

Notes on a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

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Bethlehem.

Numerous minor objects of interest are shown the pilgrim in the vicinity of Bethlehem; and whilst he does not feel in any sense obliged to credit the alleged proofs of their authenticity, he is, nevertheless, quite convinced of the solid character of the same, resting, as they do in many cases, on authority which is above suspicion. I was much impressed in this connection with a remark of Disraeli's in his *Tancred*. "Tradition," he observes, "perhaps often more faithful than written documents, is a sure and almost infallible guide in the minds of the people where there has been no complicated variety of historic incidents to confuse and break the chain of memory; where their rare revolutions have consisted of an eruption once in a thousand years into the cultivated world; where society has never been broken up, but where their domestic manners have remained the same; where too they revere truth, and are rigid in its oral delivery, since that is their only means of disseminating knowledge." To no other country is this reflection of the gifted statesman and author more applicable than to Palestine; and we are disposed, consequently, to accept with respect, and even reverence, the local statements made us in regard to various sacred sites, particularly when we find that there has been no variation in them for centuries—from the beginning of the Christian era, in fact,—and that (what is more,) there has been no successful effort made to contradict them by attempting to establish rival claims for other sites or objects. Naturally, therefore, I was not averse to taking as fact, *inter alia*, the situation vouched for as that of the "Grotto and Field of the Shepherds," and handed down as such from generation to generation even unto our time. We may readily believe, indeed, that the good and highly favored men just mentioned would not be slow in making known to their

contemporaries the spot whence they saw and heard the angelic messengers who announced to them those "good tidings of great joy, that were to be to all the people." (St. Luke, II. 10.) It is quite probable, moreover, that "all the people," for whom these "good tidings" were intended, would hold so sacred a spot in constant veneration; wherefore it is extremely unlikely that its location would ever be forgotten, or that it would be allowed to drop entirely out of sight even with the lapse of ages. When, then, the pilgrim is shown, as were we, the field in which the "Shepherds were keeping the night-watches over their flock" (St. Luke, II. 8.) on the first Christmas night, he will not, if he be a sensible man, pooh pooh the tradition as absurd or as an invention of interested parties, priest-craft, and the like; but he will be more inclined to say to those who do doubt it: "Show me another site with equal or superior pretensions to be what is claimed for this one, or else hold your peace." These were my sentiments on occasion of seeing the "Field of the Shepherds," and they were confirmed, when, later on, I read up what has been said on the subject by divers authors whose probity is unimpeachable. The Grotto referred to is now an underground structure, which is reached by a flight of twenty-one steps. It is said to have been the crypt of a church built by St. Helen over the original grotto, in which the shepherds were wont to take refuge from storms, and in which they gathered their sheep at night, etc., as is common in the East. This church was consecrated, under the invocation of St. Joseph, to the sublime event which has rendered this spot for ever memorable, viz., the announcement by angels to these humble men of our divine Saviour's birth and mission. About the middle of the edifice are still to be seen the remains of an ancient mosaic pavement. The