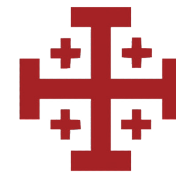




Chapter Two



Ein Kerem



Ein Kerem in the Gospels

The title of this section is a bit misleading, as the episodes in Luke's Gospel associated with the village of Ein Kerem – Mary's visitation to her pregnant cousin, Elizabeth, and the subsequent birth of St. John the Baptist – do not mention a specific site by name. Luke simply informs us that, *In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a city of Judah* (Lk 1:39). We are left to rely on tradition to locate the places linked with these joyful events, which inspired Mary and Zechariah, priest and the husband of Elizabeth, to give us two of the most beautiful canticles in all the Scriptures: the Magnificat and the Benedictus.

When the angel Gabriel greets Mary in Nazareth to announce that God had chosen her to be the Mother of *"the Son of God"* (Lk 1:35) he also tells her: *"behold, your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible"* (Lk 1:36-37). With her cousin in the advanced stages of her pregnancy, Mary did what was natural; she went to assist Elizabeth in her time of need.

Mary entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and she exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord." And Mary said,

*"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the
imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever."*

And Mary remained with her about three months, and returned home (Lk 1:39-56).

Mary's journey from her hometown of Nazareth to the village of Judah, Ein Kerem, would have been an arduous one. It was 100 miles across a remote and lawless region with bandits and other dangers. And this risky excursion was undertaken by a teenage maiden who was pregnant as well. Such was Mary's concern for Elizabeth that she accepted the hardships so that she might give comfort and aid to her beloved cousin.

Luke does not tell us whether Mary had any companions or how she managed to complete the trek through the mountains of Judea. This has led to speculation by artists through the ages who have offered their own interpretations. A lovely example of this tradition is what we see in the large mosaic built into the façade of the present-day Church of the Visitation. The artist depicts Mary on a donkey leaving Nazareth as she rides toward Ein Kerem where Elizabeth awaits. Who accompanies the Mother of God on this perilous journey? Angels, of course!

When Mary greets her elderly kinswoman, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaims “*Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!*” (Lk 1:42). Elizabeth knew that Mary carried the Savior in her womb because the Holy Spirit had enlightened her to perceive what the eye could not see. And she is humbled that the Mother of the Lord would grace her with such a visit. While deeply grateful for Mary’s presence, Elizabeth is also overwhelmed by the mystery of God’s singular gift to Mary, of choosing her to be the Mother of his Son.

Elizabeth tells Mary that, upon hearing her cousin’s voice, the babe in her womb leaped for joy. John, the unborn child of Zechariah and Elizabeth, rejoiced when his mother heard the voice of Mary because John, whose role will be to prepare the way of the Lord, has a premonition of the glory to come. He knows that God’s plan for salvation is now upon them.

In a wonderful parallel from the Book of Samuel in the Old Testament, this Visitation event is foreshadowed in the story of David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant as it is being brought to Jerusalem, its new home (see 2 Sam 6:14-15). Just as David danced for joy before the symbol of the old covenant – the Ark containing the Law of God – John now leaps for joy before Mary, the Ark of the new and eternal covenant carried within her womb.

Mary’s response to Elizabeth, a canticle of praise and gratitude to God, the Magnificat, recalls words that, throughout the centuries since, have resounded around the world. Its verses reveal Mary’s profound humility in recognizing herself as the one chosen by God. She attributes to God all that has been bestowed upon her; she recognizes his works of justice and mercy through the ages, and his faithfulness to his people Israel.



The Visitation, Miguel Cabrera (18th century)

Mary stayed with Elizabeth at her home for three months. Since the angel Gabriel had told Mary in Nazareth that her kinswoman was six months pregnant, this indicates Mary was likely present for the birth of John.

Earlier in this narrative from Luke’s Gospel, we learn about the visit of the angel Gabriel to Zechariah while he was performing his priestly duties in the Temple in Jerusalem. The angel tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, will conceive and bear a son, and that his name is to be John. He asks how this can be, since he was an old man and his wife was barren and advanced in years. Because he does not trust in God’s power to achieve his purposes, he is struck dumb until the moment his son John is named on the day of his circumcision.

Luke tells us that Elizabeth, upon becoming aware of her pregnancy, goes into seclusion for five months. This suggests Elizabeth went to live at another, perhaps a second home, such as a summer home, when Mary arrived to greet her. This traditional version of the account has been passed down through the ages, and locates the Visitation event at the present site of the Church of the Visitation on a hillside above Ein Kerem.

