

Bethlehem and Ruth



From *Die Bibel in Bildern*, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1789-1853)

Ruth Walks with Naomi Toward Bethlehem

Refusing to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi, Ruth has a prophetic intuition of her destiny and vows: "whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God."

BETHLEHEM WAS and is the Arcadia of the promised land, the site of pastoral life in the midst of Judea.* The stories of David's childhood in Bethlehem's meadows and of the shepherds to whom the angels appeared during the night of Christmas have a mood that must be connected instinctively with the name of Bethlehem. For even today, the loveliness of the place is mirrored in the special beauty, friendliness and cheerfulness of the people living there. And the prophecy of Micah, which designated Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah (Mic. 5:2), must have been based on age-old convictions of the people and sages that he who brings paradise back to mankind would have to be born at the site where the last reflection of the lost paradise remained alive.

The name of this locality points to another side of its secret. Bethlehem means 'house of bread.' It probably has this name for outward reasons as well, for it is situated on an island of fertility in the midst of a rocky desert lacking any vegetation. But above all, the name Bethlehem has religious and historical connotations. More than through any external conditions, the place is given its soul and character by means of the spiritual secret holding sway there, of the grain of seed and the ears of wheat.

Traditional theology has also called attention to the importance of the wheat field and the threshing floor as symbols and stages of the gods' activity in the religious and cultic life of pre-Israelite Palestine. Theology pointed out that the Canaanite holy high places were in many instances identical with the elevated threshing-floors of the villages in question, or were at least designated as 'threshing-floors' in a figurative sense. At some Palestinian cultic sites, Baal-Adonis can actually be called the 'deity of the threshing-floor'. Repeatedly, at important points within the Old Testament, we come across the mention of threshing-floors that must be considered in this sense as high-lying cultic sites. Gideon received his mission in a revelation on the threshing-floor of Ophrah; David acquired Araunah's threshing-floor in order to construct the temple there. In like manner, Ruth, the gleaner of ears of corn, came to the threshing-floor

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of Boaz to present herself to him as maid-servant and bride. The image of Boaz's threshing-floor permits us to behold the sanctuary as through a veil from where Bethlehem has its name.

Again, a comparison in Greek spiritual life will help. In Eleusis, the Greeks had a mystery-site, which was ensouled by the secret and fragrance of the grain of seed and the ears of wheat. There too, the external wondrous wheat fields at the coast of the blue Bay of Salamis, to which the holy processional path led all the way from Athens, was only a veil for deeper levels of existence. Men sensed the earth-mother Demeter there, feeling embedded in her lap, and beheld her in the statues that represented her with the ear of wheat in her hand. If Eleusis had not been a special source and centre of life-giving ethereal forces, a place where the goddess Natura revealed herself, people would not have built a temple there to Demeter.

Bethlehem is the Eleusis of the promised land. And if it was possible to sense a trace of paradise there for long ages, this was connected with the fact that here also a source and centre of ethereal forces existed, giving experience of the earth as the great mother of all life and, at the same time, as the guardian of the cosmic condition. The divine of the cosmos in woman, the lofty secret of the virginal mother, held sway there as well as in Eleusis.

Eleusis has the mood of Messianic expectancy in common with Bethlehem. The Greek name, Eleusis, means the same thing as the Latin word, *adventus*, 'the arrival.' At the place of the womb of the great mother, people looked longingly forward to the birth of the cosmic son. The festival of the Eleusinians was held annually as a preparation for the coming of the divine saviour. The secret of death and life was beheld in the scenes of the mystery plays. The lament of Demeter-Ceres over the loss of her daughter Persephone alternated with the jubilation over her return. Concealed behind this rhythmic alternation, and part of the deeper levels of the mystery, were the death and resurrection of Dionysus, as the Greeks called the being of Osiris or Adonis. A subdued form of the Osiris secret was experienced there. Above, in heaven, the god dies; when will he be reborn on earth? The simplest and yet most archetypal concentration of all the mys-



Woodcut, 1511, Albrecht Durer (1471-1528), private collection

St. Jerome in his Study

The Greek Septuagint was translated by St. Jerome into the Vulgate (Latin) version of the Bible in a cell in Bethlehem. The crucifix, hourglass, and style of hat are anachronisms. Jerome had noted the existence of the Adonis cult in Bethlehem as it centered around the death and resurrection of a seed of grain.

teries of Eleusis was represented in the grain of seed, which, when it is sown, dies; that it may sprout and grow and arise again. This is why the goddess was depicted with an ear of corn in her hand.

