiscovered shore. To others, in such hours, woman should seem more sacred than the most solemn temple; and to herself she must needs seem as if overshadowed by the Holy Ghost!

To this natural elevation were added, in the instance of Mary and Elisabeth, those vague but exalted expectations arising from the angelic annunciations. Both of them believed that the whole future condition of their nation was to be intimately affected by the lives of their sons.

And Mary said:—

“My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden;
For, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.
For He that is mighty hath done to me great things;
And holy is his name.
And his mercy is on them that fear him
From generation to generation.
He hath shewed strength with his arm;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
And exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
And the rich he hath sent empty away.
He hath holpen his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy;
As he spake to our fathers,
To Abraham, and to his seed forever.”

Unsympathizing critics remark upon the similarity of this chant of Mary's with the song of Hannah,¹ the mother of Samuel. Inspiration served to kindle the materials already in possession of the mind. This Hebrew maiden had stored her imagination with the poetic elements of the Old Testament. But, of all the

¹ " My heart rejoiceth in the Lord ;
My horn is exalted in the Lord ;
My mouth is enlarged over mine enemies ;
Because I rejoice in thy salvation.
There is none holy as the Lord ;
For there is none beside thee ;
Neither is there any rock like our God.
Talk no more so exceeding proudly :
Let not arrogancy come out of your mouth :
For the Lord is a God of knowledge,
And by him actions are weighed.
The bows of the mighty men are broken,
And they that stumbled are girded with strength.
They that were full have hired out themselves for bread ;
And they that were hungry ceased ;
So that the barren hath borne seven ;
And she that hath many children is waxed feeble.
The Lord killeth, and maketh alive :
He bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up.
The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich :
He bringeth low, and lifteth up.
He raiseth up the poor out of the dust,
And lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill,
To set them among princes,
And to make them inherit the throne of glory :
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's,
And he hath set the world upon them.
He will keep the feet of his saints,
And the wicked shall be silent in darkness :
For by strength shall no man prevail.
The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces ;
Out of heaven shall he thunder upon them :
The Lord shall judge the ends of the earth ;
And he shall give strength unto his King,
And exalt the horn of his Anointed."

treasures at command, only a devout and grateful nature would have made so unselfish a selection. For it is not upon her own blessedness that Mary chiefly dwells, but upon the sovereignty, the goodness, and the glory of God. To be exalted by the joy of our personal prosperity above self-consciousness into the atmosphere of thanksgiving and adoration, is a sure sign of nobility of soul.

For three months these sweet and noble women dwelt together, performing, doubtless, the simple labors of the household. Their thoughts, their converse, their employments, must be left wholly to the imagination. And yet, it is impossible not to be curious in regard to these hidden days of Judæa, when the mother of our Lord was already fashioning that sacred form which, in due time, not far from her residence, perhaps within the very sight of it, was to be lifted up upon the cross. But it is a research which we have no means of pursuing. Her thoughts must be impossible to us, as our thoughts of her son were impossible to her. No one can look forward, even in the spirit of prophecy, to see after-things in all their fulness as they shall be ; nor can one who has known go back again to see as if he had not known.

After Mary's return to Nazareth, Elisabeth was delivered of a son. Following the custom of their people, her friends would have named him after his father, but the mother, mindful of the name given by the angel, called him John. An appeal was made to the priest—who probably was deaf as well as dumb, for they made signs to him—how the child should be named. Calling for writing-materials, he surprised them all by naming him as his wife had,—John. At once the sign ceased.

His lips were unsealed, and he broke forth into thanksgiving and praise. All the circumstances conspired to awaken wonder and to spread throughout the neighborhood mysterious expectations, men saying, "What manner of child shall this be?"

The first chapter of Luke may be considered as the last leaf of the Old Testament, so saturated is it with the heart and spirit of the olden times. And the song of Zacharias clearly reveals the state of feeling among the best Jews of that day. Their nation was grievously pressed down by foreign despotism. Their people were scattered through the world. The time was exceedingly dark, and the promises of the old prophets served by contrast to make their present distress yet darker. We are not surprised, therefore, to find the first portion of Zacharias's chant sensitively recognizing the degradations and sufferings of his people: —

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel;
For he hath visited and redeemed his people,
And hath raised up an horn of salvation for us
In the house of his servant David
(As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets,
Which have been since the world began);
That we should be saved from our enemies,
And from the hand of all that hate us;
To perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
And to remember his holy covenant,
The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,
That he would grant unto us,
That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies
Might serve him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before him,
All the days of our life."

