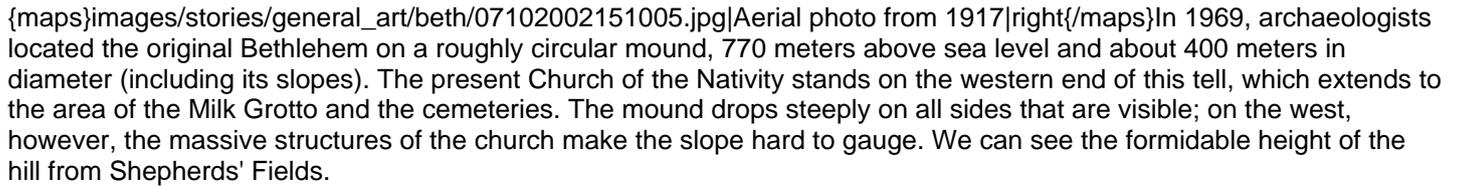


# Bethlehem

Contributed by Stephen Langfur

In 1969, archaeologists located the original Bethlehem on a roughly circular mound, 770 meters above sea level and about 400 meters in diameter (including its slopes). The present Church of the Nativity stands on the western end of this tell, which extends to the area of the Milk Grotto and the cemeteries. The mound drops steeply on all sides that are visible; on the west, however, the massive structures of the church make the slope hard to gauge. We can see the formidable height of the hill from Shepherds' Fields.

No spring has been found. Hence, Bethlehem had to be "little" (Micah 5:2). It took the birth of David to put it on the map.

The inhabitants must have relied on cisterns. Throughout the ages, as the town developed, they kept hewing them from the waterproof chalk: there are thousands of cisterns in the larger town of today, including some that are ancient. David, we recall, sent his heroes to bring him water from the well at the gate ({{tips2}}David longed, and said, &ldquo;Oh that one would give me water to drink of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!&rdquo; The three mighty men broke through the army of the Philistines, and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem, that was by the gate, and took it, and brought it to David: but he would not drink of it, but poured it out to Yahweh. He said, &ldquo;Be it far from me, Yahweh, that I should do this! Isn&rsquo;t it the blood of the men who went in jeopardy of their lives?&rdquo; Therefore he would not drink it. The three mighty men did these things.{{2 Samuel 23: 15 - 17}}). If this was a well, not a cistern (the Hebrew can mean either), it has since disappeared without a trace. The so-called "David's well" (three cisterns, in fact) lies too far removed from his Bethlehem.

The lack of a spring precluded farming by irrigation, and the area was extremely vulnerable to drought. We find biblical evidence for this in the Book of Ruth (see Shepherds' Fields). But the question arises: Given this vulnerability, why was there a town here at all? (See a possible explanation.)

The mound is at the eastern edge of a ridge. This bends like a boomerang for one kilometer, first to the west, then northward. Along this ridge the town developed. Ideally, our bus would enter from the Hebron road (the main north-south road over the central range) and drop us on Paul VI Street. Walking SE on it, we reach the Lutheran Christmas Church. From here to the east we follow the bending ridge through the older part of the present town, passing through a neighborhood known as Harat en-Najajra. Its residents, according to local tradition, descend from the Ghassanites, the first Christian tribes of the region. They came from Najran (today in northern Yemen) joining a group of families known as Rathabreh, who had come from Greece in the Byzantine period. If time permits, we can visit the local market and stop at the Olive Press Museum, ending our walk at the place of Jesus' birth.

{mospagebreak title="Solomon's Pools"}

"Solomon's Pools": Water for Jerusalem

As Jerusalem has grown through the centuries, it has always reached farther for water. Most of today's supply is pumped up from the coastal plain. In antiquity, the city relied at first on the Gihon spring, which, gushing intermittently, as well as cisterns, which collected runoff from the watersheds surrounding the city. In 586 BC came destruction and exile. The Jews who returned in the Persian period built a rather small city. It did not grow again until the mid-2nd century, the time of the Hasmoneans: family of Judah Maccabee ("the hammer") and his brothers, who revolted successfully against the Greek Empire in 167 BC. They purified and re-dedicated the Temple in Jerusalem, establishing the festival of Hanukah ("dedication"). They ruled till 63 BC, and their domain extended almost as far as King David's. Hasmoneans. This was a major expansion. The Hasmoneans would have needed more water than heretofore, and they had the technology of the aqueduct. But where was the water?

