

WOMEN AND SCHOOL

Do unto others
As ye would
that they
should
do unto
you.

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At Bethlehem.

BY THE REV. DR. VINCENT.

In the spring of 1863 I visited Bethlehem. Our party rode over from Jerusalem — a distance of six miles. Leaving the Holy City (*El-Khuds*, as Jerusalem is now called) at two o'clock p.m., by the Jaffa gate (the western gate of the city opening toward Jaffa or Joppa), we crossed the valley of Hinnom, ascended the Hinnom ridge, to the south of the city, and soon found ourselves on the broad plain of Rephaim. We passed the old tomb of Rachel, and reaching a rounded hill-top, took a good look at *Beit-Lahm*, the Bethlehem of the Bible. I was not there on Christmas day, but on the 17th day of March, in the year of our Lord 1863, as I have already said.

Bethlehem stands on a long, narrow ridge, with a simple street — very narrow, of course, as are the streets of all Oriental cities. Its houses are of stone. Many of them are in ruins. On the northern and eastern sides of the ridge we saw a huge building like a fortress. This is the "Convent of the Nativity." It seems to be but one edifice, but really consists of three convents erected at different times. These are occupied by Latin, Greek, and Armenian Christians, and inclose the church built in commemoration of Christ's birth, and is said to cover the stable in which he was born.

Passing through a low door, we went within the huge walls of the convent. Through another door, and we stood in the ancient church, said to have been built in the third or fourth century after Christ. The church is in



BETHLEHEM.

the shape of a cross. We entered the nave, or main room. It is about one hundred feet long and about ninety wide. The ceiling is supported by forty-eight immense and elegant stone columns—twelve in a line—four rows of them. Between the two middle rows the ceiling is raised much higher than on the sides, and on the walls of the elevated section are fragments of rich paintings, much defaced by the rain which comes down through the insufficient and broken roof. The

walls and columns of the church were once decorated with pictures, and the floor overlaid with marble. Most of the pictures are ruined and the marble has been taken away. The main body of the church was not much cared for when I was there, and on rainy days it furnished a playground for the filthy children of the town, who resorted to it, much as our American children would to barn or garret, when the yard and street became too muddy for their games.

An old monk offered to show us the spot where Christ was born. While the old organ played in a dismal way we walked up the long aisle, turned into the Armenian transept, went down a long flight of steps until we reached what is called "the Grotto of the Nativity." This is a little room under the church about thirty-seven feet in length, and eleven or twelve wide. The walls and floor are lined with a greenish marble. Many elegant and costly lamps hang in the room. To the right we saw a small, semi-circular recess in the wall, in the floor of which is laid a star composed of precious stones and silver, and around it are these words in the Latin: "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary."

Three elegant lamps are kept burning all the time over this star. Going down two steps farther to the right we entered a room about ten feet square, where the monk showed us "the manger in which the Babe was laid after his birth." This is a marble block hollowed out and looks but little like a "manger," even of an

Oriental sort. Here, too, hang gold and silver lamps.

All these details repelled me, because I had no faith in their reality. No one knows the precise spot of the nativity. Superstition is full of frauds, and out of the sacred shrines the monks make money. So I was glad to get out of the close, hot, and uncomfortable pit and pass into the fresh air again.

Once standing on the hill I could look down upon the beautiful plain of