

**"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,
which is Christ the Lord;"** *(Luke 2,11)*

Bethlehem (House of Bread - House of Lahmu) is located about 10 Kilometers (6 miles) southwest of Jerusalem by the hill country of Judea on the way to Hebron. It is first mentioned in the Armana letters fourteen centuries BCE.

Bethlehem is sacred to all three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Bethlehem plays a significant part in the Old Testament, in the history of the Israelites, both before they entered Egypt and slavery, and after the Exodus. It appears in the Old Testament as Ephrat, where Rachel the beloved matriarch of the Jewish People, the favorite wife of Jacob, died during childbirth. The Tomb of Rachel, is a pilgrimage place for Jews and Muslims alike. Among other Biblical mentions and Holy Sites in Bethlehem: Rachel's tomb, Naomi and Ruth, Samuel anoints King David and the well from which David's warriors brought him waters. In the bible it is called "Bethlehem of Judah" (belonging to the tribe of Judah), to distinguish it from the other Bethlehem, which was in the North in the territory of the Zebulon.

David, the youngest son of a Bethlehem-farmer (a shepherd) is chosen and anointed by the Prophet Samuel on behalf of the Lord as a king. (First Samuel 17:12). According to Matthew 2 and Luke 2, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and Matthew interpreted this as the fulfillment of Micah's prophecy. In effect it became a sort of official rightful place of the family line of David. (See Family Tree of Jesus Christ - "[From Adam and Eve to Jesus Christ](#)").

Christian tradition, perhaps as early as the second century CE, identified a cave as the site of Jesus' birth. About 338 CE Constantine, the Roman emperor and his mother, Helena, built a church over the grotto and In 527 Justinian the Emperor of the Byzantine Empire resettled in Bethlehem, his reign was one of great prosperity and expansion of churches. The site of the Nativity is a central pilgrimage destination for Christians from all over the world.

Bethlehem was a city of importance to the Crusaders, who conquered it in the year 1100. Over years of wars between the Crusaders and the Muslims the city was destroyed, and then subsequently rebuilt. The Turks destroyed the city in 1244, but the church somehow escaped, Bethlehem was rebuilt once again.

When finally the Crusaders were driven from Palestine in 1291, the Moslem rulers used the holy places for political and financial ends. Although Bethlehem was still nominally endowed, collection of revenue from the land was impossible. In 1332 Pope John XXII wrote to Edward III of England, to David II of Scotland and to Simon of Meopham, Archbishop of Canterbury, asking them to help the bishop of Bethlehem to regain his interest and so enable him to return to Bethlehem and carry out repairs. It seems little was

done.

Decay and destruction proceeded over the years as a result of fighting between the local Christian and Muslim residents.

The Population of Bethlehem today is made up of Christians and Moslems. Among the Christians: Catholics of Latin, Syrian, Malachite, Armenian and Maronite rites and Orthodox of Greek, Syrian and Armenian denominations. Protestants are present in the Judean town.

As a result of the Six-Day War, Bethlehem came under Israeli rule.

In December 1995, the town of Bethlehem reverted to Palestinian control. Israelis still have access to Rachel's tomb, on the northern outskirts of the city. Unfortunately, occasional outbreaks of violence continue to occur between Palestinian demonstrators from Bethlehem and Israeli troops stationed outside the city's limits.

"Then they moved on from Bethel. While they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel began to give birth and had great difficulty. And as she was having great difficulty in childbirth, the midwife said to her, "Don't be afraid, for you have another son. As she breathed her last --for she was dying --she named her son Ben-oni. But his father named him Benjamin. So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem). Over her tomb Jacob set up a pillar, and to this day that pillar marks Rachel's tomb"

(Gen. 35,16-19).