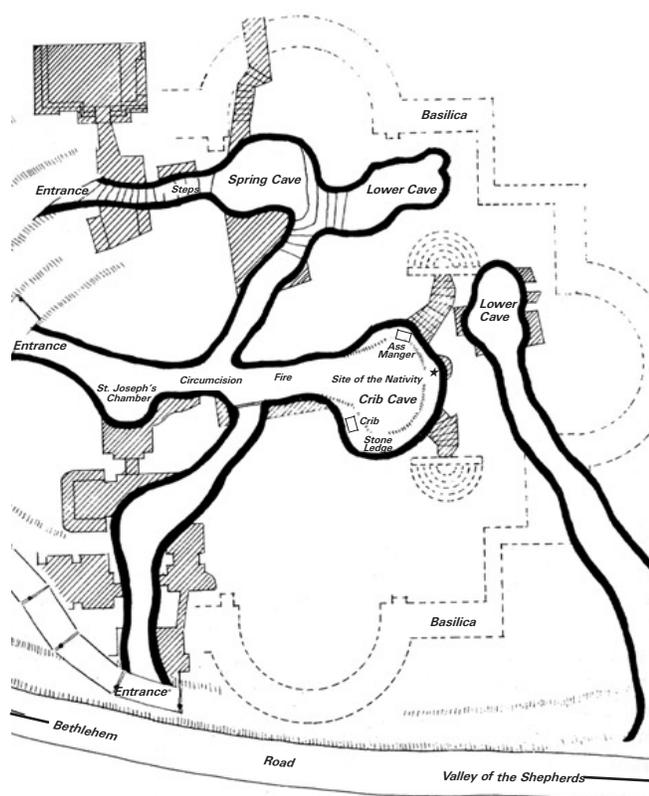
Bethlehem, the house of bread, has also had its Eleusinians. It was the site of an especially important, although quietly concealed Adonis-mystery sanctuary. We find definite traditions concerning this in early Christian times. It was believed that in order to desecrate Christian sanctuaries, the Roman Caesars, particularly Hadrian, had established Mithra grottoes and Adonis temples in many caves at the identical location. In reality, what really happened was probably that at the site where the most profound events of the Old and New Testaments occurred, Canaanite cultic centers had already existed earlier and were subsequently reestablished by the Caesars opposed to Christianity. If we know

how to read the imaginative language of the ancient holy Scriptures, the Book of Ruth, for example, is a particularly clear indication of the religious-historical past of Bethlehem.

Let us first trace the reports from the early Christian era. St Jerome, who himself chose Bethlehem as his domicile and, in the immediate vicinity of the grotto of the birth of Jesus, pursued his theological studies for forty long years, verified that between the rule of Hadrian and Constantine, a Tammuz-Adonis cult was practiced in the same rocky grotto where the crib of the Jesus infant had stood: "Bethlehem, which is now ours, the most exalted place on earth...was overshadowed by a holy grove of Tammuz, who is identical with Adonis: and in the cave, where the Christ-child once whimpered, the dirges over the beloved of Venus resounded."

The commentaries recorded in reference to the book of the prophet Ezekiel allow us to perceive that the Church fathers possessed a clear conception of the cults which, accordingly, were also practiced in Bethlehem. For Ezekiel speaks (8:14) of the Tammuz cult, which, at that time, when the people of Israel were in the Babylonian exile, took place in the temple at Jerusalem. St Jerome states: "According to a heathen sage, Adonis, the beloved of Venus, the supremely handsome youth, was slain and then called back to life in the month of June. Therefore, in his honor, the people annually celebrated a festival, where he was first mourned as dead by the women and then praised in song as having newly arisen alive...The sequence of the death and resurrection of Adonis, the mourning and the jubilation, was interpreted in the following way. The first has its correspondence in the grain of seed which dies in the earth's ground; the second relates to the sprouting crops in which the resurrection of the perished grain of seed becomes evident.

Some time before Jerome, Origen expressed something quite similar: "Year after year, the people celebrate commemorative festivals there, where the god is first mourned as having died, then is praised with jubilation as having risen from the dead...They say that Adonis is a symbol of the fruits of the fields, which are in the condition of



R. Larson

Cave of the Nativity—Bethlehem

The site of the Nativity is attested to by an unbroken tradition dating back to the 2nd century. The above plan is a suggested reconstruction based on Anne Catherine Emmerich's clairvoyant descriptions in her Life of Mary. The basilica, erected by Constantine over the cave in the 4th century, and still in use, is one of the oldest churches in the world. The grottoes were, before and after, the site of the Tammuz-Adonis cult.

mourning when they are sown, but which are resurrected and fill man with jubilation when they sprout and grow."