South of Jerusalem, the mountain of Judah rises gradually but steadily, a solid block, shaped like a loaf of bread. At several places along the peak (the watershed) are springs. It was possible to lead this water by gravity into the city. Logically, the Hasmoneans would have done this, though we have no proof. Certainly Herod did.

To see how the water problem was solved, we drive south of today's Bethlehem. East of the road are three large pools that bear the name of Solomon. In their present form, they probably date to the Mamluke period. If we go to the eastern end of the easternmost, however, we can see a green swath that winds south 300 yards. It is fed by the spring of Etam, which takes its name from a First Testament city half a mile to the east. Herod the Great caught the spring water in two aqueducts, parts of which are still visible at various points. One of these supplied Herodium, a retreat he founded in the desert four miles to the east. The other followed the contours of the hills, though twice tunneling through them, for 13 miles (with a drop of less than a hundred feet) to cisterns in the Temple Mount.

Later rulers, including Pontius Pilate, took water from the peak farther south. The longest of the Roman ducts winds 25 miles (= 6 miles as the crow flies) from the springs of Ein Arrub to Solomon's Pools, thence to Jerusalem.

The area around the pools is lush, containing three springs in addition to that of Etam. The connection to Solomon derives from Ecclesiastes, the Preacher, who took as pseudonym the name of the wise and wealthy king: "I made myself gardens and parks, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit. I made myself pools of water, to water from it the forest where trees were reared" (Ecclesiastes 2:5-6). The area of the pools received the credit for these verses, because it was the most splendid natural garden near Jerusalem. We find this identification as early as Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. Because of a paragraph about John the Baptist (and maybe a sentence about Jesus), the Church preserved his works. Josephus:

The king himself rode upon a chariot in the midst of these men, who were still in armor, and had their bows fitted to them. He had on a white garment, and used to take his progress out of the city in the morning. There was a certain place about fifty furlongs distant from Jerusalem, which is called Etham, very pleasant it is in fine gardens, and abounding in rivulets of water; thither did he use to go out in the morning, sitting on high. (Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews*, translated by William Whiston) *Antiquities* VIII 7.3)

Half a mile east of the pools is the tell of Etam. Following the water-rich valley for another half mile, we come to the village of Artas, whose name most likely derives from hortus, Latin for "garden." Here too people made a Solomonic connection, this time with the "Song of Solomon," for there (4:12) the lover compares his beloved to a "garden locked... a spring sealed up." A 17th century source explained the application to Artas: "It is called 'the sealed garden,' (because it is surrounded) not by artifice, but by nature, not by walls, but by hills and mountains."

The sisters of Mary, Our Lady of the Garden, with branches in Paraguay and Uruguay, inhabit the nunnery (1901).

Source: Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II. Keel, pp. 727-36.

{mospagebreak title=Shepherds' Fields}

## Shepherds' Fields

Between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is a Greek Orthodox monastery named Mar Elias (St. Elijah). A few yards south of it, we depart from the main highway, the water divide, eastward onto a side road skirting Jebel al-Gneim (now the Israeli settlement of Har Homa with apartment buildings) toward an Arab village called Beit Sahour ("Place of the Magi"). Driving south, before reaching the village, one can stop and look at Bethlehem to the west. Below it are the valleys. The valleys are so narrow between the hills of this central mountain range (in contrast with Galilee, for instance) that people planted orchards on the slopes in order to get enough food. These slopes, however, required terracing. In the long dry summer, the sun kills the organic matter that holds the soil in place, and when the slope is steeper than 30 degrees, the heavy autumn rains will carry the soil down into the valleys unless preventive measures are taken. Differential erosion in the hard and soft limestone of the hills created natural steps, but it was necessary to build walls on their edges. Judging from the mix of different soils found in certain terraces, some researchers think that people brought part of the soil up from the valleys and down from the hilltops (as Samsonian a task as that may seem!). No wonder, then, that people here developed an attachment to their ancestral land. Terraced slopes, and below them a narrow valley. Behind, to the east, lies the desert.

