Returning to the Caves of Mystery: texts, archaeology and the origins of Christian topography and pilgrimage

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Returning to the Caves of Mystery: texts, archaeology and the origins of Christian topography and pilgrimage

Abstract

Textual evidence is shown to support the pre-Constantinian origins of later Christian topography – in the sense of identifying places in a landscape – and pilgrimage in the Holy Land and a small group of artificial or semi-artificial caves is identified pre-dating, and forming the focus for, fourth-century pilgrimage churches associated with the Gospel narrative. The construction or modification of these caves is interpreted as marking places of Christian veneration, and this, combined with the textual evidence, suggests the existence of a Christian topography of the Holy Land prior to the earliest recorded pilgrimages. It is proposed that this topography developed incrementally from the second to fourth centuries as a result of local decision rather than central religious authority, suggesting that the Christian pilgrimage centres known from late fourth-century texts originated through a gradual process of self-organisation based on the Gospel narrative rather than fourth-century imperial planning.

(key words: archaeology; history; Christianity; pilgrimage; caves; tombs; cave-churches)

1. INTRODUCTION

Although pilgrimage, in the sense of religiously motivated travel to places considered holy, already existed in the Mediterranean world – both in Jewish and pagan contexts – before the first century AD (e.g. Rutherford 2017; Harland (ed.) 2011; Rutherford (ed.) 2007; Holum 1990), the importance assigned to it in Christianity was unprecedented (Maraval 1995, 2002). The effects of Christian pilgrimage on the Roman world were profound, not least the transformation of three entire provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire into a Christian Holy Land, characterised by a series of holy places sought by pilgrims (Wilkinson 1977; Hunt 1982; Sivan 1990; Walker 1990; Wilken 1992; Limor 1998, 1999, 2001, 2006; Piccirillo and Alliatta (eds.) 1999; Trampedach 2001; Klein 2002; Bar 2003, 2005). By the fifth century, pilgrimage centres were connected by networks of travel extending beyond the imperial frontiers (e.g. Dauphin 1982; MacCormack 1990; French 1991; Wilkinson 1999, 2002; Stone 1988; Hunt 1992; Leyerle 1996; Maraval 2004; Dietz 2005; Sheridan and Gregoricka 2015).

Yet pilgrimage is far from being an intrinsic aspect of Christian belief and its origins in Christianity are obscure (e.g. Hunt 1999; Markus 1994). Pilgrimage requires a destination assigned significance by those undertaking it, for religious pilgrimage this is normally a 'holy place', 'sacred landscape' or both, as the objective of travel. However, the canonical Gospels say that Christ taught that there was no such thing as a 'holy place' (Matthew 23:29; John 4:21), a statement contextualised by Second Temple Jewish theology and practice (Rutherford 2017; Haber 2011; Wilkinson 1990). Consequently, in order to discuss the origins of Christian pilgrimage one must first ask when a concept of holy places, sacred landscapes or both, a Christian topography, entered Christian thought, and when Christians first travelled to those places or landscapes for religious reasons.

2. TEXTUAL EVIDENCE FOR THE EARLIEST CHRISTIAN HOLY PLACES

After centuries of intermittent persecution (Maraval 1992), Christianity became a legal religion in the Roman Empire in 311 (Lactantius *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*, hereafter *DMP*, 34), a position consolidated by the so-called 'Edict of Milan', issued by Constantine I in 313 (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*, hereafter *HE*, 8:17) and later re-confirmed by Constantine and Licinius (*DMP*:48; *HE* 10:5). In his early fourth-century *Life of Constantine* (3:43), Eusebius describes the construction of three great churches on sites said to have been selected by the emperor's Christian mother, Helena, in the 320s. These are the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (the site of the Resurrection), the Nativity (the site of the Birth of Christ in Bethlehem), and the Eleona, on the Mount of Olives, considered by Eusebius *In Praise of Constantine* (9:17) to have been near the place of the Ascension. Eusebius also says that Constantine 'chose these three places, each distinguished by a sacred cave, and adorned them with rich buildings' (*HE* 9:1). All were substantial basilicas, setting a pattern for Christian monumental architecture during the next millennium (Vincent and Abel 1926: 337 – 360; Loukianoff 1939; Corbo 1974; Biddle 1999; Patrich 2016).