Such cults, quite closely resembling those of the Eleusinians, must be pictured as the hidden secret of Bethlehem as early as the period when Joshua led the people into the country. The mystery site of Bethlehem was probably one of those that knew how to guard against Phoenician decadence and with which the leaders of Israel could therefore associate. But most likely it was cultivated in a humble obscurity and did not emerge even so far as did the mystery centre of Gibeon. We must also picture the Bethlehem cult as being enveloped in the paradisaical Demeter atmosphere of the locality.

Later, destiny brought it about that the now abandoned grotto, in which the Adonis cult had been celebrated in the past, was used as a shelter

for cattle. Thus it became the birthplace of the Jesus child. And in the same cave a century later, those who could not comprehend that prophecy and expectation were superseded by fulfillment, renewed the ritual cult which had been but an expression of the Eleusinian longing of pre-Christian humanity....

Israel's history had already touched upon the area of Bethlehem when Jacob returned with his people from Mesopotamia. Eleven sons had been born to him in Babylonia, although only one by Rachel whom he loved with all his heart. Now, at the threshold of the house of his father, where he had arrived, Rachel was to become a mother for the second time. But sudden grief clouded the joyous celebration: Rachel sealed the birth of her son with the sacrifice of her own life. This took place in Bethlehem. To this day, close by the gates of the little town, Rachel's grave is revered by Muslims and Jews alike.

Rachel had been like a reflection and embodiment of the eternal in woman. At the well in Babylonia, she had appeared like a goddess in human form to Jacob; hence his servitude of over a decade was only for the purpose of becoming united with her. Her death in Bethlehem also stood like a symbolic sign in Israel's history. When, on the holy high place of Bethlehem, Rachel raised her voice in a cry of pain, the reason was not the pain of birth but a portentous vision of humanity's future. The prophet Jeremiah said: "A cry is heard from on high, lamentation and bitter weeping: Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for they have died." (Jer. 31:15 *Bock*). Rachel's cry of pain is a first, moving Adonaic lamentation. The eternal element of femininity and the paradisaic youth and beauty of gods must die in mankind. The death of Rachel at the site where the mother of life was experienced and revered was in itself a prophecy and an apocalyptic event. In Rachel, Demeter, the great mother, becomes the *mater dolorosa*, the mother of sorrows, whose soul is pierced by a sword.

Following this, the Israelites had to undergo difficult and serious paths of destiny. The element of joy and beauty became increasingly alien to them. The people had to relinquish the secret of the

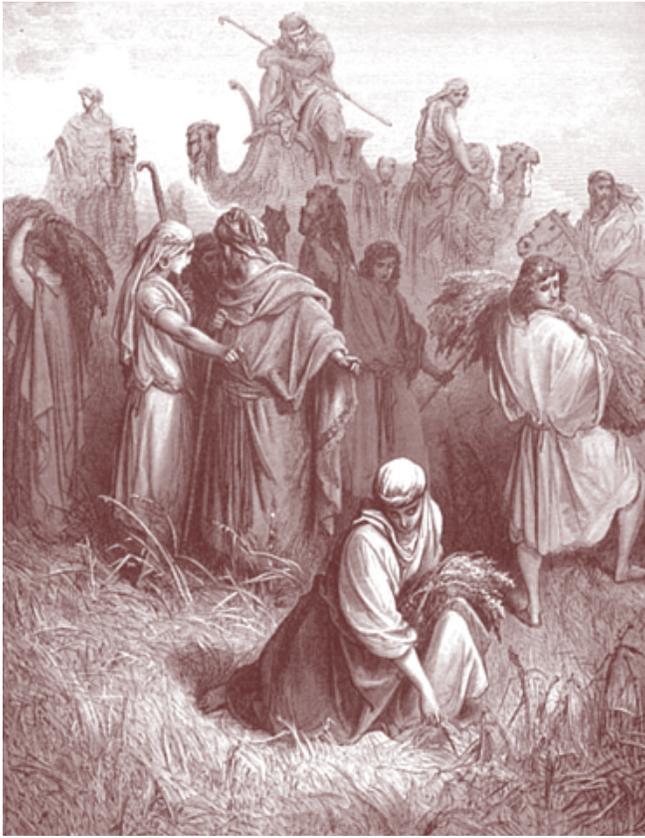
eternal in woman and, for the purpose of the ego-consciousness of thinking, which it was their task to develop, had to assume an increasingly masculine character. Israel actually became something like a nation of the eternal element of masculinity. But it travelled through the wasteland of sternness and severity to be able to approach the trial of Messianic fulfillment on the other side.

