

THE NATIVITY CAVE AND GENTILE MYTHS

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How would Gentiles have heard the early Christian tradition of Jesus' nativity in a cave, and Hadrian's subsequent 'defilement' of that site with a sacred grove? This article briefly surveys some relevant or potentially relevant pagan analogies. The analogies with pagan nati- vities are not sufficient to decide the authenticity of the tradition of Jesus' nativity in a cave. While it might constitute fictitious apologetic, it seems to have been believed in Bethlehem before a significant pagan presence there, hence before the Christian interest in a competitive apologetic. Whether the early Christian tradition is fictitious or (as I think somewhat more likely) based on genuine local beliefs, pagan analogies do illustrate how the story could have proved useful to later generations of Christians in a Gentile setting.

The Early Christian Tradition

Evidence suggests that people in Bethlehem honored a cave as the site of Jesus' birth by the early second century. By this time Bethlehemites knew the exact cave where Jesus had reportedly been laid in a manger; when Hadrian was desecrating Judean sacred sites, he responded to this tradition by establishing a sacred grove there. Because Jerome settled in a Bethlehem cave near the nativity grotto, he knew the local tradi- tion.¹ Although Jerome arrived only in 385, the claim that Hadrian desecrated this site in the early second century coheres with his

1. Cf. Jerome, *Epist.* 58.3 (to Paulinus); Paulinus of Nola, *Epist.* 31.3; see here Ethelbert Stauffer, *Jesus and his Story* (trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 21; Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament: The Life of Jesus and the Beginning of the Early Church* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 20-23; John McRay, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), pp. 156-57.

desecration of other sites sacred to Judeans. Second- and third-century Christian sources also report the nativity cave near Bethlehem, and later sources continued to follow this tradition.²

That the early Judean church would have known and preserved the site of Jesus' birth, given the prominent role played by Jesus' family (especially his brother James, Gal. 2.9; cf. 1.19) is plausible. Bethlehem was just about six miles from Jerusalem.³ Jesus' relatives probably owned the property where the cave was,⁴ and relatives typically displayed loyalty to their kin, supporting each other socially.⁵ With reference to the specific local applicability of the tradition of Jesus' nativity in a cave, Bethlehem did have caves. Moreover, Bethlehemites used these natural structures for their own ends; thus during the century before Jesus' birth Bethlehem was using caves for burials.⁶

Nevertheless, it is clear that this tradition would also commend itself to Gentiles, since a cave was seen as a hospitable, or at least useful, site

2. See Justin, *Dial.* 78; Origen, *Cels.* 1.51; and later, Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.41, 43; Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 2.2.1 (from c. 430 CE); Sulpicius Severus, *Hist. sac.* 2.33. These sources are cited and discussed in Finegan, *Archeology: Jesus*, p. 20; McRay, *Archaeology*, p. 156; Matthias Köckert, 'Bethlehem: Early History', in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider (eds.), *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2002-), II, pp. 616-17 (617).

3. J. Monson, consultant, *Student Map Manual: Historical Geography of Bible Lands* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), p. 1-1; Joseph L. Gardner (ed.), *Reader's Digest Atlas of the Bible: An Illustrated Guide to the Holy Land* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest Association, 1981), pp. 172-73.

4. As is widely acknowledged, Luke's account does not speak of an inn; see, e.g., Eugene LaVerdiere, 'No Room for Them in the Inn', *Emmanuel* 91 (1985), pp. 552-57; Eric Francis Fox Bishop, 'Bethlehem and the Nativity: Some Travesties of Christmas', *ATR* 46 (1964), pp. 401-13. Most likely, he thought of a family guest room or other family property; see, e.g., Kenneth E. Bailey, 'The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7', *Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 2 (1979), pp. 33-44; M. Byrne, 'No Room for the Inn', *Search* 5.2 (1982), pp. 37-40; Kaikhohen Kipgen, 'Translating *Kataluma* in Luke 2.7', *The Bible Translator* 34 (1983), pp. 442-43; differently, for a travelers' shelter, cf. J.L. Ottey, "In a stable born our brother", *ExpTim* 98 (1986), pp. 71-73.

