

On the Place of the Birth of Christ

CHRISTUS NATUS EST – “Here, of Mary the Virgin, Jesus Christ was born.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem in the days of Herod the Great (40-4 B.C.) during the reign of the Roman Emperor Ceasar Augustus (22 B.C.-14 A.D.). But where in Bethlehem? The New Testament mentions nothing after the initial story of the birth—in Bethlehem (Hebrew, beth lechem, “house of bread”).

Pope St. Evaristus (100-109 A.D.) was born in Antioch; his father was Judah of Bethlehem. St. Evaristus was martyred under the Emperor Hadrian, who hated Jews and Christians, and tried to eradicate all Jewish and Christian places of worship. Evaristus is witness to the profanation of his father’s home town by Hadrian. At Bethlehem, Hadrian planted a garden dedicated to the pagan god Adonis on the site venerated as the place of Jesus’ birth.

In 396 A.D., St. Jerome wrote: “From Hadrian’s time until the reign of Constantine, for about 180 years, the Gentiles used to worship an image of Jupiter set up in the place of the Resurrection and on the rock of the Cross a marble statue of Venus. For the authors of the persecution supposed that by polluting the Holy Places with idols, they would do away with our faith in the resurrection and in the cross. Bethlehem, now ours, and the earth’s most sacred spot... was overshadowed by a grove of Thammuz, which is Adonis, and in the cave where the infant Messias once cried, the paramour of Venus was bewailed.”

But the site of the birth of Jesus remained visible, as Origen (+254 A.D.) witnesses: “Even among those who are stranger to the faith, it is known that inside that grotto, He who is adored and glorified by the Christians was born.”

In 325 A.D., St. Macarius, Bishop of Jerusalem, told Emperor Constantine of the neglected condition of the holy places in his diocese. Constantine ordered the construction, among others, of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem. The tradition had been preserved among the local people about the exact site in the pagan sacred grove erected by Hadrian. The trees were cut down, and the superfluous rock quarried away, and the original cave of the birth made the center of the great basilica. An octagonal platform was raised over the actual cave and was adorned with precious metals and stones. There was an L-shaped stairway leading from the platform down to the actual cave. Unfortunately, the original crib, made of stone or clay, was replaced by one of precious metal. St. Jerome laments: “We, as if this was to honor Christ, have removed the one made of clay and substituted it with a silver one; but for me the removed one was more precious.” Many fourth and fifth century writers describe the richness of the marbles, mosaics, frescoes, and the silver manger.

After the freedom given to the Church under Constantine, many monasteries and convents were established between Jerusalem and Bethlehem (five miles apart). St. Jerome lived in a cave adjacent to the cave of Jesus’ birth. It was there that he made a new translation of the Bible, the *Biblia Vulgata*, which we use at our Mass.

One can still see the mosaic pavement of Constantine’s basilica. The basilica of Bethlehem was one of the few churches to survive the Persian destruction in 613 A.D. But the holy, holy site is still below. One still descends by the ancient stairs to a cave. There you can see a silver star marking the spot, with the words: HIC DE MARIA VIRGINE JESUS