According to Eusebius, none of these churches was the first Christian monument at its site; instead he claims that all were built over pre-existing 'caves of mystery', understood by him to have been the actual scenes of crucial moments in the Gospels. Although this would seem to attest these caves as foci of pre-Constantinian Christian veneration (Wilkinson 1999: 12 – 14) this has been considered unlikely by most scholars (e.g. Smith 2007; Bitton-Ashkelon 2005) since Joan Taylor's important 1993 book *Christians and the holy places* (Taylor 1993). Instead, they have argued that the Christian holy places commemorated by Constantinian and

later pilgrimage churches were *de novo* Late Roman sites, founded in the fourth century and later developed. The purpose of this paper is to build upon Taylor's study, which remains the most comprehensive and convincing critique of previous interpretations of the sites, to re-evaluate the question of whether there is archaeological and/or textual evidence for the pre-Constantinian Christian identification of holy places or landscapes and, if so, what this might tell us about the origins of Christian pilgrimage.

Pre-Constantinian Christians, it has been argued, held what Robert Markus has described as a 'reluctance to accord holiness to places' (Markus 1994: 257 – 258), in keeping with the Gospels, so that the very concept of holy places, let alone travel to them, was alien to their value-systems. However, there is convincing textual evidence that Christians could identify locations as places of religious interest before the Constantinian period. As early as the reign of Caracalla (198-217), Alexander, the future bishop of Jerusalem, travelled from Cappadocia in Anatolia to Jerusalem 'for prayer and the investigation of the [biblical] sites' (*HE*: VI. 12. Hunt 1982: 4), so at least one pre-Constantinian Christian sought to localise biblical events in the landscape. This may be evidenced by the even earlier, mid-second-century, journey of Melito, bishop of Sardis, to the Holy Land (*HE*: IV.26), although the primary purpose of his visit was seeking out texts (*HE*: 4:26; Hunt 1982:3 – 4, 83). In the first half of the third century, Origen also toured the Holy Land 'for the sake of the Holy Places', using what he saw in his *Commentary on John* (VI.40), and so may have Firmilianus, a Cappadocian bishop, and Pionius, from Smyrna (Hunt 1982: 4 – 5, 92 – 93). Thus, by the third century at latest Christian holy places were identified in the Holy Land and people were willing to travel to the see them, that is, there was Christian pilgrimage.

To investigate this question further, it seems appropriate to start with Bethlehem (Köckert 2002), where, according to the Gospels, Jesus was born. In the second century, Justin Martyr (*Dialogue with Trypho*: 73), whose childhood home was at nearby Nablus (Flavia Neapolis), knew of a cave in or near Bethlehem said to be associated with the Nativity. The *Apocryphal Gospel of James* (18:1), also dating from the second century, again refers to a cave associated with the Nativity (on the Apocryphal Gospels: Elliott 1993), and a Nativity cave at Bethlehem is mentioned by Origen (*Against Celsus*:1:5), who, while living at Caesarea in 232, was apparently shown it by local people. Of course, none of these caves need necessarily have been associated with the actual birth of Jesus, but they combine to show that there was at least one Christian holy place at a cave believed to have been the place of the Nativity in,

or near, Bethlehem during the second and early third centuries. That is, as early as the second century this was an event identified by Christians with a specific place in their contemporary landscape.

Other textual evidence shows that it was more than an 'exception to the rule'. A cave on the Mount of Olives, where Eusebius' Constantinian church of the Eleona stood, is mentioned as having Christian significance in the (probably late second century) *Apocryphyal Acts of John* (Hunt 1983: 3; Wilkinson 1999: 12 – 13; Stemberger 2000: 64). Eusebius himself, in his *Demonstration of the Gospel* (6.18), dated 314-320, separately notes that Christians met 'for prayer' on the Mount of Olives, before the construction of the Constantinian basilica there. Putting aside the questions of authenticity that have principally concerned authors of previous studies of this site, the Mount of Olives was identified by second-century Christians as place of religious significance.

Initially, one might suppose that any similar evidence of pre-Constantinian veneration is impossible at the remaining one of Eusebius' 'caves', actually a tomb, at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Eusebius says that Hadrian (117-38) built a temple over the tomb deliberately to deface its site because of its Christian associations (an argument convincingly supported by Biddle 1999, see esp: 56). This has understandably been dismissed by many scholars to reflect fourth-century Christian rhetoric (Biddle 1999: 56), but building temples is evidenced elsewhere as part of Hadrian's means of suppressing dissent and asserting imperial authority (Bazzana 2010). The most widely known example, of course, is Hadrian's decision to build a pagan shrine, probably a monumental temple, on Temple Mount at Jerusalem (on Hadrian and Jerusalem: Hofman 2019; Zeev 2018; Biddle 1999: 56 – 57). Another, less well-known, but – in imperial terms – similar, episode of temple-foundation took place at Mount Gerizim, the holiest place of the Samaritans. Whether it stood on, or adjacent to, the principal focus of Samaritan devotion is debatable, but the monumental Hadrianic temple built there even appears on Roman coins from the Neapolis mint, dated to 138-161 (Bull and Wright 1965: 257; Bull 1967, 1968; Magen 2000; Magen 2009: 236 – 256; Evans 2011; Zangenberg 2012; Pummer 2016; De Hemmer and Katrine 2015; Hensel 2018).