This is the best place to view Bethlehem as it would have been seen by nearby shepherds (Luke 2: 1-20). There are three official sites for Shepherds' Fields in Beit Sahour itself (they require shoulders covered, legs covered below the knees. Modest dress):

1. The Greek Orthodox church in the valley, east of the main part of town. (Telephone: 02-2773135. Call in advance to assure entry.) The church includes the remnants of a cave with a mosaic floor containing crosses. Since a Byzantine emperor banned crosses on the floor as impious in 427 AD, the mosaic must be earlier. The cave was then enlarged for a chapel. This site has had the longest life of the three, indicating a persistent tradition. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide*, 4th edition. London: Oxford, 1998. pp. 419-20.

2. The Roman Catholic church. (Open 08:00-11:30, 14:00-17:30; Telephone: 02-2772413). The site includes a chapel designed like a tent (built in 1954), as well as a cave; a group can arrange to have Mass in either. Outside are the ruins of a monastery, dating from the 4th century AD to the 7th. This was one of many monasteries in the Judaeen desert.

3. The YMCA of Beit Sahour, east of the town center on the north side of the road. Here many Protestants commemorate Shepherds' Fields. There are no ancient remains. There is a grove of pines, a cave, and a view toward Jerusalem and the desert.

The area of Judah was famous for two main products: wine and milk. So we read in Jacob's blessing over Judah: "Binding his foal to the vine, his donkey's colt to the choice vine; he has washed his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes will be red with wine, his teeth white with milk." (Genesis 49:11-12). The wine came from the grapes grown on the mountain, and the milk from the flocks of goats and sheep that grazed in the desert. There must have been a great many flocks and shepherds in the time of Jesus: at each Passover, Jews in Jerusalem would have needed perhaps 30,000 unblemished lambs to sacrifice and eat. Thus the shepherds who raised these lambs heard about the birth of one who would later be called the "Lamb of God" - and who would be sacrificed in Jerusalem at Passover.

Another biblical account can be placed here as well:

The pattern of the Rain|right|Situating east of the watershed on the desert edge, ancient Bethlehem was a fine, fruitful place in rainy years, but it had no spring and was vulnerable to drought. This is reflected in the Book of Ruth: Because of famine, Naomi and her family leave Bethlehem and settle in Moab, east of the Dead Sea, where her sons marry Moabite women. The family's journey fits the geography: the leeward side of the central range often misses the rain. Flowing down toward the Dead Sea, the air warms, because (other things being equal) the lower an area is, the hotter. Given this heat, the moisture in the air does not condense, which is why there is desert here. On the Moabite side of the Dead Sea, however (Jordan today) the air encounters a cliff. It rises and cools, and its moisture condenses as rain. Thus Moab sometimes gets the rain that Bethlehem misses.

After ten years in Moab, Naomi had lost her husband and both her sons. Hearing that the famine was over in Bethlehem, she decided to return to Judah and bade her daughters-in-law to stay, since she had no more sons to give them. One agreed, but the other, Ruth, replied (Ruth 1:16):

Ruth said, "Don't entreat me to leave you, and to return from following after you, for where you go, I will go; and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die, will I die, and there will I be buried. Yahweh do so to me, and more also, if anything but death part you and me."

They came back to Bethlehem, and being poor, they gleaned in the fields behind the harvesters, who were forbidden to pick up any sheaves they dropped or to reap the corners ( "Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God." (Leviticus 19:9-10) ). At this point comes the story of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth, 2-4). They marry and beget Oved, the father of Jesse, the father of David. Thus David, the great-grandson of a Moabite convert, is born in Bethlehem. Two centuries later, when the prophets foresaw the birth of the Messiah, they harked back to David. Micah, in particular, identified the town of the Messiah's birth with that of David's: Micah 5:1-5.

{mospagebreak title=The Name}

The name "Bethlehem"

In popular etymology, the name Bethlehem means "House of Bread." (In Hebrew, beth = house, lehem = bread.) Often in

the Bible, the name Ephrata is attached, meaning "fruitful." Thus both names seem to refer to fertility, although only the soil west of the town can rightly be called fertile.

