

The Life of JESUS CHRIST

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New and Revised Edition

NEW YORK

CHICAGO

TORONTO

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1. **The Nativity** - Augustus was sitting on the throne of the Roman Empire, and the touch of his finger could set the machinery of government in motion over well-nigh the whole of the civilized world. He was proud of his power and wealth, and it was one of his favorite occupations to compile a register of the populations and revenues of his vast dominions. So he issued an edict, as the Evangelist Luke says, "**that all the world should be taxed**," or to express accurately what the words probably mean, that a census, to serve as a basis for future taxation, should be taken of all his subjects. One of the countries affected by this decree was Palestine, whose king, Herod the Great, was a vassal of Augustus. It set the whole land in motion; for, in accordance with ancient Jewish custom, the census was taken, not at the places where the inhabitants were at the time residing, but at the places to which they belonged as members of the original twelve tribes.

2. Among those whom the edict of Augustus thus from afar drove forth to the highways were a humble pair in the Galilean village of Nazareth - Joseph, the carpenter of the village, and Mary, his espoused wife. They had to go a journey of nearly a hundred miles in order to inscribe themselves in the proper register; for, though peasants, they had the blood of kings in their veins,

and belonged to the ancient and royal town of Bethlehem, in the far south of the country. Day by day the emperor's will, like an invisible hand, forced them southward along [9] the weary road, till at last they climbed the rocky ascent that led to the gate of the town, - he terrified with anxiety, and she well-nigh dead with fatigue. They reached the inn, but found it crowded with strangers, who, bent on the same errand as themselves, had arrived before them. No friendly house opened its door to receive them, and they were fain to clear for their lodging a corner of the inn-yard, else occupied by the beasts of the numerous travelers. There, that very night, she brought forth her first-born Son; and because there was neither womanly hand to assist her nor couch to receive Him, she wrapped Him in swaddling-clothes and laid Him in a manger.

3. Such was the manner of the birth of JESUS. I never felt the full pathos of the scene, till, standing one day in a room of an old inn in the market-town of Eisleben, in Central Germany, I was told that on that very spot, four centuries ago, amidst the noise of a market-day and the bustle of a public-house, the wife of the poor miner, Hans Luther, who happened to be there on business, being surprised like Mary with sudden distress, brought forth in sorrow and poverty the child who was to become Martin Luther, the hero of the Reformation and the maker of modern Europe.

4. Next morning the noise and bustle broke out again in the inn and inn-yard; the citizens of Bethlehem went about their work; the registration proceeded; and in the meantime the greatest event in the history of the world had taken place. We never know where a great beginning may be happening. Every arrival of a new soul in the world is a mystery and a shut casket of possibilities. Joseph and Mary alone knew the tremendous secret - that on her, the peasant maiden and carpenter's bride, had been conferred the honor of being the mother of Him who was the Messiah of her race, the Savior of the world, and the Son of GOD. [10]

5. It had been foretold in ancient prophecy that He should be born on this very spot: "**But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall He come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel.**" The proud emperor's decree drove southward the anxious couple. Yes; but another hand was leading them on - the hand of Him who overrules the purposes of emperors and kings, of statesmen and parliaments, for the accomplishment of His designs, though they know them not; who hardened the heart of Pharaoh, called Cyrus like a slave to His foot, made the mighty Nebuchadnezzar His servant, and in the same way could overrule for His own far-reaching purpose the pride and ambition of Augustus.

6. **The Group Around the Infant** - Although JESUS made His entry on the stage of life so humbly and silently; although the citizens of Bethlehem dreamed not what had happened in their midst; although the emperor of Rome knew not that his decree had influenced the nativity of a king who was yet to bear rule, not only over the Roman world, but over many a land where Rome's eagles never flew; although the history of mankind went thundering forward next morning in the channels of its ordinary interests, quite unconscious of the event which had happened, yet it did not altogether escape notice. As the babe leaped in the womb of the aged Elizabeth when the mother of her Lord approached her, so, when He who brought the new world with Him appeared, there sprang up anticipations and forebodings of the truth in various representatives of the old world that was passing away. There went through sensitive and waiting souls, here and there, a dim and half-conscious thrill, which drew them round the Infant's cradle. Look at the group which gathered to gaze on Him! It represented in miniature the whole of His

future history. [11]