It may be significant that the foundation of both Hadrianic temples targeted the principal religious foci of non-Roman monotheistic religions. In these terms it is, therefore, credible

that a temple would be built on what the imperial authorities perceived as the Christians' holiest place if the imperial authorities perceived this as a principal shrine of another anti-Roman monotheistic group. If a Hadrianic pagan shrine of any sort was built on the later site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, this suggests that the site which it sought to counter was already venerated by Christians before the 130s (Biddle 1999:57).

It might be supposed that the fourth-century writer Jerome (*Letters*:58.3, dated to 395) provides us with another example of a Roman imperial attempt to negate a Christian shrine, when he says that the Cave of the Nativity had once been a shrine of Adonis (Cain 2009: 247). Although it has occasionally been claimed as evidence that the cave was originally a pagan shrine, later adopted by Christians, what Jerome says (using the translation by Cain 2009) is:

From the time of Hadrian to the reign of Constantine— a period of about one hundred and eighty years — the spot which had witnessed the Resurrection was occupied by a figure of Jupiter; while on the rock where the cross had stood, a marble statue of Venus was set up by the heathen and became an object of worship. The original persecutors, indeed, supposed that by polluting our holy places they would deprive us of our faith in the passion and in the resurrection. Even my own Bethlehem, as it now is, that most venerable spot in the whole world of which the psalmist sings 'the truth has sprung out of the earth', was overshadowed by a grove of Tammuz, that is of Adonis, and in the very cave where the infant Christ had uttered His earliest cry lamentation was made for the paramour of Venus.

This seems to say that there was a pagan grove on the site of the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem prior to the fourth-century church, and that the cave beneath it had itself been used for pagan worship. If this was so, then one might consider the possibility that it was another example of a deliberate attempt to replace a place of Christian religious importance by a pagan religious site, unless even at this date there were already places used by more than one religious group, as Mamre and Machpela in Hebron were venerated by Idumeans, Jews and later Christians (cf. Hakola 2016). Even if the latter were true, then it negates the arguments that the Cave of the Nativity was a Christianised pagan shrine or only a Constantinian-period invention.

However, if it is taken as a factual description, 'overshadowed by a grove' need only indicate that the 'grove' was on the hills above Bethlehem, 'overshadowing' the settlement, rather than specifically the cave. Even this is probably too literal a reading, because Jerome's 'grove' derives from the phrase 'we found it in the plains of the wood' in the thirty-first Psalm, understood when Jerome wrote to refer to the Nativity. This may also explain why the mid-fourth-century Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem (Wilkinson 1999:11. On Cyril: Drijvers 2004) also said of Bethlehem that 'a few years ago the place was wooded', as both writers would have been familiar with the same interpretation of the Psalm. Further suspicion is aroused by the fact that Jerome's mention of 'Tammuz' comes from Ezekiel:8:14. Consequently, while Jerome offers no convincing evidence for a pagan shrine at the cave, if it was used as a pagan shrine this might only have been as part of, or in emulation of, Hadrian's policy toward monotheistic 'holy places'.

That is, texts suggest that all three of Eusebius' sites were identified as Christian holy places before c.200. There are also hints of pre-Constantinian Christian holy places elsewhere. For example, as Pierre Maraval (2002: 65 – 66) has noted, before the Constantinian period 'Christians liked to meet for prayer at Gethsemane or to be baptized at Bethabara, the site of the baptism of Christ', both again later pilgrimage centres. That, as Maraval highlights, Christians went to these places for prayer – as they also did at the Mount of Olives (see above) – or baptism shows that the religious topography created by such pre-Constantinian holy places was more than just a mental map but was linked to religious practice at the places concerned.

Consequently, textual evidence supports the view that Christians already had holy places long before the Roman Empire legalised Christianity, that at least some of these places were probably used for Christian religious activities at that time and that, at least occasionally, Christians travelled to them for religious reasons. Indeed, if local Christians identified a tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the place of the Resurrection no later than the 130 – and a Cave of the Nativity at Bethlehem was identified in th second century, as shown above – then this was probably happening within a generation or two of the composition of John's Gospel (Koester 2005; Porter 2016).

