



CHRIST CHURCH

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Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippian 4:4-7)

Dear Friends in Christ,

We are more than halfway through Advent and making the transition towards Christmas. In this Chronicle I want to offer some thoughts on Bethlehem based on my study of the Bible and the Pilgrimage I made this past summer.

BETHLEHEM IN THE BIBLE

The first mention of Bethlehem in the Bible is in Genesis as the location where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, was buried.

Bethlehem shows up several times in the Book of Judges. My favorite is the brief mention of Ibzan. Here is everything we know of Ibzan: “Ibzan of Bethlehem judged Israel. He had thirty sons. He gave his thirty daughters in marriage outside his clan and brought in thirty young women from outside for his sons. He judged Israel seven years. Then Ibzan died, and was buried at Bethlehem.” (Judges 12:8-10) I have two children, I cannot fathom what life would be like with sixty children... not to mention sixty spouses of sixty children!

There's a wonderful bit in the Talmud - the Talmud is the central, non-Biblical text of Rabbinic Judaism and a primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology – which asserts that Ibzan is to be identified with Boaz from the Book of Ruth, who lived in the Bethlehem in Judah, and that he consummated his marriage with Ruth on the last night of his life. This tradition is non-Biblical, and most scholars today believe Ibzan hailed from another town of Bethlehem in the Galilee area. Regardless, the Talmud teaching highlights the importance of Bethlehem in Judaism – more on that and Ruth below.

Bethlehem in Judah – the town we all think of when we hear of Bethlehem – appears in Judges 17 and again in Judges 19. In each of these stories Bethlehem plays a minor role, being first the home of a certain Levite and second the home of a certain concubine – I leave it to you to read those stories. In any event, it seems clear that by the time of the Judges Bethlehem of Judah was a well-known town. It is likely that the tomb of Rachel played an important role in the town’s prominence, and in fact, you can visit her tomb if you visit the Holy Land – more on that below as well.

Bethlehem in Judah is the scene for the bulk of the Book of Ruth, which takes place during the days of the Judges. The book begins in Moab where a woman named Naomi, her husband, and her two sons have emigrated from Bethlehem. Naomi’s husband dies, her sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, and then the sons also die. Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem and Ruth accompanies her. If you haven’t done so, I recommend that you read the Book of Ruth which tells the story of Ruth’s faithfulness to her mother-in-law and her courtship with Boaz, a relative of Naomi. An important part of Ruth’s story is that she is a Moabite, not a Jew. Her story is a story of reconciliation between people who did not always get along well. Her story is also the end of the era of judges and the beginning of the monarchy. The genealogy at the end of the Book of Ruth informs us that the son of Ruth and Boaz is Obed, who will be the father of Jesse, the father of David, who will become King.

As the kings after David failed to live up to expectations Bethlehem played an important role in Messianic prophecies. The prophet Micah proclaims: “You, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” (Micah 5:2-5)

This prophecy was remembered in Jesus’ lifetime. In Saint Matthew’s Gospel account of Jesus’ birth when the Magi appear and ask Herod where they can find the “child who has been born king of the Jews” the chief priests and scribes refer to Micah: “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” (Matthew 2:1-6). Saint John likewise notes: “Others said, “This is the Messiah.” But some asked, “Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he? Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?”” (John 7:41-42)

Both Saint Matthew and Saint Luke tell the story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem. Advent is a good time to reread Luke’s full account of Mary, angels, and shepherds (Luke 1-2) and Matthew’s full account that focusses on Joseph, Herod, and Magi. The final reference to Bethlehem in Matthew’s Gospel is the Slaughter of the Innocents – when Herod murders all

boys under age two in an effort to eliminate this rival “king of the Jews” – which takes place in Bethlehem. To place this event in the larger Biblical narrative surrounding Bethlehem, Saint Matthew references the Prophet Jeremiah speaking about Rachel: “A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.” (Matthew 2:18)

The earliest known non-Biblical mention of Bethlehem is quite important for Bible Scholars. Around 1400 BC (likely in the Judges period) Abdi-Heba who was governing Jerusalem sent a written request for archers to the Pharaoh of Egypt to help quell a rebellion in nearby Bethlehem. Abdi-Heba warns Pharaoh that the town and the surrounding land will desert to the “Habiru” (transliterated from the Akkadian language) – a group whose name is so similar to “Hebrew” (transliterated from the Hebrew language) that scholars have long debated whether or not this is the same group. The title Hebrew is not used often in the Bible, appearing most frequently in Genesis and Exodus. The first mention of “Hebrew” in the Bible is in Genesis 14 when Abram is dubbed “Abram the Hebrew”. In Genesis it is most often used to refer to Joseph who was the son of Rachel who was buried in Bethlehem. Oftentimes archeological evidence strengthens the historicity of Scripture, and I believe this might be one of those cases... was Abdi-Heba was interacting with descendants of Rachel? It seems likely.

