

Bethlehem: Here Jesus Christ was truly born

Modern-day pilgrims can be confident that Bethlehem is the authentic site of the birth of Christ.

December 28, 2018 Father Seán Connolly The Dispatch



Bethlehem! The mere sounding of the name of this ancient city brings joy to the Christian heart. The name of Bethlehem has been familiar and dear to us since childhood. Among the first things we were ever taught is the story God's birth which occurred there on a winter's night 2,000 years ago.

If one is fortunate enough to pilgrimage to Bethlehem today, the city he will find is completely different from the quaint village of shepherds he has imagined since childhood. Only the sloping hills clad with olive and fig terraces surrounding the city center recall that traditional image. Bethlehem today is a densely populated Palestinian city located in the West Bank, only six miles south of Jerusalem.

Of its nearly 30,000 inhabitants, 15 percent are Christian. The streets are packed and full of noise from traffic and the large crowds. Shops catering

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to tourists and pilgrims are everywhere, with local merchants constantly hawking their items of hand carved olive wood or mother-of-pearl, an industry introduced by the Franciscans in the 16th century. But can today's pilgrim know for certain he is truly praying in the authentic site of Jesus' birth?



Several modern scholars have cast doubt on whether Bethlehem is the correct location of Jesus' birth. They have tried to disprove this by positing the Christmas event most likely took place in Nazareth, the home of Mary and Joseph in Galilee. This theory is based on the premises of a general doubt in the reliability of Sacred Scriptures, archaeological investigations showing Bethlehem to have been relatively uninhabited at the time of Jesus' birth, and the reasoning that the Blessed Virgin Mary's full-term pregnancy would have made it impractical for her to journey the 90 miles to Bethlehem.

This hypothesis holds the historical-critical view that the Gospels shouldn't be considered as reliable historical accounts. The Nativity account is dismissed as an attempt by the Evangelists to link their Messiah from Galilee to King David of Bethlehem in Judea, merely symbolic narratives

intended to associate Jesus with the prophecy that the Messiah would be David's descendant and born in his own city (Jeremiah 23:5; Micah 2:5).

These scholars cynically suggest that the prophecy wasn't fulfilled, but that accounts of Christ's Nativity were written to fulfill the prophecy. They point out that none of the early New Testament sources, such as the Epistles of St. Paul or the Gospel of St. Mark, make any mention of Bethlehem.

Neither does St. John's Gospel, the last to be written. Mark and John only refer to Our Lord being from Nazareth, but Saints Matthew and Luke are clear in locating his birth in Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:1a; Luke 2:4-7).

Let's review the evidence from the study of Scripture first.

Father Bargil Pixner makes the point:

"There have been countless other historical figures whose place of birth is unknown. People in antiquity became famous as a result of what they said or did in the course of their lives, and that is what was written about. Therefore, it is not surprising that the earliest authors [Paul and Mark] do not mention Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, even assuming the authors could hardly have remained unaware of the fact" (Bargil Pixner, *Paths of the Messiah and Sites of the Early Church from Galilee to Jerusalem: Jesus and Jewish Christianity in Light of Archaeological Discoveries* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010], 9.).

Jesus' Davidic lineage is, however, repeatedly pointed out in the two earliest Gospels (Matthew 9:27; Mark 10:47, etc.), and also by Paul, who in his letter to the church in Rome (circa AD 57), takes for granted that this is known when he writes: "...the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh..." (Romans 1:3) (Pixner, 10).

Testimonies from the early Church assert that Matthew was the first to write his Gospel, probably in the 50s or 60s. Luke could have written his Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles as early as the mid 60s, but probably no later than 80. Pixner supposes that Matthew and Luke's inclusion of their Infancy Narratives were attempts at countering the heretical current of Ebionism,

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which propagated the doctrine that the “prophet” Jesus was adopted as God’s son at the time of his baptism in the River Jordan. Both of them, independently of one another, detailed how Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and thus is one with the Father.

The oral teachings on all that the Lord said and did in his earthly life would not have become so distorted only 30 years after his Ascension as to lose track of the site of his birth. It is easy to imagine Matthew asking Our Lord questions about his infancy and youth, and this serving as the primary source of information for his Gospel.



It is just as reasonable to conclude that Luke, who did not know Jesus personally, along with Matthew, could have consulted close relatives such as Simeon Bar Cleopas—Jesus’ cousin and second bishop of Jerusalem—for source material about the early days of Jesus’ life. Luke could well have incorporated the memories of the Lord’s Mother into what he wrote about the birth of Christ, as Mary lived among the first Christian community on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.

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Luke's infancy narrative has a particular focus on Mary's role in our salvation; her *fiat* at the Annunciation in Nazareth is recorded by Luke alone, and he includes these two verses which suggest he might have interviewed Mary specifically for the purpose of his writing of the Gospel: just after the adoration of the shepherds on Christmas night he writes: "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19); and after the Holy Family's return home when the Christ Child was found in the Temple of Jerusalem, he writes "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51).

To counter the claim that the journey from Galilee to Judea would have been too difficult for Mary and Joseph to undertake, is the fact that Luke's Gospel makes clear that the journey was not optional for Mary and Joseph. A decree was issued from Rome commanding a census of the whole world so Caesar Augustus might



find out how much he could tax his subjects. The Jews who were subject to him were to go to the place of their ancestors to be properly recorded.