Interpreting texts in this way casts a different light on Eusebius's famous *Onomasticon* (Barnes 1981:10-11; Maraval 2002: 66. For the text: Freeman-Grenville, Chapman and

Taylor 2003; Notley and Safrai 2005), which describes a developed sacred landscape in the 290s, approximately a generation before the 'Edict of Milan'. According to the interpretation suggested by the evidence so far discussed, a landscape of Christian holy places had been developing since the second century. This then continued to develop through the Constantinian period and beyond (Leyerle 1996), so that fourth-century and later church-builders (Ovadiah 1970; Ovadiah, and Gomez de Silva 1981, 1982, 1984) were consolidating, monumentalising and expanding a network of holy places already long in the making. If so, the emergence of a Christian topography of the Holy Land – a landscape of places assigned religious significance by Christians – was a much more gradual process than usually supposed. It was an incremental evolution over centuries rather than a 'big bang' in the Constantinian period. This highlights the question of whether there is any archaeological evidence for this pre-Constantinian Christian topography of the Holy Land.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR PRE-FOURTH CENTURY FEATURES AT FOURTH-CENTURY PILGRIMAGE CHURCHES

After decades of scholarly research aimed at elucidating this issue (Finney 1988; Krautheimer 1988; White, 1990, 1996-7; Bowes 2008) there is international archaeological consensus that no known Christian basilica in the Holy Land can be dated to earlier than the fourth century. Several scholars have suggested that earlier purpose-built Christian places of worship existed (e.g. Richardson 2004:144 – 147. For critiques: Finney 1988; Bowes 2008: 581 – 582), and structures identified archaeologically as these (*aulae ecclesiae*) have been claimed at a handful of sites across the Mediterranean, including at Megiddo (Kefar 'Othnay) in the Jezreel valley (Di Segni and Tepper 2006; Tzaferis and Miller 2007; Adams 2008; Taylor 2018: 371 – 372). But, with the exception of the, probably fourth-century, structure at the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth (Dark 2020a, ch. 6), and the fourth-century phase at Capernaum (Taylor 1993, ch. 12; Loffreda 193a and b, 1996; Strange and Shanks 1982), none have been found at any of the places later attracting pilgrims to the Holy Land.

In fact, as Kim Bowes (2008: 81) has pointed out: 'The number of definite third- and early fourth-century worship spaces has been steadily eroded as earlier excavations are re-evaluated and new chronological evidence brought to light', and even rooms in pre-existing structures adapted specifically as worship spaces have seldom been found (Bowes 2008: 581 – 582; Saxer 1988; White 2000), although these are attested in early Christian texts – perhaps even in the letters of Paul (Corinthians 1:11, 1:16 and 16:15) and in Acts (2:46, 20:7, see:

Blue 1994). Although it is almost impossible to identify structures used in this way from material evidence alone, the one thing they require is a building, and the presence or absence of that is something archaeology can hope to establish at the sites of later pilgrimage churches. Once recognised, it might then be possible to evaluate using conventional methods of archaeological interpretation whether such a structure might have been used for Christian purposes.

Only two Christian holy places show any evidence of pre-Constantinian buildings prior to fourth-century pilgrimage churches. A first-century house formed the focus for the Byzantine church at Capernaum (White 2000: 710; Taylor 1993, ch. 12), but there is no convincing evidence that it was used for worship in the pre-Constantinian period. At the Sisters of Nazareth (Dark 2020b, chs. 56 - 6), another first-century house was disused, its site used for quarrying, and then both cut through by a rock-cut tomb, probably long before the earliest church at the site. Neither has evidence suggesting a house-church.

However, one possibility remains: that Eusebius's 'caves of mystery' really were associated with Christian religious activity earlier than the fourth-century churches on the same sites. The archaeology of these caves has been almost entirely overlooked since Taylor's (1993) refutation of the 'Jewish-Christian' hypothesis concerning their interpretation. But while Taylor's argument against that hypothesis remains convincing, the caves found at fourth-century pilgrimage churches merit more archaeological attention. No evidence at all exists that they were constructed at the same or after those churches were built, so it is at theoretically possible that they pre-date them.

Beginning again with Bethlehem, the altar of the Constantinian church was placed in an artificial cave with an octagonal apse built to display it as the focal point of the church (Bagatti 1952, 1968; Wilkinson 1999: 11 – 12; Prag 2000). Designing the church to display the cave in this way might be taken on purely archaeological grounds to imply that the cave pre-dated the church, where it was plainly the primary physical focus for the fourth-century structure.

The cave at the fourth-century Eleona church is also artificial and, as it also formed the focus for an early fourth-century church building, probably pre-dates it. It was one of several artificial caves in a pre-fourth century cemetery area on the site of the fourth-century church,

but unlike the others shows no indication of having been a tomb (Murphy-O'Connor 1998: 126). Apart from being earlier than the fourth-century church, its date and original purpose are, therefore, unknown. It might have been the cave mentioned in the *Apocryphal Acts of John* as a Christian meeting place (see above), but it is impossible to prove that it was.

