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The Saviour Birth in Ancient Hellas.
(See "Birth Place of Jesus," page 705.)

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PILGRIMS ENTERING BETHLEHEM ON CHRISTMAS DAY.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.
THE BIRTHPLACE OF JESUS.

BY THE EDITOR.

FOLK notions are powerful factors in the formation of popular conviction, and this appears in all the domains of communal life, in politics, in social affairs, and most of all in religion. Accordingly we need not be surprised that the legends of the pre-Christian saviours affected the story of Christ, and that the traditions of the life of Jesus were retold and interpreted according to the prevalent conception of the ideal of mankind, of the God-man, the Christ. Thus the facts of actual occurrences are frequently embellished and overlaid by myths as vines cover the branches of a tree.

Since tradition at a very early date, even during his lifetime, called Jesus the "son of David," it was assumed that he must have been born in Bethlehem, the native town of David, and this notion crept into the canonical books of the New Testament.¹

The fixation of the day and month in the year is a matter of history, which can be traced in sermons of St. Ambrose, Pseudo-Chrysostom and other Church Fathers. That finally adopted was the same as the birth-festival of Mithras which was celebrated at the winter solstice, and Chrysostom² says about it: "On this day [the birthday of Mithras] the birthday of Christ was also lately fixed at Rome in order that whilst the heathen were busied with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their holy rites undisturbed."

In the same or a similar way, many other occurrences were attributed to Jesus, because he was worshiped as the Christ. If

¹ Cp. Matt. ii. 6 and Micah v. 2. See also Luke ii. 4.
pre-Christian saviours had done or suffered one thing or another, it was but natural that the same should apply to Jesus, and these traits are most in evidence in his passion and in his nativity.

Even before the time of Mithraism the pagans had celebrated festivals of the nativity of their gods, of Zeus, Dionysus, Heracles, and others. Sometimes the mother is on a journey or flies before her ene-

THE NEW-BORN ZEUS SEATED AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE CAVE OF HIS NATIVITY.

The young faun, the tree, the birds and the goats indicate the rustic surroundings.

mics. The birth of a divine babe always takes place in rural surroundings, among herdsmen and in the secret recesses of caves. His needs are so little provided for that he is cradled in a winnowing fan or a trough or any vessel from which the cattle are fed. However, in spite of the lowly conditions under which the saviour-hero enters
THE BIRTHPLACE OF JESUS.

THE CHILD DIONYSUS IN THE WINNOWING BASKET.
From a terra cotta relief in the British Museum.

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI.
(From an early print.)
THE OPEN COURT.

into the world of men, he is greeted with great joy, and his birth is celebrated with much merrymaking. The illustrations which represent such scenes prove that both in customs and sentiment there existed among the pagans something analogous to our Christmas. Although the Gospels say nothing definite about the place of Christ's birth except that he was laid in a manger because there was no room in the inn, it is possible that the custom of laying a baby in a manger may have been practiced in the East, where the practice of placing fruit and other offerings in the manger of an animal was common.
no room in the inn, tradition still clings to the old notion that the nativity of the Saviour must have taken place in a cave. The grotto of the Nativity was definitely localized in Bethlehem at a very early date, certainly not later than the second century, for Justin Martyr mentions it as a rock-cut cave. There is
no reason to doubt that he refers to the spot where Constantine erected a basilica dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which is still stand-

ing, though much changed and several times rebuilt in parts. St. Jerome lived here 34 years of his life. His study, a rock-cut room, is still shown to the traveler. Here he translated the Bible into Latin,
and here he died and was buried. A hallway connects the place of his literary labors with the vault which holds his tomb and those of his faithful admirers and disciples, a certain Eusebius (not the Church historian) and two Roman ladies, Paula and Eustochium.

Two staircases lead down to the chapel of the Nativity, one in the south from the Greek chapel, the other in the north from the Armenian chapel. It is a cave 38 feet long and 11 feet wide. A niche at the east end near the southern stairs has been marked in the pavement by a silver star as the very spot of Christ's nativity, and on a marble tablet we read the words, "Hic de Virgine Maria,

WHERE THE ANGELS SANG THE GLORIA TO THE SHEPHERDS.

Jesus Christus natus est." On the other side of the southern stairs in the western wall of the cave is another niche which has been selected to serve as the spot where the manger stood, but the original manger discovered here has been carried to Rome, where it is preserved in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore. Further north, we are told, is the place where the magi stood when offering their gifts and worshiping the new-born Saviour.

At Christmas the nativity of Christ is celebrated by the population together with thousands of pilgrims who gather here from
long distances. The patriarch leaves Jerusalem in the morning to visit Bethlehem for this purpose. He is received with great pomp and accompanied to the church of St. Catharine. The service lasts fully nine hours, from three in the afternoon until midnight. At twelve o'clock the candles are lit, and while the Gloria is intoned to the accompaniment of shepherds' pipes, the wax figure of an infant appears above the altar. A high mass follows, and after about two hours the patriarch carries the wax figure in a cradle to the church of the Virgin and places it on the silver star in the grotto of the Nativity. Here the figure is wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the chapter on the birth of Christ is read. This done, the procession returns to the church of St. Catharine where another mass is celebrated which lasts until sunrise.