Then, as if seized with a spirit of prophecy, and beholding the relations and offices of his son, in language

as poetically beautiful as it is spiritually triumphant he exclaims : —

“ And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest :
For thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways ;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people
By the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God ;
Whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us,
To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Even in his childhood John manifested that fulness of nature and that earnestness which afterwards fitted him for his mission. He “ waxed strong in spirit.” He did not mingle in the ordinary pursuits of men. As one who bears a sensitive conscience and refuses to mingle in the throng of men of low morality, he stood apart and was solitary. He “ was in the deserts until the day of his showing unto Israel.”

Mary had returned to Nazareth. Although Joseph, to whom she was betrothed, was descended from David, every sign of royalty had died out. He earned his livelihood by working in wood, probably as a carpenter, though the word applied to his trade admits of much larger application. Tradition has uniformly represented him as a carpenter, and art has conformed to tradition. He appears but on the threshold of the history. He goes to Egypt, returns to Nazareth, and is faintly recognized as present when Jesus was twelve years of age. But nothing more is heard of him. If alive when his reputed son entered upon public ministry, there is no sign of it. And as Mary is often mentioned in the history of the Lord's mission, it is probable that Joseph died before Jesus entered upon his public life. He is called a just man, and we know that he was humane. For when he perceived

the condition of his betrothed wife, instead of pressing to its full rigor the Jewish law against her, he meant quietly and without harm to set her aside. When in a vision he learned the truth, he took Mary as his wife.

In the thousand pictures of the Holy Family, Joseph is represented as a venerable man, standing a little apart, lost in contemplation, while Mary and Elisabeth caress the child Jesus. In this respect, Christian art has, it is probable, rightly represented the character of Joseph. He was but a shadow on the canvas. Such men are found in every community, — gentle, blameless, mildly active, but exerting no positive influence. Except in one or two vague implications, he early disappears from sight. No mention is made of his death, though he must have deceased long before Mary, who in all our Lord's ministry appears alone. He reappears in the ecclesiastical calendar as St. Joseph, simply because he was the husband of Mary, — a harmless saint, mild and silent.

An imperial order having issued for the taxing of the whole nation, it became necessary for every one, according to the custom of the Jews, to repair to the city where he belonged, for registration.¹

¹ It is needless to consider the difficulty to which this passage has given rise. Josephus states that Quirinius (Cyrenius) became governor of Judæa after the death of Archelaus, Herod's son and heir, and so some eight or ten years after the birth of Christ. How then could that taxing have brought Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem? The immense ingenuity which has been employed to solve this difficulty will scarcely add to the value of hypothetical historical reasoning. Especially when now, at length, it is ascertained upon grounds almost certain, that Quirinius was *twice* governor of Syria. See Schaff's note to Lange's *Com.* (Luke, pp. 32, 33), and the more full discussion in Smith's *Bible Dictionary*, Art. "Cyrenius," and President Woolsey's addition to this article in Hurd and Houghton's American edition.

From Nazareth to Bethlehem was about eighty miles. Travelling slowly, as the condition of Mary required, they would probably occupy about four days in reaching their destination. Already the place was crowded with others brought thither on the same errand. They probably sought shelter in a cottage, for "the inn was full," and there Mary gave birth to her child.

It is said by Luke that the child was laid in a manger, from which it has been inferred that his parents had taken refuge in a stable. But tradition asserts that it was a *cave*, such as abound in the limestone rock of that region, and are used both for sheltering herds and, sometimes, for human residences. The precipitous sides of the rock are often pierced in such a way that a cottage built near might easily convert an adjoining cave to the uses of an outbuilding.