The first-century tomb forming the focus of the fourth-century Church of the Holy Sepulchre was buried from the second- to early fourth-century beneath the massive platform of a monumental Roman building (Biddle 1994, 1999: 53, 56 – 57; Sabelli 2019). This platform had to be largely removed in order to build the Constantinian church over the tomb, and is, therefore, consistent with the textually-attested Hadrianic pagan shrine discussed earlier (Biddle 1999: 53 – 64). Despite the construction of the temple-platform, the first-century tombs buried beneath it were surprisingly well-preserved, as twentieth-century archaeological excavation and structural analysis, and twenty-first century geophysics and associated studies, have shown (Biddle 1994, 1999. For twenty-first-century work: Agrafiotis *et al* 2013; Georgopoulos et al 2017; Lampropoulos *et al* 2017: Lampropoulos *et al* 2019).

From this, it is evident that burying the tombs, rather than destroying them, was deemed sufficient by the Hadrianic builders for their own purposes. Whether, as both recent archaeological studies have argued, the tomb forming the focus of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was that believed in the pre-Hadrianic period to be that of Christ or whether this was another tomb at the site, and the Hadrianic platform and structures had confused later identification, the fact remains that all three of the churches mentioned by Eusebius – actually two artificial caves and a tomb (the Holy Sepulchre) – were located on the sites of pre-existing artificial existing rock-cut features. Archaeologically, the most plausible interpretation is that the churches were there because those features were identified by Christians as of religious significance.

Archaeological evidence for other fourth-century churches in the Holy Land also indicates a close association with artificial, or partly artificial, caves. At Shepherds' Fields (Beit Sahour, also known a Shepherds' Field), near Bethlehem, said to be where the shepherds saw the Star of Bethlehem, excavation showed that the fifth-century surface-level church was secondary to a rectilinear cave (c.15 x c.11 m). The latter was used as a cave-church in the fourth century (Tzaferis 1973, 1975; Taylor 1993: 168; Wilkinson 1999: 90; Anon. 2016) but, like the Eleona cave, it was originally one of a series of similar cavities, here partly natural and partly

constructed, of which the others were utilised to serve the needs of a small farming settlement in first century AD (Corbo 1955; De Cree 1999). Again an, at least partly, artificial cave pre-dated the fourth-century pilgrimage church, at this site being re-used for the actual church itself.

Similarly, at Gethsemane, the Grotto of the Betrayal, another at least partly artificial cave (c. 19 x 10 m), was originally used for a wine-press (Taylor 1993: 199 – 200) before being transformed in the fourth century into a cave-church. As Taylor (1993: 192 – 195) has pointed out, the Betrayal of Christ was localised at a rock near the cave, under the built church, so that the cave was perceived by the fourth-century church builders as being adjacent to, rather than on, the exact place where the betrayal of Jesus by Judas was thought to have occurred (Taylor 1993: 192). Nevertheless, it is clear that, yet again, an earlier semi-artificial cave was used for the fourth-century pilgrimage church.

Away from Jerusalem, Nazareth has two fourth-century churches associated with earlier caves. The Church of the Annunciation (Bagatti 1969; Dark 2020a) originated as a, probably fourth-century, structure focussed on an earlier cave, the Cave of the Annunciation, where the Annunciation was claimed to have taken place. The cave (c. 6 x 5.5 m) was formed by modifying an earlier underground space associated with agricultural production, cut by a tunnel, resembling the refuge tunnels of the First Jewish Revolt and, therefore, probably earlier in date than c.70 (Dark 2020a, ch. 6). The cave was, therefore, much earlier in date than the earliest, fourth century, church on the site, and again it was at least partly artificial. As at the other sites already described, the fourth-century church was probably positioned in relation to the cave, implying that it was already ascribed Christian significance before the church was built.

The second cave in Nazareth is at the Sisters of Nazareth site (Dark 2020b), already mentioned (Fig. 1). There, a cave (c. 15 x c. 5 m) was formed by cutting away the north side of an earlier Roman-period *kokhim* tomb (Tomb 2). It was probably used as a cave-church in the fourth century and is likely to have been the cave-church in central Nazareth seen by the late fourth-century pilgrim Egeria (Dark 2020a and b), although its construction date – other than being in the Roman period – is unknown. Later, most plausibly in the fifth century, a large, elaborately decorated, church, probably dedicated to the Nutrition (or upbringing) of Christ, was built above the cave-church, incorporating the latter into its crypt (Dark 2020b,

ch. 6). Once again, the cave which was used for the cave-church was at least partly artificial, and again the fourth-century focus of veneration seems to have been an adjacent feature, here a first-century house (Dark 2020b, ch.5).

