Irish Biblical Apocrypha

Selected Texts in Translation

EDITED BY

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THE NEW TESTAMENT

10. INFANCY GOSPEL

1 It was the time and season when stewards and functionaries of the Roman ruler, Octavius Caesar, came to levy the Caesarian tribute. This was the manner in which the tribute was collected. Everyone in the world had to go to his own district to pay it, and it would not be accepted elsewhere. It was called polltax because it was levied on every head of livestock and cattle, on family members and spouses, as well as on wealth, clothing and implements, and all movable and immovable property, both land and produce, held throughout the world. When Joseph (formerly called Moab iustus, because of his righteousness) heard this, he set out with his household, himself and the Virgin Mary, and Simeon, Ameon, and James of the Knees, his three sons, to go from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem of Juda, since that was the city of David, and Joseph had been born there. For Joseph and Mary were of the family of David, there being forty generations exactly between Joseph and David. For that reason, therefore, they went to pay Caesar’s tribute to Bethlehem of Juda.

2 When they came near the city Joseph and Ameon went ahead to get lodgings, and Mary stayed behind with James of the Knees and Simeon, for she was very weary after the journey, being close to her time of delivery. It was a four-day journey from Nazareth in Galilee to the city of Jerusalem, with two further days from Jerusalem to Bethlehem of Juda. It was no wonder, then, that the maiden was exhausted after the long trek. And when Joseph reached the centre of the city, great gladness came upon him, and he said: “It is most fitting that everyone should love his native place, and nothing is more appropriate than that everyone should be at ease in his own fatherland … And my heart is joyous before you, O Bethlehem of Juda, and I am gladdened by the sight of you. You are the heritage which God granted to the noble and honourable patriarch, Abraham. I, however, have come to this city to render tribute to Caesar, and to suffer hardship on that account”.
3 Joseph was seated thus on a stone, writing his declaration according to Roman law. This is what he wrote: "I, Joseph, of the city of Bethlehem of Judah, of the tribe of David, am accompanied by the virgin Mary, of the same tribe, who was entrusted to my care by the casting of lots. I am accompanied also by my three sons, Simeon, Ameon, and James of the Knees. I have no wealth save my craftsman's tools. Moreover, the maiden is weary after the journey, and I have come in advance to seek lodgings for her, for she needs a place to stop and rest, where the child in her womb will survive".

4 Then Joseph raised his eyes and saw a certain secluded little house standing alone beside the city, and he said: "We should remain at this house, since it seems to me that it is an abode for visiting strangers". Then Joseph went in and looked around. "It is a small abode", said he, "yet though it be so, it is suitable for poor people. It is remote from the converse and clamour and display of the populace. Stay here, son, while I go to the city to show my wares and fine craftsmanship in the hope of finding someone who will give me something for them".

5 While Joseph and his son were thus conversing together, the voice of the herald was heard proclaiming to the eminent people of the city: "Come, men, and make your declaration without delay, since Cyrrinus son of Cirin, chief ruler of the land of Judah, is about to go immediately to confer with the king of the Romans, Octavius Augustus. For that reason, you are to come yourselves with your men and women, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, your young and old, free and unfree, nobles and commoners. Give a written account of your gold and silver, land and territory, livestock and cattle, clothing and implements, and all your goods besides. Write down your seniority, your debts and your credits, and render justly the tribute of Caesar". James has said that every time this tribute was levied everyone in the whole world had to draw up a will, as if on the point of death, and no man could conceal a penny-worth of his worldly goods from that levy. If he did, everything would be confiscated from him ...

6 As Joseph and Ameon listened to the proclamation, Joseph said to those who were collecting the tribute: "You have given sufficient notice. Everyone who has the wherewithal will pay his tax to Caesar. Come here and see this house", said he, "for it is not really a house at
all, but a small insignificant cave containing a manger for an ass and ox. I see only one bed for the stranger to rest, and one little wooden stool for a guest to sit. These are the property of the owner of the lodging, not mine at all. All I have are my smith’s implements, and my craftsman’s tools, and though they seem paltry to you in the estimation and reckoning of the tribute, yet they provide a means of livelihood for myself, and for my three sons, and for the maiden whom God sent into my keeping after the drawing of lots, and whom I brought from the great temple of Jerusalem, and from the sons of Israel. These are the only possessions I have”.

