

Eusebius, The Life of Constantine: Mambre

CHAPTER LI: That he ordered a Church to be built at Mambre.

SUCH was the principal sacred edifices erected by the emperor's command. But having heard that the self-same Saviour who ere while had appeared on earth had in ages long since past afforded a manifestation of his Divine presence to holy men of Palestine near the oak of Mambre, he ordered that a house of prayer should be built there also in honor of the God who had thus appeared. Accordingly the imperial commission was transmitted to the provincial governors by letters addressed to them individually, enjoining a speedy completion of the appointed work. He sent moreover to the writer of this history an eloquent admonition, a copy of which I think it well to insert in the present work, in order to convey a just idea of his pious diligence and zeal. To express, then, his displeasure at the evil practices which he had heard were usual in the place just referred to, he addressed me in the following terms.

CHAPTER LII: Constantine's Letter to Eusebius concerning Mambre.

"VICTOR CONSTANTINUS, MAXIMUS AUGUSTUS, to Macarius, and the rest of the bishops in Palestine.

"One benefit, and that of no ordinary importance, has been conferred on us by my truly pious mother-in-law, in that she has made known to us by letter that abandoned folly of impious men which has hitherto escaped detection by you: so that the criminal conduct thus overlooked may now through our means obtain fitting correction and remedy, necessary though tardy. For surely it is a grave impiety indeed, that holy places should be defiled by the stain of unhallowed impurities. What then is this, dearest brethren, which, though it has eluded your sagacity, she of whom I speak was impelled by a pious sense of duty to disclose?

CHAPTER LIII: That the Saviour appeared in this Place to Abraham.

"SHE assures me, then, that the place which takes its name from the oak of Mambre, where we find that Abraham dwelt, is defiled by certain of the slaves of superstition in every possible way. She declares that idols which should be utterly destroyed have been erected on the site of that tree; that an altar is near the spot; and that impure sacrifices are continually performed. Now since it is evident that these practices are equally inconsistent with the character of our times, and unworthy the sanctity of the place itself, I wish your Gravities to be informed that the illustrious Count Acacius, our friend, has received instructions by letter from me, to the effect that every idol which shall be found in the place above-mentioned shall immediately be consigned to the flames; that the altar be utterly demolished; and that if any one, after this our mandate, shall be guilty of impiety of any kind in this place, he shall be visited with condign punishment. The place itself we have directed to be adorned with an unpolluted structure, I mean a church; in order that it may become a fitting place of assembly for holy men. Meantime, should any breach of these our commands occur, it should be made known to our clemency without the least delay by letters from you, that we may direct the person detected to be dealt with, as a transgressor of the law, in the severest manner. For you are not ignorant that the Supreme God first appeared to Abraham, and conversed with him, in that place. There it was that the observance of the Divine law first began; there first the Saviour himself, with the two angels, vouchsafed to Abraham a manifestation of his presence; there God first appeared to men; there he gave promise to Abraham concerning his future seed, and straightway fulfilled that promise; there he foretold that he should be the father of a multitude of nations. For these reasons, it seems to me right that this place should not only be kept pure through your diligence from all defilement, but restored also to its pristine sanctity; that nothing hereafter may be done there except the performance of fitting service to him who is the Almighty God, and our Saviour, and Lord of all. And this service it is incumbent on you to care for with due attention, if your Gravities be willing (and of this I feel confident) to gratify my wishes, which are especially interested in the worship of God. May he preserve you, beloved brethren!"

Arbo, also Terebinth. The Oak of Mambre - (Ramat al-Khalil)

The site of Mamre, known in Arabic as Haram Ramet el-Khalil, lies approximately 3 km north of Hebron on the ancient road linking the main Hebron-Jerusalem and Bethlehem-Ziph routes. The Bible describes Elonei (oaks of) Mamre as Abraham's dwelling place, where he built an altar to God (Gen. 13:18, 18:1, 23:19). Some scholars locate the biblical Elonei Mamre within the town of ancient Hebron (Tell Rumeideh); others identify it with the enclosure of Haram Ramat el-Khalil which was already considered a sacred site in the Second Temple period.

Josephus relates that Abraham resided near Hebron, by an oak called ogyges, the oak

of Genesis (Antiq. 1, 186). Elsewhere he mentions a terebinth 6 stadia from Hebron that had stood there since creation (War IV, 533); it is not clear whether both references are to the same place. In Antiquities he tells the biblical story, calling the tree an oak: whereas in War of the Jews he is describing a holy place in his own time, calling it a terebinth. Josephus is mistaken about the distance between Elonei Mamre and Hebron, which is not 6 but approximately 18 stadia (3 km). Neither does he mention a structure around the terebinth. Modern excavations have made it clear that the structure was already standing in his time.

