

THE HOLY PLACES IN THE HOLY LAND

I—BETHLEHEM¹

The prophet Micheas (v.2) had foretold that the Messias, the hope of all Israel, would be born in Bethlehem, a small town, but one very famous in Jewish history for it had been the birthplace of King David, ancestor of the princely hero and saviour to come. We know from St Luke's Gospel how this foretelling was fulfilled, how Our Lady and St Joseph, both of the family of David, came to Bethlehem, and how Our Lord was born there and laid in a manger. A strange beginning this to that sitting on the throne of David his father and reigning in the house of Jacob forever, about which the angel of the Annunciation had told Our Lady. But so it was. We see presently the pageant of the Magi bringing royal offerings to the Child, and then any shadow of royalty fades away.

But do we, who live in the twentieth century, really know the site of that stable-cave where the divine Child was born one winter night? It is the aim of this article to provide evidence on the point.

The convert Emperor Constantine (306-37) came to Palestine and, about the year 326, built a basilica over a cave held, at that time, to have been the scene of Christ's birth. This basilica remains to our own day and, except for some alterations made by the Emperor Justinian (528-65) in the east end, stands just as Constantine built it. We have the evidence of an adventurous pilgrim who in 333 came to Palestine, and has left us an account of his pilgrimage. He writes: ". . . Bethlehem where Our Lord Jesus Christ was born, there a basilica has been built by order of Constantine". Thus, only seven years after its building, this man who came from Bordeaux saw the basilica in its austere dignity. Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, speaking in Constantinople in 335, says that Constantine "chose in that country (Palestine) three spots, sacred because they contained three mystical caves, and over these he erected splendid edifices. He gave to the place where the Lord first appeared the honour which was its due". The other places mentioned were the mount of the Ascension and the holy Sepulchre. Again, between 335 and 340, Eusebius speaks of "the cave where the Saviour first showed himself in the flesh", and says that both the Emperor and his mother St Helena adorned the cave in the richest fashion, sparing neither gold nor silver nor the finest woven stuffs.

¹ This article contains the substance of a chapter on the subject by Rev. Fr Gaetano Perella, C.M., in his book, *I Luoghi Santi*, and is translated by Miss Mary Chadwick, and published by permission of the Vincentian Fathers.

We have here the witness of two contemporaries of Constantine as to the building of a basilica over the cave at Bethlehem. We shall now follow the tradition backward from Constantine and again we quote Eusebius. Writing between 315 and 325, he says that the people about Bethlehem show to those who come "the field where the Virgin laid her babe after his birth". The field? Yes, because this being before the building of the basilica, the cave lay open to the fields near the town. St Cyril of Jerusalem speaks of the woods near by. Going back now half a century, we find Origen, the great scholar, writing that in 215 he had visited Bethlehem and had seen there "the cave where he was born and in that cave the manger where he lay wrapped in swaddling clothes just as the Gospel tells in the story of his birth". This was written in 248. Before this we have St Justin, born between 100 and 110 in Palestine itself, writing of Bethlehem as the place where St Joseph took refuge "in a cave" within which the Messiah was born and "laid in a manger". This was written about 150. Then, before St Justin, there is the apocryphal "Gospel of James" which speaks of the cave of Bethlehem and Our Lord's birth within it. That this "Gospel" surrounds the story with fantastic legend does not detract from the value of its evidence as to plain facts. Its author seems to have been a Jewish Christian.

Pursuing tradition ever farther back, we come to the year 135. In that year, the Emperor Hadrian came to Palestine and, after crushing a Jewish revolt, reduced Jerusalem to the status of a Roman "colony", even changing its ancient name to that of Aelia Capitolina. He built a temple to Jupiter on Calvary and dedicated the cave of Bethlehem to Tammuz-Adonis. St Jerome writes: "Our dear Bethlehem also, the most august spot on earth. . . Bethlehem itself was overshadowed by Tammuz, that is by Adonis. The cave where Christ wept now echoed to laments for the lover of Venus". Hadrian's repressive measures fell upon both Jews and Christians; carven images, so much abhorred by Jews, were set up to overlook the ruins of their temple; the places of Christ's birth and death were likewise desecrated, apparently in order to obliterate his memory from the minds of men. What Hadrian's real motives were we shall never know, but it is certain that what he did served to keep alive the memory of these two sacred sites.