On the eighth day after the child was born to Elizabeth, the circumcision rite took place with friends and neighbors, as ordained by Jewish law. Those present asked Zechariah what the boy’s name was to be. He motioned for a writing tablet and wrote: “*His name is John.*” *And they all marveled. And immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God... And his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying,*

*“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people,
and has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David,
as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
that we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all who hate us;
to perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
and to remember his holy covenant,*

*the oath which he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us
that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
in the forgiveness of their sins,
through the tender mercy of our God,
when the day shall dawn upon us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”*

*And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the wilderness
till the day of his manifestation to Israel (Lk 1:63-80).*

Zechariah's words of thanksgiving and praise of God have become popularly known as the Benedictus, Latin for “Blessed,” the first word in his canticle. The verses of this canticle speak about the fulfillment of God's promises and about John's role in preparing the way for the Savior.

Luke's mention of John being in the wilderness is the biblical basis for the local tradition identifying a cave about two miles from Ein Kerem as the place where John lived until he began his work of preparing the way of the Lord. Today, a Franciscan sanctuary with a chapel and monastery, known as St. John in the Wilderness, welcomes pilgrims to commemorate this tradition.

An apocryphal source called the *Proto-Gospel of James* contains a passage relevant to a tradition set in Ein Kerem. It relates a story connected with



Birth of St. John the Baptist, Luca Giordano
(between 1670 and 1679)

Herod's slaughter of the innocents. Soldiers had raided Elizabeth's village on orders to kill all male infants according to the decree of Herod: “And Elizabeth, having heard that they were searching for John, took him and went up into the hill-country, and kept looking where to conceal him. And there was no place of concealment. And Elizabeth, groaning with a loud voice, says: O mountain of God, receive mother and child. And immediately the mountain was cleft, and received her. And a light shone about them, for an angel of the Lord was with them, watching over them.”

The place in the mountain which opened to receive Elizabeth and John is associated with the grotto enclosed by the lower chapel in the present-day Church of the Visitation.

Ein Kerem and its Sanctuaries in History

As mentioned earlier, Ein Kerem is not identified in Luke's account by name as the site where Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth and where John the Baptist was born. We owe the association of those events with Ein Kerem to local tradition. It should be noted that the term *hill country of Judah* aptly describes the location of Ein Kerem, as it rests in a mountainous region of the biblical territory of Judah.

There is archaeological evidence demonstrating that Ein Kerem has been inhabited from the Middle Bronze Age (2100-1550 B.C.) through to the modern era. In particular, artifacts show that the village flourished during the Roman and Byzantine periods and later in the Crusader period. Among the ancient relics found were coins, the torso of a marble statue of Venus, oil lamps, shards of pottery, and remnants of Byzantine and Crusader churches.

The earliest account supporting the claim that Ein Kerem was Elizabeth's home is from the Archdeacon Theodosius, a pilgrim and chronicler, who wrote in his travel guide to the Holy Land (530 AD): “From Jerusalem to where St. Elizabeth lived, mother to St. John the Baptist, five miles.” As it turns out, Ein Kerem is precisely five miles from the center of Jerusalem. In the late Byzantine period, early Arab period (seventh to eighth centuries), a liturgical text called the *Jerusalem Lectionary* records these words celebrating a feast day: “28 August. In the village of Encharim [Encharim referring to - Ein Kerem], in the church



of the just Elizabeth, her commemoration.”

The oldest textual eyewitness to the existence of two separate sanctuaries, one commemorating the visit of Mary and the other John's birth, dates from the fourteenth century: “Zechariah's house is in the mountains of Judea,” wrote Brother Giovanni di Fedanzola of Perugia in 1330 after a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. “In this place there are two churches...and between these churches flows a spring that is quite full of water. At the site of the first church, it is said, Elizabeth was greeted by the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is also said that the blessed John the Baptist was hidden there during the Slaughter of the Innocents. At the site of the second church, the blessed John the Baptist was born.”

There is little evidence to show the presence of a church in the Byzantine era on the site where the Visitation and the Rock of Hiding traditions are commemorated today. Remains of a cistern, the remnants of a foundation wall in the grotto and a portion of the tunnel above the well from this period suggest a structure that could have been a sanctuary.

At the site of John's nativity, though, there are considerable archaeological remains dating to the Byzantine period which indicate the presence of a church or churches. Excavations revealed a Byzantine era chapel (fifth century) on the west side of the present church under the porch. It is called the Chapel of the Martyrs due to a mosaic found in the ruins with the inscription: “Hail, martyrs of God.” The identities of the martyrs remain unknown. This mosaic also displays figures of peacocks, doves, flowers and fruit. Perhaps the artist meant these symbols to represent Paradise, the eternal home of the martyrs commemorated in the chapel that once stood on this site.