Caves are not rare in Palestine, as with us. On the contrary, the whole land seems to be honeycombed with them. They are, and have been for ages, used for almost every purpose which architecture supplies in other lands, — as dwellings for the living and sepulchres for the dead, as shelter for the household and for cattle and herds, as hidden retreats for robbers, and as defensive positions or rock-castles for soldiers. Travellers make them a refuge when no better inn is at hand. They are shaped into reservoirs for water, or, if dry, they are employed as granaries. The limestone of the region is so porous and soft, that but a little labor is required to enlarge, refashion, and adapt caves to any desirable purpose.

Of the "manger," or "crib," Thomson, long a missionary in Palestine, says: "It is common to find two sides of the one room, where the native farmer resides

with his cattle, fitted up with these mangers, and the remainder elevated about two feet higher for the accommodation of the family. The mangers are built of small stones and mortar, in the shape of a box, or, rather, of a kneading-trough, and when cleaned up and whitewashed, as they often are in summer, they do very well to lay little babes in. Indeed, our own children have slept there in our rude summer retreats on the mountains.”¹

The laying of the little babe in the manger is not to be regarded then as an extraordinary thing, or a positive hardship. It was merely subjecting the child to a custom which peasants frequently practised with their children. Jesus began his life with and as the lowest.

About five miles south of Jerusalem, and crowning the top and sides of a narrow ridge or spur which shoots out eastwardly from the central mass of the Judæan hills, was the village of Bethlehem. On every side but the western, the hill breaks down abruptly into deep valleys. The steep slopes were terraced and cultivated from top to bottom. A little to the eastward is a kind of plain, where it is supposed the shepherds, of all shepherds that ever lived now the most famous, tended their flocks. The great fruitfulness of its fields is supposed to have given to Bethlehem its name, which signifies the “House of Bread.” Famous as it has become, it was but a hamlet at the birth of Jesus. Here King David was born, but there is nothing to indicate that he retained any special attachment to the place. In the rugged valleys and gorges which

¹ Thomson's *The Land and the Book*, Vol. II. p. 98.

abound on every side, he had watched his father's flocks and had become inured to danger and to toil, defending his charge on the one hand against wild beasts, and on the other against the scarcely less savage predatory tribes that infested the region south and east. From Bethlehem one may look out upon the very fields made beautiful forever to the imagination by the charming idyl of David's ancestress, Ruth the Moabitess. Changed as Bethlehem itself is, which, from holding a mere handful then, has a population now of some four thousand, customs and the face of nature remain the same. The hills are terraced, the fields are tilled, flocks are tended by laborers unchanged in garb, working with the same kinds of implements, having the same manners, and employing the same salutations as in the days of the patriarchs.

Were Boaz to return to-day, he would hardly see an unfamiliar thing in his old fields, — the barley harvest, the reapers, the gleaners, the threshing-floors, and the rude threshing, — all are there as they were thousands of years ago.

At the season of our Saviour's advent, the nights were soft and genial.¹ It was no hardship for rugged

¹ This is true, whichever date shall be selected of the many which have been urged by different learned men. But further than this there is no certainty. "In the primitive Church there was no agreement as to the time of Christ's birth. In the East the 6th of January was observed as the day of his baptism and birth. In the third century, as Clement of Alexandria relates, some regarded the 20th of May, others the 20th of April, as the birthday of our Saviour. Among modern chronologists and biographers of Jesus there is still greater difference of opinion, and every month — even June and July (when the fields are parched from want of rain) — has been named as the time when the great event took place. Lightfoot assigns the Nativity to September, Lardner and Newcome to October, Wieseler to February, Paulus to March, Greswell and Alfera to the 5th of April, just after the spring rains, when there is an abundance of pasture; Lichteustein

shepherds to spend the night in the fields with their flocks. By day, as the sheep fed, their keepers might while away their time with sights and sounds along the earth. When darkness shut in the scene, the heavens would naturally attract their attention. Their eyes had so long kept company with the mysterious stars, that, doubtless, like shepherds of more ancient times, they were rude astronomers, and had grown familiar with the planets, and knew them in all their courses. But there came to them a night surpassing all nights in wonders. Of a sudden the whole heavens were filled with light, as if morning were come upon midnight. Out of this splendor a single voice issued, as of a choral leader, — “Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy.” The shepherds were told of the Saviour’s birth, and of the place where the babe might be found. Then no longer a single voice, but a host in heaven, was heard celebrating the event. “Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, good-will toward men.”

