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# The stubborn donkey and the sweet thistle

When Saint Joseph was told in a dream that he and his family had to flee from evil Herod, the angel also woke up the donkey in the stable.

"Get up", he said from on high, "you are chosen to carry Mary and our Lord to Egypt." This did not please the donkey. He wasn't a very pious donkey, and he was rather stubborn.

"Can't you do it yourself?" he argued, "you've got wings, and I'd have to carry everything on my back. And why does it have to be Egypt? That's to the end of the world!" "Just to be on the safe side", the angel said, and that's a reason even a donkey can't argue against. When he left the stable and saw what he was supposed to carry - sheets and blankets for Mary, a pile of nappies for the baby, the little box with gold and incense and myrrh from the kings, a round cheese, smoked meat and a sheepskin from the shepherds, the skin waterbags, and finally Mary herself and baby Jesus - when he saw all this, he started grumbling again. Nobody could understand him except little Jesus.

"It's always the same with poor people", he said, "they arrived with nothing, and now they have a load for two pairs of oxen. I'm not a hay cart", he said - but he certainly looked like one. When Joseph led him by the bridle you could hardly see his hooves. The donkey hunched his back to get more comfortable. Then he took a step, carefully, as he thought the load would crash down.

But strangely enough he felt quite light, as if he were carried himself. He almost danced over the rocks in the darkness. It didn't take long and this annoyed him, too.

"Is someone poking fun at me?" he grumbled, "I'm the strongest donkey in Bethlehem and could carry four bags of barley in one go!" In his anger he suddenly stopped and planted his legs in the sand and wouldn't move another step. "If Joseph is going to beat me now", the donkey thought, "I'll throw the whole load into the ditch."

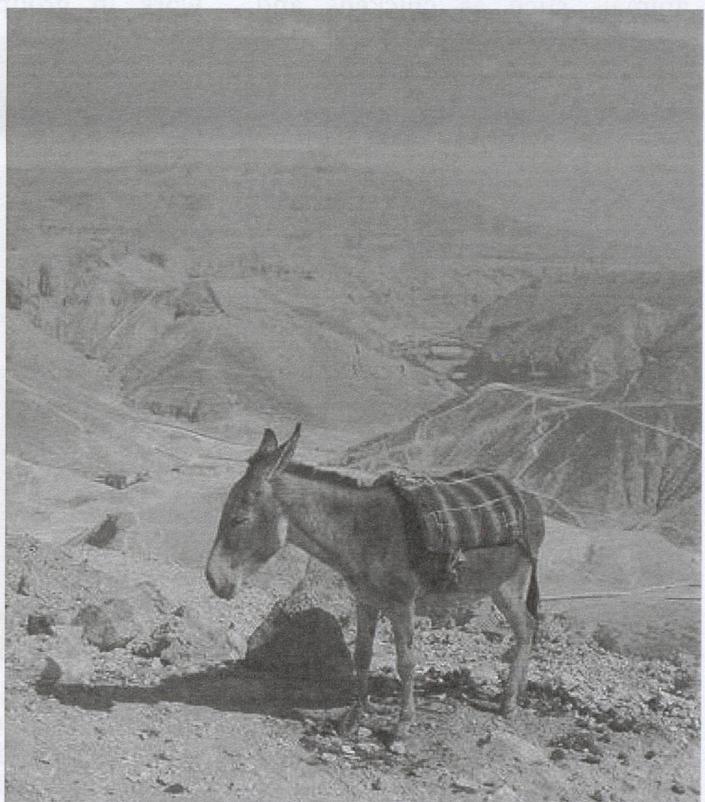
But Joseph didn't hit him. His hand felt its way under the blanket to the donkey's ears, to fondle him. "Please walk a little bit further", Joseph coaxed him gently, "we'll soon have a rest." What could he do? The donkey went on. Hm, this Joseph must be a real saint; he doesn't even know how to make a donkey walk faster.

In the meantime dawn had broken, and the sun was soon very hot. Joseph found a dry thorny bit of scrub in the desert, and he wanted to give Mary a rest in the little bit of shade. He unloaded the donkey and rubbed the sticks together for a fire, to boil the billy. The donkey looked on, full of mistrust. He was waiting for his own meal, but only to refuse it. "I'd rather eat my own tail than their dusty hay", he mumbled.

But there wasn't any hay, not even straw. Joseph had been so preoccupied with Mary's and the baby's

welfare that he had clean forgotten about the donkey. The donkey suddenly suffered from a terrible hunger attack. He made his tummy grumble so loudly that Joseph looked around full of fear because he thought there was a lion in the scrub.

In the meantime the soup was ready, and Mary ate, and Joseph had the leftovers, and little Jesus drank his mother's milk, and only the donkey stood there and had nothing to chew. Nothing grew here, except for some thistles amongst the rocks.



"Dear Lord", the donkey started a long impassioned speech to Jesus. It was a donkey speech, but very cleverly thought out and presenting clearly all the grievances he had. "E-OO", he cried at the end, which means: "as true as I'm a donkey."

Baby Jesus listened very carefully. When the donkey had finished, little Jesus bent over, picked a thistle and offered it to the donkey.

"Well, well", the donkey said, very hurt in his feelings, so I eat the thistle. But you in your wisdom will know what is going to happen. The thorns will prick my tummy, and I'll die - and then you can see how you get to Egypt."

Full of anger he bit into the tough plant - and his mouth gaped wide open, for the thistle didn't taste as he had expected at all. It tasted lovely and sweet, like the sweetest clover. Nobody except a donkey can imagine how sweet it tasted. This time he even forgot to grumble. He folded his long ears together, just as we fold our hands, and gave thanks.

*after Heinrich Wagler*