The archaeological remains show that after the arrival of the Crusades in 1099, churches once stood at both the site of the Visitation and the site of John's birth. The Church of St. John, built by the Crusaders on the northern hill of the village, incorporated the grotto which local tradition held to be the birthplace of St. John. The Crusaders also accepted the local tradition that on the southern hill of the village, the Virgin Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth where she was staying when she went into seclusion upon learning of her pregnancy. Here, they built a church on two levels. The lower crypt chapel, containing the grotto of the spring,

is also the site associated with the Rock of the Hiding.

After the departure of the Crusaders in 1187, the churches fell into ruin due to neglect and adaptation of the buildings by the locals. When the Franciscans arrived in the seventeenth century to take possession of the two sites, they found the churches in poor condition, both in need of major repair and restoration.

The Church of the Visitation

In a small verdant valley between Mount Herzl and the Hadassah Hospital, about five miles southwest of Jerusalem, sits the picturesque village of Ein Kerem, which means in Hebrew “the spring of the vineyard.” Even today, one can see vineyards and terraced gardens on green slopes crowned with Italian cypress and Lebanese cedar and native pine trees. Here on the edge of town is an ancient spring, which gives Ein Kerem its name. The spring, located below an abandoned mosque, reminds visitors that this was once an Arab village.

This pastoral landscape was the setting for two of the most joy-filled stories recorded for us in the Gospels: the Visitation of Mary with Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist, now commemorated by beautiful Franciscan churches on sites that have beckoned pilgrims since early in the Christian era.

On the hillside a steep hike above Ein Kerem, tradition marks the mystical meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, known as the Visitation. For Christians, this encounter is an event shrouded in mystery as we learn how the Holy Spirit enlightened Elizabeth to understand that Mary carried in her womb the Divine Savior.

Today, a majestic church on the site commemorates this sublime mystery. Franciscans, the caretakers of the shrine on the hillside overlooking Ein Kerem, built the church, having purchased the property in 1679. Due to difficulties securing permission from the local authorities, they did not begin construction on the crypt chapel until 1862. In 1938, the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi [see Sidebar on Antonio Barluzzi] began the design of the upper church. The church was consecrated on May 31, 1939. Further work on the church, including the creation of the frescoes, was interrupted by World War II. The frescoes were completed in 1953-4.



A delicately ornate iron gate graces the entrance to the courtyard, and visitors find themselves swiftly drawn to the colorful mosaic high on the church's west façade, which is large enough to be seen from across the valley. It shows Mary, clothed in white and seated on a donkey as she travels from Nazareth to Ein Kerem, guided by a retinue of angels. Decorative porcelain tablets with the words of the Magnificat canticle in more than 60 languages grace the wall adjacent to a garden.

Recalling the sacred encounter, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, between these two expectant women at this site, visitors often find themselves deeply moved. Here, God's mysterious plan for our salvation takes on a maternal dimension as we recall the two principal persons in this story, kinswomen upon whom God bestowed his special favor. Each will give birth to a son whose name was given by an angel sent by God. John, born of Elizabeth, will be the Precursor of the Lord, and Jesus, born of Mary, will be the Lord and Savior of the world.

From the courtyard, the entrance to the crypt chapel is on the left at ground level. This modern sanctuary, a masterpiece of design and devoutness, provides a loving tribute to Mary to remind us that all generations call her blessed. Barluzzi was careful to incorporate ruins from the existing Byzantine structure and Crusader church. Like the Crusader church, the modern church has two levels.

The lower-crypt chapel was built against the hillside at the spot where tradition says the mountain opened to protect the infant John and Elizabeth from Herod's soldiers. Today, a remnant of the rock which hid John can be seen on the right in a niche in the wall. The Latin inscription in the niche reads, "According to tradition Elizabeth hid John [behind] this rock." A small barrel-vaulted passageway in the east wall leads to an ancient well.

In the crypt chapel, three frescoes by the Italian artist Angelo della Torre adorn the walls. On the left, the priest Zechariah in his vestments offers incense in the Temple in Jerusalem. Above the well, a lovely pastoral scene shows Mary and Elizabeth together – the Visitation. On the right, the artist depicts the massacre of the Holy Innocents and the legend of the Hiding of John. In this scene, Elizabeth flees while carrying the baby John to a place where the angel directs them. Nearby, Herod's soldiers slaughter the innocent babes while their horrified mothers look

on helplessly.