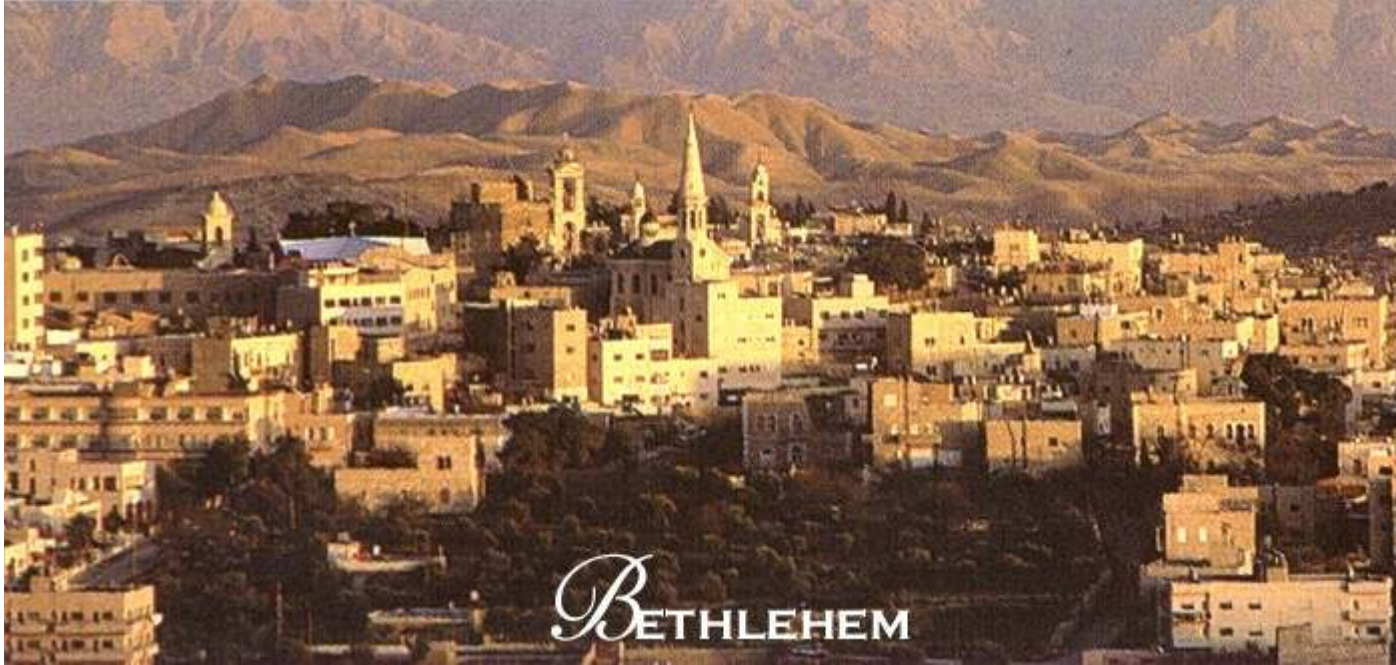
"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem (because he was of the house and lineage of David)"

(Luke 2,4)

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the lord."

(|Luke 2,11)

Below is a view of Bethlehem today...



Bethlehem

Also known as Beit Lahm, Beit Sahur, Bet Lehem, Betar, Beth-Lehem, Beth-lehem-ephatah, Bethlehemjudah, Bit-Lahmi, City of David, Ephratah, Ephrath

-Unlike the rest of the photos on BiblePlaces.com, some of the photos on this page are recent and not included in the current edition of the Pictorial Library-



From the north

This aerial photograph shows the main road to Bethlehem from the north (Jerusalem). The modern city stretches out from the historic center in all directions. Today Bethlehem is controlled by the Palestinian Authority and has a population of about 22,000 not including the suburbs of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour.

Shepherd with Flock

The area to the east of the city is traditionally believed to be the area of the fields of the shepherds "keeping watch o'er their flocks by night." Several churches have been built to commemorate this event. Even today local shepherds can be seen tending their flocks in this same area (even on Christmas eve!)



Nativity Church

The entrance to the famous church in Bethlehem is remarkably unimpressive. The large courtyard is perfect for priests, pilgrims or tourists, but most noticeable are the vendors. Palestinian police now patrol the



area. Buses no longer are allowed to enter the square, but instead are directed to a large parking structure.

Church Interior

This building is the oldest standing church in the Holy Land. Originally built by Constantine's mother in the 4th century, Emperor Justinian rebuilt the current structure in the 530s. It was apparently spared destruction from the Persians in 614 A.D. because the invaders saw the depictions of the Magi on the walls. Local Muslim-Christian friendship is believed to be why the church was not destroyed during al-Hakim's rule in 1009.





Ancient Mosaics

Underneath the present floor are beautiful mosaics of the earlier church. The church built at the direction of Constantine's mother was octagonal in shape, typical of Byzantine memorial churches. Before the Roman empire converted to Christianity, the area was a sacred grove of Thammuz.

The Birth Cave

Early tradition places the birth of Jesus in a cave. Scripture doesn't mention the existence of a cave, and skeptics note that many biblical events were commemorated in caves (more convenient for pilgrims to be sheltered from sun and rain?). But it is also true that many houses in the area are built in front of caves. A cave could serve a household well by providing shelter for the animals or a place of storage.





Birth Place

According to tradition, Mary gave birth to Jesus at the place of where the star is located on the floor. The tradition that the birth was in a cave is one of the oldest Christian traditions. Justin Martyr mentions it in the mid-2nd century, as does the Protoevangelium of James (also 2nd c.). Origen notes that the cave of Jesus' birth was pointed out in his day and no doubt this was the same place where the Byzantine church was erected.