

Jesus in the Valley of Shepherds Near Bethlehem

Jesus leaving Beth-Araba directed His steps, followed by many of His last audience, toward the valley of the shepherds about three and a half hours distant. Once I saw Him with the disciples under an open shed, eating corn and red berries, which they had gathered on the way. Then the disciples separated, each taking a different road, Jesus having appointed the place at which they should again join Him. As they went along, they told all whom they met about Jesus and



exhorted them to penance and Baptism, if they had not already been baptized. Many of those whom they thus exhorted followed them to the appointed meeting place, there to listen to the teaching of Jesus. Jesus Himself took very circuitous routes, and I often saw Him passing half the night alone on the hills in prayer, so that the whole time of the journey was entirely filled up. I heard the disciples beseeching Him not to bring on an untimely death by the little care He took of His body, His fasting, His going barefoot, His long night-watches during that cold, damp season. But Jesus reproved them gently and went gravely on His way.

Before daybreak I beheld Him and His disciples descending the mountain side into the valley of the shepherds. The shepherds dwelling around already knew of His coming. All had been baptized by John, and some even had had dreams and visions of the approach of the Lord. Several were on the watch for Him. They gazed uninterruptedly toward the point whence He might be seen coming down the mountain. Suddenly He appeared in sight. They beheld Him shining with glory and surrounded by light, descending into the valley, for many of these simple-hearted people were highly favored with grace. Instantly they sounded a horn, to arouse the more distant dwellers and summon them to the spot. This was their custom at every extraordinary occurrence. All hastened to meet the Lord. They knelt before Him, with head lowly bent, their long staves resting in their arms; many of them prostrated flat on their face. They wore short doublets to the knee, mostly of sheepskin, some open on the breast, others closed, their wallets hung on their shoulder. They greeted Jesus in words from the Psalms that foretold the coming of the Messiah and proclaimed Israel's gratitude for the fulfillment of the Promise. Jesus showed them great affection, and congratulated them on their happy

state. Here and there He taught in the huts that lay around the broad meadow valley, His instructions turning upon the pastoral life which He treated in parables.

Then, followed by His hearers, He passed farther on through the valley toward Jerusalem to the shepherd tower. This tower stood on an eminence in the center of a field, its foundation being huge fieldstones. It consisted of a very high superstructure of beams, supported in part by the green trees around it. The walls were hung with mats. There were galleries and outside steps around it, and at various distances little, covered standing places like sentry boxes. From a distance it looked like a ship with high masts and spreading sails; it also bore some resemblance to the towers in the land of the Three Kings from which they watched the stars. The whole country around could be scanned from this tower, even Jerusalem and the mountain upon which Jesus was at a later period tempted by Satan.

The shepherds made use of it to catch their herds and ward off threatening danger. Some of them with their families dwelt around it in a circle of about five hours in circumference, in farmhouses surrounded by gardens and field. But their general rendezvous was in the near neighborhood of the tower.

Here they kept their various utensils, and here the herdsmen received their food. All along the base of the tower-hill were huts, and at some distance from it a large enclosed shed wherein the wives of the herdsmen dwelt and prepared the food. These women did not go forth with the rest to meet the Lord and His disciples, but later on they were instructed by Jesus. There were about twenty shepherds living around here. Jesus instructed them, called their attention to the happiness of their state of life, and told them that He had come to visit them because they had greeted Him in His infancy and had lovingly treated both Himself and His parents. He taught especially in parables of shepherds and herds, telling them that He, too, was a Shepherd, that He had under Him other shepherds who till the end of time should gather together, heal, and guide His flocks.

Then the shepherds told Jesus all about the glad tidings brought them by the angels, also about Mary, Joseph, and the Child. They had seen, they said, the image of the Child in the star that had hovered over the Crib Cave. They told of the Kings and how they in their turn had beheld the shepherd tower in the stars, and of the numerous gifts they had left here on their return to their own country. Many of them had been put to use both in the tower and in the surrounding huts, which were formed of coarse canvas. Some of the old men present had in their youth been at the Crib. They repeated the story all over

again to Jesus.

Next day Jesus and the disciples were escorted by the shepherds farther on toward Bethlehem to the dwellings of the sons of the three eldest shepherds to whom the angels at Christ's birth had first appeared, and who first had offered Him their homage of veneration. They were now dead and lay buried not far from the dwellings, which were about one hour's distance from the Crib Cave. Three sons of the old shepherds were still alive and they were themselves old men. They were held in great respect by all the others, their families being something like superiors over the rest, something similar to the Three Kings among their people. They received Jesus very humbly and joyfully, and led Him to the graves of their fathers. The site was an isolated hill covered by a vineyard; the base was surrounded by a kind of covered walk from which opened various caves and cellars. The cave containing the remains of the old shepherds was high up on the hill. The light entering from above disclosed the three graves which lay together in the ground, two parallel, the third lengthwise between them, They were closed by doors.

The shepherds opened the graves for Jesus, and I saw the brown faces of the closely enveloped corpses. The space around the coffins was filled with little pebbles. The shepherd crooks lay in the coffins by their owners.

The shepherds also showed Jesus the treasure that they still had from the gifts of the Three Kings and which was concealed here in the cave. It consisted of little solid bars of gold and whole pieces of very costly stuffs embroidered in gold. They asked Jesus whether or not they should give it to the Temple. He answered by telling them to keep it for the Community which was to form the new Temple, and He foretold to them that there would one day be a church erected over this tomb.¹ On this hill began a vineyard that extended toward Gaza. It was the usual burial-place of the shepherds.

From here the Lord was conducted to the place of His birth in the Crib Cave distant about an hour. Their way led through a remarkably beautiful meadow valley. Three paths ran through it between tracts of fruit trees trimmed into shape. The shepherds told on the way of the angelic and I saw all again in pictures. The angels had appeared in three different places: first, to the three shepherds; then, on the following night, at the shepherd tower; and lastly, at the well near the spot at which Jesus had the day before been welcomed by the shepherds. Around the shepherd tower they appeared in greater numbers, large, wingless figures. The shepherds took Jesus into the tomb cave of Maraha, Abraham's nurse, near the great pine tree.

