

LETTER XXXI.

IN JUDEA AND THE VALLEY OF ESCHOL.

MAR SABA is the name of an ancient convent built on the side of the almost perpendicular wall of one of the deep gorges which abound between the Dead Sea and Bethlehem. It was like waking up in the Middle Ages as, refreshed by a short *siesta* after our long ride from Jericho, we looked out upon its venerable walls. The opposite wall of the gorge is full of hermits' cells, cut in the rock or made by the help of artificial walls of stone. We learned that they were little occupied now except by jackals. The old monastery itself is sufficiently uninviting and desolate to please any hermit's fancy. Here it has stood since the fifth century, a wonder and a mystery. Sabas, for whom it was called, was the abbot of an order that bore his name. Here, doubtless, was buried some of the best life of the Church just at that critical period in its history when was developed the germ of the papacy. Men thought that they did God service when they hid in seclusion and renounced the stern calls of life. Self-denial and works here, among the earliest places in the Church, began to hew out the path to heaven. Here, on his crust and cup of cold water, the hermit began to count his beads and prayers and renounce his manhood.

The mystery which hung about the old monastery led the Persians, in the seventh century, to plunder

it, the Chosroes murdering all the monks then found. Its reputation for wealth led to repeated attacks upon it in the eighth and ninth centuries. It was accordingly well fortified, and watch-towers were built from which threatened danger could be seen afar off by the sleepless watchmen. Even now guards are on duty in these old towers, and the great iron doors of the monastery are kept constantly barred and locked. No one can enter without a special order from the Greek patriarch at Jerusalem. Even this order will not avail if presented after sunset.

An ignorant-looking monk met us at the iron door, after we had descended some forty or more stone steps, and led us down as many more to a paved court, where, in a small building with a white dome, he pointed out the tomb of St. Sabas. We were then shown through different chapels some of which were adorned with old paintings. In one we were shown a great pile of skulls in a sort of alcove. They were the skulls of the monks killed when the monastery was plundered in the seventh century. Our guide with the cowl could only command enough English to tell us that they were the skulls of the "monkeys" killed there, a statement which he repeated once or twice. We got occasional glimpses of the present monks in their narrow cells. There are less than one hundred of them altogether. Some are lunatics, and others are refractory priests who are confined here for impurity or disobedience to the patriarch.

One special object of our visit was to see the room of old manuscripts, where Tischendorf found some of great value. We had an order from the patriarch permitting us to see them, but we were told privately that the monks would consent reluctantly. We found it so, but insisted on our privilege according to our permit, and were finally taken into

a small room adjoining one of the chapels. Here, with three monks to watch us, we were permitted to look over a few bound manuscripts of the Gospels, but none of great antiquity or value. The monks knew nothing of their character, often holding them upside down, and yet professing that they could not be bought at any price. We learned afterward that the most ancient manuscripts were in another part of the monastery, and that the monks had shown this one room as if it were all. Dr. Schaff had been similarly deceived the day before, for, meeting us on the shore of the Dead Sea, he told us that we should be disappointed in the library, and that the monks were a most ignorant set. The building was the most interesting, clinging, as it did, to the rocks, and supported at places by stone buttresses. It is long and somewhat straggling, but this is owing mostly to its peculiar location.

A walk after supper revealed conduits cut in the mountain to convey the water of a large area, in time of rain-fall, to the monastery cisterns. We felt equally safe in our tent with such travelers as chose to spend the night behind that barred iron door. One of the monks stood guard over our tent with the soldiers employed for that purpose. He found the savory roast pigeons of our dragoman more to his taste than the vegetables which he had sworn to eat all his life.

We had not finished our omelet and chops the next morning, April 11, before our baggage was nearly packed for the day's march. One of the pack-mules preferred to follow us over the mountain path to keeping company with the mule-train. None of these pack-mules have bridles, but simply follow their leader with his train. The lead-mule will never allow himself to be passed by any other in the train, and this one would not submit to such airs. He came galloping up the steep ascent with

his heavy load as if it were nothing compared to liberty. He was caught, however, and remanded to his old place among the *deliberative* bodies, the donkeys, and to his fellow-mules, which, like himself, are "without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity."

