

# The KING'S WAY

Christ the King Parish -- McFarland, Wis. 53558

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## THE RICH HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM A Sacred Place for Jews, Christians and Muslims

The old Hebrew name for the town of Bethlehem is *bêth lehem* which means “house of bread.” The Arabic form is *bêt lahm* which means “house of meat.”

The town of Bethlehem dates to well before the Christian era. Archaeologists have found evidence of Canaanite tribes that settled on the spot of present-day Bethlehem about 1,400 years before the birth of Jesus. These tribes named this place Beit Lahama. On the mount of the present Church of the Nativity, the Canaanites built a temple to venerate their god Lahama – honored throughout Babylonian creation myths. Beit Lahama hosted many sacred shrines in ancient times.

The Hebrew Scriptures mention two Bethlehems. Joshua 19:15 identifies it as one of the twelve cities belonging to the tribe of Zebulon. This Bethlehem is in the north – only 7 miles from Nazareth. In order to avoid confusion, this northern town is generally called “Bethlehem Zebulon” or “Bethlehem of Nazareth,” while the place of Jesus’ birth (located 5 miles from Jerusalem) is called “Bethlehem of Judea” or “Bethlehem-Ephrathah.”



*Town of Bethlehem*

### The Tomb of Rachel

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Bethlehem became a memorable place for Jewish people during the time of the patriarchs – the era beginning with Abraham and extending to the death of Moses. Genesis 35:16-19 and 48:7 tell of the death of Rachel, the wife of Jacob and the mother of Joseph. Rachel died in childbirth at Bethlehem after delivering her son Benjamin.



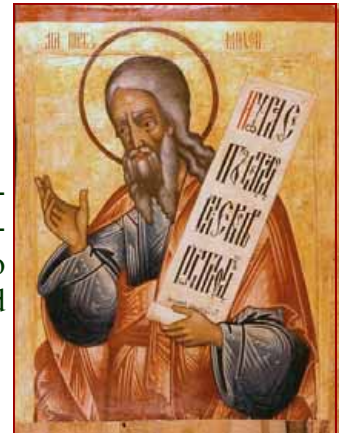
*Rachel's Tomb*

The Scriptures tell that Jacob set up a memorial stone to mark her burial place. For unlike the other patriarchs of the Old Testament, she is not buried at Hebron. Rachel's tomb sits inside a domed building about a mile north of Bethlehem. Legend holds that originally atop her burial place lay 11 flat stones with a twelfth stone above the others. Jacob's 11 older sons placed the first stones, and Jacob laid the final one. While not sacred to Christians, the tomb is a place at which Jewish women pray for their children. Muslim Arabs also honor the tomb because of their ancestry from Abraham.

The First Book of Samuel mentions Rachel's Tomb (1 Sam 10:2) as the place where newly anointed King Saul, at the command of the Prophet Samuel, meets two men. And St. Matthew, after his account of the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, mentions Rachel bewailing her children (Matt 2:18).

## **Bethlehem's Significance Emerges**

While Bethlehem did not really emerge as an important place in Israelite history until the time of King David, the Book of Judges (Judges 17:7-13) does mention a young Levite, a hereditary priest, from Bethlehem who went to the prophet Micah. The significance of Bethlehem as the foretold birthplace of Jesus came from several Old Testament sources.



*The Prophet Micah*

The Old Testament prophet Micah wrote:

“But you, Bethlehem-Ephrathah, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient times.” (Micah 5:1)

Micah prophesied that someday a prince of David's house would rule over a reunited Israel. Matthew's Gospel (Matt 2:6) quotes Micah as the scriptural source for Herod's chief priest and scribes determining Bethlehem to be the birthplace of the newborn king of the Jews.

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The Book of Ruth tells the story of Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons, who left their native Bethlehem because of famine. They traveled to the plateau of Moab (the land east of the Sea of Galilee). Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons who had married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Both of Naomi's sons then died, and Naomi planned to return home to Bethlehem because she heard that the famine had ended.

Naomi told her daughters-in-law to return to their families and to marry

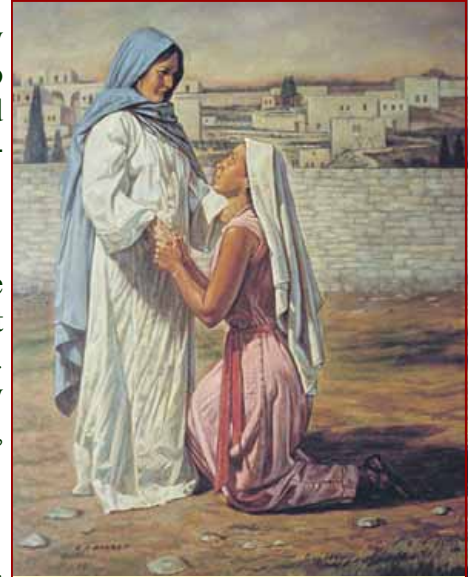
again. But Ruth refused and spoke words now often read or sung at wedding ceremonies:

“For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there be buried. May the Lord do thus to me, and more, if even death separates me from you!” (Ruth 1: 16-17)

Naomi and Ruth returned to Bethlehem destitute. To supply food for Naomi and herself, Ruth went into the fields of Boaz, who was a prominent kinsman of her father-in-law’s clan, and she gleaned ears of grain. Boaz, having heard that Ruth had heroically accompanied her mother-in-law to Bethlehem, spotted Ruth in the field.

