

## The Arrival in Bethlehem

The distance from the last public house to Bethlehem may have been three hours. Mary and Joseph went around by the north and approached the city on the west. A short distance outside the city, about a quarter of an hour's walk brought them to a large building surrounded by courtyards and smaller houses. There were trees in front of it, and all sorts of people encamped in tents around it. This house was once the paternal home of Joseph, and ages before it had been the family mansion of David. It was at this period used as the custom house of the Roman taxes.



Joseph still had in the city a brother, who was an innkeeper. He was not his own brother, but a stepbrother. Joseph did not go near him. Joseph had had five brothers, three own-brothers and two stepbrothers. Joseph was five and forty years old. He was thirty years and, I think, three months older than Mary. He was thin, had a fair complexion, prominent cheekbones tinged with red, a high, open forehead, and a brownish beard.

The little she-ass was not with them here. She had run away around the south side of the city, where it was somewhat level, a kind of valley.

Joseph went straight into the custom house, for all newcomers had to present themselves there and obtain a ticket for entrance at the city gate. The city had properly no gate, but the entrance lay between two ruined walls that looked like the remains of a gate. Although Joseph was somewhat late in presenting himself for assessment, he was well received.

Mary remained in a small house in the courtyard among the women, who were very attentive to her, and offered her something to eat. These women cooked for the soldiers. The latter were Romans, as I could tell by the straps hanging around their hips. The weather was lovely, not at all cold, the sun lighting up the mountain between Jerusalem and Bethania. One can see it very well from here. Joseph went up to a large room in an upper story, where he was interrogated, who he was, etc., and his questioners examined long rolls of writing, numbers of which were hanging on the walls. They unrolled them and read to him his ancestry, also that of Mary. Joseph knew not before that through Joachim, Mary had descended in a straight line from David. The official asked him, "Where is thy wife?"

For seven years the inhabitants of this part of the country were not regularly assessed, owing to various political troubles. I saw the numbers V and II, and that certainly makes seven. The tax collecting had already been going on for many months, but two payments were still to be made. The people had to remain almost three months. They had indeed paid something here and there during those seven years, but there had been no regular collection of taxes. Joseph did not pay anything on that first day, but his circumstances were inquired into. He told the official that he possessed no real estate, that he lived by his trade and the assistance of his wife's parents. Mary also was summoned to appear before the clerk, but not upstairs. She was interrogated in a passage on the first floor, and nothing was read to her.

There were numbers of clerks and functionaries in the house, scattered throughout the different rooms, and a great many Romans and soldiers were to be met in the upper stories. There were also Pharisees and Sadducees, priests and elders, and all sorts of clerks and officials of both Jewish and Roman extraction. There was no such payment of taxes going on in Jerusalem. But in many other places, in Magdalum on the Sea of Galilee, for instance, taxes were being received. The Galileans had to pay there, and the people from Sidon, too, partly on account of their commercial intercourse, I think. Only those that had no establishments, that possessed no estates, had to report at their birthplace.

The receipts for the next three months were to be divided into three parts.

The Emperor Augustus, Herod, and another king who dwelt in the neighborhood of Egypt, had a share in them. The king near Egypt, having gained some advantage in war, had a claim upon a certain district far up the country; consequently, they had to give him something. The second payment had some reference to the building of the Temple; it was something like a payment on money advanced. The third was for the poor and for widows, who had received nothing for a long time. But it all went as such things do in our own day—little to the right man. Good reasons were easily found for its remaining in the hands of the great. Incessant writing and moving to and fro were kept up.

