



The Church of the Nativity

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First Edition

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All photos are provided by Garo Nalbandian except baptism photos on page 64.
Credit to the late Father Michel Picirillo for drawings of columns
and to Jerome Murphy-O'Connor *The Holy Land: a Guide* for illustrations
and to the Franciscan museum in Jerusalem for artifacts photographed.

1. Palestine 2. Bethlehem 3. Churches 4. Christianity
5. Architecture 6. Archaeology

2 0 1 3

w w w . d i y a r . p s

Foreword

This book is meant to serve several purposes. It is foremost a keepsake to Bethlehem's greatest treasure, the Church of the Nativity, providing memories of a once-in-a-lifetime visit with photos and text. The average guided group tour lasts perhaps thirty to forty minutes, not long enough for a full examination of all that this church offers. The material provided here amplifies and explains many details and also provides a number of images not readily available to the public. For those who prefer to explore the church at their own pace, this book is designed in a way that can serve as a helpful guide.





Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity is a World Heritage site. Each year at Christmas the world's attention focuses on this small-town humble grotto where many residents trace their roots back to the time when the birth of a child to a young unmarried couple would change human history. During the shortest days of the year people everywhere tune in via television for a glimpse of the midnight Christmas mass. For a brief moment they observe a flickering flame of candlelight that offers a struggling world the promise of peace, hope, light, and love. With that in mind, every day, crowds of tourists, pilgrims, and school children from every corner of the planet make their way to discover what is special about this place. Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity is a World Heritage gem.

This is one of the world's oldest churches, dedicated on May 31, 339 AD. The idea of such a church to memorialize Jesus' birth was proposed by Jerusalem's Bishop Macarius at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. Prior to that time there were no church buildings in the Holy Land because Christianity was not yet recognized by the Roman Empire. Christians then worshipped in private homes. The change to such a large public structure, therefore, was monumental.

This church is one of three major Holy Land churches commemorating events central to Jesus' ministry, namely his birth, his teaching (Mount of Olives), his death and resurrection (the Church of the Holy Sepulcher). The Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, played the role of a budding archaeologist traveling to the Holy Land as Constantine's emissary in 326 AD, investigating these locations, and interviewing local Christians about their shared memory and tradition. Here she learned about a cave just outside the town on the east where Jesus was said to have been born.

Already in the mid-second century Justin, a theologian from Nablus, had referred to this cave, yet without providing much specific detail. Jerome, who lived and worked in Bethlehem, later noted that the cave had been located in a grove where Roman soldiers worshipped the god Adonis. The difficulty is that Jerome was writing several generations after Helena's visit. Yet the presence of Roman soldiers in this area had in fact increased dramatically in the 2nd and 3rd centuries after Hadrian had transformed Jerusalem into a Roman city renamed Aelia Capitolina.

In 248 AD Origen writing from Caesarea stated that "there is shown at Bethlehem the cave where he was born. . . this site is greatly talked of in surrounding places, even among the enemies of the faith." Those opening words suggest first-hand knowledge, perhaps even confirming knowledge of an interest in this site by Romans. The date of Origen's testimony is significant. A year later, the Roman emperor, Decius, initiated the first empire-wide persecution of the church, attempting to stamp out all memory of Jesus. One can only wonder if this campaign had led to a broader effort by occupying soldiers to take over this site completely, creating their own facts on the ground.

This changed dramatically in the early 4th century when the Emperor Constantine had a change of heart concerning Christianity and when he commissioned his mother not only to restore, but also to promote these sites significant in Jesus' life. The residents of Bethlehem recalled for her that this indeed was the place where Jesus had been born—at least according to their sacred tradition. Following Helena's recommendation, Constantine provided funding and sent skilled workers to construct this first Bethlehem church.

Today's church, however, is often known as the Justinian church, named for the Roman Emperor who in 540 AD sponsored the building of some of the largest churches in the Holy Land and transformed others.

In a land often invaded by foreign armies, it is nothing short of amazing that this Bethlehem church has persevered for so long. While invading armies occasionally destroyed other Holy Land churches, the Church of the Nativity was always regarded with respect. Occasionally, one hears guides refer to destruction of the Constantine church by the Samaritans in the uprising of 529 AD. However, that is unlikely. Scholars who have studied this revolt now conclude that it did not spread to southern Palestine. Likewise, the single source mentioning Justinian's role in rebuilding this church—a report by Eutychius, the 10th century Patriarch of Alexandria—only links the two events chronologically. After reporting the emperor's role in putting down the rebellion, he goes on to mention that Bethlehem's own St. Sabas was sent as an emissary to request a series of projects. These included rebuilding damaged churches in the north, and other projects such as the construction of new monasteries and the totally new Church of Mary, known often as the Nea Church, in the southern part of the old city of Jerusalem.

It is preferable to put Justinian's work in Bethlehem in this latter category of new projects. Twice he mentions the destruction of the Nativity church, yet not by the Samaritans. First, he states that Justinian ordered his representative to demolish the church and build a larger one. In summary he concludes that "Justinian tore down the Bethlehem Church and built it the way it stands today." According to Eutychius, Justinian was dissatisfied

with the final product believing that his representative had misused funds designated for the church and consequently had him beheaded—a common motif that tends to sensationalize great building projects.

Why would Justinian tear down such an impressive church? It was not a matter of size since archaeologists discovered the later structure to be only slightly larger. Rather, the reason seems to have been to make the building user friendly for worship by the local Bethlehem Christian community, a concern likely raised by St. Sabas who proposed this project to the emperor. Constantine built a memorial primarily where pilgrims could visit the place of Jesus' birth. Yet that early building was not conducive to formal worship rites. The alterations by Justinian made it possible for daily prayer, regular Eucharist, baptisms and marriages to be carried out while at the same time allowing for pilgrimage visits and quiet meditation. It was not to be a museum of things past, but a living temple for all generations.

There is also a story that during the Persian conquest in 614 AD when many churches were burned, the Church of the Nativity was spared because the invaders saw mosaics of the Magi above the door and recognized them as their own ancestors. That story sounds rather fantastic, but it was included in the minutes of the Council of Jerusalem in 836 AD, and it is true that there is no evidence of damage to this church during that invasion.

The church has not been immune from hostilities during the modern era, as bullet holes in the roof and stone walls testify. When Israel conquered the West Bank in 1967 and Bethlehem residents found refuge there, Israeli military forces shelled the church. In April 2002, in the midst of the second Intifada, the church came under a forty-day siege when Palestinian gunmen retreated to the church for shelter.

Many have remarked that the current structure resembles a fortress rather than a church. Perhaps that is why it has withstood the test of time. Yet it remains a World Heritage site to welcome visitors to the Holy Land where this land's living stones also congregate to be nurtured by word and liturgy—both a memorial of the past and a gathering place for the faithful in the present.

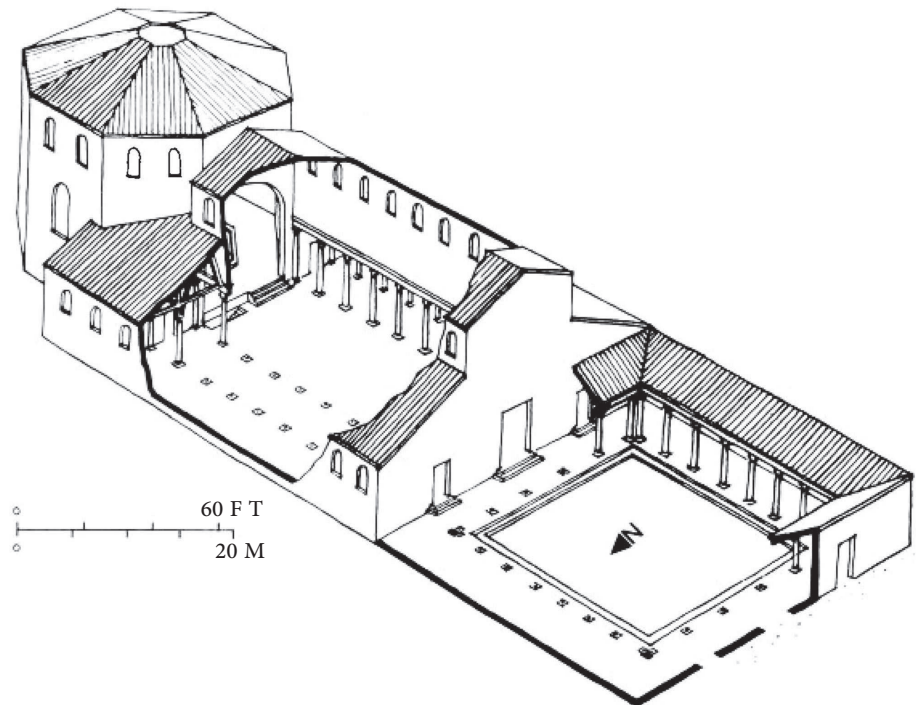
The courtyard



From the time of Constantine it has been common for churches to be laid out in an east-west floorplan with the altar in the east. The Church of the Nativity was located accordingly on the eastern edge of the village of Bethlehem positioned to look out over the shepherds' fields of Beit Sahour and across the desert toward Jordan where the sun rises each morning in the same way that Christ will one day return according to the Christian faith.

