

The church that stands at the spot of Christ's birth

For two millennia, it has withstood the Romans, Persians, Arabs, Ottomans, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But against all odds, the Church of the Nativity still stands.

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The author prays in the grotto of the Church of the Nativity, where tradition holds Christ was born, in Bethlehem, West Bank.
(Image: Seán Connolly)

The place rendered sacred by the birth of the Savior does not look like one would expect it to. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem looks more like a dilapidated fortress than a basilica. While it is the oldest surviving church in Christendom, it has always had a precarious existence. For two millennia, the church has withstood the Romans, Samaritans, Persians, Arabs, and Ottomans. Even today, it is stuck between “a rock and a hard place” with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and has the bullet holes to prove it. But against all odds, the Church of the Nativity still stands. Lying at the heart of the fascinating history of this ancient basilica is the persevering spirit of our Christian ancestors who sought to keep the memory of the first Christmas alive in the often-dangerous region where it took place.

The earliest Christians were drawn to the holy place where God was born. St. Justin, who was a native of Palestine and martyred in 165, speaks of Christ's birth in a cave, for instance. Christian devotion to the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem was enough to catch the attention of the Roman

authorities. It was a common practice of the Emperor Hadrian to profane worship sites of Christians and Jews to deter the practicing of all local religions in opposition to the Roman cult; in 135 he did this to the Grotto of the Nativity when he constructed over it a grove to the Greek God Adonis, the paramour of Venus. When Origen visited Bethlehem in AD 220, he mentions how the local pagans knew very well where Christ was born and were happy to show any Christian pilgrim the spot.

When Constantine became Emperor and converted to Christianity, his mother, St. Helena, journeyed to the Holy Land to venerate the sites sanctified by our Lord's earthly life and to establish basilicas at them. In a twist of irony, Hadrian's attempt to obliterate the memory of these holy sites by profaning them with pagan shrines had the opposite effect. The pagan shrines preserved the knowledge of the precise locations for Helena to easily find. In Bethlehem, she was directed to the pagan shrine of Adonis, where she constructed the first Church of the Nativity, consecrated on May 31, 399. The apse of this church was in an octagonal shape and situated directly above the cave of the Nativity, which could be reached by descending stairs. Today, the only remains of this church are portions of the mosaic floors that are almost two feet below the floor of the nave in the present church.

In 384 St. Jerome established a monastic center in Bethlehem and took up residence in a cave adjacent to the one where Christ was born. There are several other caves in the surrounding area, such as one dedicated to the Holy Innocents and ones that contain the tombs of Jerome's two close companions, Sts. Paula and Eustochia, her daughter. Upon his death, St. Jerome was interred in one of these caves but his remains were eventually translated to Saint Mary Major in Rome.

This same Roman basilica's most prized relic also came from Bethlehem. For some time, this basilica was known as St. Mary of the Crib, as Palestinian Christians brought wooden fragments of this relic from the Lord's Nativity to Rome when forced to flee the Muslim invasion of the seventh century. The translation of this relic was likely orchestrated by Pope Saint Theodore (642-649) who was a native of Palestine and also came to Rome after the Arab conquest of the Holy Land. St. Mary Major still hosts a procession of the Holy Crib every year on Christmas Day. This year Pope Francis gave a wonderful Christmas gift to the Palestinian Christians of Bethlehem; he ordered a small fragment of the Lord's Crib be returned to the Church of the Nativity, which operates under the care of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

In 529 this Constantinian Church of the Nativity was damaged greatly during a Samaritan insurrection. Shortly after, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian had the church entirely rebuilt to a much grander scale. This edifice still stands today.

The Church of the Nativity is built over a series of natural caves that extend a considerable distance forming chambers connected with each other. The Grotto of the Nativity, where tradition indicates Mary gave birth to the Divine Infant, is situated in the lower part of one of these caves reached by two slopes that were converted into marble steps. The Grotto is rectangular in shape and measures about 35 feet long and 10 feet wide with the floors and walls covered in marble and devotional art. Between the two steep staircases beneath the high altar of the main church leading down into the Grotto, there is a slight depression that marks the traditional spot where Jesus was born; today this Altar of the Nativity is in the care of the Greek Orthodox. Beneath the altar is a 14-point silver star placed by the Franciscans on the exact spot of Jesus' birth.

Tradition locates the manger in which Jesus was placed after his birth in another little grotto only a few paces away from the Altar of the Nativity. Opposite the location of the manger is an altar dedicated to the Wise Men; this altar is where the Catholics are able to celebrate Mass today.

The Justinian basilica has survived many close calls, most especially during the Persian invasion of the Holy Land in 614. While most churches in the region were destroyed during this time, the Church of the Nativity was spared. How this came to be is recounted for us in a letter from the Jerusalem Synod of 838, which quite interestingly recalled the event to counter the arguments of the iconoclasts: "When the Persians, after having sacked all the towns in Syria, reached Bethlehem, they were greatly surprised to discover on its facade a representation of the magi from Persia. Out of reverence and respect for their ancestors, they decided to honor these sages by sparing the church. And this is how it has survived until this day."