7. First came the Shepherds from the neighboring fields. That which was unnoticed by the kings and great ones of this world, was so absorbing a theme to the princes of Heaven, that they burst the bounds of the invisibility in which they shroud themselves, in order to express their joy and explain the significance of the great event. And seeking the most worthy hearts to which they might communicate it, they found them in these simple shepherds, living the life of contemplation and prayer in the suggestive fields where Jacob had kept his flocks, where Boaz and Ruth had been wedded, and David, the great Old Testament type, had spent his youth, and there, by the study of the secrets and needs of their own hearts, learning far more of the nature of the Savior who was to come than the Pharisee amidst the religious pomp of the temple, or the scribe burrowing without the seeing eye among the prophecies of the Old Testament. The angel directed them where the Savior was, and they hastened to the town to find Him. They were the representatives of the peasant people, with the "honest and good heart," who afterwards formed the bulk of His disciples.

8. Next to them came Simeon and Anna, the representatives of the devout and intelligent students of the Scriptures, who at that time were expecting the appearance of the Messiah and afterwards contributed some of His most faithful followers. On the eighth day after His birth, the Child was circumcised, thus being "**made under the law,**" entering into the covenant, and inscribing His name in His own blood in the roll of the nation. Soon thereafter, when the days of Mary's purification were ended, they carried Him from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord in the temple. It was "**the Lord of the temple entering the temple of the Lord;**" but few visitors to the spot could have been less noticed by the priests, for Mary, instead of offering the sacrifice usual in such cases, could only afford two turtle doves, the offering of the poor. Yet [12] there were eyes looking on, undazzled by the shows and glitter of the world, from which His poverty could not conceal Him. Simeon, an aged saint, who in answer to many prayers had received a secret promise that he should not die till he had seen the Messiah, met the parents and the child, when suddenly it shot through him like a flash of lightning that this at last was He, and, taking Him up in his arms, he praised GOD for the advent of the Light to lighten the Gentiles and the Glory of His people Israel. While he was still speaking, another witness joined the group. It was Anna, a saintly widow, who literally dwelt in the courts of the Lord, and had purified the eye of her spirit with the euphrasy and rue of prayer and fasting, till it could pierce with prophetic glance the veils of sense. She united her testimony to the old man's, praising GOD and confirming the mighty secret to the other expectant souls who were looking for redemption in Israel.

9. The shepherds and these aged saints were near the spot where the new force entered the world. But it thrilled susceptible souls at a much greater distance. It was probably after the presentation in the temple and after the parents had carried back their child to Bethlehem, where it was their intention to reside instead of returning to Nazareth, that He was visited by the Wise Men of the East. These were members of the learned class of the Magians, the repositories of science, philosophy, medical skill and religious mysteries in the countries beyond the Euphrates. Tacitus, Suetonius and Josephus tell us that in the regions from whence they came, there then prevailed an expectation that a great king was to arise in Judaea. We know also from the calculations of the great astronomer Kepler, that at this very time there was visible in the heavens a brilliant temporary star. Now the Magi were ardent students of astrology and believed that any unusual

phenomenon in the heavens was the sign of some remarkable event on earth; and it is possible that, connecting this star, to which [13] their attention would undoubtedly be eagerly directed, with the expectation mentioned by the ancient historians, they were led westward to see if it had been fulfilled. But there must also have been awakened in them a deeper want, to which GOD responded. If their search began in scientific curiosity and speculation, GOD led it on to the perfect truth. That is His way always. Instead of making tirades against the imperfect, He speaks to us in the language we understand, even if it express His meaning very imperfectly, and guides us thereby to the perfect truth. Just as He used astrology to lead the world to astronomy, and alchemy to conduct it to chemistry, and as the Revival of Learning preceded the Reformation, so He used the knowledge of these men, which was half falsehood and superstition, to lead them to the Light of the world. Their visit was a prophecy of how in future the Gentile world would hail His doctrine and salvation, and bring its wealth and talents, its science and philosophy, to offer at His feet.

***** BBB Note: The chief problem with the so-called "brilliant temporary star" of Kepler is that it can not account for the fact that the star disappeared for a time and then stood over the house where the Child lived. We ought to ever be cautious of seeking 'natural explanations' to biblical miracles - no matter how sincere we may be *****

10. All these gathered round His cradle to worship the Holy Child, - the shepherds with their simple wonder, Simeon and Anna with a reverence enriched by the treasured wisdom and piety of centuries, and the Magi with the lavish gifts of the Orient and the open brow of Gentile knowledge. But, while these worthy worshippers were gazing down on Him, there came and looked over their shoulders a sinister and murderous face. It was the face of Herod.