Today the Church of the Nativity complex covers about 12,000 square meters. The ancient cross-shaped edifice is situated in the center with the Greek Orthodox convent immediately to the south and east; the Catholic Church of St. Catherine, the Latin convent, and the Casa Nova guest house and restaurant to the north; and the 17th century Armenian convent in front of the church and to the south.

The original Constantinian church is represented by the following diagram.



Visitors first approached a colonnaded atrium. They then entered the large nave of the basilica by one of three doors. Finally, they came to the grotto itself housed inside an octagonal structure.

There are two major differences in the plan of this earlier church from today's church. First, the section covering the cave was octagonal, similar to 5th-century churches related to Mary, including the Kathisma Church on the road to Jerusalem and a church of Mary on Mount Gerizim. There was yet another octagonal church in Caesarea Maritima. Today pilgrims and tourists are most familiar with the octagonal church in Capernaum built over an early house church.



The second major difference is that the earlier church extended to the west an additional twenty seven meters from the current church, where a square atrium was surrounded by twenty two columns. Several steps led down to a sunken level in the center. Two thirds of the atrium foundations lie below the paving stones of the current courtyard leading from Manger Square to the entrance of today's church. The rest are found underneath the present Armenian convent on the right. Some of the atrium's broken columns can still be found today in the courtyard and others were reused inside the convent. A paved road led west from the atrium to the then much smaller town of Bethlehem.

The entry

Visitors are often surprised by the appearance of the front of the church. The ages have transformed the splendid entry into an awkward conglomeration like something thrown together in a hurry. Yet looking carefully one can delineate the original stone work where the central section was raised to a roof twice as high as the sloping roofs on the sides. By Justinian's time the atrium had been removed and a narthex on the inside had been added. The Crusaders replaced the original wooden roof of the narthex with a heavy vaulted roof pushing out the western wall some thirty centimeters. As a result buttressing was erected in 1775 which now obscures the appearance while protecting the western wall from collapse. Another significant portion of this wall remains hidden by the Armenian convent added on the right in the 17th century.



The central doorway shows three levels of construction. The higher lintel remains from the 6th-century church; the pointed arch was installed in the 12th century to strengthen the wall; and the lower opening was constructed during Ottoman times perhaps for security, or--as tradition

goes--to prevent horses from entering the church. Today's visitor can enter this 1.3 meter high door only by bowing. Thus it is aptly called *The Door of Humility*.



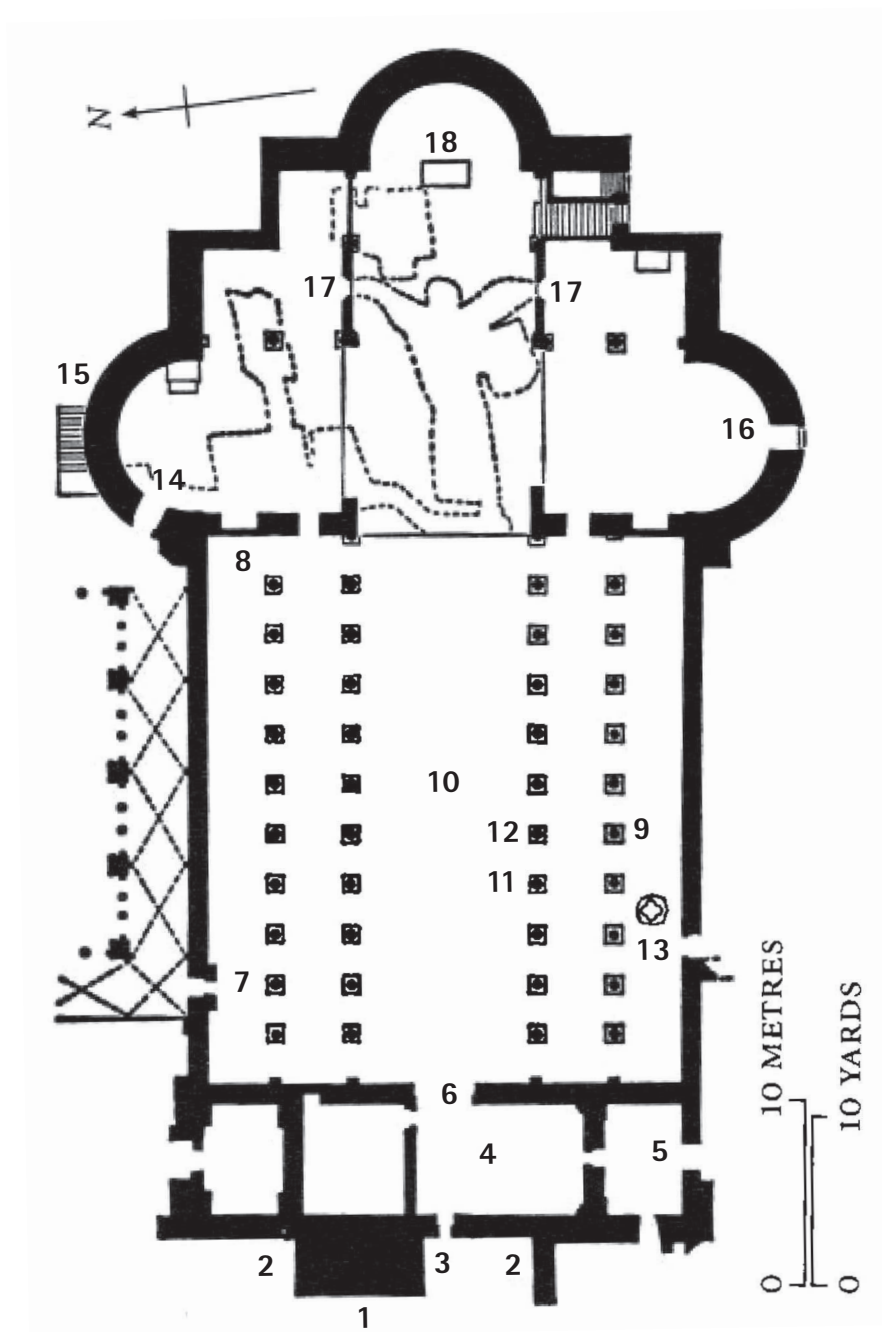
Lintel from
Justinian Church

Crusader Era
opening

Door of
Humility

This is an amazing contrast to the early church where crowds could make their way inside without hindrance. The original six-meter-high by three-meter-wide doorway was flanked by two other doors half the width. The lintel of the left doorway can be seen peeking out from behind the buttressing (on the left of the photo). The doorway on the right is hidden by the Armenian convent, but a very small part of the lintel is still visible where the wall of the convent meets the front wall of the church (on the right of the photo).

Floor plan of current Church of the Nativity,
following Justinian structure:



Key to diagram

1. External buttress
2. Lintel for early side entrance
3. Three stages of central doorway
4. Narthex
5. Door to Armenian convent
6. Armenian & Arabic door inscriptions
7. Side entry to Franciscan cloister
8. Walled up section of aisle
9. Painted column - Virgin Mary
10. Wooden trap - doors to mosaic floor
11. Painted column - Danish Canute
12. Painted column - Norwegian Olaf
13. Octagonal baptismal font
14. Side-entrance to Church of St. Catherine
15. Latin stairway to cave system
16. Door to Greek convent
17. Stairways to Nativity grotto
18. Greek Orthodox altar

Narthex

Justinian added a six-meter deep narthex to the plan of the church. Originally it extended the whole width of the church, but later was subdivided. To the north is the guard room. Underneath its floor mosaics were discovered and steps from the earlier atrium. To the south the doors lead into the Armenian convent.



Scenes from Armenian Convent including old section from Constantine's Atrium with columns reused.



Wooden doors

In the center of the narthex a large wooden double door led straight ahead into the nave. Today the top portion is covered with a smaller entry cut into the larger door.

The most recent doors were a gift from two Armenians in 1227, and today are in need of great and delicate care. Originally they were covered with crosses and a floral arabesque arrangement, part of which can be seen looking to the top. The lower parts are covered with more recently added boards.



At the very top of the right door an Armenian inscription (covered) reads:

"This door with the help of the blessed Mother of God was made in the year 676 by the hands of Father Abraham and Father Arakel, at the time of Haytun son of Constantine, King of Armenia. God have mercy upon their souls."

At the top of the left door a second inscription in Arabic says:

"This door was completed with the help of Allah, may he be exalted, at the time of our lord the sultan Malik al-Mu 'azzam in the month of Muharram in the year 624."



