

Holy Sites Are Known

By Steve Ray

It is often asked: how do we know these are the real sites where Jesus and Mary lived and walked. The earliest Christians realized the importance of these sites and immediately viewed them as sites to be remembered and venerated. Small chapels were built and pilgrims came from around the world to walk on these spots and to pray.

When Christianity became legalized, churches were built on these sites. Tradition, archaeology and the ancient witness confirms the authenticity of the sites. Below is a few examples relating to Bethlehem.

In a very enlightening side note, Bethlehem was mentioned by St. John Chrysostom in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, written in AD 370: “. . . Since that birth [of Jesus], men come from the ends of the earth to see the manger, and the site of the shed.”¹ The early Christians remembered and preserved the location and pilgrims like you visited even in the first centuries.

The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* says, “The cave-stable is mentioned by Justin Martyr, Origen, and Jerome. After the Romans conquered Bethlehem anew (AD 135) the site of the Nativity was desecrated, probably under Hadrian (117–138; cf. Jerome *Epistle* 58.3). Jerome lived for thirty-three years in Bethlehem (AD 387–420). Here he helped found and direct pilgrim hospices, convents for women, and a monastery.”²

The *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* says, “The birth of Jesus possibly took place in a cave in the rocks outside the town. The early Christian writer Justin Martyr 9100–165) thought so, as did Origen (c. 185–254) some years later. Origen frequently resided in the Holy Land and wrote, ‘In Bethlehem you are shown the cave where he was born, and within the cave the manger where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes.’ Jerome later described the grotto over which the Emperor Constantine had built a basilica. In excavations in 1934–35, evidence indicated a second period of building in the reign of Justinian (AD 527–565), when Constantine’s basilica was extended beyond its original proportions. Steps lead down to the grotto, the rectangular shape of which suggests that Constantine’s builders reshaped the original. But there is no description of the grotto prior to the construction of Constantine’s basilica.”³

Notice a case in which we can see how important holy sites were and how they were carefully remembered. The Tomb of Rachel can be visited today in Bethlehem even though she was buried there about 3,800 years ago! Abraham bought a plot of land called

¹ NPNF, 2nd series, 10:44.

² Bromiley, G. W. (1988; 2002). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Vol. 1, Page 472). Wm. B. Eerdmans).

³ Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers).

the Cave of Machpelah (Gen 35:16–20; 48:7; 1 Sam 10:2). Even today, the Cave of Machpelah is known and can be visited in Hebron, just as the tomb of Rachel can be visited in Bethlehem.

These places were remembered! Abraham was buried in the cave and over 400 years later when the children of Israel came back from slavery in Egypt they knew where it was. They've known that spot for almost four millennia.

Cave of Machpelah

Bought by Abraham about 1850 BC as a tomb to bury his wife Sarah. It is now in Hebron, the city of Abraham. It was remembered in Genesis 49 over 400 years later when the Israelites returned from Egypt. The city of Hebron was built around this tomb and King Herod build a huge monument over the graves of Abraham and his family which still stands today in the heart of Hebron.

“That he may give me [Abraham] the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field” (Genesis 23:9)

“After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan” (Genesis 23:19)

“Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre” (Genesis 25:9)

“...in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place” (Genesis 49:30)

“...for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite, to possess as a burying place” (Genesis 50:13)

Rachel's Tomb

Notice that Jacob buried Rachel in Bethlehem and the location of the tomb was still known 800 years later—after the Israelites returned from Egypt. Do you think they forgot its location over the subsequent centuries? It is still there today and we filmed there for our David DVD.

“So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” (Genesis 35:19)

“And Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day” (Genesis 35:20)

“[Samuel said to Saul] When you depart from me today you will meet two men by Rachel’s tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah” (1 Samuel 10:2; over 850 years after Rachel was buried there).

These are just two examples from the Old Testament to show how these holy sites were venerated and remembered. The same can be said from the New Testament. Holy people have always remembered the holy sites.

How much more so for Jesus the Son of God who became flesh! We can be very confident that the holy sites we see today, were the holy sites of old—the very places where God and the saints walked and where we can walk today.