From these mountain summits we continue to see the winding green line of the Jordan and the blue haze which still does not wholly obscure the waters of the Dead Sea, while Olivet and some of the towers of Jerusalem now also come in sight. We lose them, however, as we near Bethlehem. We gladly exchange the barren hills of this uninhabited wilderness of Judea—the same, perhaps, where John the Baptist lived on locusts and wild honey—for the green fields and terraces of Bethlehem. Honey still abounds in Judea. Just before us is a bee-house, with hundreds of hives. The locusts which the Baptist ate seem more probably to have been the pods of the carob-tree than the grasshoppers which sometimes scourge our western frontier and are eaten by savage tribes. The locusts visit Palestine every few years, coming from the east of the Jordan, but are not so frequent visitors as to be the constant diet of any who choose to eat them, while the carob, or locust-pod, is much eaten by the people, and can nearly always be had at the markets. As for milk, which, with honey, was to abound in the land, I suppose the flocks of goats supplied that in former times even more than now. "Cattle" in this country appear to mean sheep and goats especially. Mutton, rather than beef, is the meat most used. Sheep and goats appear in considerable numbers on all these hills of Bethlehem. They are often found together in flocks, but when desired "the shepherd separates his sheep from the goats."

No wonder David was so apt with the sling!

Never did a shepherd's boy have such opportunity of practicing. Stones, and smooth stones, such as he knew how to use so well, are everywhere. While he watched his flocks, using his harp as a pastime by night, he doubtless used his sling by day. Thus grew that muscle that enabled him to tear the kid from the lion's mouth and the paw of the bear. All along here where we see these flocks to-day the son of Jesse led his father's sheep, and the shepherds were watching their flocks by night when a great light shone round about them, and angel voices sung, "Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Down there in that fertile valley lay, perhaps, the field of Boaz, where Ruth gleaned after the reapers. Her Gentile blood mingled with Jewish in the veins of David and his greater Son, perhaps broadening the sympathies of the one, and helping us to realize that the other was the Son of Adam as well as the Son of David. Up there on the edge of the town is pointed out David's Well. He had often slaked his thirst there in his boyhood. Now when the Philistines held it David, burning with thirst, cried, "O that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate! And the three mighty men brake through the host of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David; nevertheless he would not drink thereof, but poured it out unto the Lord." A woman at the well drew some of the water for us, and we found it sweet and refreshing.

We wonder not at the name given the town of Bethlehem—the "house of bread." Coming as we did from the wilderness, we were much struck with the evident fertility of the soil. Doubtless these fields, and vineyards, and olive-groves, feed a large section of country, many coming from a distance to

get bread. The town, which numbers some five thousand souls, is the cleanest, most enterprising place we have seen. True, it has the advantage of a good situation, and in a relatively fertile section, but there is a fresh look about the place which would indicate that much is owing to the spirit of the people. So it doubtless is. We visited a number of the shops where skilled labor employs modern inventions in the manufacture of different articles. Here were fine displays of goods made from mother-of-pearl, or Dead Sea stone, or olive-wood. Some of the Bethlehem merchants had their wares at Philadelphia last year. The women appeared better contented and more modest, while the children in fewer numbers cried "Backshish!" What made the difference? Nearly the whole population is *Christian*. In Siloam, and other towns where all were Moslems, there was an air of universal decay, and the children were dirty, noisy beggars, without exception. The type of Christianity most seen here is the Greek. It is by no means the best. The Armenian is better, and the Latin an improvement over either. Still, while the Protestant may almost blush that much of it is called Christianity, yet it must be confessed that such purely Christian towns as Bethlehem and Bet-Jala, a place of three thousand souls, near by, are a great improvement over any Moslem town in the country. One feels a broader charity for all who are called Christians on seeing that the lowest form of the true religion is a great advance as regards public morals, and the sanctity of home, and the place of woman, over the best type of the best false religions. If I felt disposed to disclaim the Greeks who danced around the sepulcher of the Lord awaiting the holy fire, I honor those who have made Bethlehem such a place that a Christian need not feel ashamed that Jesus was born here.