The dates in the Armenian and Muslim calendars correspond to the year 1227 AD.

From the inside, one can observe the size of the main entry door, now mostly covered with wood. Only a small access door is available in the wooden structure. Two other entries, half the size of the main door once flanked this main door, but are now plastered over.

The nave

The basilica style of construction was borrowed from a common rectangular style of government building. The name basilica is itself derived from the Greek word referring to the king. Typically a semi-circular apse was located at the far end where governmental officials sat. In a church this became the location of the altar and the clergy. In this Nativity church, the nave (the part of the church for the congregation) makes up a room 29.3 meters in length and 26.5 meters wide. The nave of the earlier Constantinian church had been formed basically as a square, 26.5 meters by 26.5 meters. This was determined by archaeologists in the early 1930s who uncovered the foundation of the Constantinian church's western wall, along with steps, underneath the current floor 2.8 meters inside the present doorway to the nave.

Today's structure is rather dark because the lower level windows have been blocked along both the north and south walls. A small door in the northern wall leads to the Franciscan cloister.

Upon entering the Justinian church, the visitor was overwhelmed with beauty and light—as reported in pilgrim diaries. The 7th-century Byzantine Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronius, poetically expressed his emotions upon entering the church:

*I would go with a heart filled
With all the fervor of holy love
To the little town of Bethlehem
Where the King of all things was born.*

*With my heart dancing I would enter
Those most sacred halls,
The four most admirable arcades
And the elegant three-fold apse.*

*Gazing at the numerous pillars
Gleaming with gold, a work
Decorated with marvelous art,
I would dispel the clouds of care.*

*I would gaze at the coffered ceiling
With its brilliant stars of gold:
From these marvels of works of art
The grace of the heavens shines forth.*

The walls of the nave, as well as the floor, were originally covered in marble. Today, understandably, the interior shows signs of age as this is the oldest church in the world in continual use. Some of the change was the result of looting when marble was stripped from the walls for building projects in Jerusalem. The church has also endured earthquakes and deterioration due to weather.



Many find it most meaningful to wander among the columns, finding a quiet place to pause and to reflect.



The roof

The wooden rafters in the nave have long been a source of concern for the preservation of the church. In 2010, a team of specialists from Italy determined that some of the cedar beams date to the 6th century from the original Justinian church. The majority of the beams are oak imported from the eastern Italian Alps and date to the 15th century when the earlier flat roof was replaced. King Edward IV of England provided the materials for a lead roof which would have offered protection for centuries. However, this roof lasted less than a century because the lead was confiscated for ammunition for the Ottoman-Venitian war. The subsequent tin roof proved to be a poor substitute against the elements. The 1834 and 1927 earthquakes caused further significant damage. Indeed it is surprising that the church has survived this long.

The restoration of the church's roof and windows began in the fall of 2013.



Exploring the nave

The nave of the church is a virtual art gallery for those who know where to look. This includes ancient floor mosaics hidden beneath wooden trap doors, painted columns darkened by smoke and moisture, and fragments of fine gold mosaic wall decorations of three registers. Modern light fixtures in the Orthodox tradition complete the display.

South aisle: baptismal font

In the south aisle of the church, not too far from the entry, is a large octagonal monolithic baptismal font made from the same locally quarried crystalline red stone as the columns. On four of the eight sides there are cross decorations. On the north side there is a Greek inscription, which translated, says:

*For remembrance, rest, and forgiveness of sins
Of those whose names the Lord knows.*

The font itself likely belonged to the Constantinian church, as the octagonal shape would suggest. In the 1930s, archaeologists digging underneath the paving stones of the current floor near the east wall of the north apse uncovered an octagonal stone configuration which perfectly matches the dimensions of the font's base.

In the first church, the font was located outside the church next to a cistern. By the 7th century it became common practice in churches to locate the baptismal font near the main entry for catechumens to receive baptism upon entering the nave and before approaching the altar. In the Justinian church, the font was likely located closer to the main door. Later, when local Christians began the practice of baptizing their children in the Chapel of St. George, outside the south apse, the font was moved to its present location and is no longer functional.



Floor mosaics center nave

The present floor was laid following the earthquake of 1834. In the earlier Justinian church, the floor was covered with marble slabs. None of these remain in the nave. Several, however, have been recovered in the apse including some measuring 72 centimeters by 72 centimeters square and some as long as 165 centimeters.



In the church of Constantine, mosaics covered the floor throughout the nave. These were uncovered during excavations in 1934 and portions can be seen underneath wooden trap doors in the floor. They are situated 75 centimeters lower than the present floor level and rest directly on rocky soil.



Different patterns make up several larger mosaic carpets and suggest that several teams of artists were at work. Some of the designs include an interlacing border, an inner border composed of acanthus and fruit, and enclosed panels filled with intricate interwoven patterns. Others display continuous swastika-like ribbon. Still others include geometric designs arranged within

a circle. Some have noted the technical similarity of these mosaics with those in the imperial palace in Constantinople.



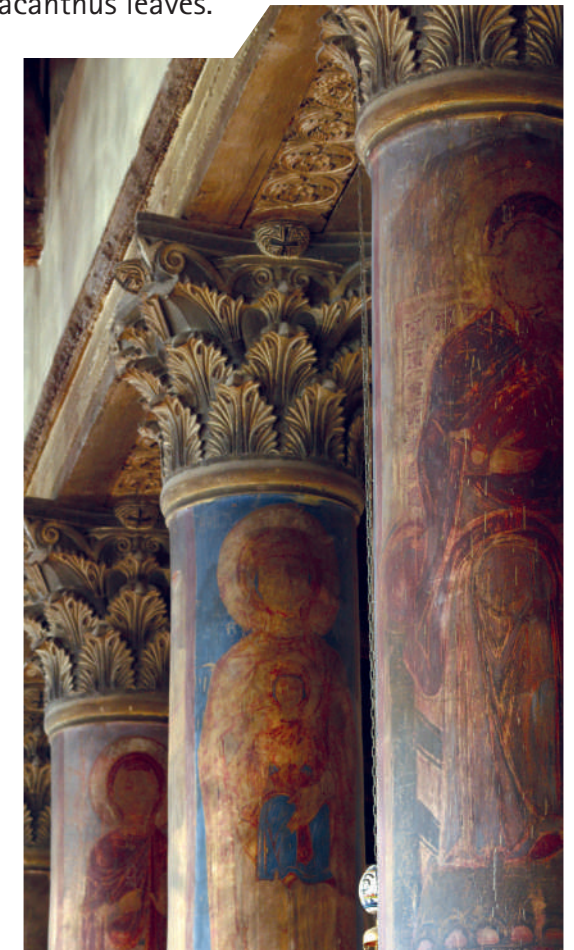
The absence of human or animal figures points to a Judeo-Christian piety reluctant to depict images. Rather these early Christians appear to have expressed boundless eternal ideas in interlocking and endless abstractions. There is only a single floor mosaic inscription located near the front on the left with the Greek acrostic **IXΘΥΣ** (*ichthus* = fish) representing the early creed: *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior*. The antiquity of this mosaic is certain. By the end of the fourth century ecclesiastical laws discouraged such sacred monograms in floors where people would walk.



Northern aisle: painted columns

The nave is arranged with four side aisles created by four rows of rose-colored limestone columns, likely quarried from the Slayyib quarry in Beit Jala. In the Constantinian church, each row had nine columns. The elongated nave of the Justinian church included four rows of eleven columns each. One of the key findings of archaeological exploration is the fact that the column bases were raised to the higher floor level at the time of the Justinian restoration. The current column bases rest on stone blocks that are placed on a stylobate wall which was added only after cutting into portions of the earlier mosaic floor. The 5.5 meter high columns are topped by Corinthian capitals which support architraves decorated with acanthus leaves.

The columns remained undecorated for centuries. In the 12th century when the church was under control of Latin Crusader clergy, thirty encaustic paintings of saints were added to adorn the columns. The paintings were likely commissioned by individual donors with the practice eventually discontinued leaving the program incomplete—sixteen columns remained without decoration. The paintings have suffered damage from smoke and moisture, as also from the practice of cleaning with oil. Many visitors no longer even notice the obscure figures.



The saints represented on the columns are identified by name, usually in both Greek and Latin. They are arranged in the nave as the following:

Altar			
None	Crucifixion	Marina	Virgin & Child
None	John	Fusca	None
None	Virgin & Child	Onufrius	None
None	Catald	Elijah	None
None	Damianus	John the Baptist	Margaret
None	Cosmas	Vincent	Anne & Leo
None	Leonard	Olaf	Blasius & Virgin
None	George	Canute	None
None	Euthymius	Stephen	None
None	Anthony	Sabas	Bartholomew
None	Macarios	Theodosius	James

It is difficult to make a generalized statement about the entire program of paintings. The overall impression is given that the church is supported by the lives and contributions of a variety of saints, represented on these columns.