Joseph then went with Mary straight to Bethlehem on whose outskirts the houses stood scattered, and into the heart of the city. At the different streets they met, he left Mary and the ass standing while he went up and down in search of an inn. Mary often had to wait long before Joseph, anxious and troubled, returned. Nowhere did he find room; everywhere was he sent away. And now it began to grow dark. Joseph at last proposed going to the other side of the city, where they would surely find lodgings. They proceeded down a street, which was more of a country road than a regular street, for

the houses stood scattered along the hills, and at the end of it reached a low, level space, or field. Here stood a very beautiful tree with a smooth trunk, its branches spreading out like a roof. Joseph led Mary and the beast under it, and there left them to go again in quest of an inn. He went from house to house, his friends, of whom he had spoken to Mary, unwilling to recognize him. Once during his quest, he returned to Mary, who was waiting under the tree. He wept, and she consoled him. He started afresh on his search. But whenever he brought forward the approaching delivery of his wife as a pressing reason for receiving hospitality, he was dismissed still more quickly.

Meantime it had grown dark. Mary was standing under the tree, her ungirdled robe falling around her in full folds, her head covered with a white veil. The ass was nearby, its head turned toward the tree, at the foot of which Joseph had made a seat for Mary with the baggage. Crowds were hurrying to and fro in Bethlehem, and many of the passersby gazed curiously at Mary, as one naturally does on seeing a person standing a long time in the dark. I think also that some of them addressed her, and asked her who she was. Ah, they little dreamed that the Saviour was so near! Mary was so patient, so tranquil, so full of hope. Ah, she had indeed long to wait! At last she sat down, her hands crossed on her breast, her head lowered. After a long time, Joseph returned in great dejection. I saw that he was shedding tears and, because he had failed again to find an inn, he hesitated to approach. But suddenly he bethought him of a cave outside Bethlehem used as a storing place by the shepherds when they brought their cattle to the city. Joseph had often withdrawn thither to conceal himself from his brothers and to pray. It was very likely to be deserted at that season or, if any shepherds did come, it would be easy to make friends with them. He and Mary might there find shelter for awhile, and after a little rest he would go out again on his search.

And now they went around to the left, as if through the ruined walls, tombs, and ramparts of a country town. They mounted a rampart or hill, and then the road began again to descend. At last, they reached a hill before which stood trees, firs, pines, or cedars, and trees with small leaves like the box tree. In this hill was the cave or vault spoken of by Joseph. There were no houses around. One side of the cave was built up with rough masonry through which the open entrance of the shepherds led down into the valley. Joseph opened the light wicker door and, as they entered, the she-ass ran to meet them. She had left them near Joseph's paternal house, and had run around the city to this cave. She frolicked around and leaped gaily about them, so that Mary said: "Behold! It is surely God's will that we should be here." But Joseph was worried and, in secret, a little ashamed, because he

had so often alluded to the good reception they would meet in Bethlehem.

There was a projection above the door under which he stood the ass and then proceeded to arrange a seat for Mary. It was quite dark, about eight o'clock when they reached this place. Joseph struck a light and went into the cave. The entrance was very narrow. The walls were stuffed with all kinds of coarse straw, like rushes, over which hung brown mats. Back in the vaulted part were some air holes in the roof, but here also everything was in disorder. Joseph cleared it out and prepared as much space in the back part as would afford room for a couch and seat for Mary, who had seated herself on a rug with her bundle for a support. The ass was then brought in, and Joseph fastened a lamp on the wall. While Mary was eating, he went out to the field in the direction of the Milk Cave, and laid a leathern bottle in the rivulet that it might fill. He went also to the city where he procured some little dishes, a bundle of other things, and I think, some fruit. It was, indeed, the Sabbath but, on account of the numerous strangers in the city and their need of various necessaries, provisions and utensils were exposed for sale on tables placed at the street corners. The price was paid down on the spot. I think servants or pagan slaves guarded the tables, but I cannot remember for certain.

When Joseph returned, he brought with him a small bundle of slender sticks beautifully bound up with reeds, and a box with a handle in which were glowing coals. These he poured out at the entrance of the cave to make a fire. He next brought the water bottle, which he had filled at the rivulet, and prepared some food. It consisted of a stew, made of yellow corn, some kind of large plant that contained a great many seeds, and a little bread. After they had eaten and Mary had lain down to rest upon her rush couch over which was spread a cover, Joseph began to prepare his own resting place at the entrance of the cave. When this was done, he went again into the city. Previously to setting out, he had stopped up all the openings of the cave, in order to keep out the air. Then for the first time, I saw the Blessed Virgin on her knees in prayer, after which she lay down upon the carpet on her side, her head resting on her arm, her bundle serving for a pillow.