5. See, e.g., Gen. 14.14-16; Aeschylus, *Prom.* 39; David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 168.

6. See M. Dadon, 'M'rt qbwrh bbyt (Burial Caves at Bethlehem)', *Atiqot* 32 (1997), pp. 199-201 (NTA 42:524). Burial caves were not limited, of course, to Bethlehem (Gen. 23.9-20; Jdt. 16.23; Jn 11.38).

for a deity, not least one facing hostility. Given the commonness of caves, it is possible that one should not make too much of this. That is, to note the apologetic usefulness of the tradition does not mean that the tradition was invented. Whether invented or not, however, the connections with Gentile myths undoubtedly provided fertile connections for Gentile hearers. The cave might also correspond to the Gospels' report of Jesus' rock-hewn tomb (Mt. 27.60; Mk 15.46; Lk. 23.53) for literary purposes, though again with the same caveat.⁷

The Cave

Mithraism made significant use of caves, but this tradition would be relevant only for later interpretation. Christian sources connected Mithraic initiations with caves or grottos;⁸ the 'caves' we know about were especially artificial ones built in cellars or elsewhere.⁹ Though Mithraism, being secretive, revealed little about its 'caves' in literary sources, excavations suggest that these rooms could hold only about twenty people; if the group grew, wealthy donors would establish a new 'cave' rather than enlarging the old one.¹⁰ Later generations may have connected the grotto of Jesus' birth with the Mithraic cave,¹¹ but the tradition of Jesus' birth, and certainly Bethlehem's caves, predates the

7. We shall note below that Zeus was believed to have been born in Crete; Cretans also claimed that he was buried there (much to others' dismay; Callimachus, *Hymn. Jov.* 8; Lucian, *Deor. conc.* 6; *Tim.* 4; *Jupp. trag.* 45; *Philops.* 3; Philostratus, *Vit. soph.* 2.4.569; Euhemerus, *Sacred History* 6; *Sib. Or.* 8.45-49; as late as the Byzantine Ps.-Lucian, *Philopatr.* 10). Many sources we note below regarding Zeus's birth there also connect that claim with his alleged tomb there.

8. See, e.g., Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Carl Newell Jackson Lectures; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 7; Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (trans. Brian McNeil; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 146.

9. Klauck, *Context*, p. 146. For types of Mithraic caves, see Leroy A. Campbell, *Mithraic Iconography and Ideology* (*Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain*, 11; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968), pp. 6-11.

10. Burkert, *Cults*, p. 42.

11. Michael Gervers, 'The Iconography of the Cave in Christian and Mithraic Tradition', in Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Mysteria Mithrae* (*Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain*, 80; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), pp. 579-99 (noting on p. 598 that any connection would be indirect). For Mithraism borrowing Christian symbolism, cf. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity. I. The First Five Centuries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 247.

primary spread of Mithraism in the Roman world in the second century.¹²

Whereas Mithraic sources are late, pagan ritual use of ‘caves’ more generally was widespread.¹³ Caves sometimes hosted cultic associations. Although mentions of caves in mythical and cultic contexts are not always cultic,¹⁴ various cults did employ caves.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, they were often associated with countryside spirits such as Pan and nymphs.¹⁶ Some caves supposedly exuded fumes that provided special oracular potency,¹⁷ and oracular answers were sometimes associated with such settings. Thus, to reach the shrine of the subterranean oracular deity Trophonius, one had to descend into a cavern.¹⁸ The Sibyl was said to have answered questions brought to her ‘dark grotto’.¹⁹

12. Cf. Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God* (Library of Early Christianity, 1; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp. 40-41.

13. See, e.g., Richard M. Rothaus, *Corinth: The First City of Greece: An Urban History of Late Antique Cult and Religion* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World, 139; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000), p. 129.

14. The association of a Cyclops with a cave (e.g., Homer, *Od.* 9.182; Virgil, *Aen.* 3.63) probably simply recalls their primitive character, perhaps similar to legends about other cave-dwellers (on which see, e.g., Pliny, *Nat.* 5.5.34; 5.8.45; 6.34.169; 6.35.189; Robert G. Morkot, ‘Trogodytae’, in *OCD*, p. 1555; for them as primitive, Roger L. Beck and Antony J. S. Spawforth, ‘Caves, Sacred’, in *OCD*, p. 305).

15. Beck and Spawforth, ‘Caves’; Rothaus, *Corinth*, p. 129 (on Attica); for an Attic cave with an Apollo sanctuary, see Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.28.4.

