

Cave of the Nativity, Bethlehem

(The site of the Nativity is attested to by an unbroken tradition dating back to the 2nd Century. This plan is a suggested reconstruction of the original arrangement based on the description in the “ and the present form of the caves (shaded areas).

During the centuries there have been many additions and enlargements. Sister Emmerich stated that new grottoes were cut in the rock even during the lifetime of Our Lord. The basilica, erected by Constantine over the cave in the 4th Century, and still in use, is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world).



The three oldest shepherds came back in turn and helped Joseph to make the Crib Cave and its surroundings more comfortable. I saw also several pious women with the Blessed Virgin, performing some services for her. They were Essenians, and lived in the valley, not far from the Crib Cave, in little rocky cells adjoining one another. They owned little gardens near their cells, and they taught the children of their community. St. Joseph had invited them to come, for he was acquainted with them even in early youth. When he was hiding in the Crib Cave, from his brethren, he visited these pious women who dwelt in the side of the rock. They now came in turn to the Blessed Virgin, bringing little necessaries and bundles of wood. They cooked and washed for the Holy Family.

Some days after the birth of Jesus, I saw a touching scene in the Crib Cave. Joseph and Mary were standing by the Crib and gazing with emotion upon the Infant Jesus, when suddenly the ass fell upon its knees and lowered its head to the ground. Mary and Joseph shed tears. I saw Mary at another time standing by the Crib. As she gazed upon the Child, the deep conviction stole upon her that It had come upon earth to suffer. That reminded me of a vision I had had at an earlier period in which I had been shown how Jesus, while still in His Mother's womb and from the moment of His birth, had suffered. I saw under the heart of Mary a glory and in it a bright shining Child. As I gazed upon It, it seemed as if Mary were hovering over It and surrounding It. I

beheld the Child growing and all the torments of the Crucifixion inflicted upon It. It was a sad, a fearful sight! I wept and sobbed aloud. I saw other forms around It beating and pushing, scourging and crowning It. Then they laid the Cross upon It, next nailed It to the same, and pierced It in the side. I saw the whole Passion of Christ in the Child. It was a frightful sight! As the

Child hung on the Cross, It said to me: "All this did I suffer from My conception until My thirty-fourth year, when My Passion was outwardly consummated." (The Lord died when He was thirty-three years and three months old.) "Go and announce it to men!" But how can I announce it to men?

I saw Jesus also as the newborn Child, and I saw how many of the children that went to the Crib ill treated the Infant Jesus. The Mother of God was not there to protect the Child, and the children went with all kinds of switches and rods, and struck It in the face until the Blood flowed. The Child meekly extended Its little hands before Its face, in order to ward off the blows. The smallest children were they that struck the most maliciously. The parents of some even twisted and wrapped the rods for them. They brought thorns, nettles, whips, little rods of all kinds, each having its own signification. One came with a very slender rod, like a reed. But when it was about to strike the Child, the rod snapped, and fell back upon itself. I knew several of the children. Some went about boasting in their fine clothes, but I stripped them, and whipped some of them well.

While Mary was still standing by the Crib in deep meditation, some shepherds drew near with their wives, in all about five persons. To give them room to approach the Crib, the Blessed Virgin withdrew a little to the spot upon which she had given birth to the Child. The people did not actually adore, but they gazed down upon the Child deeply moved, and before leaving they bowed low over It as if kissing It.

It was day. Mary sat in her usual place with the Infant Jesus on her lap. He was swathed, the hands and face alone free, Mary had something like a piece of linen in her hands with which she was busied. Joseph was at the fireplace near the entrance of the cave, and appeared to be making a shelf to hold some vessels. I was standing next the ass. And now came in three aged female Essenians, who were cordially welcomed, though Mary did not rise. They brought quite a number of presents: small fruits, birds with red, awl-shaped beaks as large as ducks, which they carried by the wings, oval rolls about an inch in thickness, some linen, and other stuff. All were received with rare humility and gratitude. The women were very silent and recollected. Deeply moved, they gazed down upon the Child, but they did not touch It. When they withdrew, it was without farewells or ceremony.

Meanwhile, I was taking a good look at the ass. It had a very broad back, and I thought to myself: "You good beast! You have carried a great burden!"¹ and I wanted to feel it, to see if it were real. I ran my hand over its hair, and it felt as smooth as silk.