The basilica built over the place of Christ's nativity belongs to the Latins, Greeks and Armenians, while the churches of St. Helena and St. George are the property of the Greek Church.

Bethlehem, like Jerusalem, must have been an old settlement of prehistoric ages. The name probably means the "house of Lakham (or Lakhmu)," who was one of the ancient gods of Baby-
lonian mythology. Later on when Lakhmu was forgotten, the word was interpreted to mean "house of bread." The Arabs now call it Beit-Lahm, i. e., the "house of meat."

There is a picturesque ancient tomb near the town of Bethlehem where Rachel, the ancestor of the tribe of Benjamin and a kind of patron saint of the inhabitants, is reported to lie buried. From here
the visitor enjoys a good view of the town as it appears in the ad-
joined illustration.

This so-called Tomb of Rachel is a typical whitened sepulchre,
such as is used for the Moslem saints called weli. Formerly a
stone pyramid covered the tomb, but the site was purchased in 1841
by Sir Moses Montefiore who had it restored and decorated with
a cupola and a vestibule. It is not known who lies buried here.
The assumption that it ought to be Rachel is based on the passage
Gen. xxxv. 19-20, where her death and burial are mentioned as
follows:

"And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-
lehem.

"And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave
unto this day."

The passage appears to be contradicted by another statement
in 1 Sam. x. 2, according to which Rachel's tomb was situated at
Zelzah on the frontier between Benjamin and Ephraim, which is to
be located north of Jerusalem.  

Since we know that the New Testament genealogies are im-
possible, that the edict of Emperor Augustus, according to which
Joseph had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, is unhistorical,
and that the story of the magi together with the massacre of the
innocents is a legend attributed to Jesus only because it had been
told of Buddha and of Krishna, we must conclude that Jesus was
not born in Bethlehem and we might be led to believe that he hailed
from Nazareth, but here again we become entangled in difficulties.

The village of Nazareth is a beautiful spot in Galilee, and was
formerly called en-Natsira, but this identification of Nazareth with
en-Natsira rests upon a weak foundation. We search in vain for a
town or village of Nazareth in the time of Jesus. He was called
the Nazarene because he was a member of the sect of the Nazarenes.
His disciples too were called Nazarenes and St. Paul was a "ring-
leader of the Nazarenes," yet none of them was born in Nazareth.
This term "Nazarene" is sometimes replaced in the Greek text of
the Gospels by the clause "he of Nazareth," which indicates that
whoever translated the original Aramaic documents into Greek mis-
took the designation "Nazarene" for an inhabitant of a city, and
this city Nazareth was later identified in the third century, with
en-Natsira in spite of the difference of the two sibillants. The

* For arguments that the tomb of Rachel must be sought north of Jeru-
salem, see Ebers, Palästina, I, p. 493 note. Cf. Tobler, Topographie von Jeru-
salem, II, p. 785 ff.
Greek ζ of Nazareth is soft as in English dz, while the ts in en-
Natsira is a sharp ts like the German z.

Nazareth, nowhere mentioned in the Old Testament and ab-
solutely unknown to geographers and historians at the time of

Christ, was an insignificant place even in the Christian era. Epiphanius mentions it (Adv. Her. I, 136) as having been inhabited only by Jews until the reign of Constantine. The place grew
slowly and Arkulf who wrote in the fifth century, speaks of a church built over the house of Joseph and Mary. In the sixth century a basilica is mentioned, and since then the place has received increasing attention. We are scarcely mistaken when we attribute its present significance exclusively to the tradition that the old en-Natsira is the Nazareth of the Gospels.

In the time of the crusades, the seat of the metropolitan of Palestina Secunda was transferred from Scythopolis to Nazareth, which naturally added considerably to the importance of the town.

If neither Bethlehem nor Nazareth can be regarded as the birthplace of Jesus, where shall we seek the home of his parents and the scenes of his childhood?

Prof. W. B. Smith regards the term "Nazarene" as the title of a guardian spirit or saviour, and he believes that "Jesus" means practically the same. He therefore uses "Jesus" with the article, speaking of "the Jesus," as Christians originally spoke of "the Christ," and there is much truth in his argument. We do not deny that the saviour idea antedated Jesus, and that many incidents of his life and many traits were attributed to him because he was worshiped as the fulfilment of this ideal.

We cannot enter here into a discussion of the problem, but we will say that in spite of the truth in this conception we need not deny that Jesus, the Jesus of the Gospels, was a definite historical personality who was born at the time of Herod the Great and died on the cross as a martyr to his convictions under Pontius Pilate. We grant that the historical evidence is not quite conclusive and leaves a large margin for opinion.