16. For association of caves with Pan and nymphs, see Rothaus, *Corinth*, p. 129; Christa Frateantonio, ‘Grotto’, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, V, pp. 1034-35; on nymphs, see Susanne Gödde, ‘Hamadryads’, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, V, p. 1121. Pan was a deity of woodlands (Longus, *Daphn.* 2.26-31; 4.39; Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.32.7; 8.38.5); but caves (Pausanias, *Descr.* 10.32.6) and wooded areas (Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.10.1) could also be sacred to other deities. For cults associated with forests, fields and groves, see Jörg Rüpke, ‘Kult jenseits der Polisreligion: Polemiken und Perspektiven’, *JAC* 47 (2004), pp. 5-15.

17. Pliny, *Nat.* 2.95.207-208; the oracular chasm for Orpheus in Philostratus, *Hrk.* 28.9; see especially this claim for Delphi, e.g., in Valerius Maximus 1.8.10 (and Apollo’s voice from the cavern in 7.1.2); Lucan, *Bell. civ.* 5.148-157; Iamblichus, *Myst.* 3.11. Cf. Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 8.2, regarding a subterranean encounter with a spirit.

18. Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 8.19. On Trophonius’s role, see Albert Schachter, ‘Trophonius’, in *OCD*, p. 1556; cf. similarly Amphiarus in *idem*, ‘Amphiarus’, in *OCD*, p. 75.

19. Statius, *Silvae* 5.3.172-175 (LCL).

Herod built a temple for Caesar near a deep cavern.²⁰ Such associations with caves, however, are fairly far afield from the tradition that Jesus was born in one.

More relevantly, some myths associated caves specifically with births.²¹ In many traditions, Zeus was born in a cave meant to conceal him from harm; this was an ignominious birth.²² The traditional site of Zeus's birth in a Cretan cave on Mount Ida was collecting votive offerings already (and especially) in the archaic period,²³ and the association appears in some pre-Christian as well as later sources.²⁴ Even some traditions meant to dispute the Cretan claim attest to its pervasiveness.²⁵ In northern Phrygia, another cave sanctuary grew into a temple honoring Zeus, recalling his birth in a cave.²⁶ At the same time, we should not overestimate the significance of the connection. Caves were common (appearing even in other stories about Crete),²⁷ and people used them for various purposes, including refuge.²⁸ That

20. Josephus, *Ant.* 15.364.

21. Some Egyptian traditions claimed that Rameses son of Amenophis was born in a cave (Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.300).

22. Seneca, *Herc. fur.* 459-60.

23. Holger Sonnabend, 'Ida', in *Brill's New Pauly*, VI, p. 709. It is not of course by any means certain that the association was already with Zeus's infancy in the early period. Cave sanctuaries were common in the Neolithic and Bronze ages; see Christa Frateantonio, 'Cave sanctuaries', in *Brill's New Pauly*, III, pp. 56-57; *idem*, 'Grotto'.

24. See, e.g., Hesiod, *Theog.* 479-480; Apollodorus, *Library* 1.1.6 (which I think predates Virgil, though most today date to the first or second century CE); cf. Euripides, *Hyps.* frg. 752g.23. Sonnabend, 'Ida', p. 709, cites Diodorus Siculus 5.70.2, 4 (a pre-Christian source) as well as Strabo, *Geogr.* 10.4.8; Mela 2.113; Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.7.6; Aratus, *Phaen.* 31ff.; Pindar, *Ol.* 5.42; Diogenes Laertius 8.13; Porphyry, *Vit. Pyth.* 17. See further Strabo, *Geogr.* 10.3.7, 11, 13; Lucian, *Deor. conc.* 6; *Sacr.* 5; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.* 4.34.

25. Diodorus Siculus 3.61.1-3 suggests that the Zeus supposed to have been born in Crete was a king, not the deity; Pausanias, *Descr.* 8.38.2 notes that Arcadians claimed that the 'Crete' where he was born was in their land, not the island.

26. Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*. II. *The Rise of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 18-19.

27. The Cretan Epimenides supposedly slept for years in a cave (e.g. Pliny, *Nat.* 7.52.175; Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.14.4; Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 10.1).

28. E.g. 2 Macc. 6.11; 10.6; Heb. 11.38; Rev. 6.15; Diodorus Siculus 34/35.2.22; Seneca, *Nat.* 6.1.6; Josephus, *Ant.* 5.61; 6.99, 111, 116, 247, 283;

one seeking refuge for giving birth secretly or safely would do so in a cave is not surprising, and the tradition about Zeus's birth may thus fit the wider practice of seeking free shelter in caves.

