

HISTORY OF OUR SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST.

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(Translated from the French for the NEW ZEALAND TABLET.)

CHAPTER III.—SUMMARY.

THE NATIVITY. THE CIRCUMCISION. PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE. THE MAGI. FLIGHT INTO EGYPT. MASSACRE OF THE INNOCENTS. THE RETURN FROM EGYPT. REDUCTION OF JUDEA TO A ROMAN PROVINCE. JESUS IN THE MIDST OF THE DOCTORS.

§ I.—THE NATIVITY.

1.—GOSPEL NARRATIVE OF THE NATIVITY

THE crowd that resorted to Bethlehem, the city of David, was great because all the members of royal descent, gathered together, from the different parts of Judea, went up to be enrolled, according to the terms of the imperial decree. "And it came to pass, that when they were there, her days were accomplished, that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him up in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds watching, and keeping the night-watches over their flock. And behold an angel of the Lord stood by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them, and they feared with a great fear. And the angel said to them: Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, that shall be to all the people: For this day is born to you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. And this shall be a sign unto you. You shall find the infant wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God, and saying: Glory to God in the highest; and on earth peace to men of good will. And it came to pass, after the angels departed from them the shepherds said one to another: Let us go over to Bethlehem, and let us see this word that is come to pass, which the Lord hath showed us. And they came with haste; and they found Mary and Joseph, and the infant lying in the manger. And seeing, they understood of the word that had been spoken to them concerning this child. And all that heard wondered at those things that were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these words, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God, for all the things they had heard, and seen, as it was told unto them." (1)

2.—THE DIVINE MAGNIFICENCE OF THE STABLE.

The entire world has followed the shepherds to the stable of Bethlehem. Prostrate before the crib, bathing with their tears the humble straw on which reposes a God, man annihilates himself in an ecstasy of love, adoration and gratitude. Yes, it was thus that a God should be born! A miserable, vain creature, having to make choice of its cradle, would, doubtless, have placed it on the steps of a throne, and have surrounded it with the eager assiduities of a servile crowd; the peal of the resounding trumpets would have awakened the echoes, to announce to the earth the birth of a new master; the cottage would have thrilled with joy at the expected signal from the palace. What but indignance before God are all the royalties of this world! What but silence to him is the roar of our thunders! What nothingness our grandeurs! All that we call riches is but a borrowed mantle, to cover our native miseries; what we dignify with the name power, is but the sign of a more glaring servitude; God, descending to this lower earth could not espouse our delusive pomps. "But the ox knew his owner, and the ass his master's crib." (2) The angels visited the plains of the Nativity, as in the days when Jacob led his flocks to pasture there. "The nations, seated in darkness, in the shadow of death," bending under an iron yoke, in the Roman *Ergastulum*, "saw the great light arise." (3) The decrees of salvation, enregistered from eternity, in the councils of Providence, are accomplished. "The Word was made Flesh. Glory to God in the splendors of Heaven; and peace to men of good will!" Shepherds are the first adorers of the immortal king of peace, who is just born; the first fruits of the Divine Shepherd, who will gather together the flocks of human generations, into the fold of His Church. Mary, the Immaculate Virgin, leads them to the child, whom her hands have wrapped up in swathing bands; whom she has a right to call her son, and the duty to adore as her God. Joseph, the inheritor of David, contemplates with them, the head promised to Israel, whose reign will have no end. The report of the shepherds circulates amongst the crowd which the edict of Augustus has drawn to Bethlehem. Wonder is excited about the crib, where the infant reposes. Such pomps alone suited the Incarnate Word; his divinity shines forth with greater splendour amidst the nakedness of the stable, and the abasement of the crib!

3.—MODERN RATIONALISM PLACES THE BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST AT NAZARETH.

But, let us study, from an authentically historical point of view, the narration of this wonderful birth. Besides the divine charm which the sacred text exercises over hearts, there is in each detail, a perfume of truth which it concerns us to disentangle by a serious analysis, at a time when denial has sought to intrude itself everywhere. All Europe has read, in these latter days, a 'Life of Jesus,' which commences with these words: "Jesus was born at Nazareth, a small town of Galilee, which before his time had no celebrity." (4) If the writing of a paradox were sufficient to make it be believed, Nazareth should remain invested with the unexpected honor of having been the birth-place of Jesus Christ. But history does not proceed by affirmation, it requires proofs. When the question is to know the exact birth-place of Augustus, we have recourse to the testimony of Suetonius, Tacitus, Dion and the authors who have transmitted to us the life of that prince. As all of them unanimously agree in saying that Augustus was born at Rome, a smile of pity would be excited on hearing a writer, separated by nineteen centuries from the facts which he relates, taking upon himself to affirm that this Emperor was born at Messina. Now, the history of Jesus Christ interests the world, by a better title than that of Augustus. Of the few Evangelists who have transmitted it to

us, not one has placed the birth of the Saviour at Nazareth; they proclaim that Jesus was born at Bethlehem. Apart from their formal text, we have quoted unexceptionable witnesses, establishing the same fact; consequently the reader has a right to treat with a sovereign contempt the affirmation which has just been adduced, script, as it is, of all proofs. In by-gone centuries, when the Gospel was a popular text, engraven on all memories, and perfectly understood by all, a loud burst of laughter would have done justice to the recent exegesis. We are unwilling to offer an injury to our epoch by treating these novel soporisms too seriously. But, at least, we may be allowed to state on this subject, what our fathers all knew, and what their sons, it is to be feared, while learning many other things besides, may have generally forgotten. The text of St. Luke, relative to the birth of Jesus Christ at Bethlehem, rests not solely on the divine inspiration of the Evangelist. This title to credibility—the highest that a Christian soul could desire—would have been, we conceive, without value in the eyes of pagans, whom it was necessary to convert; it is so, still, unfortunately, with regard to modern incredulity, which looks for human proofs, before submitting itself to the word of God. Now, human proofs superabound. The most direct of these, and the most easily grasped, is that which results from the examination of the Gospel narrative itself.