The Bible allows one of the most beautiful presentiments of future salvation to shine forth from the history of the people by leading us a second time to Bethlehem in the Book of Ruth. The folk with the element of eternal masculinity are gently touched by the rays of the early dawn emanating from the secret of the virginal mother that is newly being revealed. The Moabite woman, Ruth, bore a tinge of the element of eternal femininity into the soul of the people. What died in Rachel seemed to revive anew.

At the time of the judges, when the story of Ruth took place, Bethlehem especially must have withdrawn into quiet seclusion. The larger city of Jerusalem, located nearby, must have had all the attention, since it closed itself off from the Israelites in stubborn hostility. In addition, as the Bible relates, there came a time of famine in the land. In the House of Bread, there was a lack of bread. Had Demeter ceased to bestow her gifts?

It was not a startling event that came to pass because of the famine in Bethlehem. A man and a woman with their two sons migrated to the land of Moab, east of the Jordan. In the foreign country, the two sons took Moabites as wives. Some time went by, and then, as destiny would have it, the three male members of the family died one after the other. Naomi, the mother, decided to return to Bethlehem, where the famine had in the meantime come to an end. She left it to the decision of her daughters-in-law, who had both remained childless, whether to stay in the land of the Moabites and enter into a new marriage. One of them remained, but in the soul of the other, a wondrous, instinctive conviction blossomed forth. It was Ruth, whose pure sensitivity became a perceptual organ for the Israelite mission and future, and for the spirit who hovered over these people.

At the moment when she faced the decision, she



Gustave Doré (1833-1883)

Ruth Gleaning in the Fields of Boaz

Ruth is the Mary-figure of the Old Testament. In her, Demeter-Ceres became Mary. On the threshing-floor of Boaz, within the confines of the sanctuary (crib cave), she became the wife of Boaz and the mother of the Messianic lineage of David.

experienced a reality in comparison to which the affiliation with her own people paled completely. She spoke, “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.” Just as did Rahab in Jericho, Ruth, with the sensitivity of her soul, perceived that the divine being, whom Israel served, was on its way to the earth. And she felt herself irresistibly called upon to belong with those who had the task of preparing a place and an abode on earth for this divine being. Thus she moved to Bethlehem with Naomi.

Here, she breathed the atmosphere of the pure, maternal element of the cosmos to which her soul was able to respond with a wonderful echo. We see Ruth striding across the cornfields of Bethlehem as a gleaner of ears of corn. This scene is one of those in the Bible which is most filled with an aroma of soul, and is most lastingly engraved in the hearts of those who have seen it in a picture or have had it

described to them in their childhood. The earthy fragrance of ripe wheat wafts from this image; only the scent of Christmas cooking, remembered from childhood, in which a Bethlehem secret is concealed as well, can measure up to it. When Ruth rose and stood erect, the ears of corn in her hands which she had gathered from the ground, was it not as if the goddess, who in Eleusis was represented with the ears of wheat, had herself taken on human form?

The sense for fathoming the Messianic future of Israel, which had caused Ruth to follow Naomi to Bethlehem, must have found a wonderful affirmation and fulfillment in Bethlehem. Did not the being of the Messiah, the Christ, of whom Ruth had said, “Your God is my God”—the true Osiris-Adonis, drawn close to the as yet pure Adonis mysteries of this locality—hover over the ripe corn of the threshing-floor, as it had earlier soared over the fire and steam of Sinai? If Ruth was willing to give herself to Boaz as a maid-servant and adorned as a bride, did not the devotion and willingness to serve that she felt in regard to the approaching divine being speak in her attitude? In her pure soul, Ruth must truly have experienced ‘Eleusis,’ the coming, the Advent of Christ and her affinity to this secret.

Ruth is the Mary-figure of the Old Testament. In her, Demeter-Ceres became Mary. What Mary later said to the angel, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk. 1:38), was something that already passed through Ruth’s soul. Thus, on the threshing-floor of Boaz, within the confines of the sanctuary, she became the wife of Boaz and the mother of the Messianic lineage of David. Invisibly, in soul form, the crown of the *mater gloriosa*, the mother rich in revelation, wove itself around her head.

When, a thousand years later, at the same place, Mary became the mother of the Jesus child in the grotto of Adonis, the secret of Rachel and Ruth became one in her. She became both the *mater dolorosa* and *mater gloriosa*. The death and resurrection of the eternal-in-woman, the virginal, maternal element of the cosmos, took on human form in Mary and thus became a seed for the soul-future of humanity. □