If one focuses on the twenty-two columns in the center rows, one notices several smaller patterns. Upon entering the church, one is greeted first by a number of monastic figures. These include Theodosius, Sabas, and Euthymius, all of whom were prominent in the greater Bethlehem area. Standing beside them are two leaders of the early monastic movement in Egypt: Marcarios and Anthony. Here the pattern breaks down because a third monastic figure from Egypt, Onufrius, is located near the front of the church. In the case of the three Bethlehem saints, as also with Anthony, they are holding manuscripts in their hands with an epitaph written in Greek.

In the middle section of the nave, one finds a number of figures especially significant for the European Crusaders. George supposedly appeared to the Western army at Antioch and was considered the patron saint of the Crusaders, though he was born in Lydda and continues to be a favorite in the Bethlehem area appearing in images on Palestinian homes. Canute and Olaf reflect the participation of Scandinavians in the Crusades and are recognized by the title *Rex*. These three, holding spears in their right hands and shields in their left hands, stand out from all the rest who hold a Bible or a cross, or who lift up their hands in blessing. Other western figures include Leonard, a protector of prisoners; Catald from Ireland who visited the Holy Land; and Vincent who was martyred in Spain. In the midst of these columns depicting Western figures, one also finds Cosmas and Damianus, both from Arabia and both known for their ability to heal.

The front of the church appears to be reserved mostly for women saints. On the north, the crucifixion scene focuses on the women who remained faithful at the cross. There is also a column with the Virgin and Child, especially fitting for this church. On the south, there are two young women recognized for their faithfulness in martyrdom, Marina (known in the West as Margaret) from Antioch in Asia Minor and Fusca, martyred in Venice.

Then there are the anomalies. There is John the Evangelist, but no St. Luke, known for his beautiful story of the nativity. Elijah is the lone Old Testament figure, not depicted as standing as the others, but sitting where ravens feed him with crumbs of bread. His presence in this parade of saints may be related to the establishment of the Carmelite order of nuns in Palestine in the 12th century. There is John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, holding a manuscript with words from the Gospel in both Latin and Greek: *Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*. Stephen is represented too as the first Christian martyr—the experience of many of the saints in this program. With regard to the two center rows of columns, there seems to be a general grouping with regards to certain figures. It does not, however, appear that the artists adhered closely to a master plan.



North Center
1-2-3



Macarios



Anthony



Euthymius

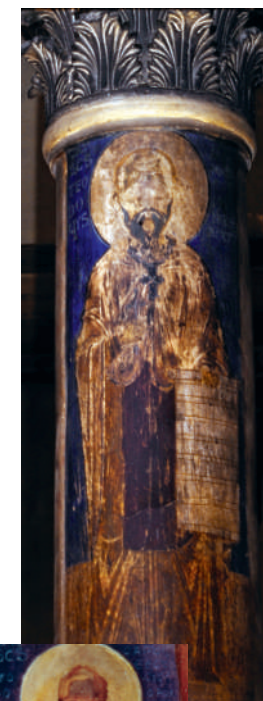
South Center
3-2-1



Stephen



Sabas



Theodosius



George

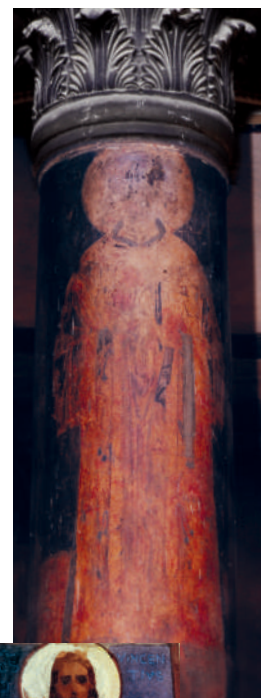


Leonard



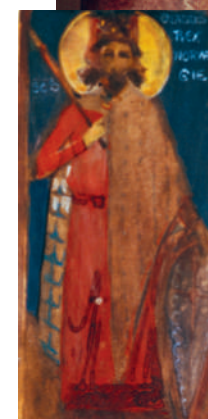
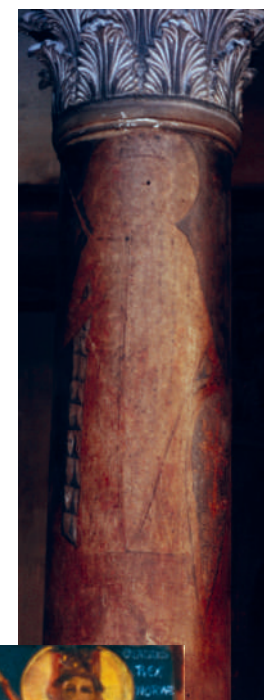
Cosmas

North Center
4-5-6



Vincent

South Center
6-5-4



Olaf



Canute

North Center
7-8



Damianus



Catald

South Center
8-7



Elijah



John the Baptist



Virgin & Child



John Evangelist

North Center
9-10-11

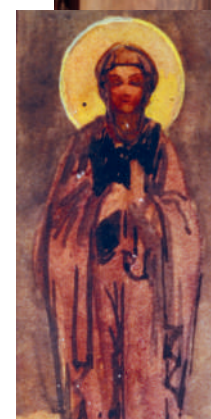


Women at cross

South Center
11-10-9



Marina



Fusca



Onufrius

The lack of planning is even clearer when looking at the row of columns in the far south where only six columns have been painted. The six painted columns are scattered: one in the front of the church, two in the rear, and three in the middle. While five columns in this row have been left blank—as the whole of the far north row of eleven columns are blank—on two columns there are two images each. There are also duplicates. The Virgin and Child appear twice in the south row, even though this figure appears near the front of the church in one of the center rows. Marina/Margaret, appearing at the front of a center row, is repeated here on the margin.

Among new figures in the south row, is Anne, the mother of Mary, particularly appropriate for this church. Sharing the column is Pope Leo, who helped shape the doctrine of the two natures of Christ at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. Another new figure is Bishop Blasius of Armenia. Bartholomew appears as the only one of the twelve disciples, which is odd because he is hardly mentioned in the New Testament, yet perhaps significant here because tradition says he founded the Church in Armenia. The last figure is James, the Brother of Jesus, who also was martyred, for his faith, in Jerusalem. Considering the haphazard arrangement of images, the idea of an overarching pattern is unlikely.



The example of one column

Another possibility is that the choice of images was not determined by a master artist, but rather by individuals who commissioned the paintings. This is suggested by a close examination of one particular column in the far south row.

The fifth column on the southern aisle portrays a traditional scene of the Virgin and Child enthroned. The duplication of this motif suggests the idea of individual choice.

The haloed figure of the Virgin is wearing a reddish-purple veil and mantle over a bluish-gray robe. The child in her arms is dressed in red. An inscription on both sides of the halo gives the year 1130 AD, the second generation of the Crusader period. Because of the similarity in artistic style, it is assumed that all the paintings come from this same period.

At the top of this column is the title of the figure in Latin: *SCA MARIA*. There is no corresponding name in Greek.

Also there is a Latin inscription:

"Fili q(u)i vere D(eu)s es p(re)cor his m(anibu)s be(nedice)re"

"O Son, you who are truly God, I pray to bless these hands."

It is generally assumed that this is the prayer of artist.

However, because there are several letters that cannot be deciphered, some have suggested another reading: a prayer for mercy for those who commissioned the work.

There are also three figures kneeling at the Virgin's feet, two women are on the right and a man with a Norman shield is on the left. These figures likely represent the individuals who commissioned the painting. Above their heads is inscribed their prayer:

"Virgo celestis confer solatia mestis."

"Virgin of heaven, grant solace to the sorrowful."



One can only imagine their story: Two women accompanying the Crusader army; a spouse or relative wounded or dead in battle.

While the painting of the Virgin fills the west half of the column, a second painting faces east. In this case, the subject of the painting was not from the West, but Bishop Blasius of Armenia who had been martyred in the early 4th century.

What is one to make of this sharing of figures on two sides of

the column? Perhaps it was a matter of cost with the supplicants unable to afford a full column. Interestingly, it seems that in a time of need, East and West meet here on a single column.

Yet there might be another reason. The name of Bishop Blasius appears not in Greek nor in Armenian, but in Latin. This is significant because the cult of Blasius became widespread in Europe at this time, in the 11th-12th centuries. The popularity of Blasius grew, not simply for his example of martyrdom, but because he had been a physician who continued his reputation for healing. Thus this column may be a single piece with a significant message: loved ones praying for a Crusader soldier,



appealing to the Holy Virgin, but also to an eastern saint who had been popularized in the west.

Another column, with the image of James at the rear of this same row, also includes two smaller figures kneeling at the bottom, again seeming to represent those who commissioned the work.

The idea of individual commissioned works seems to be the best explanation for the arrangement of paintings. Perhaps the artists had a role in grouping some of these commissioned works. As more and more columns were completed, there was less choice for location. Duplicates were placed in the far row. The project came to an end, long before it was complete and sixteen columns remain unpainted.

