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ART. IV.—MEMORIES OF BETHLEHEM.

THE Jewish historian Josephus and certain Latin writers inform us that there prevailed throughout the world about the time of the birth of our Blessed Lord a strong conviction that a powerful ruler would soon appear in Judæa, who would obtain ascendancy over the world. This persuasion was doubtless grounded on ancient prophecy. Daniel, who delivered his prophecy in the East, predicted (ix. 24-26) that Messiah the Prince, who was to be born in Judæa, should arise at this period, and would have universal dominion. The prophecy of Balaam (Num. xxiv.) may have suggested the idea that His appearance would be signified by a star. The cause of the expectant attitude of the Magi, and their journey of devotion and love to Jerusalem in search of the new-born King, was, as they declared, because they had "seen His star in the East."

This prophecy of Balaam, widely disseminated in the East, was doubtless the basis of the notion that the advent of the promised Saviour-King would be heralded by the appearing of a proclaiming star. In later times, in the reign of Hadrian, the false Messiah received the name "Bar-Cocheba," or "Son of a Star." The Jews bestowed the title, which shows what the prevalent expectation was. When Mahomet set forth on his career of imposture and slaughter, he pointed to a comet as a portent which favoured and was illustrative of his vain pretensions. Another prophet, Micah, accurately foretold the place of the Nativity. It was to be in Bethlehem, "the least by no means amongst the leaders of Judah," because, "though little," yet therefrom would arise One who should be the Shepherd and Ruler of Israel. Though "little" indeed at that time, and of no repute, the prophecy announced its future glory and grandeur. The promised Ruler was one whose "goings forth are from of old from the days of eternity." Here we find proclaimed the human and the eternal generation of Christ—the one from all eternity, the other in time at Bethlehem. Thus "the City of David," once of small account, became great and of marked renown. We will not delay to investigate closely the precise year in which the Saviour's birth took place, suffice it to say that it evidently occurred three or four years before our received era A.D., which is due to Dionysius Exiguus, A.D. 525. The death of our Lord took place about 782 A.U.C. He was some thirty years old when He began His public ministry, which lasted three and a half years. He was thus born somewhere about

748-749 A.U.C.—that is, some four years earlier than our present era.

The festive season of Christmas directs our thoughts to Bethlehem, David's city, and to the stupendous event which there transpired nineteen hundred years ago, which was so plainly foretold. An event full of interest for the whole human race, and big with blessings for all mankind. A wondrous event, destined to bring about the reconciliation of God and man, diffuse happiness, peace and joy amongst multitudes of every kindred, tongue and people.

A personal visit to this sacred city, and a view of its surroundings, clothes the inspired narrative with a vividness, a force, and a reality which cannot be realized at a distance, and which must be experienced on the spot to be fully comprehended. To be there, in the very locality where took place the wondrous birth; where were seen angelic messengers from the courts of heaven; where were heard the sweet voices of angels hymning their joyous anthem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men"; where

Shepherds kept their flocks by night,
All seated on the ground.

To be here where these great events transpired kindles emotions, begets feelings, stirs the heart in a manner difficult to describe. To the Gospel story new power is given. It becomes a living history. The reality of what transpired on that eventful night is brought home with marked vividness. Joyful and glorious was the intelligence conveyed to the wakeful keepers—"Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, Christ the Lord."

THE CITY

is situated on an eminence comprising a narrow ridge which is connected with adjacent hills around. These are of varying heights, and are for the most part sterile and unproductive, yet in the past they were not so, and in the coming future, when Israel shall again possess the land, they will resume their ancient fertility. The absence of trees which attract nourishing rain may account for existing barrenness. In time the "desert will blossom as the rose," and the land will yield her increase. A good era is in store, a season of blessing and of increase. Events betoken its approach. The marked returning of the Jews to their own land is "a sign of the times." New colonies are springing up on all sides. New buildings for the accommodation of colonists are presenting themselves in many directions. In numerous places the land is being

