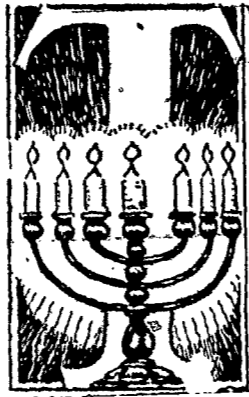


Where Christmas Really Began

By Sara Lockwood Williams



TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO Augustus Caesar issued a decree that all the world was to be enrolled.

Thus Joseph took Mary, his betrothed, from their home at Nazareth and journeyed to Bethlehem to be inscribed. Now the way was about seventy miles. Mary, seated sidewise on a small donkey, with their few belongings tied in a cloth hanging across the donkey's neck, and Joseph trudging beside her, found their way through the narrow streets of ancient Jerusalem, through the Joppa or Jaffa Gate down into the Valley of the upper Gihon, then up to the ridge or watershed of Palestine's hill country and on to the Plain of Rephaim. Midway on the plain they probably paused beside the road to drink from a well. They did not know this well would some day be called the Well of the Magi because the Wise Men following "God's bright star" may have stopped there to drink and may have seen the star reflected in the water's depths as they traveled by camel to Bethlehem in search of Jesus, the Son born to Mary.

Joseph and Mary gazed happily across the well-cultivated, terraced valleys, across the fields where shepherds guarded their flocks, noted the old stone watch towers where the farmers and shepherds could go to look across their lands in all directions. Then they glimpsed the city of Bethlehem, a small and humble village whose rock walls, cobbled streets and stone buildings showed gray and uninviting.

The man and woman wended their way through the throngs of citizens about the bazaars and found the inn where they sought lodging. The inn was overflowing. People were having to sleep by the wayside. Now Mary was with child and Joseph wished to protect her and make her comfortable, but no room was to be had. So the couple sought shelter in a stable beside their tiny donkey. The stable was a cave or grotto in the rocks with crude wooden mangers filled with hay. Here Jesus of Nazareth was born. Mary wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger. Here the shepherds, to whom angels had announced the Saviour's birth, came to kneel beside the humble bed and lay their gifts before the Babe whom they adored.

Because this Babe was born the whole world rejoices and celebrates Christmas. Joy, peace, love, humility—all the great truths of Christianity came to the world with His birth. The basis of modern civilization lies in the little town of Bethlehem.

Even as the Wise Men 2000 years ago made their way to the shrine, so pilgrims, tourists, believers and non-believers journey today across the self-same road, still the main artery of communication between Jerusalem and all the southern part of Israel. They see the Well of the Magi, the terraced gardens, the shepherd's fields, and the old, old watch towers. The highway is now smoothly paved. The travelers all too often ride in luxurious motor cars. But they still pass caravans of camels and asses and see pedestrians garbed in costumes of many lands. For pilgrims come from near and far to the Holy Land, particularly to ancient Bethlehem, whose grayness has increased with centuries of dust and erosion on its leaden-hued stones. But dull as is its outward appearance, few approach the city without a thrill of reverence and awe, without renewing acquaintance with the Holy Scriptures and gaining inspiration and faith. Today they cross the lively bazaars where "objects of piety" made of shells, mother-of-pearl and olive wood have wide space among the food-stuffs and goods for sale. They go to the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem's greatest relic of antiquity. In 330 A. D. Constantine built this basilica above what is believed to be the grotto-stable in which Christ was born. The church looks like a fortress and its entrance door is so small even a short person must stoop to enter. It was made thus not, as some say, to cause thoughts of humility and reverence upon entering so holy a place, but to prevent the ancient Saracens and Turks when they were in power from desecrating the place with cattle. Five different nationalities of Christians now guard this church and hold services here. The place is strikingly simple. The Greek Orthodox and the Armenian and Syrian churches occupy the main floor. Two circular stairways lead to the dark caves below. There is a chapel in the grotto. On the floor is a great silver star with silver nails over the place where Mary is said to have given birth to Jesus. Around the star is the inscription:

"HIC DE VIRGINE MARIA JESUS CHRISTUS NATUS EST."

Fifteen silver lamps unceasingly burn day and night over this holy place. Four belong to the Latins, six to the Greek Orthodox, and five to the Armenians and Syrians. Representatives from many Christian nations kneel in common before the little altar. Seldom is the grotto without worshippers. Whether or not they believe this to be the authentic spot of the Nativity, it carries the atmosphere of holiness and spirituality. The handsome, proud natives of Bethlehem seem always a happy people, but at Christmas time in particular Bethlehem radiates joy.