CAVES & CRÈCHES

Bethlehem is located less than 7 miles from Jerusalem and built on and into a large hill full of small caves. In Biblical times these caves were used as shelters by shepherds, and often houses were built above, next to, or connected to these caves. It is likely that these caves were also used for defensive purposes to thwart invaders (like our friend Abdi-Heba).

On our trip to the Holy Land this past summer we visited Bethlehem and went into some of these caves. They are dry, clean, warm, and hidden. As soon as I was inside one of these caves I immediately understood how useful they could serve as defensive outposts, storage areas, living quarters, or stables.

It often surprises American Christians to learn that the Orthodox churches believe that Jesus was born in such a cave and that the manger he was laid in was stone. The Orthodox are not alone in this. The official Vatican Nativity Scene is often set in a cave. As an aside, you have to take a moment to look at the Vatican Nativity Scenes which change each year – this year’s is made of sand! When you begin to look deeper into Christian history and archeology you discover that this cave tradition is almost certainly true.

I have always had an image of the Nativity that features a country stable near a quaint bed and breakfast. The reality is a bit harsher. As I noted above, Bethlehem is on a hill that has lots of caves. These caves were used in a variety of ways. Often permanent domiciles—including ones that hosted travelers—were built on top of caves or next to caves or

connected to caves. Visiting Bethlehem confirmed that the Nativity Scene in my head was based more on English Christmas Carols and American Nativity Scenes than on reality.

My internal image was grounded in large part on the word “inn”. English Bibles have translated the word used for the place where Jesus’ birth took place as “an inn” for over 500 years. A more accurate translation for 21st century ears would be “because there was no room in the living space.” It turns out Mary and Joseph were probably staying in a home, guesthouse, or lodge of some sort that was attached to one of the many caves. There was no spare room, and so they moved further in or further down to the humbler setting among the animals in the cave. There Jesus was born, wrapped in swaddling bands, and placed in a stone manger.

One of the caves that we visited was generally untouched by the centuries. We entered through a stone staircase and descended into a series of three connected caves. Our guide Iyad showed us which part of the cave would have been used by animals, where the sleeping quarters would be, where a fire would have been lit, and he even showed us a rough carved stone that resembled a large basket. “That’s a manger in this part of the world,” he told us. Animals would have been kept in caves like this, and the feeding troughs were rough carved stones. We sang “Away in a Manger” in that cave. It was an experience that connected my childhood love of Christmas carols to my Seminary training in Bible Study, strengthened my faith in Jesus, and gave me a greater appreciation that God is present in rough places.

At the top of the hill lies the Church of the Nativity which is built above the likely site of Jesus’ birth. The church was built in 339 AD and expanded to its present size about 200 years later. It has survived earthquakes, fires, wars, the Crusades, Hakim’s post Crusade decree ordering the destruction of all Christian monuments, looters, a never-ending stream of international tourists and pilgrims, and only a few years ago a six-week siege and gun battle between Palestinian militants and the Israeli Army.

The front door of the church gives a clue to that history. The original massive door has been walled up and replaced with a smaller but still large arched doorway which has also been walled up. Today there is a small door about three feet high that you have to step down and then up again to get through. One must literally enter through the narrow door.

Once inside we were greeted by complete sensory overload. The church was much hotter inside than outside. It was August in Israel, and I would guess that it was about 105 degrees inside the Church of the Nativity. The art and history – nearly 2000 years’ worth – are breathtaking. The clutter and crowds are equally breathtaking. Everywhere you look are gorgeous frescos, carvings, paintings, hanging lamps, lights, and decorations... including red, silver, and green orbs like we have on our Christmas Trees. The lines of people were endless, and the crowds were pushy. Every now and again we came across an exasperated priest trying unsuccessfully to move people along. I have to say, it reminded me very much of Christmas.

All roads and lines in Bethlehem lead to the cave under the Church of the Nativity. After waiting in line for over an hour in sweltering heat I suddenly found myself in a small room called the Grotto of the Nativity which includes two shrines. The first shrine marks the traditional location where Jesus was born. There is a fourteen-point silver star on the marble floor with the words, in Latin, “Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary”. The star has a hole in it, and you can reach down and touch the rocky floor of the cave. A few feet away on the other side of the cave is another shrine marking the manger. Underneath a marble and silver covering there is a rock manger exactly like the one we saw in the less important cave down the hill.