What of the tradition about them from the days of Christ to the hour of Hadrian's triumph in 135? At the hour of Christ's birth, the truth about him had been revealed to the shepherds of Bethlehem: "This day in the City of David a saviour has been born for you, the Lord Christ himself" (Lk. II.11). So said the angels and thus set the shepherds on their way to the stable. St Luke also tells us that "all those who heard the shepherds' story were full of amazement" (Lk. II.18).

No doubt the villages were full of it, but it was not long before the Child was carried off into Egypt and later to Nazareth, and so lost sight of that, when he began his public life, his fellow countrymen seem to have had no recollection of the child whom the Magi had travelled from so far to visit. Yet in 135, as we have seen, the tradition of the cave was already ancient and so well known to both Jews and Christians that Hadrian thought well to turn over the cave to a pagan worship. To go back to the first source of tradition—Our Lady, in all probability, spent the last years of her life in Jerusalem and she will most certainly have told the first Christians where the place lay in which their master was born, told them too of the events of his babyhood, the shepherds, the singing angels, the noble Magi, the deadly fear which drove his parents to carry him away into Egypt. It is indeed from her lips, directly or indirectly, that St Luke gathered the material for the early chapters of his Gospel.

Then the Apostle St James the Less became Bishop of Jerusalem and he was succeeded by Simeon, a cousin of Our Lord. After him came the line of Jewish bishops whose names Eusebius records for us. It is impossible that the story of their master's birth at Bethlehem should not have been handed down by these devoted men—as in fact it was, since in 135 it was well known even to pagans. After 135 when Hadrian banished all Jews from Jerusalem, or tried to do so, its bishops were chosen from among Gentile converts, and we have the list of their names down to the time of Constantine. The pedigree of the tradition about the cave of Bethlehem would seem to be perfectly sound.

We may remark, however, that St Luke never mentions a stable nor does he say that St Joseph took Our Lady into a cave, but he mentions a manger, and that three times, a manger within their refuge. A manger clearly implies a stable and a stable in the Judaea of those days would most naturally be a cave. In the East, the poorer people do quite often live in caves and in Judaea especially, caves were an ordinary shelter for man and beast. As Origen wrote: "Following the account given in the Gospel about the birth of Christ, there is shown in Bethlehem the cave in which he was born".

Many pilgrims came to Bethlehem before Constantine and many after him. Of the former we may make bare mention of St Justin in 145, St Melitus of Sardis in 170, Clement of Alexandria before 180, Akhadabue the Syrian in 205, Julius Africanus in 220, St Gregory of Neo-Caesarea in 233, St Antony the Abbot in 295. In 326 or thereabouts came the great Empress St Helena who, together with her son, built and adorned the great basilicas of the Holy Land. Pilgrims after Constantine are beyond counting, and we know by name only those

who have left us accounts of their journeys. St Jerome, to whom we owe the Vulgate Bible, took up his abode in Bethlehem itself in 386. He writes : "Oh see, in this little corner of the earth was born the Creator of the heavens, here he was bound in bands, here seen by the shepherds, here adored by the Magi". After him came the Lady Etheria, a noble Spaniard, in 393. She writes of the "cave" where Christ was born. The pilgrim Arculf, a bishop from Gaul, came in 670. He says that the cave had then "a lining of marble, fine and precious". The Englishman St Bede the Venerable wrote about the Holy Places in 735, he gives us Arculf's account and adds to it from other sources. St Willibald, another Englishman, arrived in Jerusalem in 725-6; Ceowulf, an Anglo-Saxon, came in 1102-3.