After he had thus paid tribute on behalf of himself, and the four with him, and after the tax-collectors had departed, Joseph remained looking out along the road. In a short while he saw Mary approach the entrance to the city, with Simeon on one side of her, and James of the Knees on the other. Joseph said to his sons: “You were a long time coming, sons”. “It is not that we were dilatory”, said the sons,” but the maiden who is with us is very weary, and every hour and moment of the journey exhausted her, and we feared that she would go into labour before she reached a resting-place”.

Then Joseph said to Mary: “You have endured much hardship on my account. Come in and rest”. “O Simeon”, said Joseph, “Bring water and wash the virgin’s feet, and give her food and all that she needs, for I am sure that no nobler service has ever been rendered, since the virgin will bear a holy infant known only to the Heavenly Father, the saviour of all, and the creator of every living thing”. “O father”, said Simeon,”The maiden is speaking, and I do not know whom she is addressing”. “I think that she is suffering from tiredness and distress”, said Joseph. And when Joseph looked at Mary he saw that she was alternately sad and joyful. “How is it, girl”, he said,” that at one time you are grieving, while at another time you are happy?”” I see two peoples”, said she, “ one of which is in mourning, and the other in gladness”...

Joseph told her to go to her bed and rest. “O Simeon”, said he, “anoint the virgins’s feet with oil”. Simeon did so, and after Joseph had gone out Simeon followed him, and said:’’The virgin is rapidly being overcome by debility, and I think that she will give birth without
delay”. “I will not leave her”, said Joseph. “Since you are more agile than I am, let you go around the city in search of a midwife for her, for a competent midwife greatly assists a woman in childbirth”. “How am I to do that since I know neither the city nor its people? Yet I will go, for I am sure that God will provide a midwife for her, and everything else that she needs, for He has special concern for her”.

10 As they ceased their conversation, they saw a gentle, steady-eyed girl approach swiftly, carrying a chair. “Who are you, girl?”, asked Joseph, “and what is the chair which you have?” “It is a chair for women in childbirth”, said she. “My mistress sent me to bring it to you, and she will follow me herself without delay, for a beautiful handsome youth came to guide us speedily to the virgin who is with you, to assist her in giving birth to the noble king”. This amazed them. Joseph looked at the nearby mountain, and saw a tall venerable woman at the summit, vigorously traversing the hill with swift steps until she speedily reached the place in which was the noble senior of Israel, Joseph.

11 As Joseph saw her approach him he went forward to speak to her, and they greeted each other. The woman said to Joseph: “Where are you going?”. “I am going to seek a Hebrew woman who will attend to the virgin who is about to give birth to the true God and true man, the beneficent king who is the creator of the four elements” said Joseph. “Here I am”, said the woman, “for I am the best midwife of the Jewish people. Tell me, good man, are you an Israelite yourself?” “I am, indeed”, said Joseph. “Who is this young woman brought to a cave lodging?”, she asked. “She is married to me”, said Joseph. “She is not your wife at all”, said she. “She is called the Virgin Mary, she was reared in the temple of the Lord, and it fell to you by lot to look after and protect her”. “That is true”, said Joseph, “and since the Lord has revealed these things to you, I shall not conceal them. Let us go in to see Mary”, said Joseph.

12 When they went to the door of the house they saw a shining bright cloud above the cave, and such was the illumination, both inside the cave and over the outside, that human eyes could not gaze on it. “Enter”, said Joseph. “I will”, said she,” and may the hand of God be with me. And do not show me any disrespect”, she said. “For there is no midwife who is my equal throughout the land of the Jews”. “We
should rather give thanks to God that through his grace you were found thus”, said Joseph. “He who does not esteem God’s providence, and does not show gratitude, commits a sin against the Lord”. Then Simeon said to Joseph: “You have been blessed, beloved father, and the saints of heaven and the everlasting joy of all joys are with you, and your helper, from the God of gods, the Lord of lords, who is without pride.”

