

# BETHLEHEM

**History.** Bethlehem, whose name means “house of bread,” is located about five miles south of Jerusalem in the Judean hills. The area of Bethlehem was also known as Ephrathah. Genesis 35:19 reports that the family of Jacob was en route from Bethel to Bethlehem when his favorite wife Rachel died. Although some place her tomb near Bethlehem, the text says that they were “some distance” away (Gen. 35:16; 48:7). Other passages seem to indicate that her tomb was north of Jerusalem near Ramah (1 Sam. 10:2; Jer. 31:15; 40:1; Mt. 2:18).

Bethlehem is mentioned in the early fourteenth century B.C. in the Amarna Letters: “But now even a town of the land of Jerusalem, Bit-Lahmi [Bethlehem] by name, a town belonging to the king, has gone over to the side of the people of Keilah.” If no help was sent from Egypt, the author of the letter was concerned that the land would “pass over to the ‘Apiru people” (ANET, 489). Some argue that the term ‘Apiru in the Amarna Letters should not be equated with the Hebrews (Israelites). While the term may be used more broadly, one should not eliminate the possibility that it included the people of Israel. Further, it is interesting that this letter was written near the time of the conquest (1400-1380 B.C.).

Bethlehem became an Israelite city not long after Joshua conquered Canaan. The town was the setting for most of the book of Ruth, whose story transpired early in the period of the Judges. Boaz, one of the main characters in the narrative, was the son of Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who was spared in the conquest (Mt. 1:5).

David, who was a descendant of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4:21-22) was from the town of Bethlehem. It was there that the prophet Samuel anointed David as the next king of Israel, who would someday replace Saul (1 Sam. 16:1-13). Several centuries later, Micah prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times” (Mic. 5:2). This passage is quoted in Matthew 2:6 in regard to the place where Jesus (a descendant of David) was born. Herod the Great sent his soldiers to Bethlehem and its vicinity with orders to kill all the boys “who were two years old and under” in an attempt to destroy Jesus—whom he perceived to be a rival and a threat to his throne (Mt. 2:16).

The Gospel of Luke narrates how Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth in Galilee down to Bethlehem in order to be registered in the census. Traditionally, it has been understood that when they arrived in Bethlehem, there was no room left in the “inn,” so the couple sought shelter in a stable. After Jesus was born, he was laid in a “manger” (Lk. 2:1-7).

Some today suggest that Jesus was actually born in the home of relatives. They argue that the Greek word *kataluma*, translated “inn,” should be rendered “guest room” as in other passages (Mk. 14:14; Lk. 22:11). Since there was no space left in the relatives’ guest room, Mary gave birth to Jesus in the main part of the home. Then, to keep him safe and out of the way, she laid him in a manger at one end of the home, next to the lower area where the animals stayed indoors at night. (See the house diagram in Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008], 33.)

Interestingly, an ancient tradition from the second and third centuries A.D. states that Jesus was born in a cave (Justin Martyr *Dialogue with Trypho* 78; *Protoevangelium of James* 18; Origen *Against Celsus* 1.51). In those days, caves were sometimes attached to homes and used as stables (Murphy-O’Connor, 230).

**The Church of the Nativity.** While the Scriptures explicitly state that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the exact location is not given. The Church of the Nativity marks the traditional location, being built over a cave which the Christian community of Bethlehem adored as Jesus’ birthplace. The building was originally constructed by Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine; it was completed in A.D. 339. According to Jerome, from the time of Hadrian to Constantine, a sacred grove of Tammuz had been established by pagans in that spot in a failed attempt to erase the memory of the story of Christ’s birth (Jerome *Epistle* 58).

Later, in A.D. 529, the Church of the Nativity was damaged in the Samaritan Revolt. The emperor Justinian rebuilt the structure in A.D. 565, making it even larger and more impressive. Since that time, the structure has undergone various renovations. (For a schematic of the church building, see Murphy-O’Connor, 235.) It is amazing that the building has survived so many earthquakes and invasions. In A.D. 614, the Persians reportedly spared it because of a mosaic depicting the magi (wise men) who were wearing Persian clothing. The Muslims chose not to destroy it, in violation of Hakim’s decree (A.D. 1009), because they had been allowed for several centuries to use a portion of the building for their devotions.



The Church of the Nativity

In modern times, numerous people flock to Bethlehem during the Christmas season and gather in Manger Square to honor the birth of Jesus. The celebration of this holiday is not found in the New Testament. It is a human tradition that began in the fourth century A.D.



