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HEAVEN, A CAVE: CHRISTMAS IN BETHLEHEM

by Mother Nectaria McLees

It's Christmas Eve in an unseasonably warm December, and the rocky, barren hills shimmer in the morning sun. Our Arab bus rounds a final curve, revealing a solidly planted road sign, "Municipality of Bethlehem." It's a moment that drops one incongruously to earth. That the Bethlehem of the gospels, of childhood imaginings, and a thousand Christmas cards, should be a municipality at first seems preposterous. But in truth, a thread of almost frightening continuity runs between the Bethlehem of our souls and the reality of this small Palestinian village. Inhabited centuries before the time of Christ, Bethlehem's mayor is only the most recent of a long line of earthly authorities, each passing his post to neighbor or invader as surely as the apostles passed their anointing. The present mayor undoubtedly sits over dinner in a small Arab house just as his Roman-appointed predecessor sat over his two thousand years ago, as a child was born in a nearby cave.

There has never been a protective wall around the town; it was taken and retaken by succeeding invaders and through the veins of Bethlehem natives flow the memories of Arab, Roman, Hebrew, Greek, and Crusader ancestors. The fertile wheat fields that once surrounded the town gave Bethlehem its name, "House of Bread." Small workshops fill the narrow back-streets, and archways lining the alleys give onto vividly eastern scenes: a courtyard with newly-washed Arab *kafiya* head-dresses hung out to dry; a school of small Arab Christian children; the fortress-like Armenian compound, a monastery of Coptic Ethiopian monks; a shoemaker, with his tanned leather spread out before him.

I head downhill through the village of Beit Sahur to the traditional site of Shepherd's Field. The way is simple; for centuries pilgrims have known it to

be “a thousand paces from Bethlehem.” Small white houses line the roads and barefoot Arab Christian children play wild street games, shouting out greetings as I pass. At the end of the village, whose name means “House of the Shepherds,” is a spreading orchard, the field of Boaz, the husband of Ruth. Now simply called “Ruth’s Field,” it adjoins the small Greek monastic enclave marking the place where the shepherds heard the angels glorifying God and bidding them to Bethlehem to worship the newborn Babe. Eusebius of Caesarea identifies this as the site held in reverence by early Christians, and on-going excavations have uncovered the remains of a fourth-century church. (A nearby Franciscan shrine also claims to be Shepherd’s Field, but is built over a much later Byzantine monastery.)

The Greek site, attested to by twenty centuries of pilgrims, includes a domed village church over an ancient cave-basilica with mosaic crosses from 324. In an adjoining baptistry archeologists have discovered the bones of Christians martyred by the Persians in 614. Monks from Mar Saba now watch over the shrine. Tradition says that the shepherds, ill content with earthly life after their glimpse of divinity, asked on their deathbeds

to be buried in this field. A small icon-tablet in the cave memorializes their request.

As I leave the church, I try to picture what it was like that wonderful night. Maneuvering my camera lens through the chain-link fence that borders Ruth’s Field, I’m startled at the acuteness of my imagination which has conjured up the unmistakable bleating of lambs. Too much sun? I turn the corner into a pasture bordering the shrine property, and find myself staring at an imposing Arab shepherd in *kaftan* and *kafiya*, smoking in the high grass. He looks up and I raise my hand tentatively, hoping for a human gesture to break the spell. He ducks his head in greeting, and turns back to his flock.

The center of Bethlehem is Nativity Square, covered with lights and bordered by small shops selling postcards and mementos. These shops are kept by families who, for centuries, have fed their children on the pilgrim’s irresistible urge to carry home a tangible reminder of this holy place. Like a litany of Old Testament ancestors, one Arab woman recites for me six generations of family names, all of whom, she claims, sold wooden camels and carved manger scenes on this same spot.



Shepherd's Field with church and excavations.
Foreground: contemporary shepherds.

Our earliest historical witness to the site is St. Justin Martyr, a native of neighboring Nablus, who wrote in c. 155 that the location of the Nativity in the cave at Bethlehem was already an accepted belief. Origen supported the location in 248, adding:

In Bethlehem you are shown the cave where he was born, and within, the Manger where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes. These things that they show you are recognized in the district, even by those who do not share our faith. They admit, that is, that the Jesus whom the Christians adore, was born in this cave.

Set back from the edge of the square, the Church of the Nativity is a massive structure of golden-brown stone blocks, and one bends almost double to pass through the low door. They say that the doors of the church were walled up long ago except this one, which was purposely lowered to prevent the infidel from riding in on horseback.