Raised to a fervor of wonder, these children of the field made haste to find the babe, and to make known on every side the marvellous vision. Moved by this

places it in July or December, Strong in August, Robinson in autumn, Clinton in spring, Andrews between the middle of December, 749, and the middle of January, 750, A. U. C. On the other hand, Roman Catholic historians and biographers of Jesus, as Sepp, Friedlieb, Bucher, Patritius, and also some Protestant writers, defend the popular tradition, — the 25th of December. Wordsworth gives up the problem, and thinks that the Holy Spirit has concealed the knowledge of the year and day of Christ’s birth and the duration of his ministry from the wise and prudent, to teach them humility.” — Dr. Schaff, in *Lange’s Commentary* (Luke, p. 36).

faith to worship and to glorify God, they were thus unconsciously the earliest disciples and the first evangelists, for "they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child."

In beautiful contrast with these rude exclamatory worshippers, the mother is described as silent and thoughtful. "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart." If no woman comes to herself until she loves, so, it may be said, she knows not how to love until her first-born is in her arms. Sad is it for her who does not feel herself made sacred by motherhood. That heart-pondering! Who may tell the thoughts which rise from the deep places of an inspired love, more in number and more beautiful than the particles of vapor which the sun draws from the surface of the sea?

Intimately as a mother must feel that her babe is connected with her own body, even more she is wont to feel that her child comes direct from God. *God-given* is a familiar name in every language. Not from her Lord came this child to Mary. It was her Lord himself that came.

A sweet and trusting faith in God, childlike simplicity, and profound love seem to have formed the nature of Mary. She may be accepted as the type of Christian motherhood. In this view, and excluding the dogma of her immaculate nature, and still more emphatically that of any other participation in divinity than that which is common to all, we may receive with pleasure the stores of exquisite pictures with which Christian art has filled its realm. The "Madonnas" are so many tributes to the beauty and dignity of motherhood;

and they may stand so interpreted, now that the superstitious associations which they have had are so wholly worn away. At any rate, the Protestant reaction from Mary has gone far enough, and, on our own grounds, we may well have our share also in the memory of this sweet and noble woman.

The same reason which led our Lord to clothe himself with flesh made it proper, when he was born, to have fulfilled upon him all the customs of his people. He was therefore circumcised when eight days old, and presented in the Temple on the fortieth day, at which period his mother had completed the time appointed for her purification. The offering required was a lamb and a dove; but if the parents were poor, then two doves. Mary's humble condition was indicated by the offering of two doves. And yet, if she had heard the exclamation of John after the Lord's baptism, years afterwards, she might have perceived that, in spite of her poverty, she had brought the Lamb, divine and precious!

Surprise upon surprise awaited Mary. There dwelt at Jerusalem, wrapped in his own devout and longing thoughts, a great nature, living contentedly in obscurity, Simeon by name. This venerable man seized the child with holy rapture, when it was presented in the Temple, and broke forth in the very spirit of a prophet: —

“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,
According to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
A light to lighten the Gentiles,
And the glory of thy people Israel.”

Both Mary and Joseph were amazed, but there was something in Mary's appearance that drew this inspired

old man specially to her. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel. . . . Yea, a sword shall pierce through thine own soul also."

As the asters, among plants, go all summer long un-beautiful, their flowers hidden within, and burst into bloom at the very end of summer and in late autumn, with the frosts upon their heads, so this aged saint had blossomed, at the close of a long life, into this noble ecstacy of joy. In a stormy time, when outward life moves wholly against one's wishes, he is truly great whose soul becomes a sanctuary in which patience dwells with hope. In one hour Simeon received full satisfaction for the yearnings of many years!

Among the Jews, more perhaps than in any other Oriental nation, woman was permitted to develop naturally, and liberty was accorded her to participate in things which other people reserved with zealous seclusion for men. Hebrew women were prophetesses, teachers (2 Kings xxii. 14), judges, queens. The advent of our Saviour was hailed appropriately by woman,—Anna, the prophetess, joining with Simeon in praise and thanksgiving.