Now came two married women with three little girls about eight years old. They appeared to be strangers and people of distinction, who had come in obedience to a call more miraculous than that received by any previous visitor. Joseph welcomed them very humbly. They brought presents less in size than the others, but of greater value: grain in a bowl, small fruits, and a cluster of thick, triangular, gold leaves on which was a stamp like a seal. I

thought:

"Strange! That looks like the representation of the eye of God! But no! How can I compare the eye of God with red earth!" Mary arose and placed the Child in the ladies' arms. Both held Him a little while, praying silently with uplifted heart, and then kissed Him. The three little girls were silent and deeply impressed. Joseph and Mary conversed with their visitors and when they left, Joseph accompanied them part of the way. Ah! Could we, like these women, behold the beauty, the purity, the innocent wisdom of Mary! She knew all things! But in her humility, she appears unconscious of her gifts. Like a child, she casts down her eyes; and when she raises them, her glance, like a flash of lightning, like the truth, like a ray of unsullied light, pierces one through and through. That is because she is perfectly pure, perfectly innocent, full of the Holy Ghost, and without any reflection on self. No one can resist her glance.

These people appeared to have come at least some miles and that secretly, for they avoided being seen in the city. Joseph behaved with great humility during such visits, retiring and looking on from some distant corner.

I saw also Anne's maid and an old man servant coming from Nazareth to the Crib. The maid was a widow and related to the Holy Family. She brought all sorts of necessaries from Anne to Mary, with whom she took up her abode.

The old man shed tears of joy, and returned with news to Anne.

The day after, I saw the Blessed Virgin and the Infant Jesus leave the Crib Cave with the maid for some hours. Stepping from the door of the cave, Mary turned toward the shed on the right, went some steps forward, and concealed herself in that side cave in which, at the birth of Jesus, a spring had welled up. She remained there four hours, because some men, spies of Herod, had come from Bethlehem, in consequence of the rumor set afloat by the words of the shepherds, that a miracle had there taken place in connection with a child. These men met St. Joseph in front of the Crib Cave. After exchanging a few words with him, they left him with a contemptuous

smile at his humility and simplicity.

The Crib Cave was retired, and very pleasantly situated. No one from Bethlehem went there, only the shepherds whose duties called them thither. No one in Bethlehem took any interest in what was going on outside for, in consequence of the influx of strangers, the city was all alive, and much buying and selling going on. Cattle was being bought and slaughtered, for many people paid their taxes in cattle. There were numbers of pagans in the city in the capacity of servants.

The wonderful apparition of the angels was soon noised among the dwellers of the mountain valleys far and near, and with it the birth of the Child in the cave. The innkeepers from whom the Holy Family on their journey had received hospitality now came, one after another, to do homage to Him whom unknown they had entertained. I saw that hospitable keeper of the last inn, first sending presents by a servant, and then coming himself to honor the Child. I saw also the good wife of that man who had been so cross to Joseph, and other shepherds and good people coming to the Crib. They were very much affected by what they saw. All were in holiday attire, and were going up to Bethlehem for the Sabbath. The good wife might have gone to Jerusalem which was nearer, but she preferred coming here to Bethlehem.

A relative of Joseph, and father of that Jonadab who, at the Crucifixion of Jesus presented a strip of linen to Him, had also come to the Crib Cave on his way to Bethlehem for the Sabbath. Joseph was very kind to him. This relative had heard from people of his place of Joseph's wonderful situation; he came therefore to bring him gifts and to visit the Infant Jesus and Mary. But Joseph would not accept anything, although he pawned the little she-ass to this relative with the understanding that she might be redeemed for the same amount of money received. After that, Mary, Joseph, the maid, and two of the shepherds who were standing in front of the entrance, celebrated the Sabbath in the Crib Cave. A lamp with seven wicks was lighted, and upon a small table covered with white and red, lay the prayer rolls.

The numerous eatables presented by the shepherds were either given to the poor or handed around for the entertainment of others. The birds were hung on a spit before the fire, turned from time to time, and sprinkled with the flour of a reed-like plant which was very plentiful around the area of Bethlehem and Hebron. From its grain a shining, white jelly was prepared and cakes baked. I saw under the fireplace very hot and clean holes in which birds could be roasted.

After the Sabbath, the Essenian women got a meal ready under the arbors which Joseph, with the help of the shepherds, had put up at the entrance of the cave. Joseph went into the city to engage priests for the circumcision of

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the Child. The cave was cleared and put in order. The partition that Joseph had put up in the passage was removed, and the ground spread with carpets, for in this passage near the Crib Cave, the place for the ceremony was prepared.