I bow my head and cross the threshold to straighten up in 4th-century Byzantium. It is one of the great surprises of the Holy Land to step from the dusty street into this austere Roman basilica. Great Corinthian pillars of deep red stone divide the nave into aisles. This is the church built by Emperor Constantine the Great and his mother, St. Helen, as one of the first Roman tributes to Christianity. It is the earliest Christian church in use today, renewed by Justinian, but still containing some original elements. On the walls are fragments of 12th-century gold mosaics of ecumenical councils, prophets and saints, and below, roped-off squares reveal portions of the early Constantinian floor. The narthex has been sub-divided and part is now used as a guard-room, although centuries ago there was a Justinian-era mosaic here of the visit of the Magi, depicted in Persian costume. In 614, when the Persians sacked Jerusalem and the surrounding area, including Shepherd's Field, they spared the Church of the Nativity because they were misled by the mosaic into believing that these Christians venerated their prophet Zoroaster.

Even the basilica roof is replete with centuries of Christian piety. High up, out of sight, are huge rafters of hardy English oak that King Edward IV of England sent to the Holy Land to rebuild the roof. In a rare impulse of cooperation between the English and French, Edward supplied the materials, and Philip of Burgandy, the craftsmen. Tons of lead sent to bind and protect the heavy rafters and walls were melted down by the Turks in the 17th century to be recast into bullets to fight the Venetians. Now Greek and



Silver star in the Grotto of the Nativity.

Armenian monks and local Arab Christians watch over the Roman-Byzantine nave, roofed by 15th-century English forests.

The basilica is built over the cave where the Lord was born, and the cave itself was recognized as His birthplace two centuries before Rome became a Christian state. Bethlehem is dotted with many such limestone caves, and it remains the practice of the poorer inhabitants of the area to build their houses over them, with the family in the upper floors and the animals stabled below. Another evidence of the cave's sacredness to early Christians is that in 135 Emperor Hadrian attempted to defame it as he had Golgotha, building a temple to Adonis over the cave, and planting a sacred grove. When St. Helen arrived in the early 4th century to uncover the Christian holy places, she ordered the pagan grove destroyed and the temple pulled down. In their place she erected this church.

The Nativity cave is entered by a flight of steps set into the floor to the right of the altar. The dark little staircase is so narrow that only one at a time may descend the stairs. Dozens of silver oil lamps dimly light the tiny cave; small pin pricks of light against the smoke-blackened walls. Affixed to

a shallow recess near the floor, is a large silver star, placed here in 1717 by the Roman Catholics and inscribed in Latin: *Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary*. The removal of this star many years ago led to a quarrel between Russia and France that eventually ignited the Crimean War.

Like the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity is jointly guarded by Greek, Armenian and Latin clergy. Details of where each group cleans or dusts, and when services are performed is strictly controlled, as is the placing of icons or pictures. Opposite the recess are relics of the Holy Innocents, the children slaughtered by Herod's soldiers as they searched for the infant Christ. A second rock-hewn staircase on the opposite wall opens onto a warren of small underground rock chambers, including St. Jerome's cell, where he translated the gospels into the Latin Vulgate.

I've arrived on Christmas Eve, but have little hope of praying quietly in the cave. The town is crowded with pilgrims for the midnight Christmas liturgy, and even on normal days, visitors fill the church from morning to night. I hope that with perseverance I may have a moment before the momentum of the crowd sweeps me out the other side, but as I descend the staircase, I'm



Shepherd near Bethlehem.

astonished to find the cave almost empty. In one corner an elderly Ethiopian monk stands leaning on a t-shaped Coptic staff, praying intently. Near him sits a nun on a small rock ledge, who looks at me with shining eyes. In the dim light, with their long eastern robes, I think of another man who once stood here with a woman resting at his side.

Sensing my hesitation, the monk opens his eyes and nods gravely to indicate that I am welcome, then returns to his prayers. The nun pats the narrow rock shelf for me to sit beside her. Whispering a word of greeting, she kisses my hand to tell me we are sisters and then she, too, begins chanting. The oil lamps throw gigantic shadows against the cave walls, echoing back the murmured Amharic prayers. Moments pass, slow and drop away, until the chant seems an echo of every pilgrim who has ever worshiped here on Christmas Eve: kings, monks, children, saints, sinners, pilgrims.... Did they also muse on who was here before them and who would follow? I take up my book to read vespers for Christmas Eve, thanking God for His great mercy.

A pilgrim quietly descends, and then another. An elaborately vested Greek deacon descends to cense the cave, and scuffling on the stairs announces a crowd of small Arab children with their teacher. Creeping forward like little birds, they kneel in turn, each kissing the star; their faces solemn in the lamp-light. The monk glances at his companion, who gathers a worn cloak from the floor. Bowing gravely with their hands to their hearts, they greet me with the Nativity and depart into the starry Bethlehem night. ✦

"Call of the Shepherds" marking their burial in Shepherd's Field.