After exiting the crypt chapel, turn right and climb the steps through a garden to the upper church. Inside the Italianate bronze doors, the floor is covered with mosaics depicting plant and animal life. The imagery invites the visitor to join with Mary and Elizabeth in singing the praises of God for all of creation. The twelfth-century Crusader apse has been incorporated into the modern church. Part of the altar also derives from the Crusader period.

In the apse above the altar are five fresco panels by the Italian artist Fernando Manetti. In the central panel, Mary stands gracefully in the hill country of Judea flanked by her devotees, including the Franciscan Custos, Fr. Faccio, who presents her with a model of the church dedicated to her honor. Nearby is the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Alberto Gori, in a gray robe, along with St. Francis, crowned by a halo. In the panel on the top left, Christians present Our Lady with models of important Marian churches from around the world. In the bottom left panel, Elizabeth receives Mary at her home. The top right panel features members of the many and diverse religious communities whose spirituality is centered on Marian devotion. On the bottom right, an unnamed woman in the Gospels calls out to Jesus after he had just expelled a demon from a man: "*Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!*" (Lk 11:27).

High on the wall opposite the entrance are another series of fresco panels; these by the Italian artist Cesare Vagarini in the style of the late Renaissance Tuscan masters, celebrating Mary's titles and her intercession in salvation history. The Latin titles given by the Church for Mary have been placed under each panel. Nearest to the altar, one finds a scene of the Council of Ephesus (431), which decreed Mary to be the "Mother of God." In the next panel, Mary is depicted as "Refuge of those who hope in you" in her flowing robe, enveloping sinners from every race and nation who find refuge in her mantle, as she stands ready to intercede on their behalf before her Son's Throne of Mercy. Barluzzi, the church's architect, had himself painted into this panel, perhaps to show that he considers himself a sinner in need of Mary's maternal care. Look for the bearded gentleman in a suit and bowtie.

The middle panel shows the wedding feast at Cana, the place of Jesus'



first miracle, which was prompted by a request from his Mother. It is the biblical basis for Mary's title "Mediator Most Powerful," and the root of our faith in her intercession. The next fresco depicts Don Juan of Austria receiving a blessing from the papal legate at the Battle of Lepanto (1571) when the Holy League armada led by Don Juan defeated the Turkish Ottoman fleet and saved Europe from Muslim invasion; this despite the fact that the Christian alliance was vastly outnumbered. The miraculous victory was attributed to Mary's intervention, and hence her title "Help of all Christians." Finally, in the last panel, the medieval Franciscan theologian, Blessed John Duns Scotus, defends the Immaculate Conception at the University of Paris (1307), representing yet one more title of Mary as the "Immaculate Conception."

The Church of St. John the Baptist

The forerunner of the Messiah, the one who was to "*prepare the way of the Lord*" was born on the site where today stands an imposing limestone sanctuary bearing his name, the Church of St. John the Baptist. Its spire rises above the town of Ein Kerem, where it has been a familiar landmark for over a century. From a cave within this church came forth the Precursor who would bear witness that Jesus is the Son of God. He would one day point out Jesus to the crowds gathered at the Jordan River and say: "*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world*" (Jn 1:29).

Inside the church to the left of the main altar are steps which lead down to a grotto, the traditional birthplace of John. The Franciscans found mostly ruins from the Crusader church and made minor repairs after purchasing the site in 1621. Later, with funding from the Spanish monarchy, they undertook extensive restorations during the next 200 years, taking care to retain as much of the Crusader-era church as possible. By the late nineteenth century, the renovated church, featuring a Spanish design with decorative glazed tiles and finely detailed iron work, was completed.

In the front courtyard, a wall bears tiled panels with the Benedictus canticle inscribed in more than three dozen languages. Climb the steps to the porch at the front entrance. Here a circular wrought-iron fence encloses an opening in the floor, allowing the visitor to see a mosaic

remnant of the Byzantine chapel. Written in Greek, it reads "Hail Martyrs of God." Above the main entrance to the church, a plaque with a Latin inscription, roughly translated, reads: "This church, dedicated to the birthplace of the Holy Precursor, was restored by the Custody of the Holy Land through the generosity of the Catholic Kingdom of Spain. A. D. 1895"

Six massive pillars divide the dimly lit interior into three aisles. The walls and pillars are covered with marvelous blue and white tiles in the Majolica style, a gift from the Spanish royal family that sponsored the renovation. Sculptures, oil paintings and other works of sacred art, mostly by Spanish artists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, adorn the church. To the right of the altar, above the sacristy door, the words, "The Beheading of St. John the Baptist," powerfully attest to this holy man's martyrdom.