Scholars dispute the name's original meaning. In 1887 a peasant woman at el-Amarna in Egypt discovered 379 clay tablets in the ruins of the Pharaoh Ikhnaton's palace. These included letters in Akkadian from princes of city-states in the land of the Bible, such as Megiddo and Jerusalem, as well as some from Babylonia and Assyria. Written in the 14th century BC, they convey an impression of unstable conditions in the land at that time. Amarna letter #290 refers to a town "of the region of Urusalim (= Jerusalem)" that has joined the enemy of Pharaoh. This town is designated in cuneiform by the sign bet nin.ib, which is preceded by the sign for a god. In 1915 a German scholar named O. Schroeder, using cuneiform name lists, equated Ninib with Antu and Antu with Lachama, an old Accadian divinity. This pair of equations gave rise to the widely accepted notion that the town of the Amarna letter was a Beth-Lachamu, the original of our Bethlehem. Schroeder's equations, however, are by no means certain.

Bet nin.ib could refer to a Sumerian warrior god named Ninurta. In this case, the town of the Amarna letter could still be our Bethlehem: we can discern, in lehem, another possible Hebrew root: the word "to fight." Bethlehem, then, would be "the place of fighting." This designation would suit the strategic reason for the town's existence.

As for Ephrata, a Calebite clan of Ephrathites apparently settled here: Caleb married Ephrath, who bore him Hur, who bore Salma, "father of Bethlehem" (Azubah died, and Caleb took to him Ephrath, who bore him Hur. ...After that Hezron was dead in Caleb Ephrathah, then Abijah Hezron's wife bore him Ashhur the father of Tekoa....These were the sons of Caleb, the son of Hur, the firstborn of Ephrathah: Shobal the father of Kiriath Jearim, Salma the father of Bethlehem, Hareph the father of Beth Gader. 1 Chronicles 2:19,24,50-51).

For more on all these points, see our source, Othmar Keel, Max Kuechler and Christoph Uehlinger, *Orte und Landschaften der Bibel*, Koeln: Benziger and Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1984. Volumes I and II|Keel, Vol. I, pp. 613-14.

{mospagebreak title=No spring?}

A town without a spring?

[http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general\\_art/beth/09122002085254.jpg](http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general_art/beth/09122002085254.jpg)|Approach to Jerusalem from the Northwest|Bethlehem is only six miles south of Jerusalem. In 1887 a peasant woman at el-Amarna in Egypt discovered 379 clay tablets in the ruins of the Pharaoh Ikhnaton's palace. These included letters in Akkadian from princes of city-states in the land of the Bible, such as Megiddo and Jerusalem, as well as some from Babylonia and Assyria. Written in the 14th century BC, they convey an impression of unstable conditions in the land at that time. Amarna letter # 290 refers to it as "a town of the land of Urusalim" and complains that it has joined the enemy of Pharaoh. Jerusalem was the important city in the region, and Bethlehem was important to it for strategic reasons. Despite its natural defenses, Jerusalem had to worry about the armies of Egypt or Mesopotamia, which would likely approach from the Great Trunk Road on the coast. There were two likely approaches from this road; both were ridges unbroken by wadis. One ascends through lower and upper Beth Horon (the Beth Ur's of today) to the central Benjamin plateau, north of Jerusalem; here it meets the single north-south road of the central range.

[http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general\\_art/beth/09122002085158.jpg](http://new.netours.com/images/stories/general_art/beth/09122002085158.jpg)|Approach

to Jerusalem from the Southwest

The second ridge ascends from the Valley of Elah, intersecting the main road southwest of Bethlehem. Jerusalem needed a buffer in the area between itself and this intersection. It did not always control Bethlehem (e.g., in its Jebusite period), but it thought it should: hence the complaint in the Amarna letter.

Thus, Bethlehem always had the strategic value that Solomon's son Rehoboam recognized when including it in the belt of fortified cities protecting his capital. Rehoboam lived in Jerusalem, and built cities for defense in Judah. He built Bethlehem, and Etam, and Tekoa, Beth Zur, and Soco, and Adullam, and Gath, and Maresha, and Ziph, and Adoraim, and Lachish, and Azekah, and Zorah, and Aijalon, and Hebron, which are in Judah and in Benjamin, fortified cities. It was a last-chance bulwark in the south.