brought under cultivation, and the olive, fig-tree and vine are being extensively planted. The number of Jews in Jerusalem and throughout Palestine is vastly in excess of what it ever has been since the destruction of the Holy City under Titus, A.D. 70. The curse of Turkish rule, or rather mis-rule, and the blight of Mohammedan oppression, have had much to do with the backward state of the country in general. Around Bethlehem, however, there is a better appearance than in most places. The inhabitants are industrious. The vegetation is rich, and well repays the expenditure of labour. The gardens around bear productively, and for the most part furnish the large supply of fine vegetables which find their way into the market at Jerusalem. These gardens are near the entrance to the town, and abound with olive-trees and fig-trees. The vine also is carefully tended. Watch-towers are seen in many directions. These are occupied by watchers when the fruits are ripe to protect them from animals which have a partiality for good things, and also from bipeds of human form, who are not over-particular about appropriating other people's property, whether familiar with the Eighth Commandment or not. They recall to our mind some of our Lord's expressive parables which were taken from local surroundings. Another object of interest which meets us ere we enter the town is the Well of David. It is so called because on one occasion, when the King expressed an ardent wish for a drink of "its sweet water," three of his mighty men with bold daring broke through the host of the Philistines and successfully obtained the water and brought it to David, who refused to drink it, but "poured it out before the Lord." As we stood by this well some native damsels, with remarkably fine teeth—we will not say anything respecting their looks: they have their own feminine opinion on that subject—well, they very good-naturedly offered us a copious draught. Of course their disinterestedness was influenced by the hope of backsheesh, to which they are by no means averse, however much they are to soap and water. As we did not like the appearance of the water, we respectfully declined it, not wishing to make acquaintance with typhoid just then.

From a distance the city looks remarkably picturesque, but a nearer acquaintance shows that all is not as it appears. As we drove along in our chariot, manned by three horses abreast, we had a hard time of it. We came in contact with irregularities of all sorts—huge boulders, great ruts, deep holes, animals and humanity. Our Jehu paid little attention to any of these, and so there were some narrow shaves. As we charged through the very narrow street the natives were compelled to paste their backs longitudinally against the walls to

escape collision, but we managed to bowl over a donkey who was not up to this trick, and a baby got a tumble over; it did not seem to mind, being evidently accustomed to trifles of this sort. In fact, the streets are like the dry bed of a mountain-torrent. The sensation of driving in a ramshackle old thing grandiloquently called a carriage is far from pleasant. It was bump, bump, all the while, and if the springs were not of the clumsiest sort, they must have given way. No honest spring could stand such abuse. The nerves and the sensitiveness of the rider receives severe shocks, but it all adds to the variety of one's pilgrimage, and certainly makes a keen impression.

The people of Bethlehem are of an industrious disposition. They give themselves to husbandry and to the manufacture of fancy articles, which find their way to Europe and elsewhere. They are made from olive wood, mother-o'-pearl, and volcanic stones from the Dead Sea. Pilgrims are glad to purchase these as souvenirs. It is interesting to watch the workmen at their work; it is done sitting; Easterns do not stand except when they cannot help it. They transact their business sitting. At the market you will see the purchaser of a cucumber seated opposite to the vendor, who is in a like position, and he will haggle over the transaction for half an hour to get it a half-penny cheaper. The work is done here, in Bethlehem, in a sitting posture, and the men use their toes as skilfully as fingers in their operations. They execute very fine carving on shells brought from the Red Sea. The workshops are small, low rooms, and the houses are flat roofed, and in most cases but one story high. Such is Bethlehem to-day.

To this town it was that the good Joseph with Mary travelled from Nazareth. The journey must have been tedious. It is trying enough to-day. I have had experience of it. No good roads exist; rough bridle-paths, useless for vehicles, form the main thoroughfare. When the Romans were in power there did exist good roads, but withal travelling must have been slow. Be it what it was in the past, Joseph was compelled to undertake the journey. The Emperor Augustus had ordered a census to be taken. Each person had to come to his native town for this enrolment. God's providence arranged it all. He was the Author of the decree; the Roman was but His instrument. He had declared through His prophet that from Bethlehem should come forth Him who was to be Ruler in Israel. He had said it, and it must be accomplished. His word can never fail, or His promise be made of none effect. Men may propose, but it is God who doth ever dispose. Hence, Joseph and Mary must come to Bethlehem. As members of the House of David, they were compelled to enrol their names here in the City of David.

On arrival at

THE KHAN

they found "there was no room for them." There was a building in the form of a square where the weary traveller could obtain shelter for himself and his cattle. There was an open court with high protecting walls and a supply of water for the beasts. For the travellers' convenience and accommodation there was an arched recess with a raised floor. He had to provide his own bedding and victuals. I have rested in just such a place. Attached to the building there was frequently a cave, or grotto, which had been excavated in the limestone rock with which Palestine abounds. Occasionally this was used as a stable. When the holy pair from Nazareth arrived, they found that earlier arrivals had secured those parts of the establishment set apart for human beings. For the late arrivals there was no other shelter but in the adjoining cave where cattle were stabled. To it Joseph was compelled to take the weary Mary. And here took place on that eventful night that mighty, unparalleled, transcendent wonder. Here, in this humble cave, in this lowly abode; here, without pomp, display, or regal splendour; here, amid tokens of poverty, and marks of humility, and signs of low estate; here, without comfort, or luxury, or ease; here, even here, "when the fullness of time was come," took place the wondrous event we joyfully celebrate on our Christmas Day—here was born the Prince of peace, the King of the Jews, the God-man who was bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, "made in all things like unto His brethren," only without sin, for "in Him was no sin"—equal to the Father as touching His Godhead. He was "made under the law to redeem them who are under the law," and its terrible curse on account of its violation. He by whom "all things were made," who by a word called the sun and moon and all the hosts of heaven into being, "without whom nothing was made," came into this world His own handiwork as a helpless babe, born in this mean manner. With our fallen humanity He identified Himself in reality and in name. Though rich, yet for our sakes He became poor; He lowered Himself that His believing people might one day be exalted. Thus came into the world in a quiet, humble, unostentatious manner the King of kings and Lord of lords.