Two paintings in the nativity grotto also deserve mention. The first, located above the steps leading down to the marble-encased grotto, "The Baptism of Jesus," offers an exquisite portrayal of the Gospel episode the moment when the Spirit of God in the form of a dove descends and rests upon Jesus. Above the white marble altar at the base of the grotto, a painting depicting the birth of John can be seen. And on the floor beneath the altar, a marble medallion with the Latin inscription, "Here the Precursor of the Lord was born," marks the site where the joyful words of the Benedictus were heard for the first time.



Marble floor beneath the altar marking the birth place of St. John the Baptist

St. John in the Desert

About two miles from Ein Kerem sits a site on a wooded slope of the Judean hills which local tradition records as having been the place where John lived in seclusion before starting his public ministry. Apparently,



the area had been deserted and isolated during John's lifetime; it served him well as a hermitage, where he could prepare for his work by dedicating himself to prayer and asceticism away from the distractions of his hometown.

Some remains of a twelfth-century Crusader monastery and church still exists here, giving witness to the fact that the Crusaders accepted the local tradition that identifies the site as John's place in the wilderness. In 1586, Belgian pilgrim Jean Zuallart visited the ruins, and made drawings of what he saw, which made a deep impression:

"Leaving the Visitation, we decide to continue for another two or three miles, to visit the Desert where St. John the Baptist, guided and comforted by the Holy Spirit, spent his childhood until the day of his manifestation to Israel, preaching the Baptism of Repentance," he wrote. "When we reached this Desert, following a very difficult and dangerous path, we were filled with joy at seeing a place that was both so austere and beautiful, although now there are not as many trees as apparently there were in the past and it is very rough and harsh and far from any settlement."

The community of local Arabs, well known for maintaining traditional names of places for centuries, called the site Ain el-Habis, which translates as "Spring of the Hermit," due to the existence of a spring in the cave where John lived.

In 1922, the Franciscans built a chapel and monastery above the remains of the Crusader church. Today, the friars welcome pilgrims and curious locals who are drawn here both for the biblical significance of the site as well as its natural beauty. Orthodox Christians, as a manner of custom, immerse themselves in a pool which collects fresh water from the spring.

Follow a path that leads up the hill about one hundred yards to the chapel which encloses the place where John's mother, Elizabeth, was once entombed.

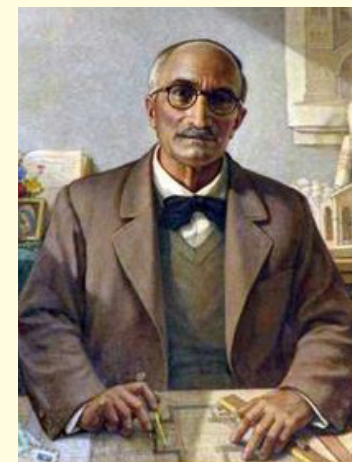
With its canopy of trees and lush vegetation, the site today looks more like an oasis than an arid desert as its name implies. Nonetheless, the site offers refuge from the bustle of the world, a place of reprieve for reflection and meditation. It is a fitting memorial to John the Baptist, who calls us to be attentive to the quiet voice and presence of Jesus.

Fellow Pilgrims: Antonio Barluzzi (1884-1960)

The Church of the Visitation was designed by the Italian architect and secular Franciscan Antonio Barluzzi, who devoted his life to the building of shrines in the Holy Land. His other masterpieces, two dozen in all, include the Church of the Beatitudes, the Basilica of the Transfiguration, Dominus Flevit, and the Basilica of the Agony.

When Barluzzi received his first commission in 1919 for the churches of Gethsemane and Mount Tabor, he wrote in his diary words of joy that echoed those of Mary and Elizabeth: "My heart leaps for joy, and I say, 'It is God's will.'" While embarking on his projects, Barluzzi lived and prayed and attended Mass with the Franciscans as a brother. He said the purpose of his work was to "translate by architecture the majesty and simplicity of the Bible" and he designed his churches to express as eloquently he could the sacred events they commemorate.

In 1958, Barluzzi's design for the rebuilding of the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth



Portrait of Antonio Barluzzi

was rejected, a hard blow for him to endure. He had a heart attack and never regained his health. A visitor who saw him convalescing in his bare room at the Franciscan Terra Sancta Delegation in Rome said that the gaunt, dying 76-year-old "resembled nothing so much as a saint by El Greco." His churches endure as monuments to the mystery of faith, and they continue to inspire pilgrims from around the world. As the saying goes, "There are three types of architecture in the Holy Land: Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and Barluzzi."