Approaches from the West

Once the decision has been taken to establish a bulwark between Jerusalem and the intersection, a small population would naturally choose this mound for its strength and its commercial advantages. Bethlehem projects eastward into the Judean desert, picking up secondary roads that cross it. It had immediate access to the desert's herding industry, as well as Beduin commerce. On its eastern flank, its people cultivated grain and olives. On the west they had vineyards and orchards.

Enlarge the thumbnail on the right to see a satellite image of the two main approaches to Jerusalem from the west.

{mospagebreak title=Nativity Church}

The Church of the Nativity

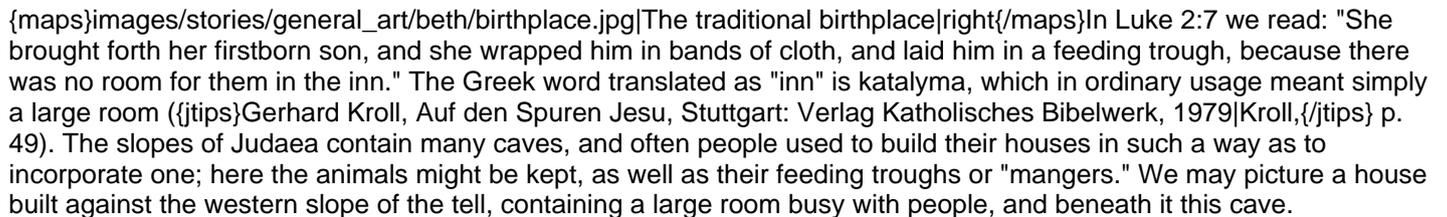
We shall discuss the church in two parts:

1. The Manger.
2. The church as a whole, including logistics for a visit.

The Manger

The focal point of the church is the cave of the birth. The Gospels do not mention a cave in this connection, but the tradition goes back at least to 150 AD, when Justin of Nablus, philosopher and martyr, mentions the birth of Jesus in a cave ca. 150 AD, in his Dialogue with Trypho (78,6): "Finding no shelter in that village, Joseph took quarters in a

nearby cave." Justin of Nablus recorded it. The cave he knew must have been the one that the Christian philosopher Origen (ca. 185-254 AD). A Christian thinker, the greatest to appear after Paul, who thought through the Christian faith from what he called "First Principles." He did most of his work at Caesarea Maritima. In his *Apologia Contra Celsum* (1, 51) he mentions the cave of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Origen wrote about in 248 AD, adding: "For the heathens, too, it is a well known matter." Two years later, however, when the Roman emperor Decius carried out the first empire-wide persecution of Christianity, heathens turned the cave into a sanctuary of Adonis, a Greco-Roman god of vegetable fertility, was believed to die and rise again with the change of seasons. He appears in mythology as the lover of Aphrodite (Venus). This profanation went on for almost a hundred years. In the late 4th or early 5th century, Jerome (a.k.a. Hieronymus) (ca. 347 – 420 AD), the learned Church father (and favorite saint of Christian painters after the Holy Family), spent the last 34 years of his life in Bethlehem, where he translated both the Hebrew First Testament and the Greek Second Testament into Latin, the so-called "Vulgate." It remained the authoritative version of the Bible for Western Christendom for a thousand years. He took part in the great theological controversies of his day, and his influence was tremendous. From what remains of his vast correspondence, he appears to have kept his faith at the cost of struggle with his own impulses; his bitter, combative disposition (perhaps a result of that struggle) often seems far from the teachings of tolerance found in Jesus, Paul and Origen. Jerome wrote a friend: "Bethlehem, which now is ours, was overshadowed by the grove of Tammuz, that is, Adonis, and in the cave where once the infant Jesus whimpered, people bewailed the lover of Venus."

The traditional birthplace In Luke 2:7 we read: "She brought forth her firstborn son, and she wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a feeding trough, because there was no room for them in the inn." The Greek word translated as "inn" is *katalyma*, which in ordinary usage meant simply a large room (Gerhard Kroll, *Auf den Spuren Jesu*, Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1979 p. 49). The slopes of Judaea contain many caves, and often people used to build their houses in such a way as to incorporate one; here the animals might be kept, as well as their feeding troughs or "mangers." We may picture a house built against the western slope of the tell, containing a large room busy with people, and beneath it this cave.