What sort of basilica did Constantine build? Strictly, a basilica. We can see it today, standing in its ancient majesty, altered but little since the day of its consecration. It is of excellent construction and internally is a vast rectangle 146 × 84 ft. divided by a fourfold row of columns into a nave with double aisles. Its east end was a great semi-circle with a soaring arch (somewhat altered by Justinian) and in front of the arch stood the altar. Directly beneath the altar lies the cave of the Nativity, a natural cave in limestone rock. A natural curve in the wall of the cave formed a small apse, in front of this stood a little altar. In a lower part of the cave, the manger is said to have been placed, and at least up to the time of Origen's visit in 215 it was shown to pilgrims. The manger, according to the late Fr Abel, O.P., one of the best archaeologists, will have been some kind of receptacle resting on the floor with one of its sides against the wall of the cave. Its construction will have been, wholly or in part, of clay and chopped straw. St Jerome, preaching in Bethlehem one Christmas day, laments its disappearance : "Under pretext of honouring Christ, we have taken away the manger of clay and put one of silver in its place. Oh, had I but been allowed to see the real manger where the Lord was laid!" It seems probable that St Helena who, with her son, adorned the cave so richly, gave the precious manger of silver.

The Persians who invaded Palestine in 614 destroyed many of the Christian sanctuaries, but spared the basilica at Bethlehem; it is said that they held their hands because they saw on the façade a mosaic representing the Magi in Persian dress and concluded that these were their own ancestors (see a Synodal Letter of the Council held in Jerusalem in 836). In the next invasion, of 638, by the Arabs this time, the basilica was again spared, for the Caliph Omar, seeing that one of its transepts pointed directly to Mecca, requested that he might use it for prayer. The basilica was spared yet a third time when the savage Sultan Hakim came to Palestine in 1009 and, considering the character

of this Sultan, it is not surprising that the immunity of the church was attributed to a miracle.

When the Latin Kingdom of the Crusaders was established in 1099, the basilica received all possible honour. Pope Paschal II made Bethlehem a bishopric in 1110 and, some years later, both Greeks and Latins set to work to embellish it, setting up statues of both Greek and Latin saints, and using both languages for inscriptions. When, however, the Latin Kingdom fell to the sword of Saladin in 1187, the Latins perforce withdrew and the basilica was served by Greeks only. But in the thirteenth century the Franciscans came to Bethlehem and, although the Greeks made certain concessions to them, friction was continual, so that in the sixteenth century the Greeks built a wall some six feet high right across the church so as to divide it into Greek and Latin portions. This wall stood until 1918, when it was pulled down by order of the British authorities who then occupied Palestine.

In 1634 the Greeks obtained from the Sultan Amuret IV a firman which put them in possession of the whole basilica as well as the cave of the Nativity, but when Louis XIV protested, the cave was handed back to the Franciscans in 1689. There, under the little altar of the Nativity, they replaced the silver star which the Greeks had removed, and also restored the inscription that surrounded it and ran: *Hic de Virgine Maria Christus natus est*. But the Greeks were not disposed to remain at peace and a series of encroachments culminated in a raid upon the crypt in 1873 when they sacked the place and wounded several of the friars. After this affair, the Turkish Government ordered that a sentry should stand in the crypt by night and by day.

The entrance to Constantine's splendid basilica has suffered greatly. Huge stone buttresses, blackened by time, disfigure the façade, and instead of Constantine's triple doors opening into the nave there is but one entry—a mean aperture so low that a man must stoop to pass under it. This is a record of a time so barbarous that Turkish soldiers would force their way in on horseback. In 1944 a thorough cleansing of the basilica and the sacred cave was carried out, so that the pilgrim of today can see something at least of the ancient glory.

It would be interesting to know what became of the silver manger which was substituted for the original "manger of clay" of which St Jerome tells us. It may have been sent to Constantinople with other treasures when Persian and Arab invasions had descended on Palestine, for in 1157 there was to be seen there "the manger in which the Saviour was laid". And after that? We do not know. In the seventh century the famous church of Our Lady in Rome, Santa Maria Maggiore, became known as Sancta Maria ad Praesepe, Our Lady of the Crib, and good authorities say that this title was given when some

fragments of rock from the cave of the Nativity were brought there and, having been enclosed in a leaden box, were deposited under the altar at which the Popes were accustomed to say Mass on Christmas Eve.

It would seem that we need have no hesitation in holding :

- 1 That the existing basilica at Bethlehem was built by the Emperor Constantine.
- 2 That he built it over a cave held to be the birthplace of Christ.
- 3 That this tradition rested on a perfectly sound tradition which can be traced back to the earliest times, the beginning of the Christian era.