Another site in Galilee has a well-dated fourth-century pilgrimage church was built above a cave. This was at Tabgha (Schneider 1937; Wilkinson 1999: 38, 41, 43, 97 – 98; De Luca and Shiel 2012), where a small fourth-century chapel overlay a cave (c. 4.5 x c. 2.2 m), usually considered to be that claimed by Egeria as the location of the Sermon on the Mount (Loffreda 1970, 1981). Even if, as recent work (De Luca and Karen Ilardi 2010; De Luca and Shiel 2012, 37 – 38) proposes, another, at least partly artificial, cave (c.3.2 x c. 3.2m) in the hillside separate to the church was that seen by Egeria, this is unable to detract from the fact that the fourth-century chapel at Tabgha was associated with the life of Christ in the Gospels and built above a cave.

Thus, there is a strong archaeological case that these seven artificial and semi-artificial caves and the tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre pre-date the fourth-century churches at the same sites, and that those churches incorporated them in ways suggesting that the existing religious associations of the caves was what attracted the church-builders. As shown above, these caves are at the same places assigned religious significance by pre-Constantinian Christians according to texts, which specifically refer to a tomb at the Holy Sepulchre and caves at the Mount of Olives and Bethlehem (see above).

A few other caves where what might be fourth-century pilgrimage churches have ambiguous dating evidence for fourth-century ecclesiastical use, as at Khirbet Qana (McCollough 2015), probably identified in the Byzantine period as New Testament Cana, or at Mount Tabor, associated with the Transfiguration (Bagatti 1977). Likewise, while there was a Byzantine pilgrimage complex at al-Maghtas in Wadi al-Kharrar in Jordan, apparently associated with the Baptism of Christ (Waheeb 2001, 2008, 2012; Piccirillo 2006; Hutton 2008; Taylor 2017: 14 – 15), the evidence for a fourth-century church at the site is uncertain.

Except for the Holy Sepulchre itself, none of these caves was perceived by fourth-century Christians as a tomb. However, there is evidence that other tombs were assigned Christian significance, and understood by Christians as earlier burial places, as early as the fourth century. These may be considered a separate group of sites to those already discussed, both

because of the way they were perceived, known from inscriptions or texts, and their relationship with churches, if any, at their sites. For example, there was a fourth-century church at the tomb venerated in the fourth century as the site of the Raising of Lazarus (Di Segni 2006-2007, 387 – 388; Wilkinson 1999, 40; Taylor 2003: 180 – 192), but the tomb was under the church atrium, rather than being either used as a church or directly beneath one. Likewise, at the alleged tomb of St. James at Silwan, the mid-fourth-century chapel was erected outside, rather than in or on, the earlier tomb (Di Segni 2006/2007, 382 – 383).

Later, Byzantine Christian monks, especially hermits, used natural caves, earlier tombs and other underground spaces – such as disused cisterns (Gutfeld and Ecker 2012) – as places of residence and/or retreat (e.g. Taxel 2008, 61-62, 64, 69; Aviam 2004, 201; Zissu 1999; Zissu *et al* 2013, esp. 50). They might pray there or carve or paint inscriptions and religious symbols on their walls, but these caves were used for purposes other than as churches or the foci for churches. They should, therefore, also be considered archaeologically distinct from the caves found below, or altered into, fourth-century churches.

Most examples of the monastic use of caves as places of residence or retreat are fifth century and later and the earliest dateable example may be the so-called 'Cave of John the Baptist' at Suba, immediately west of Jerusalem (Gibson *et al* 2019, esp. 462). As the excavator, Shimon Gibson, and his colleagues Rafael Lass, Egon Lass and James Tabor (Gibson *et al* 2019), put it:

Archaeological evidence uncovered in the Suba suggests occasional visits were made by Christians to the cave as early as the fourth century and as late as the tenth century….The site was evidently never used as a pilgrimage chapel and the finds on its earthen floors – bits of pottery, animal bones and hearths – suggests [sic] the cave was used only infrequently. (Gibson *et al* 2019, 461).

This was, therefore, a different type of Christian religious activity at an earlier cave than either it being turned into a cave-church or forming the focus for an overlying fourth-century church.