This prince then occupied the throne of the country - the throne of David and the Maccabees. But he was an alien and low-born usurper. His subjects hated him, and it was only by Roman favor that he was maintained in his seat. He was able, ambitious and magnificent. Yet he had such a cruel, crafty, gloomy and filthy mind as you must go among Oriental tyrants to meet with. He had been guilty of every crime. He had made his very palace swim in blood, having murdered his own favorite wife, three of his sons, and many others of his relatives. [14]

He was now old and tortured with disease, remorse, the sense of unpopularity, and a cruel terror of every possible aspirant to the throne which he had usurped. The Magi had naturally turned their steps to the capital, to inquire where He was to be born whose sign they had seen in the East. The suggestion touched Herod in his sorest place; but with diabolical hypocrisy he concealed his suspicions. Having learned from the priests that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, he directed the strangers thither, but arranged that they should return and tell him the very house where the new King was. He hoped to cut Him off at a single blow. But he was foiled; for, being warned by GOD, they did not come back to tell him, but returned to their own country another way. Then his fury burst forth like a storm, and he sent his soldiers to murder every babe under two years of age in Bethlehem. As well might he have attempted to cut a mountain of adamant asunder as cut the chain of the divine purposes. "He thrust his sword into the nest, but the bird was flown." Joseph fled with the Child to Egypt, and remained there till Herod died, when he returned and dwelt at Nazareth; being warned from Bethlehem, because there he would have been in the kingdom of Archelaus, the like-minded son of a blood-thirsty father. Herod's murderous face, glaring down on the Infant, was a sad prophecy of how the

powers of the world were to persecute Him and cut off His life from the earth.

***** BBB Note: It should be noted that when the Magi came upon the child, He was already two years old. They came to a 'house' not a manger - and Herod sought to destroy all children that had been born over the space of the last two years *****

11. **The Silent Years at Nazareth** - The records which we possess up to this point are, as we have seen, comparatively full. But with the settlement at Nazareth, after the return from Egypt, our information comes to a sudden stop, and over the rest of the life of JESUS, till His public ministry begins, a thick covering is drawn, which is only lifted once. We should have wished the narrative to continue with the same fulness through the years of [15] His boyhood and youth. In modern biographies there are few parts more interesting than the anecdotes which they furnish of the childhood of their subjects, for in these we can often see in miniature and in charming simplicity the character and the plan of the future life. What would we not give to know the habits, the friendships, the thoughts, the words and the actions of JESUS during so many years? Only one flower of anecdote has been thrown over the wall of the hidden garden, and it is so exquisite as to fill us with intense longing to see the garden itself. But it has pleased GOD, whose silence is no less wonderful than His words, to keep it shut.

12. It was natural that, where GOD was silent and curiosity was strong, the fancy of man should attempt to fill up the blank. Accordingly, in the early Church there appeared Apocryphal Gospels, pretending to give full details where the inspired Gospels were silent. They are particularly full of the sayings and doings of the childhood of JESUS. But they only show how unequal the human imagination was to such a theme, and bring out by the contrast of glitter and caricature the solidity and truthfulness of the Scripture narrative. *They make Him a worker of frivolous and useless marvels, who moulded birds of clay and made them fly, changed His playmates into kids, and so forth. In short, they are compilations of worthless and often blasphemous fables.*

13. These grotesque failures warn us not to intrude with the suggestions of fancy into the hallowed enclosure. It is enough to know that "**He grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.**" He was a real child and youth, and passed through all the stages of a natural development. Body and mind grew together, the one expanding to manly vigor and the other acquiring more and more knowledge and power. His opening character exhibited a grace that made everyone who saw it wonder and love its goodness and purity. [16]

14. But, though we are forbidden to let the fancy loose here, we are not prohibited, but, on the contrary, it is our duty, to make use of such authentic materials as are supplied by the manners and customs of the time, or by incidents of His later life which refer back to His earlier years, in order to connect the infancy with the period when the narrative of the Gospels again takes up the thread of biography. It is possible in this way to gain, at least in some degree, a true conception of what He was as a boy and a young man, and what were the influences amidst which His development proceeded through so many silent years.