Perhaps the artist died.

Or perhaps another project was begun which took precedence.



In the last eight centuries other pilgrims have added graffiti, crests, and their own drawings on the lower portions of columns. Visitors can often be seen pausing at the sixth column on the south side to touch five holes worn over the ages in the shape of a cross.

Center of nave: wall mosaics of angels

In today's church, small portions of mosaics can be seen covering the walls. When the original marble was removed, the walls remained undecorated for a time. Then in the Crusader era, mosaics were added which completely covered the walls.



The top register on the north wall, for example, includes a procession of angels, one spaced between each of the ten windows, and mirrored on the opposite wall. They are a reminder that on the first Christmas the heavenly angels proclaimed "good news for all people," singing "Glory to God in the Highest." With their hands raised in adoration, they point visitors forward toward the nativity grotto. Only six have survived the centuries (providing a partial look at what was) and are currently visible on the north wall.

Here too one catches a glimpse of the artist who left his name, *Basilius Pictor*, both in Latin and in Syriac, almost as if he identified with the role of an angel announcing the Christmas message through the visual arts.

Ancestors



On the south wall, no angels remain, but the bottom register includes other important characters in the Christmas Story; the ancestors of Jesus following the list in Matthew 1:2-16. Of the forty named in that gospel text, only seven remain toward the front of the church: Azor, Zadok, Achim, Eliud, Eleazar, Matthan, and Jacob, the father of Joseph (reading from west to east or right to left). In the image included here Eliud reaches across his body with his hand to point the visitor forward to the baby Jesus. They are merely forerunners, showing the way. A corresponding genealogy of ancestors according to Luke 3:23-38 once looked down from the north wall, but these have since been lost.

How do we know this from these incomplete fragments? For one thing, the artist has inscribed the names of these six ancestors. We also have the word of earlier visitors, among them the Franciscan priest, Quaresmius, who in 1628 took copious notes. Without early witnesses, we would have no idea what images covered the back wall, now totally blank.

Thanks to Quaresmius and others like him, we can report that the back wall was once covered by mosaics, depicting a tree of Jesse showing Jesus' genealogical roots going back a millennium earlier than Jesus to Bethlehem's own Jesse and his son David as described in the narrative

of 1 Samuel 16. The 8th-century prophet Isaiah 11 envisioned the special status of Jesse's offspring:

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

Among the branches of the tree are four different prophets who spoke of the Messiah's birth.

Leading from the stump of this tree along the lower register of both north and south walls, the branches of descendants move forward to the family of Joseph and Jesus.



The central register: councils of the church

The remainder of the mosaics on both walls depict significant councils of the Church, a unique and seemingly esoteric subject in a church dedicated to the nativity of Jesus. To fully appreciate their significance, one must understand the historical context in which they were painted during the age of the Crusaders. Although the Crusaders are usually associated with Jerusalem and the coastal cities, the Church of the Nativity was given a special place by these Western rulers. In this church Baldwin I chose to be crowned King of Jerusalem on Christmas Day in the year 1100. Under the Latin rulers, Bethlehem was raised to the status of a Bishopric and the church elevated as a Cathedral.



The irony is that it was the Byzantine Emperor of Constantinople, Manuel Comnenus, who in 1169 commissioned, planned, and paid for the decorations of what was at that time a Latin church—in spite of the schism in 1054 AD between Eastern and Western churches, the Crusaders' attack upon Constantinople itself, the mistreatment by the early Crusaders of Eastern Christians. The intention of the emperor was unmistakable: to heal the wounds of the past and to unite a divided Church.

This is all made clear by a Greek inscription located on the wall of the main apse just in front of the iconostasis, which translated reads:

"This work was brought to completion by the monk Ephrem, the painter of history and mosaic master craftsman, during the rule of the great emperor Manuel Porphyrogenitus Comnenus, and in the days of Amaury [Amalric], king of Jerusalem, and in the time of the bishop of Bethlehem, Raoul [Ralph], in the year 1169."

Comnenus was both wise and clever. He includes the same information in an adjacent Latin inscription, mentioning King Amalric first.

The most important figure listed here is Ephrem, the master craftsman who supervised a team of local artisans. Like Basilus Pictor, the Syrian artist whose name is recorded on the upper north wall of the nave, Ephrem was a Syrian Christian.

Not only was Bethlehem well populated at this time with artisans from Syrian, Armenian, Coptic Churches as well as Arabic, but they were actively worshipping in the Church of the Nativity—most likely with their own priests—just as the Westerners were worshipping with their Latin priests. For many who spoke Arabic, their liturgy remained Syriac. How else can one explain the diversity of Eastern and Western saints portrayed on the columns? And the mention of Ephrem and Basil on the wall inscriptions may well suggest their long involvement in decorating these columns and their familiarity among the local congregation.

Especially significant is the fact that the column painting had already been taking place for at least thirty-nine years, since 1130 AD, as

inscribed on one column. In other words, the decision in 1169 by the Emperor Comnenus to promote the reunification of the church through a carefully designed artistic program in the Church of the Nativity may well have originated as a grassroots movement among the local Christians of Bethlehem through a more spontaneous arrangement of column paintings portraying a mix of East and West, where the figures of a Pope Leo and a King Olaf could stand just a short distance from figures of local heroes like Saints Sabas and Theodosius.

Symbolic of this theme of unity in diversity is the depiction of significant councils of the Church, where central tenets of the Christian faith were agreed upon. The center register of the northern wall includes representations of six provincial meetings:

Synod of Carthage	254 AD
Council of Antioch	272 AD
Council of Ancyra	314 AD
Council of Gangrae	340 AD
Council of Sardica	343 AD
Synod of Laodecia	364 AD



Today only remnants of Gangrae, Sardica, and Antioch can be seen. The Council of Sardica (today's Sofia in Bulgaria) is represented by a domed church with bell towers.

These local councils often were concerned with the implementation of the Church's theological affirmations. The Greek text from the Council of Antioch thus reads:

"The Holy Synod of Antioch in Syria of thirty-three bishops took place before the Ecumenical Council of Nicea against Paul of Samosata who held that Christ was a mere man. The Holy Synod expelled him as a heretic."



The southern wall included representations of the seven ecumenical councils.

Council of Nicea	325 AD
Council of Constantinople	381 AD
Council of Ephesus	431 AD
Council of Chalcedon	451 AD
Council of Constantinople 2	553 AD
Council of Constantinople 3	680 AD
Council of Nicea 2	787 AD

The representation of each council includes a frame of two columns supporting two arches under which stand two altars with a book of the Gospels. On the left are two censers; on the right two candlesticks. In the space above the altars, inscriptions present the important decrees of each council.

This may appear to be an unusual artistic program for a church commemorating the nativity. It underscored the importance of the doctrines defining who this Jesus really was. Yet it also spoke clearly about nature of the Church. For the Eastern Emperor Manuel Comnenus in 1169 AD, the councils were a clear reminder about the unity of the Church. This was a Church whose Latin Pope Urban in 1096 declared that God willed the Crusades and thus also death and destruction against the Eastern Church. This was also the Church whose Latin Pope and Eastern Patriarch had excommunicated each other in 1054 and brought about the great schism. For Comnenus, such papal leadership could be misguided, but his hope for the reunification of the Church was based on the acceptance of the authority of such councils with representation by a wide spectrum of the Church. He was appealing for adherence to doctrines already accepted in such historic councils, and he was calling for a new council to settle current disputes—a goal that never materialized.

For Comnenus, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church were already one because of their adherence to these seven ecumenical councils. The matter was more complicated because the Monophysites—the Armenian Church, the Syrians, and the Copts—had been excluded from the Council of Chalcedon in 451 which defined the two natures of Christ. Yet it is clear from his record that Comnenus reached out independently to these churches as well. At this point in time the Church of the Nativity was a Latin Church and Comnenus' intention was to speak to that audience.

The best preserved mosaic on the south wall is that of the Council of Constantinople in 381. This is ironic because the inscription is a reminder that the most important formulation of this council was the

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (known commonly as the Nicene Creed) spoken in the Christian Liturgy today throughout the world. Yet this same creed had been the source of the breaking point between East and West when the Latin Church, in speaking about the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father, added the words "and the son"—*filioque* in Latin. Through the Greek text from the council, Comnenus challenged Latin Christians to return to the original wording of this creed.

All of the regional council inscriptions are in Greek, as are six of the inscriptions of the ecumenical councils. This suggests that the significance is more symbolic, underscoring Comnenus' view that the West must come around to the Eastern view. Cleverly, Comnenus included a Latin inscription for the last of the seven councils—the Second Council of Nicea in 787 AD (now missing). This was significant because the council declared the regulations to be followed in calling future councils, which was Comnenus' goal.

