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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE CAVE
IN CHRISTIAN AND MITHRAIC TRADITION

One of the most common iconographical themes in Byzantine art and in art influenced by Byzantium is that of Christ’s birth in a cave or grotto. The textual inspiration for this scene, as opposed to the Nativity in a manger as described by Luke [2.7], would seem to derive from the apocryphal Protevangelium attributed to James:

Mary said to Joseph, take me down from the ass for that which is in me presses to come forth. But Joseph replied, Whither shall I take thee? for the place is desert. Then said Mary again to Joseph, take me down, for that which is in me mightily presses me. But Joseph took her down. And he found there a cave and let her into it. And leaving her and his sons in the cave, Joseph went forth to seek a Hebrew midwife in the village of Bethlehem. . . . Then I beheld a woman coming down from the mountains and she said to me, Where art thou going, O man? And I said to her, I go to enquire for a Hebrew midwife. She replied to me, Where is the woman that is to be delivered? And I answered. In the cave, and she is betrothed to me. . . . And the midwife went along with him, and stood in the cave. Then a bright cloud overshadowed the cave. . . . But on a sudden the cloud became a great light in the cave, so that their eyes could not bear it. But the light gradually decreased, until the infant appeared, and sucked the breast of his mother Mary. ¹

The work is believed to have been composed between the mid-second and early third centuries.² Many questions about the

text remain unanswered, and no one has yet been able to explain why James insisted on the cave location for the birth. When in the seventh century Anastasius “Sinaita” was asked to clarify this lacuna in the Gospels, he could only reply that is was a matter of tradition.3

In the first chapter of their comprehensive study of the Church and Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Vincent and Abel reviewed the various theories current at the turn of the century favouring a pagan attachment to the site, which for convenience, it was argued, was adopted by the Christians as one of their own. The authors convincingly disclaim each of these suppositions, and conclude that the Grotto of the Nativity had never been the site of a cult prior to the time it was associated with Christ.4 The questions, however, as to whether or not Christ was in fact born in a grotto and, if he were, whether the event took place in the grotto above which the Church of the Nativity was built by Constantine in the fourth century remained unresolved. In all fairness, the problem would seem to be insoluble given our present knowledge, but some reflections on the subject may bring us closer to an answer.

If the fact that Christ was born in Bethlehem is taken for granted, it is not surprising that the early Christians should have attempted to identify a precise location for the event which could be revered and visited by pilgrims. But, were the manger described by Luke free-standing and man-made would it have survived the decades, or the centuries, which separated the date of Christ’s birth from the moment when it became necessary to identify the

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4 Vincent and Abel, Bethléem, p. 18.