15. We know amidst what kind of home influences He was brought up. His home was one of those which were the glory of His country, as they are of our own - the abodes of the godly and intelligent working class. Joseph, its head, was a man saintly and wise; but the fact that he is not

mentioned in CHRIST's after-life has generally been believed to indicate that he died during the youth of JESUS, perhaps leaving the care of the household on His shoulders. His mother probably exercised the most decisive of all external influences on His development. What she was may be inferred from the fact that she was chosen from all the women of the world to be crowned with the supreme honor of womanhood. The song which she poured forth on the subject of her own great destiny shows her to have been a woman religious, fervently poetical, and patriotic; a student of Scripture, and especially of its great women, for it is saturated with Old Testament ideas and moulded on Hannah's song; a spirit exquisitely humble, yet capable of thoroughly appreciating the honor conferred upon her. She was no miraculous queen of Heaven, as superstition has caricatured her, but a woman exquisitely pure, saintly, loving and high-souled. This is aureole enough. JESUS grew up in her love and passionately returned it. [17]

16. There were other inmates of the household. He had brothers and sisters. From two of these, James and Jude, we have Epistles in Holy Scripture, in which we may read what their character was. Perhaps it is not irreverent to infer from the severe tone of their Epistles, that, in their unbelieving state, they must have been somewhat harsh and unsympathetic men. At all events, they never believed on Him during His lifetime, and it is not likely that they were close companions to Him in Nazareth. He was probably much alone; and the pathos of His saying, that "**a prophet is not without honor save in his own country and in his own house**," probably reached back into the years before His ministry began.

17. He received His education at home, or from a scribe attached to the village synagogue. It was only, however, a poor man's education. As the scribes contemptuously said, He had never learned, or, as we should say, He was not college-bred. No; but the love of knowledge was early awake within Him. He daily knew the joy of deep and happy thought; He had the best of all keys to knowledge - the open mind and the loving heart - and the three great books lay ever open before Him - the Bible, Man, and Nature.

18. It is easy to understand with what fervent enthusiasm He would devote Himself to the Old Testament; and His sayings, which are full of quotations from it, afford abundant proof of how constantly it formed the food of His mind and the comfort of His soul. His youthful study of it was the secret of the marvellous facility with which He made use of it afterwards in order to enrich His preaching and enforce His doctrine, to repel the assaults of opponents and overcome the temptations of the Evil One. His quotations also show that He read it in the Hebrew tongue, and not in the Greek translation, which was then in general use. The Hebrew was a dead language even in Palestine, just as Latin now is in Italy; but He [18] would naturally long to read it in the very words in which it was written. Those who have not enjoyed a liberal education, but amidst many difficulties have mastered Greek in order to read their New Testament in that language, will perhaps best understand how, in a country village, He made Himself master of the ancient tongue, and with what delight He was wont, in the rolls of the synagogue, or in such manuscripts as He may have Himself possessed, to pore over the sacred page. The language in which He thought and spoke familiarly was Aramaic, a branch of the same stem to which the Hebrew belongs. We have fragments of it in some recorded sayings of His, such as "**Talitha, cumi**," and "**Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani**." He would have the same chance of learning Greek as a boy born in the Scottish Highlands has of learning English, "Galilee of the Gentiles" being then full of Greek-speaking inhabitants. Thus He was probably master of three languages - one of them the grand religious language of the world, in whose literature He was deeply versed;

another, the most perfect means of expressing secular thought which has ever existed, although there is no evidence that He had any acquaintance with the masterpieces of Greek literature; and the third, the language of the common people, to whom His preaching was to be specially addressed.

19. There are few places where human nature can be better studied than in a country village; for there one sees the whole of each individual life and knows all one's neighbors thoroughly. In a city far more people are seen, but far fewer known; it is only the outside of life that is visible. In a village the view outwards is circumscribed; but the view downwards is deep, and the view upwards unimpeded. Nazareth was a notoriously wicked town, as we learn from the proverbial question, "**Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?**" JESUS had no acquaintance with sin in His own soul, but in the town He had a full exhibition [19] of the awful problem with which it was to be His life-work to deal. He was still further brought into contact with human nature by His trade. That He worked as a carpenter in Joseph's shop there can be no doubt. Who could know better than His own townsmen, who asked, in their astonishment at His preaching, "**Is not this the carpenter?**" It would be difficult to exhaust the significance of the fact that GOD chose for His Son, when He dwelt among men, out of all the possible positions in which He might have placed Him, the lot of a working man. It stamped men's common toils with everlasting honor. It acquainted JESUS with the feelings of the multitude, and helped Him to know what was in man. It was afterwards said that He knew this so well that "**He needed not that any man should teach Him.**"