As to myself, I feel there is an historical basis at the bottom of the reports of the Synoptic Gospels, and I accept the view of those theologians who believe that they are based upon a prior source best preserved in Mark and commonly known as Proto-Mark. Taking this stand I would say that a critical investigation of the Gospels can at least arrive at a pretty well established probability as to the character of Jesus and the main events of his life.

Jesus was probably born and raised in Capernaum, for the Gospels contain indications that he lived there, and that there dwelt his parents and his kin.

That Jesus was a Galilean is generally conceded, and in Matt. ix. 1, Capernaum is called "his city." Here he had his home which was known to the people (Mark ii. 1) of whom many came when "it was noised that he was in the house."* We read in Mark vi. 1.

* ἐν οἴκῳ which might be translated "at home."
and Matt. xiii. 54, that "when He (Jesus) was come into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue," and the expression, "his own country," has been commonly interpreted to mean Nazareth. But if Nazareth must indeed be identified with en-Natsira, it was a small and insignificant village at the time of Christ, yea,

less than a village, so it cannot have possessed a synagogue. It was a small settlement at a spring, then called the Spring of the Guard-house, now the Spring of the Virgin. (Compare also Luke iv. 16-30, where Nazareth is called "a city" in verse 29). Thus we are led to believe that the name Nazareth has been inserted where the original

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THE BIRTHPLACE OF JESUS.

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THE SPRING OF THE VIRGIN BEFORE ITS RESTORATION.

(After Ebers and Guthe, Palaeestina.)
THE SPRING OF THE VIRGIN AFTER ITS RESTORATION.

(After a recent photograph.)
referred merely to the home of Jesus and that "his own country" means the same as "his city" which was Capernaum. This is the place of which he said "a prophet is not without honor save in his own country [and among his own kin] and in his own house."

The words here quoted in brackets, "and among his own kin," occur in Mark, which is the older report, but have been omitted in Matthew, presumably because tradition gradually obliterated the differences that are recorded as having obtained between Jesus and the members of his family. (See Mark iii. 21, and Luke iv. 16, and also Matt. xii. 46 ff.) The mother of Jesus had become an object of veneration; she was called the theotokos, the mother of God, and in the growing Church took the place of the magna mater of paganism, the Queen of Heaven. The existence of the brothers of Jesus was altogether denied as contrary to the doctrine of the Virgin birth.

The visitor to Palestine finds churches built in commemoration of Jesus in Bethlehem and in Nazareth, but not in Capernaum. What a strange irony of fate! While both places of legendary traditions have been beautified and consecrated by Christians who have determined every spot where Jesus is supposed to have been, Capernaum has been neglected and lies in ruins. Strange indeed; but in
the history of religion, myth triumphs over history! And he who is familiar with the law of religious development knows why this is so.

Religion cares little for facts; devout souls are interested in truths only, and the religious truths of great popular movements are mostly expressed in parables, in allegories and in symbols. They are superhistorical; they need not be actual occurrences, if only their import be true. A devotee is filled with sentiment and is apt to be wearied by science. He will respect historical investigations only if they bring grist to his mill. Otherwise he does not hesitate to reject or set aside even well-established truths of science as soon as they come in conflict with what he feels to be the truth. This truth, the religious truth of his faith, is sacred to him, and the scientific truth that would tear down his faith appears to him profane. Hence it is condemned as irreligious and evil.

These considerations must be borne in mind if we wish to understand the nature of the history of religion and the spirit which dominates its development. Piety has a logic of its own; for a devotee is convinced before he investigates, and the most irrelevant suggestion is easily accepted by an unquestioning faith as irrefutable proof.

We do not say that historical investigation should be stopped, nor that facts should be set aside for the sake of religious doctrines. We only wish to point out the psychology of faith and explain its pragmatic tendency. It is not necessary either to praise or to condemn this feature of religious habits, but we must understand its mode of operation so as to appreciate its poetry and also its power over people's minds, without being blind to its weak points, especially to the dangers that lurk in playing fast and loose with the conception of truth.

Whatever conclusion may be reached by a critical investigation as to the historic Jesus, we must bear in mind that Jesus was not a man to the early Christians, he was the Christ, he was God incarnate; and therefore all the notions associated with the Christ idea were transferred upon Jesus. What it behooved a saviour to have been, or to have done, or to have suffered, must have happened to Jesus, and we understand why it was so. The people needed an ideal, and the story of the vicissitudes of a man would have been of no use to them. They needed a god. Jesus the man was of no account; but Jesus the God, the Christ, the Saviour, was of paramount significance, and necessarily so; for in the evolution of mankind, the
superhistorical truth of religious ideals is an irresistible power which does not brook the facts of actual occurrences.

Christmas is celebrated by believers and unbelievers. Similar festivals have been celebrated in pre-Christian times among pagans, as yuletide or the weird sennight, when Wodan and his host pass by; as the nativity of Dionysus, the birth of Horus, etc., and it is probable that Christmas will continue to be celebrated as the festival of the child in the manger, whatever critics may have to say about the place or date of the birth of Christ.