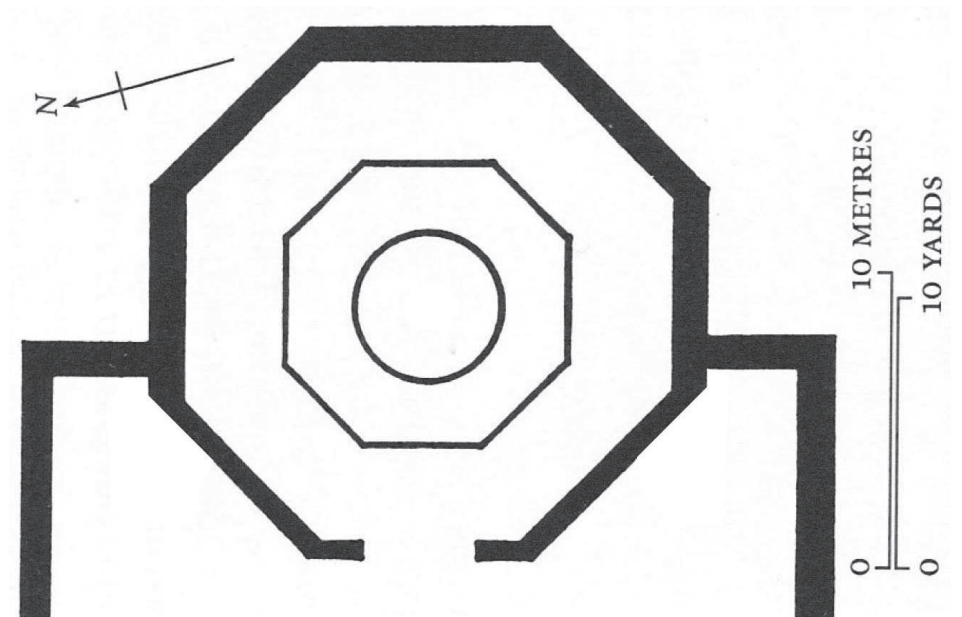
Such a unique mosaic program which stresses the importance of Christian unity in diversity can only be viewed with admiration. This is true for its historical context, when a Greek Orthodox emperor commissioned the work in a Latin Church to be carried out by local Christians both Orthodox and monophysite. It is also true today when Christians of every denomination continue to be represented in the Holy Land, as well as for pilgrims from all over the world. The birth of the Christ child is thus the unifying force which unites the Church through the centuries.



Central raised platform: the choir

Today at the eastern end of the nave, central steps lead up to the choir, a raised rectangular platform where the clergy lead the liturgy. This was perhaps the most important change made in the Justinian church.

In the Constantinian church, the nave opened on the east side to an octagonal structure. The focal point was the nativity cave located in the center. A raised octagonal platform was built directly over the rock formation of the cave's roof where visitors could look down into the grotto. This was an impressive feature since the mosaic floor of that church was 75 centimeters lower than the present floor. Ancient visitors would have climbed the stairs on one side and circled around a four-meter-diameter hole that offered a glimpse of the cave below. An *oculus* (eye) provided an opening to the sky in the roof above.



Excavations in 1934 uncovered the foundations of this structure with each side of the octagon 7.9 meters in length. A mosaic-covered floor surrounded the raised platform at a level 30 cm. higher than the mosaics of the nave. Unlike the geometric designs in the nave, one mosaic featured a rooster

surrounded by clusters of grapes. The quality of these mosaics is at a higher level with twice the number of tesserae used per square area.

This type of structure followed building models throughout the empire in Constantine's time. It was ideal for a shrine that welcomed pilgrims to view a holy site, designed for individual prayer and meditation. It was impractical, however, for a church with a worshipping congregation. The platform was too high for worshippers to see and there was no ideal place for a liturgical altar.



When Constantine built the first church, the Christian population of Bethlehem was still somewhat modest. By the time of Justinian, its numbers had swelled. Eutychius' comment that Justinian had given instructions to build a larger church does not fit the archaeological evidence, if one compares the size of the two naves. His words should most likely be taken to reflect the needs of a large local worshipping community—with pilgrimages also growing in number.

So Justinian's changes began with a larger rectangular platform built directly over the roof of the cave. The altar was placed directly over the site designated for Jesus' birth. The size of this raised area provides more than ample room for the large numbers of clergy present on festival occasions, but it also serves as a place for the congregation to gather when there are smaller numbers—thus it is sometimes referred to as the choir.

Second, Justinian raised the floor of the nave 75 centimeters to bring worshippers in the nave into a direct line of vision with the liturgical rites taking place on the platform.

Third, Justinian replaced the octagonal structure with a triple-apse structure (sometimes called triconchal) that became common in churches in the 5th century. A large semi-circular apse surrounded the altar with a smaller northern apse and a southern apse creating an architectural shape of a cross, symbolically appropriate for the Eucharistic focus of the regular worship life of the growing Christian population in Bethlehem.

Viewed from above, the cross shape of the church is obvious. As well as being a theologically appropriate change, it was also very practical. The walls on the east end of the outer aisles from the nave were opened up which made easy access for pilgrims to the grotto through side stairways without interfering with the central liturgy above. Subsequently, the large openings on both sides were walled up with only smaller doorways providing access to the side apses.



Greek Orthodox worship

Worship in the Church of the Nativity has for the most part over the centuries followed the Eastern rite in the liturgy. During the Crusader period, the church fell under control of European Catholics, but Orthodox worship continued becoming dominant again in the 13th century. According to the *Status Quo* agreement of 1852, three churches—Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian—have a legal share in this church, with specific areas designated for each. The main altar is thus assigned to the Greek Orthodox.



In 1643, the Greek Orthodox Patriarch, Dositheos, constructed an *iconostasis* (icon screen) that stood before the Holy of Holies in the back part of the apse. This screen only lasted forty years. The current iconostasis was erected in 1764 before being gilded in 1853. The elaborate woodwork is covered by the traditional icons of Christ, the Virgin, and the apostles.

The Greek Orthodox liturgy is followed in daily prayers, during Sunday worship, and on festival days.

The lamps and incense play a special part in worship life. Eggs are symbolic of new life.



On Orthodox Christmas (January 6), Patriarch Theophilus leads the procession with special prayers said at a small altar set up in the nave. The Palestinian Orthodox community crowd together among the stately columns. At the main altar the Christmas mass is said while the faithful gather around.



As a living Church, Greek Orthodox priests say the daily liturgy and Palestinian couples are married before the altar.



South apse to right of raised platform



The upper walls of the triple apse were covered with mosaics depicting scenes from the life of Jesus. The focus of the main apse was on the Virgin Mary flanked by Abraham and David. The scene of the annunciation was depicted on the arch. The south apse provides access to the grotto. Its walls were also decorated with mosaics from the 12th century. Scenes which depicted the nativity and the Adoration of the Magi are now gone. Today a mosaic of Palm Sunday can be seen on the upper wall. To its left there is a fragment of a Transfiguration scene, showing the disciple James sleeping on the mountain.

An icon of the Virgin Mary and Child and an altar of the circumcision are prominent.



People often stop to light a candle before entering the Grotto. Upon his visit to the Holy Land in 638 AD, the Caliph Omar called upon Muslims to respect Christian houses of worship and invited them to visit the Church of Nativity because of the importance of Issa, as a prophet, and of Maryam, his mother. They were encouraged to pause in the south apse for individual prayers.



South courtyard

From the south apse one can take the stairway through the door to visit the south courtyard where the Greek convent is located.



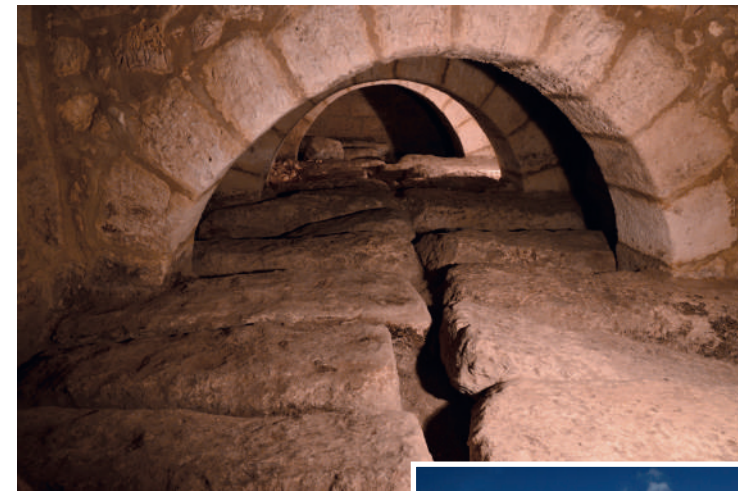
From the Nativity bell tower (seen in the photo from Milk Grotto Street) the bells ring out over Bethlehem at periodic times each day.



