

# Bethlehem

## A Brief History



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Bethlehem is located less than 10 kilometers south of the Old City of Jerusalem, along the main road between Jerusalem and Hebron, on a mountainous plateau that rises an average of 750 to 800 meters above sea level. Today it has a population of about 32,000, in addition to three refugee camps built after 1948 on its territory. Bethlehem is Syriac for “house of bread.” In Canaanite culture, there was a god called Lakhmu, the god of food.

Bethlehem is home to three universities as well as a number of museums and cultural centers. Most of the buildings of the old town have been restored through the efforts of the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation. The city’s infrastructure underwent comprehensive rehabilitation in preparation for the Bethlehem 2000 celebrations to commemorate 2,000 years since the birth of Jesus Christ.

### BETHLEHEM • PALESTINE

Bethlehem was a Canaanite settlement around 2000 BC, and it was mentioned in historical documents in the fourteenth century BC. But this ancient history is not the reason for its universal fame, which has come through its status as the birthplace of Christ. Subsequently, and with the gradual expansion of Christianity, it has become a place of pilgrimage for Christians throughout the world and includes a number of other sacred sites, for example, the Milk Grotto near the Church of the

Nativity and Shepherds’ Field in the nearby city of Beit Sahour, among others.

The fourth century AD witnessed a steady increase in the city’s importance due to the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Byzantine Empire, and Emperor Constantine ordered the construction of the Church of the Nativity under the supervision of his mother St. Helena. In the same church, most of the New Testament was translated into Latin

Manger square between 1890-1900.



by St. Hieronymus (Jerome). Bethlehem also witnessed the emergence of monasteries, including the Monastery of Mar Saba, one of the oldest in Palestine. It still exists today in the wilderness east of Bethlehem.

The Church of the Nativity fell victim to the Samaritan revolt in 529 AD. Later, Emperor Justinian ordered the construction of a new church, which escaped certain destruction by the Persians in 614 AD, during which the majority of churches and monasteries of Palestine were destroyed.

With the Arab-Muslim conquests, the city gained an additional Islamic religious dimension, given the distinctive position of Jesus in Islam. In many early accounts, the miracle journey of Isra' and Mi'raj was linked to Bethlehem through the visit of the Prophet of Islam to the birthplace of Jesus. Muslims, as individuals, began to pray inside the Church of the Nativity.

The development of handicrafts and the expansion of trade attest to the fact that Bethlehem flourished during the early Islamic period. The Crusader period brought the fortification of the city, and the restoration of the Church of the Nativity, whose wall mosaics and columns were richly decorated.

Bethlehem experienced the same historical events as the rest of Palestine during the following centuries, being reconquered by Saladin in 1187 AD, and recovering part of its Arab Christian, Muslim, Syriac, and other Eastern Christian communities. In 1263, Sultan al-Zahir Baybars destroyed the walls and towers of Bethlehem.

After the period of Ottoman control over Palestine, and because of the expansion of the borders of this empire, pilgrimage to Bethlehem increased in an unprecedented manner and continued to grow gradually until the nineteenth century. With the development of worldwide transportation, Palestine was opened to Western pilgrims and travelers, many of whom documented their journeys through reports, detailed

descriptions, graphics, and images. This period contributed to Bethlehem's development, specifically giving rise to religious art and mother-of-pearl and olive wood handicrafts, as well as the expansion of its trade, which reached throughout the Christian world.

During the reign of Muhammad Ali, the governor of Egypt, the city was partially destroyed (1834). At the end

of the nineteenth century, migration to the Americas began, which depleted the city's human resources and affected its growth. In 1917, Bethlehem, as the rest of Palestine, fell under the British occupation, and in 1948, it was placed under Jordanian rule; in 1967, it fell under Israeli occupation and was subsequently transferred to the Palestinian National Authority in 1995.

Konstantin Ivanovich Gorbatov, landscape of Bethlehem, 1935.