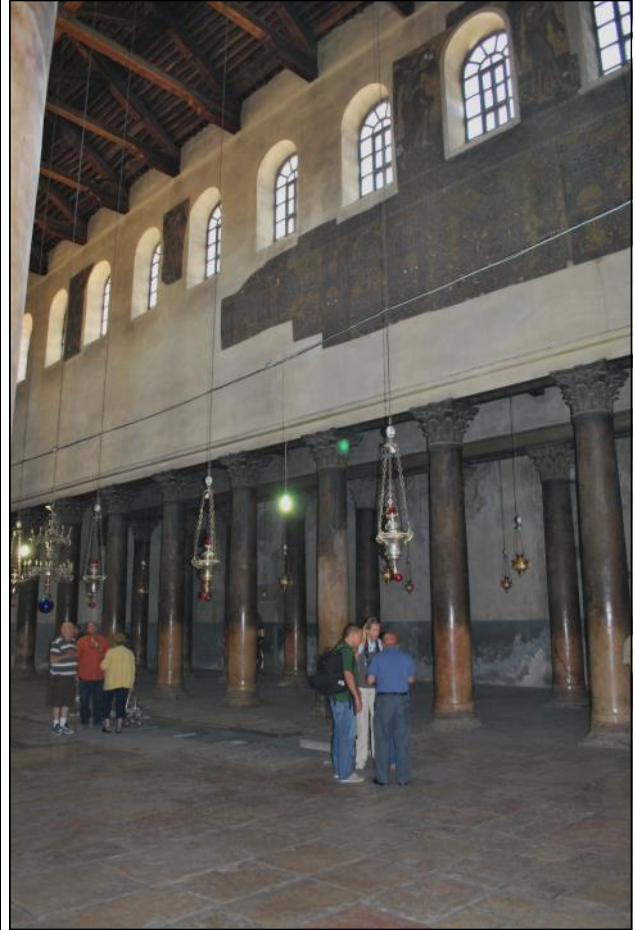
The Door of Humility  
(Church of the Nativity)

The Door of Humility is the main entrance to the church building. Three entrances are visible, showing the changes made to the structure over the course of time:

- 1) A flat lintel door from the sixth century A.D.
- 2) A pointed arch from medieval times.
- 3) The Door of Humility from the Turkish period.  
(This smaller entrance prevented horses and wagons from entering the building to loot it.)

Worshippers and visitors must bow as they enter the Church of the Nativity, which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ.





Central Aisle of the Church of the Nativity (with 4th-Century Mosaics Underneath the Floor)





Baptistry in the Side Aisle of the Church of the Nativity





The baptistry in the Church of the Nativity is in the shape of an octagon. It has a cross on the side as well as a rounded cross on the top, which symbolizes being “baptized into Christ” (Rom. 6:3-4). It had originally been in the front of the building (by the “altar”), but was relocated to a side aisle. The baptistry was built in the sixth century (Justinian’s construction) rather than the fourth century (Helena’s construction). It is not very deep—only 2.5 feet (Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009], 823). Earlier baptistries were built with more depth, because, in compliance with the New Testament, only believers were immersed in the first few centuries of Christianity. Even though this baptistry was likely used for the wrong subjects (infants and young children without sin or faith), the inscription on the side correctly indicates that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; 22:16): “For remembrance, rest, and remission of sins of whose names the Lord knows.”



The Church of the Nativity is maintained by the Greek Orthodox Church. The area of the “altar” (left) was built above the traditional cave of Jesus’ birth.

A Latin inscription can be found in the grotto, which reads, *Hic De Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est*. It can be translated, “Here, of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ was born.”

The focal point of the grotto is a 14-point star, which marks the traditional spot where Jesus was born. Over the years, the star has been the source of contention. The Roman Catholics originally put the star there in 1717. The Greek Orthodox removed it in 1847, but the Ottoman government restored the star in 1853. It may have been a contributing factor to the Crimean War (1853-1856).



Grotto of the Nativity Under the Altar Area



14-Point Star Marking the Spot of Jesus’ Birth

Next to the Church of the Nativity, the Roman Catholics (Franciscans) built the Church of St. Catherine in 1881. It is not so dark and dreary. The huge pipe organ and the confessional box are typical of Catholicism. Outside stands a statue of St. Catherine behind Jerome. According to Catholic tradition, Catherine was a virgin and martyr from Alexandria, Egypt. She supposedly converted hundreds of people to Christ. The Roman Catholic Church has made her into a “saint.” (The New Testament, however, teaches that *every* true Christian is a saint.)



Church of St. Catherine



Confessional Box



Nativity Scene in Stained Glass





Statue of St. Jerome with Statue of St. Catherine  
In the Background Above It



Tomb of Jerome

Jerome, a famous Bible scholar and monastic, moved to Bethlehem in A.D. 384, and he died in 420. During this period, he translated the Latin Vulgate, which served as the standard Bible version for Catholics until the twentieth century A.D. Jerome's grotto and tomb are accessed through the Church of St. Catherine. Although Jerome was buried here, his remains were later taken to Constantinople and then to Rome. The statue of Jerome standing with a skull is symbolic of the transient nature of life.



Mosque of Omar, Built in 1860 Across from Manger Square

**Modern Times.** After World War I, Bethlehem fell under the British Mandate (1920-1948). Jordan annexed Bethlehem in 1948, but it came under Israeli control after the Six Day War in 1967. Today, Bethlehem is a Palestinian city with about 30,000 people. Since 1995 it has been governed by the Palestinian National Authority. The city is fenced off from Israel, but there are Jewish settlements nearby. Bethlehem is a microcosm of the situation in the West Bank. Among the Palestinians, there is a Muslim majority due to immigration, and the Christian population is declining. Tourism is still the greatest economic industry. During Christmas time, Christian pilgrims flock to the Church of the Nativity to celebrate the birth of Christ. In addition to December 25th, some observe January 6th, 7th, or 19th. Souvenir shops feature beautiful woodcarvings of biblical scenes, such as the spies carrying Canaan's grapes on a pole (Num. 13:23).



Woodcarving of the Two Spies



Modern Bethlehem





Border Fence at Bethlehem

