

# BETHLEHEM

**New Testament Scriptures to Read: Luke 2; Matthew 1:18–2:23**

**Old Testament Scriptures to Read: Isaiah 7:14; Num 24:15-19**



*Shepherd near Bethlehem*

Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem, the city of David, because of the census decree of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-5). But Bethlehem is to be Jesus' birthplace not simply because of Caesar's decree, but because it is according to God's foretold plan, "But you, O Bethlehem, ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler of Israel" (Micah 5:2). Bethlehem, Hebrew meaning "city of bread," will be the birthplace of him who is to be the Bread of Life. Due to the census' influx of travelers, Joseph and Mary can only find shelter in a cave, and as a result, the King of kings and Prince of Peace is born, not in a palace, but in a lowly manger.



*Site of Jesus' Birth in Grotto of Nativity*

Just east of the town of Bethlehem are the fields where the shepherds were "keeping watch over their flock" when the "angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:8-9). The shepherds are the first to receive the heavenly revelation of him who is to be the Good Shepherd of all. Much further to the east, wise men behold a sign in the heavens. Aware of Balaam's oracle that "a scepter shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:15-19), they head to Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel/Judea to pay homage to the new king. Here they only find a confused Herod the Great. While the "book of creation" (the star) is only able to direct the wise men to Jerusalem, the "book of Scripture" (Micah 5:2) is able to direct them to Bethlehem, where they pay homage with their gifts and worship him who is King of all.



*Constantinian Floor Mosaics*

Already in the first century, Christian pilgrims traveled to this site to venerate the spot of Christ's birth. Later St. Helena and the emperor Constantine build the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church of the Nativity. While much of its original splendor has been lost, the Church of the Nativity is substantially unchanged. Original mosaics, seen through trap doors in the floor, date from Constantine's original church, as do the columns along the church's nave. What is not Constantinian, dates back to the restoration of the emperor Justinian in 531 AD. It is said that when the Persians (who burnt down the Holy Sepulcher and other churches in 614 AD) came to Bethlehem, they spared the church because they saw with amazement an exterior mosaic (no longer visible) depicting the Magi in Persian dress.





Door of Humility

The Church of the Nativity is entered through the Door of Humility—an entry so low that it will require all but small children to bow as they walk through. While its size is the result of two earlier and larger entrances being blocked, the last of which occurred during the Ottoman period to prevent non-Christian horsemen from riding into the church, the door is a reminder of our need to imitate Christ’s humility in our own life. Inside the church, beneath the high altar is the Grotto of the Nativity where the sites of Christ’s birth and manger can be venerated.

Adjoining the Church of the Nativity is the Church of St. Catherine, where the Latin Patriarch offers Midnight Mass. These churches are built over a series of caves, one of which is the cave of Jesus’ birth. Another is the chapel of St. Jerome, who moved to Bethlehem in 386 AD and led a life of asceticism and study, translating the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into Latin—the lingua franca of his day. Jerome gives us a wonderful description of the gathering of Christians in Palestine at that time, “Illustrious Gauls congregate here, and no sooner has the Briton, so remote from our world, arrived at religion than he leaves his early-setting sun to seek a land which he knows only by reputation and from the Scriptures. Then the Armenians, the Persians, the peoples of India and Ethiopia, of Egypt, and of Pontus, Cappadocia, Syria, and Mesopotamia! ... They come in throngs and set us examples of every virtue. The languages differ but the religion is the same; as many different choirs chant the psalms as there are nations...”



Church of St. Catherine

We will experience Jerome’s words for ourselves as we visit the Holy Land. There we will see pilgrims from all over the world, and hear prayers, singing and the words of the liturgy spoken in numerous languages, a very tangible experience of the universal Church and Christ’s call that the gospel reach to the end’s of the earth.

Some thoughts for your reflection and *lectio* on these passages:

- Jesus, the Son of God, takes on human flesh and is born in a manger. May we make our own the prayer, “Jesus, meek and humble of heart, make my heart like unto Thine.”
- St. Jerome wrote, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” May we be ignorant no more!