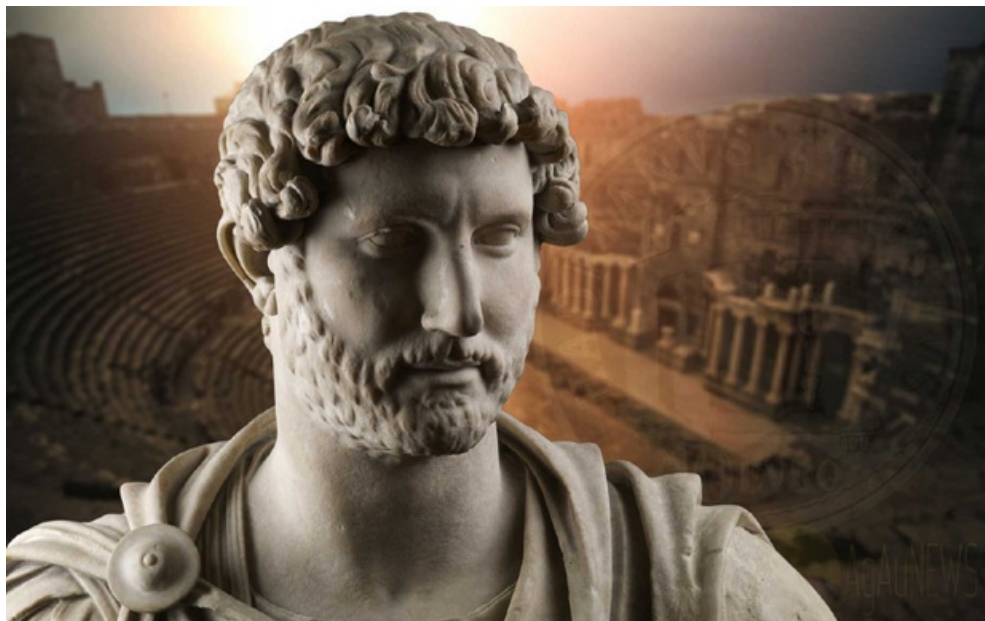
As Joseph was one of the family of David, he with his wife were ordered off to David's city of Bethlehem. Multiple archaeological discoveries have revealed that regular enrollment of taxpayers was a feature of Roman rule and have shown that a census was taken every 14 years. A document from the year AD 104 found in Egypt reveals that citizens were required to return to their original homes, in line with the census described in Luke.

There is compelling archaeological evidence that locates the precise location of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. St. Justin, a native of Palestine born in Neapolis (Nablus), who was martyred in 165, mentioned in his *Dialogue with Trypho* that he knew of a cave in Bethlehem in which Jesus was born.

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Further evidence comes, ironically, from the location of a pagan shrine. In an attempt to stamp out local religions to foster devotion to the Roman cult, it was the common practice of the Emperor Hadrian to build pagan sanctuaries on top of places held sacred by both Christians and Jews. After a revolt of the Jews, Hadrian famously had a temple to Jupiter erected on the Mount of Olives, a temple to Venus built on Golgotha, and a temple to Adonis constructed above the grottoes of Bethlehem marking the site of the Lord's Nativity.

This was done to prevent the possibility of Christian worship at these sites, but because of this sacrilege, St. Helena was able to easily locate them later. The churches she built on these spots are visited by millions of Christian pilgrims every year to this day. Hadrian's profanation proved very helpful. A gift of Divine Providence with a more than a touch of irony.



Christians never forget the site of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, even after they were prevented from visiting the place. When Origen was in Bethlehem in AD 220 he visited the pagan shrine and recounts how he was shown the place of Jesus' birth.

He writes: "In Bethlehem the grotto was shown where, according to the Gospels, Jesus was born, as well as the manger in which, wrapped in swaddling clothes, he was laid. What was shown to me is

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familiar to everyone in the area. The heathens themselves tell everyone who is willing to listen that in the said grotto there a certain Jesus was born whom the Christians revered” (Origen’s *Contra Celsum* 1.51 quoted in: Pixner, 12).

The Christians did not allow this pagan cult to deter them from venerating the holy site of Christ’s birth. Ten years before the construction of the Church of the Nativity around AD 315, the future bishop of Caesarea, Eusebius, wrote: “Up till the present day the local population [of Bethlehem] bears witness to the ancestral tradition and proceeds to show visitors the grotto in which the Virgin gave birth to the Child” (Eusebius’ *Demonstratio Evangelica* 7.2.15 quoted in Pixner, 12).



This is significant according to the famed archaeologist of the Holy Land, Father Jerome Murphy O’Connor, because,

“Pre-Constantinian localizations of sacred sites have much greater validity than identifications which first appear in the C4 when the questions of pilgrims inspired the imaginations of local guides”
(Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *The Holy Land: An Archaeological Guide*

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from Earliest Times to 1700 [New York: Oxford University Press, 1980], 148.).

When Constantine became emperor and converted to Christianity, his pious mother Helena journeyed to the Holy Land to venerate and construct basilicas over the sites sanctified by our Lord's earthly life. When she came to Bethlehem, the site of the Lord's Nativity was easy to find.

She was pointed to the pagan shrine everyone knew was built with the purpose of deterring Christian worship at the *only* place Christians have ever venerated as the site where God was born at Christmas. The church she constructed was consecrated on May 31, 399, and the mosaic floors from it can still be seen today.

When the pilgrim journeys to Bethlehem in our own day and kneels in prayer within the Grotto of the Nativity beneath the sanctuary of the church, he will see a 14-pointed silver star. It bears words that we know with great confidence speak the truth: "*Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est*", that is, "Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary."