But other witnesses were preparing. Already the footsteps of strangers afar off were advancing toward Judæa. Erelong Jerusalem was thrown into an excitement by the arrival of certain sages, probably from Persia. The city, like an uneasy volcano, was always on the eve of an eruption. When it was known that these pilgrims had come to inquire about a king, who, they believed, had been born, a king of the Jews, the news excited both the city and the palace,—hope in one, fear in the other. Herod dreaded a rival. The Jews longed for a native prince whose arm should expel the

intrusive government. No wonder that "Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." He first summoned the Jewish scholars, to know where, according to their prophets, the Messiah was to be born. Bethlehem was the place of prediction. Next, he summoned the Magi, secretly, to learn of them at what time the revealing star had appeared to them, and then, craftily veiling his cruel purposes with an assumed interest, he charges them, when the child was found, to let him be a worshipper too!

The same star which had drawn their footsteps to Jerusalem now guided the wise men to the very place of Jesus' birth.

What was this star? All that can be known is, that it was some appearance of light in the sky, which by these Oriental philosophers was supposed to indicate a great event. Ingenuity has unnecessarily been exercised to prove that at about this time there was a conjunction of three planets. But did the same thing happen again, after their arrival at Jerusalem? For it is stated that, on their leaving the city to go to Bethlehem, "lo, the star which they saw in the east went before them till it came and stood over where the young child was." How could a planetary conjunction stand over a particular house? It is evident that the sidereal guide was a globe of light, divinely ordered and appointed for this work. It was a miracle. That nature is but an organized outworking of the divine will, that God is not limited to ordinary law in the production of results, that he can, and that he does, produce events by the direct force of his will without the ordinary instruments of nature, is the very spirit of the whole Bible.

These gleams of immediate power flash through in

every age. The superiority of spiritual power over sensuous, is the illuminating truth of the New Testament. The gospels should be taken or rejected unmutilated. The disciples plucked the wheat-heads, and, rubbing them in their hands, they ate the grain. But our sceptical believers take from the New Testament its supernatural element, — rub out the wheat, — and eat the chaff. There is consistency in one who sets the gospels aside on the ground that they are not inspired, that they are not even historical, that they are growths of the imagination, and covered all over with the parasites of superstition; but in one who professes to accept the record as an inspired history, the disposition to pare miracles down to a scientific shape, to find their roots in natural laws, is neither reverent nor sagacious. Miracles are to be accepted boldly or not at all. They are jewels, and sparkle with divine light, or they are nothing.

This guide of the Magi was a light kindled in the heavens to instruct and lead those whose eyes were prepared to receive it. If the vision of angels and the extraordinary conception of the Virgin are received as miraculous, it ought not to be difficult to accept the star seen from the east as a miracle also.

The situation of the child ill befitted Oriental notions of a king's dignity. But under the divine influence which rested upon the Magi, they doubtless saw more than the outward circumstances. Humble as the place was, poor as his parents evidently were, and he a mere babe, they fell down before him in worship, and presented princely gifts, "gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Instead of returning to Herod, they went back to their own country.

And now it was time for Joseph to look well to his safety. If there was to be a king in Israel, he was to come from the house of David, and Joseph was of that stock, and his child, Jesus, was royal too. Herod's jealousy was aroused. He was not a man wont to miss the fulfilment of any desire on account of humane or moral scruples. The return of the Magi without giving him the knowledge which he sought seemed doubtless to the king like another step in a plot to subvert his throne. He determined to make thorough work of this nascent peril, "and sent forth and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under." He put the limit of age at a period which would make it sure that the new-born king of the Jews would be included.

It has been objected to the probable truth of this statement, that such an event could hardly fail to be recorded by secular historians, and especially by Josephus, who narrates the contemporaneous history with much minuteness. But this event is far more striking upon our imagination now, than it was likely to be upon the attention of men then. For, as Bethlehem was a mere hamlet, with but a handful of people, it has been computed that not more than ten or fifteen children could have perished by this merciless edict. Besides, what was such an act as this, in a life stored full of abominable cruelties? "He who had immolated a cherished wife, a brother, and three sons to his jealous suspicions, and who ordered a general massacre for the day of his funeral, so that his body should not be borne to the earth amidst general rejoicings," may easily be supposed to have filled up the spaces with minor cruelties which escaped record. But here *is* an historical