The Greeks, Latins, and Armenians, all have chapels and convents on the site of the Lord's birthplace in Bethlehem, as they have on the site of his death in Jerusalem. Here, as there, a military guard is stationed to preserve order against any possible outbreak of fanaticism on the part of either Moslems or Christians. One sacred spot is recognized by all sects, and all are permitted to visit it and worship there. The birthplace of Jesus is shown in a sort of grotto under the main chapel. The place is marked by a silver star, over which burn fifteen lamps, divided almost equally among the Greeks, Latins, and Armenians. Within a couple of yards is shown the manger where he was laid when the shepherds came to worship him. Silver lamps are kept perpetually burning, while the walls are hung with costly tapestry and the floor is paved with marble.

Of course no confidence can be placed in these exact spots, and yet there is strong probability that this is the place where Joseph and Mary took refuge when there was no room for them in the inn. The stables of this country are often caves. Over this one there arose in the fourth century a Christian church, which is believed by many to be that still standing, and through which we passed to visit the cave, or grotto. If so, it dates back to Constantine's time, and its peculiar architecture would indicate the period when the *basilica*, or sacred place for *hearing*, had not been superseded by the cathedral, where the service was mostly addressed to the *eye*. The old church is built like a large hall, having four rows of columns to support the roof. These are of stone, with capitals and bases. They are nineteen feet high and over six feet in circumference. They are so arranged that the preacher could be seen and heard by a large congregation. On this sacred spot the gospel was doubtless *preached* in its

purity before it became corrupted into a set of forms which concealed its great central truth.

Another incidental proof of the early belief that this grotto marked the birthplace of our Lord is that Jerome, one of the Fathers, and as devout as he was scholarly, came hither to live in this cave, that he might be as near as possible to the sacred spot where God became incarnate. The cave where he lived and studied so many years is connected with the traditional cave of the nativity, one opening directly into the other. Of course there are many other sacred places shown in Bethlehem, such as the Grotto of the Shepherds, where the angels first appeared to them, and the Milk Grotto, where a drop of virgin's milk fell on the rock, imparting peculiar properties to it. But these idle traditions should not divert our minds from those more trustworthy. Here angels acknowledged that Christ was born, and Satan, through Herod, sought the young Child's life, and the voice of Rachel was heard weeping for her children, and she refused to be comforted because they were not. It is not strange that if defeated then the father of lies should now seek to discredit the truth by foolish traditions.

The first thing which struck our attention on leaving Bethlehem was the remarkable aqueduct which leads to it from Solomon's Pools. Winding along the sides of the hills, with its clear water visible at different air-holes, it guided us to our camping-ground at the pools. It is made entirely of stone and cement, and was formerly in fine working condition as far as Jerusalem. Its architects understood the principle of the siphon, and accordingly overcame the great inequalities of the intervening hills. It is a creditable work, whether due to Jews or Romans. A beautiful vale of green, a little strip not over one hundred yards wide and less than a mile long, marked the village of Artas. Situated

at the foot of the hills whose barren limestone rocks only made the sunlight more glaring and painful, this little valley was a thing of beauty, and the memory of it will be a joy forever. The hum of the villagers' voices reached us as we rode along the crest of the hill on our way to Solomon's Pools.