Today we enter by descending a few steps on the south side of the church. Beneath an altar on our right is a fourteen-pointed star. It marks the place where, in Christian belief, God became human. We cannot know for sure that this was the spot, but we do know that Jesus was born at a particular place and time, and here we have the place to remember that fact.

When we come down the steps, on our left stand three candle holders, representing the magi. (One may insert a candle, bought from the cleric above.) Below them is a slightly deeper chamber, and on its far (western) side is a trough in the rock, covered with marble, in which lamps burn. This represents the manger. The visitor may sympathize with the reaction of Saint Jerome, recorded more than 1500 years ago:

Oh that I might see the manger in which the Lord lay! Now we Christians, as though we were honoring Christ, have taken away that manger of clay and set a silver one in its place. For me, however, the one they've taken away is greater in worth. The heathen world reveres gold and silver; the Christian faith serves that manger of clay. He who was born in this manger has no regard for gold and silver. I do not despise those whose reverence led them to install the manger of silver, just as I do not despise those people who wrought golden vessels for the Temple. But I feel awe before the Lord, Creator of the universe, who was born not between gold and silver, rather on clay. Bibliothek der Kirchenvaeter (2. Reihe), Kempten u. a. Bibliothek der Kirchenvaeter 15, 211

The church as a whole

The Emperor Constantine the Great (280 – 337AD). In 312 AD, he received, he believed, the help of the Christian God at a crucial battle, thus becoming ruler of the Roman empire's western half. A year later, in the Edict of Milan, he legalized Christianity. By 324 he ruled the Empire's eastern half as well. In 326 his immensely popular, 72-year-old mother Helena made a journey to the Holy Land, establishing the trend of Christian pilgrimage. In 330, having built up the ancient city of Byzantium as his new capital, Constantine renamed it Constantinople and dedicated it to the God of the Christians, whom he seems to have confused with himself. He delayed becoming a Christian till his last illness: few Christians then believed in post-baptismal forgiveness for serious sins. Constantine the Great funded the first church here, a huge basilica, finished by 334. Fire destroyed it in the early 6th century, perhaps during the Samaritan revolt of 529. Pieces of its mosaic floor may be viewed by opening trap doors inside. Its atrium (or forecourt) lay in the open space west of the present building, from which one normally enters the church.

Standing in this open space, we can view successive gates, all filled except for today's small opening. The majestic lintel of Justinian I (482 – 565 AD, from 527 as Byzantine emperor). "He worked ceaselessly, indefatigably, as few rulers in history have ever worked, for what he believed to be the good of his subjects." (Norwich, Byzantium: The Early Centuries, Penguin, 1988, p. 266) Justinian I surmounts what was the central gate of three.

The church we have today is essentially the one rebuilt by this great ruler. It is the oldest church still standing in the land, indeed one of the three or four oldest in the world. It owes its survival to a number of peculiar facts:

The church's designers put a mosaic over the outer door, showing the scene of Jesus' birth, including the wise men (Magi). Since these came from the east, the artists clothed them in Persian dress, complete with Mithras caps. (Similar Magi may still be seen at Justinian's church in Ravenna.) In 614, the Persians broke into the Byzantine period – that is, the period of the Eastern Christian Roman Empire – may be dated from 330 AD, when Constantine re-named the city of Byzantium "Constantinople" and dedicated it to the God of the Christians. Its end, in this land, came in 638, when the Muslims took Jerusalem. Elsewhere it lasted much longer: Constantinople finally fell to the Turks in 1453. Byzantine Empire. They massacred Christians and destroyed their churches. On reaching this one, however, "they were amazed at the picture of the Persian Magi, the astrologers, their fellow countrymen. In respect and affection for their ancestors...they spared the church" (D. Baldi, *Enchiridion Locorum Sanctorum*, Jerusalem, 1955. Baldi, p. 105, n.2). This report stems from a letter written long after the event, at the Jerusalem Synod of 836, in the midst of the Iconoclasm means the smashing of icons. In 726 the Byzantine Emperor Leo III issued an edict abolishing sacred images, beginning with the great golden icon of Christ in his capital. He and his supporters believed they were fulfilling the Second Commandment. The common people, however, and many of the clergy, rose in revolt to defend the icons. The controversy split Church and State in the Byzantine Empire for more than a century. Moreover, since the emperors were iconoclast and the papacy not, it contributed to the widening breach between Rome and Byzantium. Iconoclasm was strong among "monophysites," who believed that Jesus had one nature only: divine. Those who accepted the Council of Chalcedon, proclaiming the two natures of Christ, were more inclined to permit icons as representing Jesus' human side. One of the most eloquent defenders of images was John of Damascus, a scholar and monk who lived at the Mar Saba monastery in the desert east of Bethlehem. The Eastern churches resolved the matter by allowing images, flat or in relief, but forbidding three-dimensional statues. An image is considered to have three dimensions if you can grab it by the nose. Iconoclast controversy: the point was to show that images had saved a major church.