There are also sites where it is at present impossible to date the initial Christian re-use of an artificial cave or tomb employed as a Byzantine or earlier cave-church. For example, the

Cave of Salome was originally a Second Temple tomb, but was transformed into a cave-church at an unknown date in or before the Byzantine period (Di Segni 2006-2007, 398-389). At others, re-use is either certainly or probably Byzantine rather than before 400, as at the Byzantine Church of St. John the Baptist at ‘Ein Karem, where there are Second Temple tombs under both its apse and south wall, but there is no reason to suppose that Christian use of the site began in the fourth century (Di Segni 2006-2007, 389).

3.1 More than a matter of chance

It might be claimed that the association in this way seen between fourth-century churches and artificial or modified caves is simply a matter of chance as underground cavities are so common in the landscape of the Holy Land that fourth-century churches would inevitably be built over them, or that they occur so frequently under pre-seventh century churches as to be of no significance. However, both of these assumptions can be conclusively refuted.

No such artificial or semi-artificial cave occurs under – or was used for – any fourth-century pilgrimage church in the Holy Land associated with anyone other than Christ (Ovadiah 1970; Ovadiah and Gomez de Silva 1981, 1982, 1984; Taylor 1993, 166-8; Wilkinson 1999: 22 – 23; Ribak 2007, appendix 3). Other fourth-century churches are known but they are surface-built structures and have no underlying artificial or semi-artificial cave, as at Capernaum, Megiddo (Kefar ‘Othnay) or the imperial Constantinian church at Mamre (Wilkinson 1999: 22 – 23 and above).

In fact, *any* caves under, or made into, fourth- to seventh-century churches are much rarer in the Holy Land than often supposed. Eliya Ribak’s 2007 critical catalogue of fourth- to seventh-century religious sites in the Holy Land lists 189 religious structures, 139 of them churches, but just 10, other than the eight already mentioned, were cave-churches or churches built above caves or earlier tombs, excluding rock-cut chambers specifically constructed as Byzantine funerary crypts (Ribak 2007, other catalogues show a similar pattern, e.g. Ovadiah 1970; Ovadiah and Gomez de Silva 1981, 1982, 1984). It is, therefore, incorrect to say either that rock-cut tombs, caves and underground cavities were so common in the Holy Land that fourth-century churches would inevitably often overlie or re-use them, when only 10.5% of the total number of religious structures in Ribak’s catalogue – and just 7.7% of the churches – actually did so.

All of the churches in Ribak's catalogue that were, or may have been, part of monasteries where the cave was associated with the cult of saints, often with the veneration of a saintly monastic founder (on the cult of saints: Brown 1981; Hirschfeld 1992; Yasin 2009). None of these caves were artificial, although some were reworked after a natural cave had originally been used, because great importance was placed by monks on their cave-churches being wholly natural caverns: 'churches built by God', as they called them (Hirschfeld 1993, 257. For examples: Ribak 2007: 59, 71, 161 – 165, 194 – 195).

It is, therefore, possible to identify four archaeologically-discrete groups among the Christian use of caves and tombs in the fourth- to seventh-century Holy Land. The first group (Group 1) consists of the, at least partly artificial, caves found at the fourth-century pilgrimage sites discussed above. The second group (Group 2), comprises natural caves, albeit sometimes later modified, associated with fourth-century and later monastic sites. A third group includes natural caves, earlier tombs and other artificial spaces, used as monastic cells or retreats (Group 3) and a fourth consists of early burial places venerated as tombs of Christian significance without being either converted into cave-churches or being found beneath fourth-century churches, and without use as monastic cells or retreats (Group 4).

4. A PATTERN OF ASSOCIATION

The religious associations of the first two groups in the Byzantine period were mutually exclusive, Group 2 caves associated with saintly devotion in monasteries, but Group 1 – as already shown – with episodes in the Gospel narrative. The most parsimonious explanation of Group 1 is that each of these caves was already considered to mark the place where the event commemorated by its fourth-century church dedication was believed to have occurred. While those dedicated to the Holy Sepulchre and the Nativity were associated with events believed to have taken place within them, as shown by the textual sources discussed earlier, other caves, such as those at the Sisters of Nazareth and at Tabgha, seem to have been understood as adjacent to the places associated with the events commemorated by the dedications of their churches (Dark 2020b, chs. 6 and 8).

If the interpretation that the caves attracted fourth-century church-builders because they already held the same Christian religious associations as the fourth-century churches using the same sites is correct, then all the caves in Group 1 were connected with key events in the Gospels' account of the life of Christ: the Annunciation, the Nutrition, the Sermon on the

Mount, and (in its earliest attested fourth-century location) Christ's post-Resurrection teaching and the Ascension (Wilkinson 1999: 12 – 14). The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, commemorating the Crucifixion and Resurrection, was of course necessarily focussed on a rock-cut tomb, the Holy Sepulchre, itself one of Eusebius' 'caves of mystery'. Others of the less well-dated cave-churches would provide yet further episodes of the Gospels' account, as at Khirbet Qana and Mount Tabor. Even without these additional sites, Group 1 can, therefore, be 'read' as representing a narrative sequence of the Gospels' story of the life of Christ. If they were understood in this way, whoever used the caves had in mind a Gospel narrative that was consistent with that of the canonical Gospels – including the Annunciation, Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection.