These great pools are some eight miles from Jerusalem, and were built, or at least commenced, by Solomon to provide his capital with water. It is believed, however, that Pilate finished them and made them available. They are three in number, and so arranged that the highest can be made to empty into the lowest. The lowest and largest, which we reached first, is one hundred and ninety-four yards long and sixty-nine yards wide, and about fifty feet deep. The others are not so deep, but are considerably more than half as large. The water-supply comes from several springs, the largest affording a daily quantity of many tuns. A guard of soldiers is stationed at the tower where the water is divided to run into the different pools, or to continue in the aqueduct directly to Bethlehem. An extensive old fort, now used mostly as a stable and the sleeping-place of the soldiers, stands quite near the pools. The chief attraction within was a great bee-hive, where the bees were making honey in earthen jars with a small hole in the bottom. The pools looked tempting enough for a bath, and following the example of an Arab, which proved that it was customary, we all three plunged in to have more familiar experiences than attended our swim in the Dead Sea.

In the early morning of April 12, ordering our tents to be pitched for us that night at Jerusalem, we started in the opposite direction for Hebron. We had almost despaired of making this venerable town, owing to the fights between Bedouin tribes in the vicinity, which, it was thought, would make

travel somewhat unsafe. But learning that the warring tribes were preparing for a pitched battle some miles south of Hebron, and that it would be prudent to venture, we lost no time in seeing one of the oldest cities of the world, and the valley whence had come the wonderful grapes of Eschol. Our road at first lay over the rough stones which, massed, make up the hills of Judea; but we finally reached a fair road for Palestine, and passing through a fine agricultural section, we had good opportunity of seeing many of those rural scenes on which our Lord based his parables. Here in one field was the way-side or beaten path, the stony ground, the thorns, and the good ground, and yet the latter so variable that different parts of the same field would bring forth some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred-fold. Here were small stones and *strata* of stone, with a thin covering of soil. In every field were thorns, a sort of shrub with small thorns, growing rapidly, not so tall as they were bunchy, and unless watched liable to take the whole field. Even when cut down the roots have great vitality, and still send forth thorns to choke the wheat.

The fuel of the country appears to be roots and thorns. Fires made of the latter crackled so as to be heard some distance. A native has simply to set fire to a small thorn-bush and he has ample fire to cook by. They make a very hot fire, as we found by observation. It is quite easy here for a man, in making a vineyard, to build a *wall* about it and to erect a *tower*, for this is the quickest way of getting rid of many of the stones which must be cleared from the ground. We saw fig-trees planted in nearly every vineyard. It was doubtless under one of these fig-trees, hidden by the stone-wall, that Nathanael was praying in secret, unobserved by human eye, when Jesus saw him, and in that fact gave such a proof of his divinity. The stone-wall concealed

him more than the boughs of the tree. It is while men are plowing in these fields that they often come upon hidden treasure, most usually old coins, which they readily sell to travelers. Here are shepherds leading their flocks, and counting to see if there are only ninety and nine of the hundred while one has gone astray. Here are houses built upon a rock. Wood is unknown as building-material, and all the houses are built of stone, and almost invariably upon a rock, the heavy rains completely undermining all others. Here, too, are the women with their pieces of silver, all they have in the world; and if they should lose one they would seek diligently until they found it. In fact, Oriental life remains about the same in many respects as in our Lord's day.

We needed neither guide-book nor dragoman to tell us when we reached the Valley of Eschol. It is one great mass of vineyards. Many of the vines are trained on the ground, while others stand erect like ours, growing out from trunks almost as large as trees. The spies would naturally have taken back some of the delicious grapes, and Caleb had his heart set on coming back here to live. But, older than the spies, Abraham had visited these fertile fields, and, while Lot "pitched his tent toward Sodom," Abram "came and dwelt in the Plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the Lord." Hebron is one of the few cities of the country not built upon a hill. You do not see it for the surrounding figs and olives until you are almost in the town. Before you enter you may pass Abraham's Oak, a large and venerable tree, dating back several centuries, and possibly, at least in kind, connected with that grove of trees which he bought with the field of Ephron. The fact that they were included in his title-deed would indicate them as worthy of special notice, and perhaps exceptional at that early day, as this one is

now. Not far from this oak Abram could have had a view of the Dead Sea, and could see the smoke go up from the burning Cities of the Plain.