THE CHURCH OF THE NATIVITY

stands over this cave. It is the oldest Christian church in the world. It owes its existence to the pious Empress Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, who was the first Christian emperor. Its foundation was laid in A.D. 327. It comprises

a lengthened nave, with corresponding side aisles. The noble marble pillars which separate them and support the roof are thought to have formerly stood in the Temple of Solomon at Jerusalem. There is nothing unlikely in this. The Greeks and the Roman Catholics have their respective chapels under the same roof. They do not agree with one another too well, or exhibit that fraternal love which professing Christians should show. In fact, their feelings at times rise to such a pitch of animosity that bloodshed follows. They show the depth of their regard for each other by engaging in deadly combat, hardly befitting followers of the Prince of peace, whose word enjoins: "Love one another," for "God is love." It is sad that such mutual jealousy and ill-will should be nourished in a place so sacred. The cave below is enlightened with costly lamps kept perpetually aglow. To the left hand of the entrance there is a narrow recess. Here you perceive a slab of white marble, having in its centre an inlaid silver star. Around it the following words are inscribed: "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary." Long before the Emperor Constantine was converted to the Christian faith this place was looked upon as having been the veritable birth-place of the Saviour of the world. There is no reason why we should dispute the statement, however sceptical we may be about other holy sites which are pointed out, and declared to be the places where different events recorded in the Gospel history took place. I for one do not fall in with them.

If we next proceed to the outside of this church, to the open and extensive area in front of it, we can have a fine and commanding view of the

FIELD OF THE SHEPHERDS.

It lies in a rich valley below. Surrounding hills enclose it. The fields are well cultivated. Here the pastoral pipe which the shepherds play may be heard. The music which emanates is not altogether of the sweetest; in fact, it has rather a tendency to grate unpleasantly on the sensitive nerves. A tower, which was named "the Tower of the Shepherds," formerly was seen here. Eusebius, the historian, refers to it. Jewish tradition likewise mentioned it. It is supposed to have been hereabouts that the guardian shepherds were located when "the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid." In the past such structures were erected wherein shepherds found shelter whilst their flocks rested in the enclosures hard by. The Empress Helena built a church here. Its remains exist to-day. Be this the precise spot or not, it was somewhere in these fields the

shepherds were when they were made acquainted by the messengers from on high of the birth of "Christ the Lord." It was in this locality, too, that the gentle Ruth gleaned and met with the generous-hearted Boaz; and over these fields and hills roamed the youthful David as he took care of the flock of his father Jesse, who dwelt in the town above; Samuel, too, was no stranger to the neighbourhood.

CONCLUSION.

Well might angels upraise their joyous hallelujahs when "God manifest in the flesh" was born; and louder will they be in time to come, when they will proceed from the "great multitude which no man can number," saved by the "blood of the Lamb," who freely presented Himself a "sin-offering unto God, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." That perfect and accepted "righteousness of God is upon all them that believe," so assures the Apostle. All who are united to Christ by a living saving faith, which shows its reality by love and true obedience, and which is ever accompanied by the new birth from above and the regenerating influences of the Holy Spirit, will one day blend their voices in singing "Gloria in excelsis," and praise to the Lamb who has "redeemed us to God by His blood."

May we each be of that number. And as Christmas season is a period of presenting gifts, what better gift can we give to Him who gave His best gift to us, the Son of His love, than that which He asks for: "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. xii. 1).

W. PRESTON, D.D.



ART. V.—THE REFORMERS ON THE SACRIFICE OF THE MASS.¹

MR. DIMOCK has composed a most timely and useful book: a collection of the teachings of the chief Divines of the Church of England, from Cranmer to the end of the last century, on the subject of the Sacrifice of the Mass. Writing in 1841 to Dr. Jelf on the charge that Tract No. 90 asserted that the Thirty-nine Articles do not contain any condemnation of the doctrine of Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and

¹ "Missarum Sacrificia." Rev. N. Dimock. Elliot Stock, Paternoster Row. 246 pp.