13 The woman went in, and shortly afterwards Joseph followed her. When they came out again Simeon was waiting at the entrance of the cave, and he asked the midwife for news. “Woman”, said Simeon, “how is the virgin, and is there hope that she will live?” “I have news, indeed”, she said... I bless my God and Lord who revealed these things to me, his servant, unworthy though I am to witness them. And how am I to relate them”, said she, “since they are new and extraordinary things, like nothing experienced ever before?” “I beseech you for the love of God to disclose them to me”, said Simeon. “They will not be concealed from you”, said she, “for in time, they will be commonly known throughout the whole world, but they have been secret up to now. Heed these words and affix them in your heart, son”, she said.

14 “When I came to the place where the virgin was, I saw her praying and blessing the Lord. I asked her if she were in distress of body or mind. She did not answer, but remained immobile as a rock, with her eyes directed towards heaven, praying unceasingly. Then all of creation stood still, the wind ceased its storms, the ocean its roar. The sea was quiet, the wave soundless, the land untraversed, swift-flowing rivers became like pools, streams reposed as if in sleep, fish remained still. There was not a quiver in the woods, leaves were motionless, animals stood at rest, birds did not fly, people could not speak or work during the sacred time while the virgin was giving birth to the everlasting Lord. Assuredly the four elements recognized their creator... The inhabitants of hell were held fast, motionless and miserable, without the ability to do evil or harm against creature or devout person fashioned by God on that night of the divine birth...”

15 “The virgin was looking upwards, praying constantly... And we saw a bright light from her shine throughout the cave, so that she was like a single glorious radiance... Many angelic voices were heard above the
cave praising the great Lord, and giving strength to the virgin inside. And the brightness outshone the light of the sun and all the stars. Moreover, a fragrance reached us which would delight everyone everlastingly, with the perfume of all the fruit, wax, saffron, and beautiful ointments in the world, all the herbs and plants and beautiful fruits that ever existed in holy Paradise. More wonderful than all of these, indeed, was the pleasure derived from that fragrance. And heavenly angels were unceasingly in attendance, since there is no human born who could worthily partake of that mystery, except for the Virgin Mary herself”.

16 “Deep silence overcame me, and I was seized by fear and terror at the sight of these miraculous events, for the infant was like a sphere of light, such that human eyes could not look on. He was briefly in this form before assuming the shape and appearance of a child, and my mind grew animated as I looked on him, and I bent down and raised him up. He weighed nothing, unlike an ordinary child, and as I examined him attentively, I could find neither blemish nor mark nor trace of blood on him. It was as if he were washed in the gentle beautiful dew of the noble Heavenly Father. No known body was so radiant, no infant so weightless to carry, no human being was ever seen whose beauty was more resplendent. I marvelled that his nature was not like that of any other child, for he did not cry or wail, except for a little as he was being put in the manger. He was without the weakness of infancy, and as I looked in his face, he smiled at me, and no worldly delight was ever as pleasing. The flash of light from his eyes overshadowed the sunlight which reached throughout the cave at dawn from the east “.

17 When Simeon had heard these words he said: “You are blessed and ever-fortunate, O devout and astute woman, and though I am the lowliest, it is propitious for me to have heard of these wonders, though I did not see them. And I believe all that you relate”, said Simeon.
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McNamara, nos 37, 43;

Text (with minor omissions), is that of RIA MS 23 O 48 (*Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*), ii, ff 5va-7ra. Here, as elsewhere, omissions are indicated thus: ... .


The Irish text here presented in translation in the manuscript forms part of a longer work which begins with the upbringing of Mary. It provides further information for the study of Irish Infancy narratives, and especially of the recension known through the Latin texts, of which more are now known to scholars than the two edited by M. R. James.