The Arab-Islamic expansion throughout the Levant began shortly after the Persian sacking of Jerusalem and its environs. Only two years following Muhammad's death in 632, the Arab Muslim conquest of the Levant began in 634 under his successors. His second successor, Omar, would conquer Palestine in 637. Around Bethlehem the monasteries were destroyed and the monks massacred, but the Church of the Nativity was respected. As the Muslims esteem *Isa ibn Maryam*, "Jesus son of Mary" as an important prophet, the Caliph Omar decided to spare the church from the destruction that befell others. In the early 10th century, Eutychius of Alexandria reports that Omar visited Bethlehem and used the south transept of the church for prayer. He promised that Muslims who visited the church to pray could do so only in this designated area as individuals and without assembly. But much to Eutychius' chagrin, Muslim use of the church very often extended beyond this. But on account of the mutual respect between the Christians and Muslims for the birth place of Jesus, and no doubt the taxes paid by the Christians as the price for peace, these Muslim locals prevented the execution of the Caliph Hakim's decree in 1009 that all Christian monuments be destroyed.

No Muslim prayer takes place in the Church today, but across Manger Square opposite the church is the Mosque of Omar; the current mosque was built in 1860 on land donated by the Greek Orthodox Church.

The Crusaders captured Bethlehem in 1099. On Christmas Day, 1100, within the Church of the Nativity, Baldwin of Flanders was crowned the first king of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. His successor, Baldwin II, followed suit in 1122. As a sign of further appreciation for the sanctity of the place, the Crusaders engaged in extensive works of restoration and decoration from 1165 to 1169. These efforts were conducted through the rare and extraordinary cooperation between the Franks and the Byzantines, made easier because the Byzantine Emperor Manuel I Komnenos.

After the Crusaders were driven out in 1187, respect for the Church of the Nativity ebbed and flowed with each passing Muslim ruler. It was used for their political and financial ends. In 1347 guardianship of the church was given to the Franciscans, who were permitted only infrequent works of repair. With the arrival of the Ottoman Turks in 1517, possession of the church changed hands between the Franciscans and the Greeks, depending upon who the Turks were seeking to curry favor with internationally.

Though the Franciscans representing the Latin Catholics lost their place in the Church of the Nativity, over the ruins of an adjacent Crusader monastery once belonging to the Augustinians, they built a large Gothic church dedicated to St. Catherine of Alexandria in 1882. This is where they reside today; this church serves as the parish of Bethlehem's Catholics and is where the Latin Patriarch offers Christmas Midnight Mass, which is broadcast throughout the world. St. Catherine's shares a wall with the Church of the Nativity and from its various subterranean grottos can be accessed which are under the care of the Franciscans. These, which include Jerome's cave, are in close proximity to the principal Grotto of the Nativity beneath the sanctuary of the main church.

The gradual deterioration of the church was quickened by continual pillaging, an earthquake in 1834, and a fire in 1869. Of note in more modern times was the siege of the Bethlehem by the Israeli Defense Forces in April 2002 during the Second Intifada. Fifty armed Palestinians resisting the occupation of the Israelis barricaded themselves in the church. With them were roughly 200 monks and civilians. The IDF surrounded the church and a 39-day siege ensued that drew international attention. By the time negotiations ended the siege, eight were killed but only slight damage was caused to the church.

In 2012 the Church of the Nativity was declared a UNESCO world heritage site, but was also placed on a list of those at risk. In keeping with site's significance as the birth of the Prince of Peace, the different Latins, Greeks, and Armenians along with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, cooperated peaceably to begin a major restoration of the church in 2013. The largest engineering challenge was to restore the roof, made of huge cedar and pine beams, some of which date to the sixth century. During the work of replacing only eight percent of this wood, fragments of an explosive charge from the Six-Day War of 1967 were found. The holes left from Israeli gunfire during the 2002

siege were not removed to preserve this episode in the church's history for posterity. Inside the church tremendous accomplishments were made in restoring the mosaics of the Crusader period which cover the church walls. Of the 2,200 square yards of mosaics only 125 have been able to be preserved. Prior to the restoration, the mosaics were barely noticeable to pilgrims as they were heavily darkened by the buildup of soot over the centuries. Now they shine brightly giving glory to God.

Perhaps the most emblematic feature of the Church of the Nativity is its front door. Called the "Door of Humility," the front entrance of the basilica was created during the Ottoman period to be narrow and only four feet high, so as to prevent the horses and carts of looters from entering. There is something beautiful in the symbolism of this that imparts an important lesson. Just as God humbled himself by becoming one of us, even to the point of being born poor and homeless, all who approach the hallowed spot of His birth must humble themselves by stooping low to enter. No man stands so tall than when he kneels down low before God.