This cave lay at the extremity of the mountain ridge of Bethlehem. A clump of beautiful trees stood in front of the entrance, and thence could be descried some of the towers and roofs of the city. Over the entrance, which was closed by a door made of wickerwork, was a shed. From the door, a moderately wide passage led into the cave, an irregularly formed vault, half-round, half-triangular. On one side of the passage was a recess rather lower than the general surface, and this Joseph had enclosed by curtains for his own sleeping place. The rest of the passage, from the recess to the entrance,

he cut off by hangings, and there had a kind of storeroom. The passage was not so lofty as the cave itself, which was vaulted by nature.

The inner walls of the cave, where they were formed entirely by nature, though not perfectly even, yet were pleasing and clean; indeed to my eye, there was something about them quite charming. They pleased me more than did those parts upon which some attempts had been made at masonry, for these latter were coarse and rough. The foundation of the right side of the entrance appeared for some distance to have been hewn out of the rock; only the upper part seemed to have been made by the hand of man. There were also some holes in this passage. In the middle of the vaulted roof was an opening and, I think, three others cut obliquely halfway up the same. These oblique openings presented a smoother appearance than the topmost one; they looked like the handiwork of man. The floor of the cave was deeper than that of the entrance, and was on three sides surrounded by a stone seat somewhat raised, broad in some places, in others narrow. At one of the broad parts, the ass took its stand. It had no trough, but a large leathern bag was placed before it or hung in the corner. Behind was a small side cave just large enough to allow the animal to stand upright. There the fodder was stored. A gutter ran along by this corner, and I saw Joseph cleaning the cave out every day.

Where Mary reposed before the birth of the Child and where I beheld her elevated above the ground at the moment of her delivery, there was a similar seat of stone. The spot in which the Crib stood was a deep recess, or side vault. Near it was a second entrance into the cave, which was in the ridge of a hill that ran toward the city. In the rear, the hill sank into a very charming valley planted with rows of trees. This valley led to the Suckling Cave of Abraham, situated in a projection of the opposite hill. The valley may have been one-eighth of an hour in width, and through it flowed that little rivulet from which Joseph had procured the water.

Besides the real Crib Cave, there were in the same hill, but lying somewhat deeper, two other caves, in one of which the Blessed Virgin often remained hidden.

When in after years St. Paula laid the first foundation of her convent at Bethlehem, I saw a small, lightly-built chapel erected in the valley and on the east side of the cave. It was so constructed as to be contiguous to the rear of the Crib Cave and directly back of the spot upon which Jesus was born. This little chapel of wood and wicker walls was hung inside with tapestry. Four rows of cells opened into it, which were built as lightly as the shepherd's cots generally are in Palestine. In every row were separate cells, each surrounded by its own little garden, and all connected by covered passages leading to the

chapel. Here Paula and her daughter gathered around them their first companions. In the chapel and free from the wall, stood an altar with its little tabernacle. Behind it hung a red and white silk curtain, which concealed the facsimile of the Crib Cave that St. Paula had caused to be made. It was separated from the real cave, from the exact spot upon which Jesus was born, only by the rocky wall. This crib was made of white stone, and was a faithful imitation of that of Jesus. The manger also was represented, and even the hay hanging through its sides. The infant in it was likewise of white stone, and closely swathed in a blue veil. The figure was hollow and not very heavy. I saw St. Paula often taking it up into her arms while she prayed. Upon the wall over this crib, hung a banner upon which was represented the ass with its head turned toward the crib. It was embroidered in colors, and the hair made of thread, so natural that it looked like real hair. Above the crib was a hole in which a star was fastened. I saw that the Child Jesus often appeared here to St. Paula and her daughter. In front of the curtain and right and left of the altar were hanging lamps.