(1) Luc. ii, 6, 20. (2) Isaiah, cap. i, 3. (3) Isa. ix, 2. (4) Vie de Jésus, pag. 19. The author cites, in support of his assertion "Matth. xiii, 54, &c.; Marc. vi, &c.; John. i, 45, 46," according to his usual mode of proceeding, the numbers alone of the evangelical texts appear in his note; he does not produce the text. Consequently, no one would think of doubting that "Matth. xii, 54. Mark. vi, i. John. i, 45, 46," affirmed positively that Jesus was born at Nazareth. Now, those three Evangelists, in the passages above mentioned, do not say a word about it. This is surprising; it is incredible; but so it is! The parents of Jesus Christ dwelt at Nazareth, in Galilee. The childhood and youth of the Saviour were passed in this village. The native country of Jesus Christ then, for the Jews, his contemporaries, as for us, was the place where his family resided, the place where they had seen him growing up, and dwelling without interruption till the age of thirty. Thus, the inscription which, later on, the Cross of Calvary shall bear, will be this: Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. Now, St. Matthew, xiii 54; St. Mark, vi, 1; St. John, i, 45, 46, do not speak at all of the birth-place of Jesus Christ. Here is the exact text: "And coming into his own country, he taught them their synagogues." *Feniens in patriam suam, docebat eos in synagogis eorum* (Matth. xiii, 54). "And going out from thence, he went into his own country, and his disciples followed him." *Et egressus inde abiit in patriam suam, et sequentur eum discipulis sui.* (Marc. vi, 1). The place of residence, and the place of birth, are, even in our own day, two things very distinct. When St. Matthew and St. Mark speak of the place of residence of Jesus Christ, rationalism would have us to believe that they have spoken of his place of birth. Ordinary readers will not take notice of this equivocation, you say? It is true, but serious readers will stigmatize such pitiful tactics as these. By what name shall we designate an author who writes that "John i, 45, 46," places the birth place of Jesus at Nazareth? Here is the text of St. John: Philip findeth Nathanael, and saith to him: We have found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write: Jesus, the son of Joseph of Nazareth." *Invenit Philippus Nathanael, et dicit ei: Qvem scripsit Moyses in lege, et prophete, invenimus Jesum filium Joseph a Nazareth* (John, i, 45). Here, the miserable equivocation, on the place of residence and the place of birth of Jesus Christ, was not even possible, for it is clearly to Joseph that the locality of Nazareth has reference.

NEW IRELAND.

It is a somewhat strange fact that though Father Mathew was a Catholic priest and friar, his character as a Christian moral reformer has been even more highly appreciated by Protestants than by Catholics. I quoted Mr Gladstone's graceful testimony to his worth; but the following passage from a public address by Dr Channing, the celebrated American Unitarian minister, is probably one of the most elegant panegyrics upon him that ever was spoken, and it is as just as it is eloquent. After telling us how Ireland had so long been beyond other countries, hopelessly crushed by intemperance, and how in the space of two or three years this vice of ages had been almost rooted out of it by Father Mathew's labors, he said: "In a moral point of view the Ireland of the past is vanished; a new Ireland has started into life; five millions of her people have taken the pledge of total abstinence, and instances of violating the pledge are very very rare. History records no revolution like this. It is the grand event of the present day. Father Mathew, the leader of this great revolution, ranks far above the heroes and statesmen of the times. However, as Protestants, we may question the claims of departed saints here is a living minister, if he may be judged by one work, who deserves to be canonised; and whose name deserves to be placed not far below the Apostles." I must confess that when I read such testimonies as this to the character of Father Mathew and his work, I felt it an honor of no ordinary kind, even humbly speaking as a layman, to belong to a church which has in modern times produced a priest, who in the estimation even of his very enemies, deserves to be "canonised" as a saint, and to rank in the calendar "not far from the Apostles." I would ask what other association claiming to be a church has ever produced such a moral reformer, in our day or for many a day before ours? I may be told that Father Mathew's merits, and the fruits of his labor have been greatly exaggerated; but the concurring testimonies in their favor forbid that conclusion. If it be said, as it sometimes is, that the enthusiasm he awakened and the benefits he conferred on his fellow men, have been transient, and have long passed away almost entirely, I think proof to the contrary may be easily adduced. Ireland is still foremost among the advocates of the Temperance cause, and the Catholic laity in all parts of the United Kingdom, under the conduct of their bishops and priests, are at this hour making their influence felt collectively in the grand effort now being put forth to induce the legislature to interfere its power for the more effectual suppression of intemperance. If Father Mathew's noble efforts have in part failed, it is because the legislators have been working in the opposite direction. The same remarks apply to this colony. Even here the crusade against drink, begun by Father Mathew, is still carried on, however little interest the Catholic people collectively may show in it; and however formidable the enemy against whom it is directed may yet be. Mr Fox, though no priest or even a Catholic, is a worthy successor to Father Mathew, and inherits not a little of his spirit and ability. I know well that the conduct of the Catholic community in this province in reference to the Temperance cause is watched and strongly commented on by our Protestant neighbours.