There is no reason to suppose that the Group 1 caves were the product of anything other than local initiatives. Artificial caves could be constructed with simple tools in the soft geology of Judea or Galilee and by very few people with no greater construction skills than the farmers who made the agricultural installations widely found in the same areas during the Roman period. It would, therefore, be possible for small groups of local Christians, almost no matter what their background was, to create or modify such simple spaces. This could explain why many of the caves reuse earlier artificial or semi-artificial spaces, in a way analogous to the reuse of agricultural installations and silos as hiding places, in both Judea and Galilee, in the First Jewish Revolt. The caves could, therefore, have been the product of many individual, or small-group, identifications of places believed to be associated with the life of Christ by local Christian communities or their leaders, united in a narrative derived from the Gospels or local traditions.

4.1 Interpreting the caves

It is impossible to know on the basis of the available archaeological data whether any of these caves were used by pre-Constantinian Christians as places of prayer or worship, as might be argued on textual grounds for the cave on the Mount of Olives. However, whatever other function(s) they had, the existence of the caves would have meant that they could function as landmarks for a Christian topography, locating sites associated with the Gospels for believers. Interpreting these caves as landmarks may explain why places important in the Gospels, but where there were other distinctive topographical features, have no caves of this sort. For example, despite the presence of other caves within 1 km of its site, the location identified by Egeria as that of the Multiplication (the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes) was indicated by a

prominent rock, probably that later beneath the altar of its Byzantine – and modern – church (Schneider 1937). If this rock was used as a topographical indicator before the fourth-century surface-built church then no additional marker would have been needed. However, it could have formed part of a sacred landscape with the cave already discussed being understood as marking the site of the Sermon on the Mount, analogous to that which perhaps existed in fourth-century Nazareth where the Annunciation and Nutrition were associated with two separate, but nearby, caves (Dark 2020b, ch.8).

If Group 1 caves did pre-date the fourth-century churches on their sites, these were places that one might reasonably expect Christians would have visited, whether from nearby or further afield. Given that such visits would have a religious motive, then these caves became places of pilgrimage – in the sense of the objective of religiously-motivated travel – even if only what anthropologists studying contemporary pilgrimage have termed 'micro-pilgrimages', taking place over short-distances within a specific locality (Wigley 2016).

It is also plausible that the association of these places with events in the life of Christ may have been understood by at least some Roman-period Christians as a progression from the Annunciation in Nazareth to the Ascension in Jerusalem, to be visited sequentially following the Gospels' narrative. In this way, longer-distance pilgrimage – perhaps using the Roman road system – may have emerged from local agency, developing and expanding as more caves were constructed or modified. Of course, sites might have dropped out of this emerging Christian topography as well as been added to it, as suggested by the Hadrianic construction rendering the site of the Holy Sepulchre inaccessible, although its general location might have been seen, even perhaps visited, by Christians.

The possibility of the Group 1 sites self-organising in this way into a wider pilgrimage network is, therefore, a credible consequence of the physical marking of the Gospels' narrative. This could well be the basis of the Christian topography evidenced in the second- and third-century texts discussed earlier, given the overlap between the sites mentioned in texts as being assigned religious significance by pre-Constantinian Christians in the Holy Land and those of Group 1. One only accept that the Group 1 caves pre-date the fourth-century churches on their sites to recognise that a network of holy places that it was possible to visit as a matter of religious devotion was established by the decisions of, perhaps small-scale, local Christian communities.

5. CONCLUSION

The interpretation suggested here is, therefore, that instead of being established by the Roman state in the fourth century, the Christian topography of the Holy Land was established in the pre-Constantinian period by small groups of Christians undertaking local action. Association with the Gospels' narrative structured small artificial or semi-artificial caves into a network of inter-related locations, with significance to believers allowing them to be understood sequentially as well as individually. This sequential understanding may have led to these places being visited one after another, so that religiously-motivated journeys between them emerged as a consequence of their narrative associations. In this interpretation, Constantinian church-builders inherited, rather than initiated, a Holy Land already full of locations with Christian associations and an established pattern of movement between them. This, in turn, enables imperial involvement from the early fourth century onward to be understood in terms of the monumentalisation, control and further expansion of this network.

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