The oak is now in possession of the Russians, who have purchased the field containing it. Abraham's field was quite a large one if it embraced the present site of the old oak and the cave covered by the mosque where are buried the remains of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, and of Jacob and Leah. There is little reason to doubt the identity of the cave under the mosque, and some suppose that Jacob's embalmed body may be found there even at this day. Only Moslems can ever enter the inclosure of the mosque, much less look down into this wonderful receptacle for the dead. A firman from the sultan has secured for several crowned heads or princes of the blood the privilege of looking within the mosque, but none dare enter the tomb. We stood before the closed door of an old building, which, perhaps, was once a Christian church, and were told that behind this door were Jacob's remains, and under that crescent slept Abraham. Had the door stood ajar and we attempted to enter, it would have been at the peril of our lives. Dr. Schaff had been pushed violently away from the door a few days before, because, happening to come with a party to the mosque about the time of the close of the service, some fanatic supposed that he had come determined to enter. We walked down to a pool where it is believed that David caused the murderers of Ishbosheth, the son of Saul, to be hung. From there we got a better view of the general plan of the old mosque, built of drafted stone, and apparently not originally designed for a Moslem place of worship. Two minarets now rise, one at each end, but the building is any thing but handsome. It reconciles us to the Turks' possessing this old cave, when we remember the probable abuse

of it by the almost idolatrous practices of Oriental Christians.

Hebron is perhaps the third largest city of Palestine, ranking, after Nablus, next to Jerusalem. Many Jews are still there, but the mass of the people are the most bigoted Moslems. Children called out curses on our heads as we rode through the town, and a few tried their skill in throwing small stones. We were not sorry at length to leave the home of the patriarchs, and the seat, for many years, of David's kingdom, but we were glad to have visited it.

Our return trip made us yet more familiar with the objects noticed in the morning. Here were the women at the well, and especially at the spring or well by the way-side, which is the traditional place where Philip baptized the eunuch. It is entirely probable that the old road from Jerusalem to Gaza lay through Hebron, as it does to this day. If so, however, it must have been much better than now for the eunuch to have driven over it in his chariot. But the worst part of the whole road is near Hebron, and it is evidently an old Roman road greatly out of repair. The road from Solomon's Pools to Jerusalem, perhaps made at the same time, is very fair.

Nearing Jerusalem we stopped at Rachel's Tomb, a small domed building, different parts of which are used by the Mohammedans and Jews for worship. A number of Israelites were there when we looked in at the huge sarcophagus supposed to cover her dust, for it is recorded that "Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem."

One point of observation gave us a view of Jerusalem and Bethlehem at the same time. A deep depression in the rock at this place is pointed out as the cleft in the rock where Elijah was hid when the Lord God passed by faintly revealing his glory.

The convent there is named for the prophet, but was originally founded by a Bishop Elias, after whom it was first called.

The view of Jerusalem from this approach was very fine, and different from any that we had seen before. Not so full as that from Scopus or Olivet, it still had a peculiar beauty, the towers and domes in the western part of the city coming out in special prominence. The sunlight, which bathed the whole scene, gave a tinge of mingled joy and sadness to it all, such as is felt by every Christian in approaching the city where our Lord was crucified. The sunset was of that kind witnessed only once in a life-time. Great masses of clouds, which had been gathering in the west, were suddenly rifted as the last golden rays flashed upon the distant hills of Moab and the mountains which are round about Jerusalem. They seemed the augury of that better day when the darkness which rests upon the city of the Great King, the darkness of Moslem bigotry and Christian superstition, shall be scattered before celestial light. Shall the West indeed be the quarter whence that radiance shall come? and shall it be not the spasmodic light of the Crusades, but the everlasting light of a triumphant gospel?

Jerusalem, April 12, 1877.