Whether one views the Christian cave tradition as imitation or coincidence on one hand, or could view it as divine contextualization on the other, depends on one's theological premises. In any case, Gentiles could hear it as relevant to their traditions, especially their widely known myth of a supreme deity born under duress in a cave.

The Grove

Another pagan custom, the use of sacred trees and groves, also illumines the early tradition of the nativity cave, although it cannot be used to address its historicity (whether to challenge or support it), except by anchoring that earlier tradition in the early second-century events in the context of which it is reported, and to suggest the plausibility of such events.

Against the arguments of some scholars,²⁹ it is unlikely that the Tammuz grove indicates a pagan cultic site on the grounds before the tradition of the Christian site; Bethlehem was a Jewish town and the supposition of a pre-Hadrianic pagan grove there overestimates the paganization of Judea near Jerusalem³⁰ (in contrast say, to Caesarea Maritima, which had a significant or majority Gentile population).³¹

12.232, 272, 274, 421; Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.23. Robbers or revolutionaries sometimes took refuge there (Josephus, *Ant.* 14.415, 421-422, 428-430; *War* 1.304-314).

29. E.g. M. Eugene Boring, Klaus Berger and Carsten Colpe (eds.), *Hellenistic Commentary to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), pp. 42-43.

30. While we, of course, hear of groves not far from there (Pliny, *Nat.* 5.15.70, near Jericho), we have little evidence for pagan practices.

31. For discussions of paganism there, see, e.g., Gary Lease, 'The Caesarea Mithraeum: A Preliminary Announcement', *BA* 38 (1975), pp. 2-10; R. Bull, 'A Mithraic Medallion from Caesarea', *IEJ* 24 (1974), pp. 187-90; Rivka Gersht, 'Dionysiac Sarcophagi from Caesarea Maritima', *IEJ* 41 (1991), pp. 145-56; *idem*, 'Three Greek and Roman Portrait Statues from Caesarea Maritima', *Atiqot* 28 (1996), pp. 99-113; *idem*, 'The Tyche of Caesarea Maritima', *PEQ* 116 (1984), pp. 110-14; nearby, Yizhar Hirschfeld and Orit Peleg, 'An Early Roman Gemstone Depicting Apollo Found at *Rämat ha-Nädiv*', *ZDPV* 121 (2005), pp. 59-66; more generally, David Flusser, 'Paganism in Palestine', in S. Safrai and M. Stern with D. Flusser and W.C. van Unnik (eds.), *The Jewish People in the First Century: Historical Geography, Political History, Social, Cultural and Religious Life and*

Sacred groves were, however, common,³² so everyone would understand the story about Hadrian desecrating the Bethlehem site with one. Groves and trees were probably used as sacred sites even before more formal shrines,³³ and sacred groves also appear in some other traditional religions.³⁴ Deities could be thought to dwell in groves;³⁵ like cult images or monuments, trees could be decorated with sacred bands.³⁶ Different trees were sacred to different deities,³⁷ for example, the oak to Jupiter, myrtle to Venus,³⁸ bay (a kind of laurel) to Apollo and Artemis,³⁹ and olive to Athena.⁴⁰ Groves could be associated with

Institutions (Section 1 of CRINT; Assen: Van Gorcum; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974–1976), II, pp. 1065–1100.

32. E.g. Deut. 16.21; Ovid, *Fast.* 2.67; 6.9; Pausanias, *Descr.* 5.10.1; 8.38.2, 5; Lucan, *Bell. civ.* 3.399–425; Libanius, *Descr.* 2.8; see also Gerhard Baudy, ‘Tree cult’, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, XIV, pp. 886–87 (887).

33. So Pliny, *Nat.* 12.2.3.

34. See, e.g., John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophies* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), p. 67; Nonyem E. Numbere, *A Man and a Vision: A Biography of Apostle Geoffrey D. Numbere* (Diobu, Nigeria: Greater Evangelism Publications, 2008), p. 203.