Boaz restored the lands of Elimelech to Naomi who gave them back to Boaz because in a patriarchal society women could not own property. Boaz then married Ruth. Ruth and Boaz bore a child whom they named Obed. Obed was the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

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*Naomi and Ruth*

Saul was the first king of Israel. But Saul, disobeying God, spared the best of the livestock from an enemy’s city set apart for destruction. Saul destroyed only what was worthless (1 Samuel 15:8). God sent Samuel, who had first anointed Saul as king, to Bethlehem and the home of Jesse. From among Jesse’s sons, God had chosen one to become the new king. Jesse’s youngest son, David – Ruth’s great-grandson – was anointed the second King of the Jews.



*David was anointed the second King of the Jews.*

Bethlehem then became one of the most prominent places among the cities and towns of Israel. It was the home of the dynasty that ruled the land until the Babylonian Captivity, when the Israelite people were defeated and taken as slaves to the land that is now Iraq.

When the Israelite people were eventually able to return from exile, just a remnant came back to the land of their ancestors. Many had married Babylonians and felt more comfortable staying in the place where they were born than to return to the desolate country of their forebears. The leader Ezra said that “sons of Bethlehem, one hundred and twenty-three” (Ezra 2:21) returned to Bethlehem. Nehemiah (Nehemiah 7:26) told of a census that recorded “men of Bethlehem and Netophah, one hundred and eighty-eight.”

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In the years between the end of the exile and the birth of Jesus, first the Syrians and then the Romans imposed kings and rulers that included two King Herods. The lineage of Davidic Kings would never be restored. The Maccabean Revolt brought a period of independence in post-exilic Israel, but Roman armies would control the land when Jesus lived. "The City of David," however, would remain the venerable title for the hometown of Israel's second king.

## New Testament and Early Christian Bethlehem

The New Testament makes only three references to Bethlehem. John's Gospel mentions an objection for Jesus being the Messiah: "Does not Scripture say that the Messiah, being of David's family, is to come from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?" (John 7:42).

References in Matthew 2 and Luke 2 are most dear to Christians, for they narrate the birth of Jesus in the City of David. The writings of early Church fathers also reference Bethlehem as the

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birthplace of Jesus. St. Justin Martyr, in his mid-second century "Dialogue with Trypho," wrote that Jesus was born in a cave near the village of Bethlehem.



The tradition of the birth in a cave became widely accepted in the early Church. Caves were certainly not rare in that region. The early third-century Christian Origen wrote "In Bethlehem the cave is pointed out where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and the rumor in those places and among foreigners of the Faith that indeed Jesus was born in this cave." (Against Celsus 1:51) Apocryphal gospels also note Jesus' birth in a cave.

## Bethlehem in Christian Times



*Grotto of the Nativity*

The destruction of Jerusalem and its environs in 70 A.D. meant a dispersion of Christians. Following the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-135 A.D., the Romans set up a shrine to the god Adonis on the site of the Nativity. Not until Constantine became the Roman emperor did Christians begin to venerate the site of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Constantine built the Church of the Nativity there about 330 A.D.

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In the crypt of the church lies the grotto of the Nativity. Above the spot

where tradition holds that Jesus was born stands a silver star with the inscription “Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus natus est” (“Here Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary”). Nearby is what tradition holds to be the place of the manger where Jesus lay.

In 529 the church burned during a Samaritan revolt. Emperor Justinian (527-565) restored, modified and expanded the structure. Over the centuries, necessary remodeling and repair was needed. The church that pilgrims visit today at Bethlehem, however, is very similar to the structure built by Constantine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century.



*The Bethlehem Star*

### **Muslim Control & the Crusaders**

In 614 Muslims invaded and captured Bethlehem. Later sources said that the Muslims did not destroy the Church of the Nativity because they saw a mosaic with the Magi clothed in Persian garb. In 637 the Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab visited Bethlehem and promised that the Church of the Nativity would be preserved for Christian use.

The Crusaders captured Bethlehem in 1099. They fortified the city and built a new monastery and cloister near the church. The town flourished under Crusader rule. Baldwin I, first king of the Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem, was crowned in Bethlehem on Christmas Day of 1100. On the same day, the Diocese of Bethlehem was founded, and a bishop was installed.