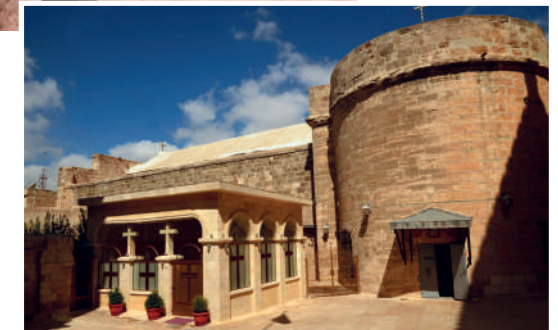
In the Crusader era a bell tower once stood at the entrance of the church. It was removed in 1452 AD when bells were outlawed. Sixteen of these bells were discovered a century ago buried in the area of the Latin convent. Today they can be seen in the Terra Sancta museum.



For many Palestinian Christians life begins and ends at the Church of the Nativity. Funerals are held inside the church. Orthodox priests are buried in a grotto located underneath the south aisle of the church. Entry to the grotto is on the west side of the courtyard.



Cemeteries for the rest of the Christian community are located east of the church on the hill sloping down toward Beit Sahour.



Baptisms are performed in the chapel of St. George on the east side of the courtyard.



The grotto

The grotto marking Jesus' birth is located directly below the raised platform of the main apse. Visitors enter through a stairway from the southern apse, and depart by way of a stairway to the northern apse. The marble facade of the stairway dates to Crusader times.

Luke 2:4-7 describes the birth of Jesus:

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

While Western imagery has depicted the birth of Jesus in a manger as conforming to a barnlike structure, it was common for Bethlehem houses

to be built over caves where the animals were kept. That Jesus was born in a cave was documented by the second-century Justin from Nablus and in the *Protoevangelium of James*.



The nativity grotto — roughly rectangular in shape (12.3 meters by 3.5 meters) was part of a larger system of caves. A door on the west end of the grotto provides access to other caves. This was once used by Franciscan Catholics for access to the grotto from St. Catherine's Church.



On the right of the photo above is the manger and the altar of the three magi — used for Latin masses



The silver star on the floor represents the Star of Bethlehem from Matthew's story, as well as the ancient prophecy announcing the rising star of the Messiah. A Latin inscription informs those who bow in prayer:

*Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est.
Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.*

The lamps above the star represent the different denominations of Christianity which now bear witness to that light.



Several different stars have been used over the centuries. In 1847, the star was removed as an attack against Latin Catholic access to the grotto. This led to the 1852 *Status Quo* agreement.

The apse above the star was earlier covered with mosaic. A fire in 1869 destroyed the mosaics and the furnishings of the grotto and left its walls blackened. Today the priests have several icons which are placed above the star. The current asbestos tapestries were a donation from France.



The walls of the grotto are covered with various icons and paintings from the Orthodox tradition.

Two pieces of Western art are displayed by the altar of the magi—paintings of the adoration of the magi and the adoration of the shepherds, completed in the 19th century by John Baglioli of Ravenna.

*Away in a Manger; no room for his bed,
the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head;
The stars in the sky looked down where he lay,
The little lord Jesus asleep on the hay.*

In the present day, a visit to the grotto plays an important part in Christmas Eve celebrations for the Greek Orthodox, the Armenian, the Catholic, and other churches of the Holy Land. For pilgrims visiting Bethlehem, it is a place to sing Christmas carols and for individual prayer.

Armenian Christmas

While Catholics celebrate Christmas on December 25 and the Orthodox on January 6, the Armenian Christmas is January 19. As one of three churches given rights according to the *Status Quo* agreement, the Armenian Christmas liturgy is centered on the altars in the north apse and in the grotto.



North apse

From the grotto visitors take the opposite stairway to the north apse.



The 12th century wall mosaics focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus. One of the few sections remaining shows the scene of doubting Thomas, with Jesus in the center taking the questioning disciple by the hand while two groups of disciples stand to the sides. To its right the bottom portion of an Ascension scene remains with Mary in the center and the disciples looking up into heaven.

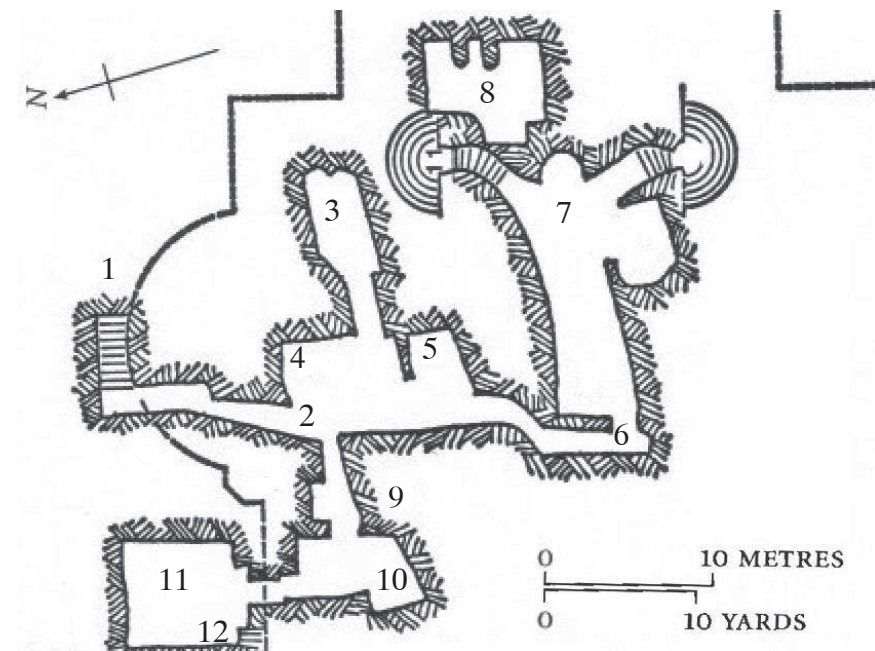


There are two altars where the Armenians officiate. One is dedicated to the Virgin Mary and the other to the magi.

Cave complex

The nativity grotto is part of a larger complex of caves. The others lie below the north apse of the Church of the Nativity, the north aisle of the nave, and also the south wing of the Franciscan cloister. The various sections of the complex are identified in the diagram below. A doorway connects the two main parts of the cave, and is kept locked most of the year. The rest of the cave complex is accessible only through a stairway in the Church of Saint Catherine.

Diagram of cave complex :



- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Stairway from St. Catherine's Church | 7. Nativity grotto |
| 2. 1st century construction | 8. Cistern |
| 3. Burial niche | 9. Tombs of Paula and Eustochium |
| 4. Altar of Holy Innocents | 10. Tomb of Jerome |
| 5. Chapel of St. Joseph | 11. Jerome's "study" |
| 6. Door to Nativity grotto | 12. Ancient stairs to cloister |

Upon descending the stairway from St. Catherine's Church, one enters a large room. The rustic cave is exposed in the rough stone ceiling and walls, but this setting has been prepared for the visit of pilgrims. To the left one finds the altar to the Holy Innocents. Straight ahead on the raised platform is the altar of Joseph.



The current state of the caves is due to some modification in 1964. However, the architecture just to the bottom of the stairs suggests that these caves were in use prior to the building of the Constantinian church. Pottery was discovered as early as the Iron Age.

It was a common practice in the Middle Ages to link various episodes in the life of Jesus in ways that were helpful to the spiritual edification of pilgrims. The question



whether or not it marked the spot was less important. The chapel dedicated to Joseph thus commemorates his dream when an angel appeared to warn him to flee King Herod for safety to Egypt with Mary and the baby Jesus (Matthew 2:13-18). Subsequently, Herod slaughtered all the male babies of Bethlehem, thus the name, the Holy Innocents. Underneath the raised platform and to the left one can observe niches cut out of the rock typical of burials.

The hallway leading to the nativity grotto—with a small hole in the door to peer into the manger—is located up the stairs and to the right of the altar of Joseph. Throughout the centuries this was the main access for Latins, and, in the dark chapters of Church history, the location where a number of skirmishes broke out between competing clergy.

Jerome

On the west side of the present complex (to the right), there are several chambers related to the story of St. Jerome—known also by his Latin name Hieronymus.

Jerome came from Rome in 386 AD to take up residence in Bethlehem where he founded Western biblical study with the translation of the Bible into the Latin Vulgate — the authoritative Bible for Catholics until the 20th century. Joined several years later by a Roman noblewoman Paula, and her daughter, Eustochium, they used their wealth to build a monastery for Jerome, a convent for sisters who followed her example, and a hospice for pilgrims.

Shortly after his arrival in Bethlehem, Jerome wrote a letter of invitation to the noblewoman Marcella in Rome:

Time forbids me . . . to recount the bishops, the martyrs, the divines who have come to Jerusalem from a feeling that their devotion and knowledge would be incomplete and their virtue without the finishing touch, unless they adored Christ in the very spot where the Gospel first flashed from the gibbet. . .