The best way to describe the historical accuracy of Grotto of the Nativity is “If not here, near.” Early Christians believed that Jesus had been born in a cave, and there was a local tradition which predates Constantine that Jesus had been born in that particular cave. At the end of the day, you can’t know for sure, but I’m not sure it matters.

Consider this. On that hot August day thousands of pilgrims waited (not so patiently) for the opportunity to spend a few seconds in the cave where they believe Jesus was born. I was given about five seconds of prayer and a brief moment to touch the stone before the priest who was doubling as a bouncer clapped his hands and waved me along. The line filled the church when we came in, and it was just as long as when we left. I have no doubt that the centuries have allowed tens of millions of people to pray there. Part of me had hoped this moment would be Silent Night on a snowy day, on my knees, alone in prayer in a quiet country-side stable, next to a bed and breakfast with good soup. Instead I got August heat, packed into a cave, with hundreds of noisy Christians. I got what I needed, and I think we all did. God became a human being in Jesus Christ for all of us. The name Emmanuel – the title given to Jesus at his birth – means “God with us”. “Us” – not just me but all of us. I realized in that place just how powerfully the prayers of countless pilgrims testify to the power of God.

SIGNS, WALLS & GRAFFITI

I noted above that the Church of the Nativity was recently the site of a gun battle between Palestinians and Israelis. I am far from an expert on the politics and conflicts of the Holy Land, and I certainly understand everyone speaks with the bias of their own background and experience. With that in mind I will describe what I saw.

Bethlehem is in the West Bank and part of the Palestinian Territories. Crossing from Israel into the West Bank is no small thing. You cross a checkpoint. You pass into an area flanked by ominous red signs written in Hebrew, Arabic, and English: “This Road leads to Area “A” under the Palestinian Authority. The Entrance for Israeli citizens is forbidden, dangerous to your lives, and against Israeli law.” There is a thirty-foot wall surrounding the towns and cities in the West Bank, and one such wall encircles Bethlehem. The roads into Bethlehem and other West Bank towns can be quickly barricaded so that no one can get in

or out. Basic utilities services change when you enter the West Bank. Even AT&T recognized a difference: my cell phone noted that I was in Palestine, rather than in a “Partner” network and the rates changed. Most of the pilgrims in our group got a text noting this switch. The walls are covered with graffiti – if you haven’t seen my photos on our church Facebook Page, I hope you will take a look. For pop/social justice/art fans, Banksy graffiti is omnipresent. The graffiti is in English and Arabic and it is clearly designed to be read and viewed by Americans – the message is “your dollars are paying for these walls”.

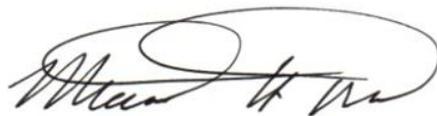
Our guide Iyad explained that there had been suicide bombers in Jerusalem who hailed from Bethlehem. I did a little research, and I believe that these bombers struck in December of 2001, March of 2002, and November of 2002. The gun battle and siege of the Church of the Nativity happened in April-May, 2002. I also discovered that a suicide bomber from Bethlehem attacked Jerusalem in 2016. Iyad explained that the walls were built in response to these events. He explained that the vast majority of residents of Bethlehem and the rest of the West Bank were not terrorists and the walls affected every resident in Bethlehem – Christians and Muslims – suffocating the economy and isolating people from their neighbors. The graffiti echoed his concerns.

Rachel’s tomb is in Bethlehem at the bottom of the hill on the other side of the wall. Because it is a holy site for Jews, the wall was built in such a way that it is easily accessible for anyone travelling from Jerusalem or any of the nearby settlements. The wall makes it basically impossible for the residents of Bethlehem to visit the tomb even though it is located in town. We stood next to the wall only a few hundred yards from the tomb on the other side. I asked how long it would take to get there: “about an hour by car”.

I wish I had a solution or some wise words that would make sense of the conflicts in the Holy Land, but I don’t. The Holy Land reminded me that life can be very hard and yet God is present even in the humblest of circumstances. The Holy Land reminded me that reconciliation and respecting the dignity of every human being is easier said than done. The Holy Land reminded me that people in the Bible and people of faith, for all their flaws, provide amazing examples of how God is living and active in life. Most of all the Holy Land reminded me that God is always with us even in the midst of things we cannot understand.

This Christmas may the Holy Spirit help us to pray and strive for justice, mercy, and reconciliation; may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among us, and remain with us always. Amen.

In Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew Hossie Mead". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

The Reverend Matthew Hossie Mead, Rector