

The land of Jesus' birth, then and now

"O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie..."

Bethlehem! The very word calls to mind an image of verdant pastures and sheep grazing under shepherds' watchful eyes...dusty streets trod by donkeys laden with water jugs...and whitewashed dwellings clustered about the village well.

Here it was that Ruth gleaned barley in the fields belonging to Boaz. It was here that the young David tended his father's sheep and where he was anointed king of Israel.

In the time of Jesus, Bethlehem was just a small village in the province of Judea. Yet the prophet Micah foresaw its future eminence. Had he not prophesied, "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; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting."

This prophecy and the Star of Bethlehem led the Wise Men to the place where Jesus lay. Today, the towers of many faiths dominate the landscape, just as the star must have on that night almost 2000 years ago. And, instead of Three Wise Men, thousands of pilgrims will descend upon the town where the Savior was born.

But, instead of a humble stable, they will find a basilica built over the cave where Mary and Joseph are said to have found shelter. A silver star marks the exact spot where Jesus is believed to have been born. Fifteen lamps surround it, donated by various Christian communities, demonstrating that here, in the land of Jesus' birth, differences fall away before a common faith.

Most pilgrims to the Holy Land will

St. Francis and the Christmas creche

One of the most common sights at Christmastime is the creche, or manger, holding the figure of the Infant Jesus.

Most churches feature large nativity scenes and many a home has its own small creche during the holidays. Nativity scenes such as this are so much a part of the season that we assume that they have always been so.

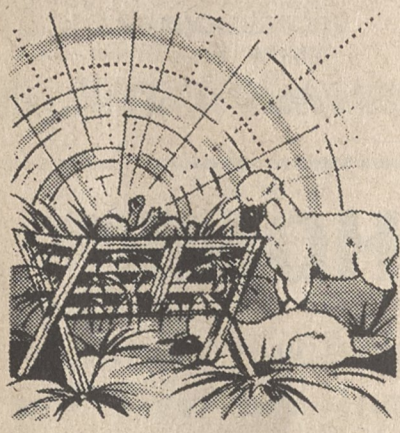
Actually, it was not until the 13th century that the creche came into usage. St. Francis of Assisi is generally credited with originating the custom. According to tradition, the gentle friar was staying near the town of Greccio, when he became inspired with the idea of recreating the first Christmas. Biographers say that he instructed a friend, "If you desire that we should celebrate this year's Christmas together at Greccio, go quickly and prepare what I tell you; for I want to enact the memory of the Infant who was born at Bethlehem, and how He was deprived of all the comforts babies enjoy; how He was bedded in the manger on hay, between an ass and an ox."

So it was that on Christmas Eve, the people of Greccio came to a spot in the woods near the town, where they found a manger filled with hay, and an ox and an ass next to it. Here Francis preached his Christmas sermon, filled with love for the Infant Jesus.

Legend has it that a member of the congregation saw a baby in the manger that night and that afterward, villagers took hay from the manger and gave it to their ailing animals, who promptly recovered.

Another version of this tradition says that St. Francis had a young woman and her baby represent Mary and the Infant Jesus. He placed hay about the church altar where the woman and child sat, and led an ox and an ass down the aisle of the church to take their place as part of the tableau. The villagers were delighted with this living representation of the nativity, and was only a matter of time before such tableaux were translated into lovingly carved manger scenes.

Today, they are universal reminders of that very first Christmas, inspiring devotion to the little Christ Child.



Some people believed an owl in the house would protect the children.

also travel to Galilee, where the town of Nazareth lies. Although the distance between the towns is short by today's standards, in the time of Mary and Joseph, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem must have been a hardship for them — especially for the young woman, heavy with child. As it was, Jews resented the census greatly; it was a humiliating reminder of their subservience to Rome.

When Jesus lived in Nazareth, the countryside was composed of wooded hills, each with its little plain. Galilee was one of the most beautiful of the provinces. In fact, Galileans were suspected of being too easy-

going and not strict enough in observing the laws; perhaps this was attributed to their pleasant surroundings. Here, in Nazareth, the growing Jesus would become familiar with such commonplace sights as the fig trees, the mustard plants, and fields of grain, all of which he would draw upon later in his parables.

Since it was the practice for sons to follow in their father's trade, undoubtedly Joseph trained the young Jesus to be a carpenter, like himself. He probably taught Jesus the Sh'ma: "Here, O Israel, The Lord our God is One lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might."

As the Bible reveals, Mary and Joseph were devout Jews, following the traditions of their ancestors. In accordance with Jewish custom, they traveled to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

What an impression that city must have made on the young Jesus! It was the holy city to all believing Jews, the

Our feet shall stand within thy gates, O Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is built as a city that is compact together;

Whither the tribes go up, the tribes of the Lord, unto the testimony of Israel, to give thanks unto the name of the Lord.

For there are set thrones of judgment, the thrones of the house of David."

Today, only the Western Wall, the Wailing Wall, remains of the Temple. But, visitors can still see the pool of Siloam, where the blind man washed his eyes to regain his sight, as Jesus had told him to do. And, from the Mount of Olives, travelers can look

down upon the Holy City, just as Jesus did.

Although Nazareth is no longer the humble village it must have been when Jesus lived there, its narrow, roofed streets and colorful marketplace evoke Biblical times, and today's Galileans still harvest their wheat in much the same manner of their ancestors. Along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, fishermen still cast their nets into the lake, just as Peter, Andrew, James and John must have done.

There have been many changes in the land where Jesus once walked, but the thoughts of Christians will be turning back to that wondrous event that took place there in another time, in a small Judean town called Bethlehem.



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