



THE HOLY CHILD AND HIS MOTHER. From Raphael's "Madonna of The Chair."

THE HOLY CHILD AND HIS BIRTH-PLACE.

The Christ—he whose name is Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Father of Eternities, Prince of Peace—came to earth as a little child! No human arrangement this! If man had even dreamed of ordering the appearing of Messiah in human form, and had had the power to bring about the wonder, he would not have had Jesus born in Bethlehem of Judaea. He would have had the King appear in his beauty and majesty, a monarch with the insignia as well as the substance of royalty. He would have had the kingdom of God come with observation.

But not so had God decreed it. The plan of infinite Wisdom is wiser than that of men. The Christ became a child, thus blessing childhood, thus hallowing motherhood. Not in royal state, not in power, not to receive the acclamations of his rejoicing subjects, was Christ born. His cradle was a manger, a few poor shepherds were all who paid him homage. But no one who now hears the story of that birth but rejoices that in just that way it pleased the God-man to take upon him our nature. Henceforth he is allied with human weakness and human need. The poorest poor can say that the Redeemer of men was cradled in a manger, because there was no room for his humble parents in the inn. Jesus came in the lowliest human conditions. The little child can say that his Saviour was once little and helpless, fondled in a mother's arms, and knowing the conditions of childhood. The mother, as she looks with yearning affection into the face of the little one whom she holds, can say that thus Jesus once sat upon his mother's knee, and that by his transforming power he can make her little one to wear his own blessed likeness.

Yes, we bless God that in his wise ordering Jesus was born a child. So, while still God, he is thoroughly man, man through and through. He knows our frame. He sympathizes—oh, the comfort of the thought!—in our every feeling and every need. He is our Saviour, standing upon the platform of our humanity. Thank God he came thus humbly!

"No crown he wore, but round his peaceful brow
An aureole shone, from whence unnumbered rays

Floated away to crown less worthy heads.
His hand no sceptre clasped, but fast and far
The beams of morning as his heralds rode
To bear the Christmas gladness to the world.
And fast and far his dearer angels sped,
Blessing the little children and the poor
With the best utterances of his perfect love;
And sorrow-heard, and mourning lips were still,
And error hid itself and was afraid.
Oh, then with heart at rest I heard again

The voice, that swelled and grew into a song:
'This day, till time shall end, from shore to shore
Shall come the blessed kingdom of the Child!'

HIS BIRTHPLACE.

Bethlehem was but the type of the ordinary Judæan village. "Its position," says Stanley, "on the narrow ridge of the long gray hill which would leave 'no room' for the crowded travellers to find shelter; the vineyards kept up along its slopes with greater energy because its present inhabitants are Christian; the corn-fields below, the scene of Ruth's adventure, and from which it derives its name, 'the house of bread,' the well close by the gate, for whose water David longed; the wild hills eastward, where the flocks of David and of the shepherds abiding with their flocks by night may have wandered—all these features are such as it shares more or less in common with every village of Judah."

Dr. Thomson, in "The Land and the Book,"—we condense his narrative—describes the village as presenting a picturesque appearance on the hillside, called now by the Arabic equivalent of its old name, Beit Lahm, "house of flesh," recognizing as of old the fertility of the soil in its immediate vicinity. It is at present one of the largest and most prosperous Christian villages of Palestine. The ridge upon which it is built is about the same height as Olivet, 2,500 feet above the sea level, but it has no relative elevation above the surrounding hills.

Just below the village is a group of cisterns, hewn in the soft cretaceous rock, and apparently ancient. One of these may be the well for the water of which David longed. The condition of the fields, the fig

and olive terraces, impart to the place a thriving aspect.

"It requires considerable knowledge of the geography of Palestine, and a decided effort of the imagination," says Dr. Thomson, "to appreciate or fully comprehend the record of the momentous journey which brought Joseph and Mary to this city of David that David's greater son might here be born, according to the word of the Lord. The journey was taken by compulsion, Joseph and Mary were very poor and must have travelled on foot four days, at least, through the miry plain of Esdraelon and over the bleak mountains of Samaria and Judea. If our Christmas be rightly placed, the journey was made in the depth of winter."

"What a mighty influence for good," says Dr. Edward Robinson, in his "Biblical Researches," "has gone forth from this little spot upon the human race, both for time and for eternity! It is impossible to approach the place without a feeling of deep emotion springing out of these high and holy associations. The legends and puerilities of monastic tradition may safely be disregarded; it is enough to know that this is Bethlehem, where Jesus the Redeemer was born. Generation after generation has indeed since that time passed away, and their places now know them no more. Yet the skies and the fields, the rocks and the hills, and the valleys around, remain unchanged and are still the same as when the glory of the Lord shone about the shepherds and the song of a multitude of the heavenly host resounded among the hills, proclaiming 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men.'"

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MODERN BETHLEHEM.