As every man of note . . . hastens hither . . . They all assemble here . . . As everyone praises most what is within his reach, let us pass now to the cottage-inn which sheltered Christ and Mary. With what words and what expressions can we set before you the cave of the Savior?

Behold in this poor crevice of the earth the Creator of the heavens was born; here he was wrapped in swaddling clothes; here he was seen by the shepherds; here he was pointed out by the star; here he was adored by the wise men.



Just to the south (left) of the passageway are found the tombs of Paula and Eustochium and opposite them to the north is the tomb of Eusebius of Cremona, Jerome's successor. Following the passageway straight ahead, is found the tomb of Jerome, attested by the Piacenza Pilgrim in 570 AD.

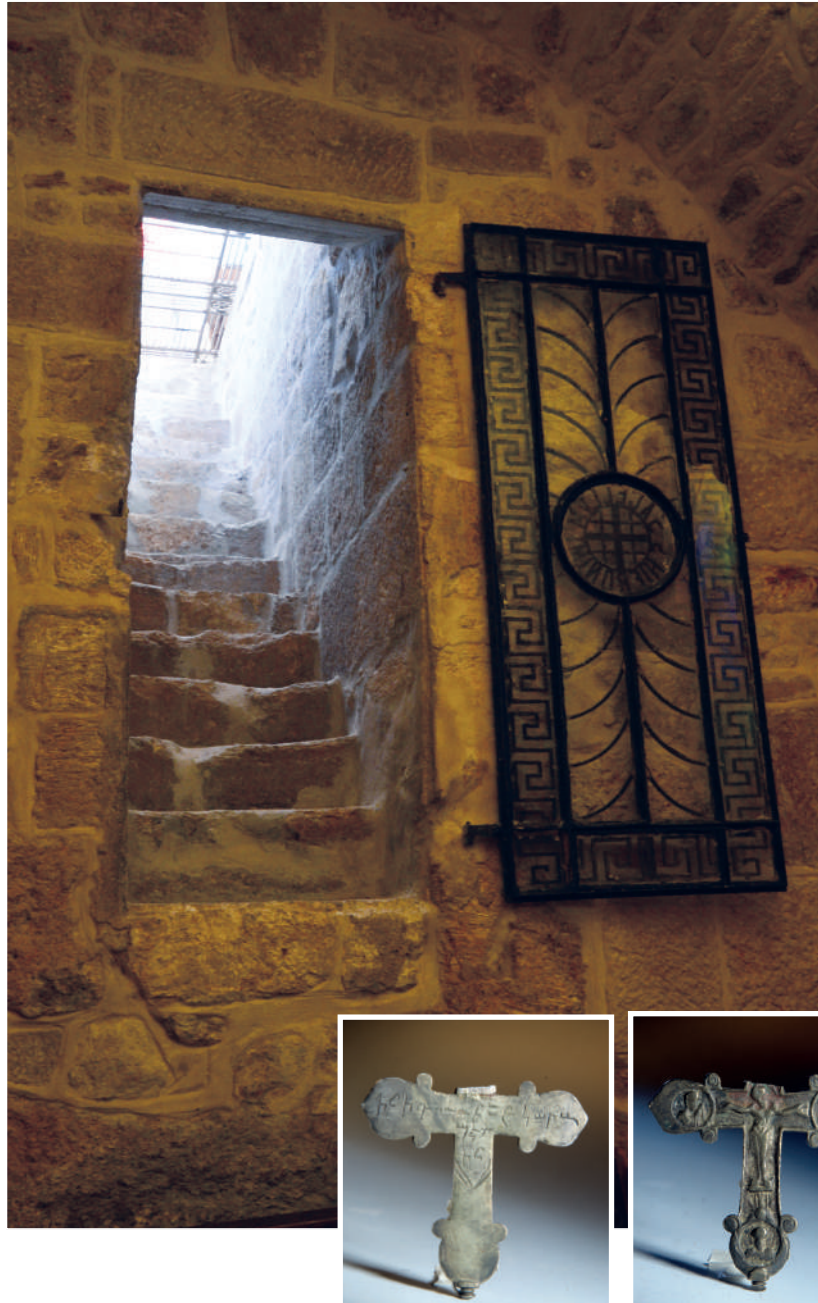
To the north of Jerome's tomb (turning right), is a square room which has traditionally been called Jerome's cell. The location of the convents of Jerome and Paula are unknown, but probably some distance from the church. A modern mosaic above an altar highlights his relationship with Paula, Eustochium, and Eusebius. The book in the center includes the beginning of John's Gospel in Latin: "In the beginning was the Word."



The modern stain glass window depicts Jerome in a way similar to that of the Old Testament prophets or the evangelists, who were inspired by God in their craft as writers of the sacred Word. This conveys that Jerome's Latin translation of the biblical writings was accepted with authority similar to the Bible in its original languages.



An ancient stairway leads up from Jerome's cell to the cloister above



An Armenian cross with the inscription "Garabet" (forerunner) from the 14th century was found cleaning the floor of the grotto.

St. Catherine's Church



St. Catherine's Latin Church is located directly north of the Church of the Nativity. The north apse of the older church leads directly into the side of the newer church as can be seen in the photo above. The current church was built in 1880, but has a long history. During the 12th century, the Crusaders established an Augustinian convent on the north of the church, protected by sloping topography on several sides. In the bottom floor of the Casa Nova Guest House, a Crusader era storage room has been converted into a modern chapel.



Later in 1334 the Franciscans were recognized as representing Western Christians and were declared *custos* of the Holy Places. They immediately established themselves in Bethlehem and by 1347 AD had built a church on this site dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria.

The Franciscan cloister is considered an outstanding example of medieval cloisters. Of the sixty four decorated capitals of columns twenty have survived the expansion of St. Catherine's Church.

The statue of Jerome in the courtyard dates from 1880. The skull at his feet is a reminder of the saint's ascetic way of life. He holds in his hand quill and book as a reminder of his active life of scholarship in Bethlehem.



Above the door of Saint Catherine's Church is a modern round stain glass window depicting the adoration of the Christ child, a gift from France in 1895 as part of the fourth general pilgrimage.



The nativity glass showing two Franciscan as guardians on the front wall of the church above the organ was a gift from Belgium in 1926.

Christmas Eve



This modern church follows a Romanesque style, divided into three aisles by simple pillars. The midnight mass each Christmas Eve (December 24) with choirs and dignitaries in attendance is broadcast around the world.



Perhaps the most prominent feature is the image of the Christ child which rests under the main altar. Every Christmas, upon completion of the midnight mass, the Patriarch of Jerusalem leads a procession to take the image to the nativity grotto and to lay it on the silver star and then in the manger.



A final word

Today the Church of the Nativity complex is shared by Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Catholic clergy who represent Christians of every denomination, people of every nationality and language, Palestinian Christians who have remained steadfast over the centuries, and pilgrims who come for a short visit. The Church of the Nativity is a World Heritage site. At times in the past, it has been the scene of competition and violence. Yet the message of this church is one of unity in diversity. When traveling through the Holy Land, one soon notices that almost every event in the life of Jesus is represented by competing shrines and sanctuaries. Yet there is only one Church of the Nativity, where visitors are united by their connection to the Christ child lying in the manger. Here one experiences a variety of styles of worship, of architectural patterns, and of artistic representations. Yet all convey the same message of peace, hope, and love. The flickering light from a Christmas candle is a reminder that the light of that first Christmas goes out through the doors of this church to the whole world.



Biographies



Garo Nalbandian is one of the best known photographers in the Middle East. He began his work in photography at the age of 13 in the Photo Yergatian shop in Jerusalem. Garo, only 15 years old, gained wide recognition by his photography of the visit of UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold in 1958. In 1960 he opened his own Photo studio in Jerusalem, and soon was published in *Life*, *Time*, and *Newsweek* magazines. Since 1961, he has been the official photographer of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, and in 1964 he was the official photographer for Pope Paul VI's Holy Land visit. He is known for possessing one of the largest photo archives in the region and has provided photo illustrations for over 25 books, including *Bethlehem 2000: Past and Present* and *Bethlehem: a World Heritage* (2013), both by Mitri Raheb and Fred Strickert. In addition to his photography, Garo also is accomplished in film.



Prof. Fred Strickert is a Lutheran pastor who is Professor Emeritus in Religion at Wartburg College in Iowa, U.S.A., and who has served as Pastor at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Old City Jerusalem. He has also taught in India, Papua New Guinea, and Bethlehem. He has over 25 years of experience in archaeological excavation. He has published numerous articles in scholarly journals. Among his books are *Rachel Weeping: Jews, Christians, and Muslims at the Fortress Tomb* (Liturgical Press: Minneapolis, 2007) and *Philip's City: From Bethsaida to Julias* (Liturgical Press: Minneapolis, 2011). He is co-author of *Bethlehem: Past and Present* (1998) and *Bethlehem: A World Heritage* (2013) with Mitri Raheb and Garo Nalbandian.