35. Ovid, *Am.* 3.1.1–2; 3.13.7–8. A spirit resides in a grove in Ovid, *Fast.* 3.295–296.

36. Rolf Hirschmann, ‘Tainia’, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, XIV, p. 117.

37. Phaedrus, 3.17.1–4; cf. also William M. Ramsay, *Pauline and Other Studies in Early Church History* (New York: A.C. Armstrong & Son, 1906; Reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 241; Baudy, ‘Tree Cult’, p. 886; Sam Eitrem, Johan Harm Croon and B.C. Dietrich, ‘Trees, Sacred’, in *OCD*, pp. 1548–49.

38. Phaedrus, 3.17.1–4. On Dodona, see also, e.g., Euripides frg. 1021; Diaspora Jews probably knew of this tradition (cf. Dale C. Allison, ‘Abraham’s Oracular Tree [T. Abr. 3.1–4]’, *JJS* 54 [2003], pp. 51–61).

39. Ovid, *Metam.* 1.553–67; Pliny, *Nat.* 12.2.3; Phaedrus, 3.17.3; Christian Hünemörder, ‘Laurel’, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, VII, pp. 300–302 (301). Cf. also apples, in Lucian, *Anach.* 9.

40. Pliny, *Nat.* 12.2.3; on Athena and olives, see further, Androtion, *Atthis* frg. 39; Lucian, *Anach.* 9; (Ps.)-Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Epid.* 1.259; Hermogenes, *Progymn.* 7.18.

deities such as Zeus,⁴¹ Apollo,⁴² Clementia⁴³ or later even heroes like Achilles.⁴⁴ Temples often sported their own groves.⁴⁵

The use of sacred groves was widespread. Roman priests could follow ancient agrarian rituals in sacred groves.⁴⁶ Romans could pray in a sacred grove, treating it as comparable to a hearth or altar;⁴⁷ they could even invoke a grove.⁴⁸ The practice apparently also extended beyond the Roman world. Thus Romans believed that British Druids practiced human sacrifice in groves,⁴⁹ and that Germans consecrated groves instead of images.⁵⁰ A sacred grove appears, perhaps, in a predominantly Gentile city in northern Palestine.⁵¹

Most people in Mediterranean antiquity took the cultic significance of these groves very seriously. A deity might be expected to defend his grove against potential aggressors.⁵² Someone who cut down a sacred grove to secure lumber for ships could incur divine judgment.⁵³ The death of trees in a grove planted in honor of an emperor constituted a frightful portent against him.⁵⁴ The tradition that Hadrian desecrated the site with a pagan grove is compatible with what we know about

41. Euripides, *Hyps.* frg. 752h.10, 14.

42. Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.21.7 (in Athens); Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 8.333de (in Lycia).

43. Statius, *Thebaid* 12.491-92, noting the grove's cultic use.

44. Philostratus, *Hrk.* 54.9.

45. E.g. Aphrodite's temple on Cnidus in Ps.-Lucian, *Am.* 12. Cf. trees encircling Artemis's temple in Plutarch, *Them.* 8.1-2; Daphne, in Jack Finegan, *The Archeology of the New Testament: The Mediterranean World of the Early Christian Apostles* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press; London: Croom Helm, 1981), p. 65.

46. Klauck, *Context*, p. 33.

47. Fronto, *Ad Verum Imp.* 2.6.

48. Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 3.9.2, noting also the 'rustling' on the Capitoline Hill (cf. 2 Sam. 5.24). For the veneration of a tree, cf. the mythical account in Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.2.7 (Walter F. Otto, *Dionysus: Myth and Cult* [trans. Robert B. Palmer; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1965], p. 157).

49. Tacitus, *Ann.* 14.30.

50. Tacitus, *Germ.* 9.

51. Josephus, *War* 2.466-471 (cf. the summary in *Life* 26), if we accept the interpretation in J.-M. Nieto Ibáñez, 'The Sacred Grove of Scythopolis (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish War* II 466-71)', *IEJ* 49 (1999), pp. 260-68. Josephus uses the violation of this sacred space to evoke horror for his audience.

52. Philostratus, *Hrk.* 57.13-14.

53. Valerius Maximus 1.1.19.

54. Suetonius, *Galb.* 1 (regarding the death of Nero).

pagan practice (though again, such knowledge was also available to the ancient writers who reported it and to their sources).

Conclusion

Pagans may have heard echoes of some of their own stories in the account of Jesus' birth in a cave. These echoes were not so pervasive and locally relevant that they need account for the rise of the cave tradition early in its history. They may, however, account for much of the appreciation for the story in subsequent times.