In 1187 Saladin captured Bethlehem and forced the Latin Rite priests to leave, although in 1192 he allowed two Latin priests and two deacons to return.

In a treaty, Bethlehem was restored to the Crusaders from 1229-1244.

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*The Crusaders*

The period of tolerance for Christians ended when Rukn al-Din Baibars came to power. He dismissed the clergy, and in 1263 he demolished the walls of the town. Only in the following century did the Latin clergy return to Bethlehem. In 1347 the Franciscans moved into the monastery adjoining the Church of the Nativity. They gained possession of the Grotto of the Nativity and the right to administer and maintain the church.

## The Ottoman Empire

In 1517 the Ottoman Empire took control of Palestine. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity split into a schism between the Latin Rite Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches. Both sides vied for control of the sacred shrines in the Holy Land. Often, these disputes resulted in violence. Only during the last 50 years has this bitterness ended. In church buildings such as the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, certain sections of these buildings have been given to the Latin Rite and other sections to the Eastern Orthodox.



From 1831 to 1841, control of Palestine fell to the Muhammad Ali Pasha in Egypt. In 1841 Bethlehem returned to the Ottoman Empire until the end of World War I. After the war the Germany-allied Ottoman Empire ceded lands it occupied in the Middle East to Britain and France. British rule in Palestine ended in 1947.

## 1947 – Present

In 1947 the United Nations General Assembly resolved to partition Palestine. Bethlehem was included in a special international enclave administered by the U. N. During the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the nation of Jordan occupied Bethlehem. Refugees from areas occupied by Israeli forces fled to a spot near Bethlehem, and the U.N. set up the official refugee camp of Beit Jibrin. This influx of displaced Muslims dramatically changed the demography of Bethlehem. No longer would Bethlehem be a predominately Christian-populated community.



*Refugees in Camp Beit Jibrin*

In the 1967 war, the Israelis captured Bethlehem along with the West Bank. On Dec. 21, 1995, Bethlehem came under the full control of the Pales-

stinian Authority, for which the city serves as capital of the Bethlehem District. Muslims now constitute the majority in Bethlehem, a city of about 40,000 people. Unfortunately, Christian Palestinians now leave Bethlehem at an alarmingly rapid pace as they emigrate to the United States and other countries.

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## A Siege Mounted & Walls Built

During a May 2002 raid by Israeli forces, many armed Palestinians fled into the Church of the Nativity. They chose the church because it had a supply of food and water and because it served as a visible focal point for an international response. About 120-240 hostages were held inside the church by about 40 gunmen. Israeli snipers sporadically shot at militants. The standoff lasted 38 days. Eventually, an agreement was reached and 13

militants were sent via Cyprus to European cities, and 26 militants went to Gaza. Everyone else was set free.



*A Siege Mounted in May 2002*

*The decision of the Israeli government to build a wall for protection against terrorist attacks has had a serious impact on Bethlehem. Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks now surround the city.*

The decision of the Israeli government to build a wall for protection against terrorist attacks has had a serious impact on Bethlehem. Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks now surround the city. Bethlehem residents may enter nearby Jerusalem only with special permits that are seldom granted. Travel to other parts of Palestinian territories are at best impeded

and at worst prevented. Periodically, Bethlehem has been placed under a curfew that prevents residents from leaving their homes.

## A Bethlehem Pilgrimage?

The government of Israel encourages pilgrimage. Tourism produces needed revenues. Pilgrims, however, should never travel by themselves in the occupied West Bank. It is always best to travel with a group, especially one organized by the Franciscans. Generally, tour busses can pass fairly readily through checkpoints. Individuals traveling by themselves – even those with American passports – are looked upon with great suspicion by the guards.

And taking a wrong turn could result in imprisonment by Islamic zealots.

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Terrorist attacks have decreased dramatically in Israel since the building of the wall. Yet due diligence is always important. Tour guides – especially the Franciscans – can have their ears to the ground to sense difficulties. Pilgrimages are wonderful experiences. But in today's Middle East, exercising caution is always of paramount importance.

*(Continued on back cover)*

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### **The Final Issue**

This will be the final issue of The King's Way newsletter. I have written most of the articles for eight years and 32 issues. I spend an average of 40 hours to write each newsletter. I have treated many topics that I believe are significant. Postage costs have increased significantly since 2004, and I am running out of both ideas and energy. I will still write the monthly E-News.



I would like to thank all those who have read The King's Way over the eight years and have been so kind in complimenting me. I would like to thank Ernie Stetenfeld, my editor. He often turned my often rough material into highly readable English. I would also thank Ann Sanner, who has combined my text with wonderful graphics to make a very attractive publication.

*-- Fr. Steve*