

Eusebius, The Life of Constantine: Bethlehem

CHAPTER XLI: Of the Erektion of Churches in Bethlehem, and an the Mount of Olives. IN the same country he discovered other places, venerable as being the localities of two sacred caves: and these also he adorned with lavish magnificence. In the one case, he rendered due honor to that which had been the scene of the first manifestation of our Saviour's divine presence, when he submitted to be born in mortal flesh; while in the case of the second cavern he hallowed the remembrance of his ascension to heaven from the mountain top. And while he thus nobly testified his reverence for these places, he at the same time eternized the memory of his mother, who had been the instrument of conferring so valuable a benefit on mankind.

CHAPTER XLII: That the Empress Helena, Constantine's Mother, having visited this Locality for Devotional Purposes, built these Churches.

FOR she, having resolved to discharge the duties of pious devotion to the God, the King of kings, and feeling it incumbent on her to render thanksgivings with prayers on behalf both of her own son, now so mighty an emperor, and of his sons, her own grandchildren, the divinely favored Caesars, though now advanced in years, yet gifted with no common degree of wisdom, had hastened with youthful alacrity to survey this venerable land; and at the same time to visit the eastern provinces, cities, and people, with a truly imperial solicitude. As soon, then, as she had rendered due reverence to the ground which the Saviour's feet had trodden, according to the prophetic word which says "Let us worship at the place whereon his feet have stood," she immediately bequeathed the fruit of her piety to future generations.

CHAPTER XLIII: A Farther Notice of the Churches at Bethlehem.

FOR without delay she dedicated two churches to the God whom she adored, one at the grotto which had been the scene of the Saviour's birth; the other on the mount of his ascension. For he who was "God with us" had submitted to be born even in a cave of the earth, and the place of his nativity was called Bethlehem by the Hebrews.

Accordingly the pious empress honored with rare memorials the scene of her travail who bore this heavenly child, and beautified the sacred cave with all possible splendor. The emperor himself soon after testified his reverence for the spot by princely offerings, and added to his mother's magnificence by costly presents of silver and gold, and embroidered hangings. And farther, the mother of the emperor raised a stately structure on the Mount of Olives also, in memory of his ascent to heaven who is the Saviour of mankind, erecting a sacred church and temple on the very summit of the mount.

And indeed authentic history informs us that in this very cave the Saviour imparted his secret revelations to his disciples. And here also the emperor testified his reverence for the King of kings, by diverse and costly offerings. Thus did Helena Augusta, the pious mother of a pious emperor, erect over the two mystic caverns these two noble and beautiful monuments of devotion, worthy of everlasting remembrance, to the honor of God her Saviour, and as proofs of her holy zeal, receiving from her son the aid of his imperial power. Nor was it long ere this aged woman reaped the due reward of her labors. After passing the whole period of her life, even to declining age, in the greatest prosperity, and exhibiting both in word and deed abundant fruits of obedience to the divine precepts, and having enjoyed in consequence an easy and tranquil existence, with unimpaired powers of body and mind, at length she obtained from God an end befitting her pious course, and a recompense of her good deeds even in this present life.

Basilica

Above a cave in Bethlehem, Constantine built an octogon with a basilica and a court enclosed by four porticoes in the front. During the Samaritan revolt of 529 C.E. the building was destroyed. Justinian rebuilt it in its actual shape, which was preserved by the Persian invaders (612). In the crypts the traditional Nativity cave is connected with other caves where the monastic sojourn of Jerome and his community is commemorated (Vincent and Abel 1914; M. Avi-Yonah, The Madaba Mosaic Map with Introduction and Commentary, Jerusalem 1954, Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land, 4 vols., ed. M. Avi-Yonah, 1975 1:202-6; Heitz 1983:6-18; Murphy-O'Connor 1983:12-13).