20. Travelers tell us that the spot where He grew up is one of the most beautiful on the face of the earth. Nazareth is situated in a secluded, cup-like valley amid the mountains of Zebulon, just where they dip down into the Plain of Esdraelon, with which it is connected by a steep and rocky path. Its white houses, with vines clinging to their walls, are embowered amidst gardens and groves of olive, fig, orange, and pomegranate trees. The fields are divided by hedges of cactus, and enameled with innumerable flowers of every hue. Behind the village rises a hill five hundred feet in height, from whose summit there is seen one of the most wonderful views in the world - the mountains of Galilee, with snowy Hermon towering above them, to the north; the ridge of Carmel, the coast of Tyre, and the sparkling waters of the Mediterranean, to the west; a few miles to the east, the wooded, cone-like bulk of Tabor; and to the south, the Plain of Esdraelon, with the mountains of Ephraim beyond. The preaching of JESUS shows how deeply He had drunk into the essence of natural beauty and revelled in the changing aspects of the seasons. It was when wandering as a lad in these fields that He [20] gathered the images of beauty which He poured out in His parables and addresses. It was on that hill that He acquired the habit of his after-life of retreating to the mountain-tops to spend the night in solitary prayer. The doctrines of His preaching were not thought out on the spur of the moment-they were poured out in a living stream when the occasion came-but the water had been gathered into the hidden well for many years before. In the fields and on the mountain-side he had thought them out during the years of happy and undisturbed meditation and prayer.

21. There is still one important educational influence to be mentioned. Every year, after He was twelve years old, He went with His parents to the Passover at Jerusalem. Fortunately there has been preserved an account of the first of these visits. It is the only occasion on which the veil is lifted during thirty years. Everyone who can remember his own first journey from a village home to the capital of his country will understand the joy and excitement with which JESUS set out.

He traveled over eighty miles of a country where nearly every mile teemed with historical and inspiring memories. He mingled with the constantly growing caravan of pilgrims, who were filled with the religious enthusiasm of the great ecclesiastical event of the year. His destination was a city which was loved by every Jewish heart with a strength of affection that has never been given to any other capital—a city full of objects and memories fitted to touch the deepest springs of interest and emotion in His breast. It was swarming at the Passover-time with strangers from half-a-hundred countries, speaking as many languages and wearing as many different costumes. He went to take part for the first time in an ancient solemnity suggestive of countless patriotic and sacred memories. It is no wonder that, when the day came to return home, He was so excited. With the new objects of interest, that He failed to join His [21] party at the appointed place and time. One spot above all fascinated His interest. It was the temple, and especially the school there in which the masters of wisdom taught. His mind was teeming with questions which these doctors might be asked to answer. His thirst for knowledge had an opportunity for the first time to drink its fill. So it was there His anxious parents, who, missing Him after a day's journey northward, returned in anxiety to seek Him, found Him, listening with excited looks to the oracles of the wisdom of the day. His answer to the reproachful question of His mother lays bare His childhood's mind, and for a moment affords a wide glance over the thoughts which used to engross Him in the fields of Nazareth.

22. It has often been asked whether JESUS knew all along that He was the Messiah, and, if not, when and how the knowledge dawned upon Him; whether it was suggested by hearing from His mother the story of His birth, or announced to Him from within. Did it dawn upon Him all at once, or gradually? When did the plan of His career, which He carried out so unhesitatingly from the beginning of His ministry, shape itself in His mind? Was it the slow result of years of reflection, or did it come to Him at once? These questions have occupied the greatest Christian minds and received very various answers. I will not venture to answer them, and, especially with His reply to His mother before me, I cannot trust myself even to think of a time when He did not know what His work in this world was to be.

23. His subsequent visits to Jerusalem must have greatly influenced the development of His mind. If He often went back to hear and question the rabbis in the temple schools, He must soon have discovered how shallow was their far-famed learning. It was probably on these annual visits that He discovered the utter corruption of the religion of the day and the need of a radical reform of both doctrine and practice, and marked the practices and the [22] persons that He was by and by to assail with the vehemence of His holy indignation.

24. Such were the external conditions amidst which the manhood of JESUS waxed towards maturity. It would be easy to exaggerate the influence which they may be supposed to have exerted on His development. The greater and more original a character is, the less dependent is it on the peculiarities of its environment. It is fed from deep well-springs within itself, and in its germ there is a type enclosed which expands in obedience to its own laws and bids defiance to circumstances. In any other circumstances, JESUS would have grown to be in every important respect the very same person as He became in Nazareth. [23]

~ end of chapter 1 ~