Justinian's church was later saved by another feature as well. The architects designed the eastern end as a cross, with large apses facing east, south and north. The southern apse could be interpreted as a Muslim Mihrab: a niche or depression in a wall, e.g. of a mosque, indicating the kibla: the direction toward Mecca, for the purpose of Muslim prayer. After the Islamic conquest in 638, the Caliph: from the Arabic khalifa, meaning "successor" (of Muhammad the Prophet); hence: the leader of Islam. Caliph Omar visited Bethlehem. Revering Jesus as a prophet and servant of God, he prayed in this southern apse. (Ibn al-Batriq, cited in Marmardji, A. *Textes géographiques arabes sur la Palestine (Etudes bibliques)*. Paris, 1951. Marmardji, p. 4). Then he gave the Christians a written guarantee that Muslims would pray there as individuals only. When the Caliph Al-Hakim (996-1021). Fatimid Caliph who ruled the Muslim world from Egypt, waging a relentless campaign to convert his Christian and Jewish subjects to Islam. In 1016, convinced of his own divinity, he led his followers out of Islam into a new religion, whose members are known as Druze. He disappeared in Cairo in 1021. Non-Druze believe he was murdered. Druze believe he went into hiding and will return to redeem and rule the world. Al-Hakim, still in his Muslim phase, carried out a great destruction of churches in 1009, he had to leave this one alone because Muslims prayed here.

Thus Justinian's church of 529 has survived to this day. The Crusaders filled in most of his great gate, leaving one formed by their typical pointed arch. Through it went the Crusader kings of Jerusalem to be crowned: they eschewed a golden coronation in the city where their Savior had been crowned with thorns.

Later Christians walled up most of the Crusader gate as well, leaving an entrance smaller than an ordinary doorway, forcing all but children to stoop. (See the photograph above.) This too had its reason. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Greek Orthodox walled off the choir, abandoning the main part of the church, which merchants then used as a market, and "the Janissaries of the Pasha and the Beduins of the desert went there to tie up their horses to the abandoned columns of the nave" (*Les Eglises de la Terre Sainte*, Paris, 1860).

After receiving permission to expel the market, the clergy walled up most of the Crusader gate so that no one could get a horse in. That explains today's tiny entrance. The result, for a Christian, is fitting: One has to make oneself small to visit the place where God made Himself small.

For a detailed explanation of the church, see [G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, The Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Jerusalem: Carta, ca. 1993](#). Here are a few pointers:

The basic structure, which we see on entering, goes back to Justinian (529 AD), who raised the floor above Constantine's and provided the 44 pillars, then unpainted. Its octagonal baptismal font, once on the eastern end, is now in the southern aisle.

There were and are no seats. People would normally stand throughout the Byzantine service, which sometimes lasted for seven hours or more. "And now we are entered on our travail and anguish," wrote Paul of Aleppo in the 17th century on entering Orthodox Russia, "For all their churches are empty of seats. There is not one, even for the bishop; you see the people all through the service standing like rocks... God help us for the length of their prayers and chants and Masses, for we suffered great pain, so that our very souls were tortured with fatigue and anguish" ([Lady Laura Ridding, ed. The Travels of Macarius, London, 1936](#) p. 14).