The book of Jubilees (29:17-19; 37:14-17) refers to Abraham's capital in the Hebron Hills as a tower (migdal). The reference is probably to Abraham's residence at Elonei Mamre. If so, the author, a contemporary of the Second Temple, was describing the enclosure at Elonei Mamre in terms associated with the Temple Mount - migdal or birah - both meaning tower or fortress. Talmudic literature refers to the place as Beth Ilanim or Botnah and it is mentioned as the site of one of the most important fairs in Palestine: "There are three fairs: the fair of Gaza, the fair of Acco, the fair of Botnah, and the least doubtful of them all is the fair of Botnah," meaning that of the three fairs this was the one most definitely associated with idolatry and therefore Jews were forbidden to participate in it (J.T. A.Z. 39c; Gen. Rab. 47:10). The fair is mentioned in two of Jerome's commentaries (In Hieremiam VI, 18, 6, CCSL 74, 307; In Zachariam III, 4-5. CCSL 76A, 851), where it is said that Hadrian brought the captive Jews to the famous marketplace at Terebinth. There he sold many into slavery. For this reason the Jews in Jerome's time shunned the annual fair. The same story is told in the seventh-century Chronicon Paschale (PG 92, col. 613) with some additions.

The Bordeaux Pilgrim (Itin. Burd. 599, 3-7) states that the emperor Constantine built a basilica there. Eusebius (Vita Constantini III. 51-53, GCS 7, 99-10 1) and Sozomenus (HE II, 4. GCS 50, 54-56) report the circumstances and the official documentation referring to the building. Both Julius Africanus (Chron. XVIII) and Eusebius (Vita Constantini III, 53, 100; Onom. 6. 12-14; 76. 1-3) mention a pagan altar at the site. The most detailed description of the site is in the work of Sozomenos. He reports that the place situated 15 stadia from Hebron, was the site of the terebinth, where the angels had appeared to Abraham. In summer, he states, a great fair was held there, attracting hordes of people from far away, who came to offer libations and burn incense, but also to trade; among them were pagans, Christians and Jews. The Medeba map seems to differentiate between Botna and Mamre, as the mosaic depicts both a church and a terebinth. During the seventh century CE there was a monastery at the site that continued to exist after the Arab conquest (Adamnanus, De Locis Sanctis II, II. 6, CCSL 175, 211). In Crusader times, the site may have been occupied by the Church of the Trinity.

Eusebius, Onomasticon 6:8-12 (ca. 295 A.D.); Jerome 7:18-24 (ca. 390 A.D.)  
 Arboc. Corrupte in nostris codicibus Arboc scribitur, cum in Hebraeis legatur Arbe, id est quattuor, eo quod ibi tres patriarchae, Abraam, Isaac et Iacob, sepulti sunt, et "Adam Magnus", ut in Iesu libro scriptum est: licet eum quidam conditum in loco Calvariae suspicientur. Haec est autem eadem Chebron, olim metropolis Filistinorum et habitaculum gigantum, regnumque postea David, in tribu Iudae civitas sacerdotalis et fugitivorum. Distat ad meridianam plagam ab Aelia milibus circiter viginti duobus. (Jerome 7:11-18)

Et quercus Abraam, quae et Mambre, usque ad Costantii regis imperium monstrabatur, et mausoleum eius in praesentiarum cernitur, cumque a nostris ibidem ecclesia iam extracta sit, a cunctis in circuitu gentibus terebinthi locus superstitione colitur, eo quod sub ea Abraam angelos quondam hospitio susceperit. Haec ergo primum Arbe, postea a Chebron, uno filiorum Chaleb sortita vocabulum est. Lege Verba dierum. (Jerome 7:18-24)

Arbo (Gen 23:2). In our codices it is written in a corrupted form, 'Arboc', while the Hebrew text reads 'Arba', that is, 'four', because the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are buried there, as well as 'the great Adam', as is written in the Book of Joshua (Jos. 14:15), although some suppose that he is buried on the Calvary. 'That is Hebron', today a large village, in ancient times one of the main cities of the Philistines [Eusebius: 'the aliens', i.e. the Cannanites in general] and a dwelling place of giants, and later royal seat of David. It fell into the lot of the tribe of Judah, and was a priestly city and one of the cities of refuge. It is south of Jerusalem at a distance of about 20 [22] miles.

135 The oak of Abraham, also called Mambre, could be seen standing until the reign of Constantius, and the tomb of the same is visible to this day and while a church has been erected there by our people, the place of the oak is [greatly] venerated by all the pagan population around, because under it Abraham gave hospitality to the angels. At first the place was called Arbe, and later it was named Hebron after Hebron, one of the sons of Caleb, as we read in the Chronicles. (1 Chron 2:42).

140 Sozomenus, Historia Ecclesiastica II, 4  
I deem necessary to declare now what was resolved about the oak of Mambre by Emperor Constantine. The place is presently called the Terebinth, and is situated at the distance of fifteen stadia from Hebron, which is to the south... Every year, at summer time, the inhabitants of that place and the Palestinians, the Phoenicians and the Arabs, coming from far away, make a fair there. Many come there for the sake of  
145 business, some to sell and some to buy. The feast is celebrated by a very big congregation of Jews, since they boast of Abraham as their forefather, of heathens since angels came there, of Christians since he who should be born from the Virgin for the salvation of humankind appeared there to that pious man. Everyone venerates  
150 this place according to his religion: some praying God the ruler of all, some calling upon the angels and offering libations of wine, burning incense or sacrificing an ox, a pig, a sheep or a cock. Constantine's mother in law (Euthropia), having come there to fulfill a vow, gave notice of all this to the Emperor. So he wrote to the bishops of Palestine reproaching them for having forgot their mission and permitted such a  
155 most holy place to be defiled by those libations and sacrifices.