From descriptions by pilgrims, we know that Justinian's church was covered with mosaics, but the fragments we see today date from the 12th century. On the side walls of the nave, in the lowest band, the artists represented the ancestors of Jesus: on the south wall according to Matthew, on the north according to Luke. Above that, on the north wall, they put summaries of the decisions by the Six Provincial Councils of the Orthodox: we can still see Sardis and Antioch. Opposite these, on the south wall, were summaries of the Seven Ecumenical Councils. Today only that from the first Council of Constantinople remains (held in 381 AD): it confirmed the condemnation of Arius, presbyter of Alexandria in the 4th century, taught that God had created Jesus Christ at a specific time as His instrument for saving the world. Although a perfect man, the Son must be subordinate to the Father, his nature human rather than divine. The doctrine appealed to many in all ranks, threatening to tear the newly legalized religion apart. That condemnation had originally occurred at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), which decided that Jesus is co-eternal with God the Father and of the same substance with Him. The mosaic summarizing Nicaea is gone. Fortunately, a monk made a copy before it disappeared:

The Holy Synod of 318 holy Fathers against Arius, who claimed that the son and the Word of God were created, met under the Emperor Constantine the Great. The Holy Synod decreed and confessed that the only Son and Word of God, by whom all things were made, is co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father, begotten and not made.

In order to overcome Arianism, Eastern Christendom surrounded the Lord's Table (the altar) with splendor and mystery, befitting one who is consubstantial with God the Father. We can still sense something of the old splendor in this Nativity church. As for mystery, we find it in the development of the iconostasis or screen, such as the one in the eastern apse. There was no such separation in churches before Arius, but in opposition to his doctrine, Christians of the East sought to stress the awesome mystery of Christ by concealing the holy Table from the eyes of the congregation. At first they used curtains. Justinian added a standing screen with doors, full of icons (hence "iconostasis"), at his great church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Other Eastern churches copied this feature, until it became the rule ({{tips}}Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Penguin, 1971|Chadwick,{{/tips}} pp. 266-67).

Crusader artists painted thirty of Justinian's 44 pillars. Today they make up one of the world's most complete collections of medieval paintings. The practice of polishing them with oil is responsible for their present dullness, although the smoke of the lamps has contributed too. The figures include not only the usual saints, but also saintly kings, such as Canute of England (1017-35) and Olaf of Norway (1016-29). If we stand in the middle aisle, we can easily find Elijah being fed by the raven (fourth pillar from the east). One pillar shows Onuphrius, a Byzantine monk who went naked; he was able to retain his modesty thanks to the amplitude of his beard.

The Nativity church has been a place of strife among the Christian communities, although the matter has rested (with occasional exceptions) since the Crimean War and the Treaty of Paris (1856). Here the European powers accepted a firman (decree) by the Turkish sultan, assigning rights in the holy places. The Sultan's ruling re-affirmed the Status Quo ante bellum, dating from 1757. In accordance with it, the Greek Orthodox have almost the entire church, although the Armenians and the Roman Catholics also hold carefully specified rights.

Passing through the northern transept (under Armenian control), we leave the church and immediately enter another: The Roman Catholic Church of Saint Catherine of Alexandria, built in 1881 on the ruins of a Crusader sanctuary. It has recently been redesigned.

The Christmas Eve Mass on December 24 is celebrated here. In the southern aisle is a staircase leading down to a series of caves. (These grottoes connect to the cave of the manger, but the door is usually shut.) A number of traditions were linked to these caves, mainly in the Middle Ages. On our left, when we come down the stairs, is a low-ceilinged chapel believed to contain the graves of the innocent children. Before us is a chapel where Christians locate the angel's warning to Joseph, to take his family and flee to Egypt. Through an opening on the right, we find several grave markers with inscriptions, including St. Jerome's and that of his helper, St. Paula. Jerome himself described Paula's burial "beside the Cave of the Lord," so her grave is probably authentic. Jerome's was here as well, but a Byzantine emperor moved the body of the cantankerous Bible translator to Constantinople, and later it is thought by some to have been moved to the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. The chamber beside Jerome's grave came to be known as his study, where the Vulgate originated.

Logistics for a visit to the main church and the manger

{{tips}}Shoulders covered, legs covered below the knees.{{/tips}}|Modest dress{{/tips}} required.

Opening hours: Winter: 05:30-17:30; Summer: 05:30-18:00

In the mornings the various denominations hold Masses in the manger with brief intervals between them. It is best to visit from 13:00.

One may also inquire with Bethlehem Tourist Information, which is open from Sunday through Thursday from 08:00-16:00. Telephone 02-274 1581/2. Fax: 02-274 3753.