

Holy Bethlehem

Bethlehem of Judea, the city which irreversibly engraved the history of mankind. In Hebrew the name Bethlehem means the house of bread, the Bread of life. According to the gospels of Matthew (2:1) and Luke (2:1-15), it is the birth place of Jesus. Bethlehem is also called Ephratah and Bethlehem-city of David to distinguish it from the similarly named city of Bethlehem on the south of Galilee. In the 4th century between the years 327-333 Saint Helen constructed a magnificent Basilica above the nativity cave of Christ, drastically contributing to the transformation of this small insignificant village into an important pilgrim site. The interior of the Basilica is sustained to its original form to this day. It is a five-aisled Basilica, the aisles been separated by forty monolith pillars of the Corinthian style. The pillars depict various Saints of the Eastern Church. Most of the nativity cave is engraved on the natural rock while the remaining part is built.

According to the above findings, the nativity cave was covered in an octagonal shape and the pilgrims could see it through a small central opening. The floors of the Basilica and the octagon were covered with colourful mosaics. The octagon was replaced by a three-semi circled Holy Bema (sanctuary) underneath which the nativity cave is found. On the west wall of the Narthex which overlooked the yard, there was a mosaic portraying the birth of Christ and the offer of worship to Him by the Wise Men.

According to the tradition, when the Persian army with Khosrau as their leader raided Palestine in 614, they revered the Church of the Nativity recognizing the three Persian Wise Men offering their gifts to the Divine Infant on the mosaic of the Narthex. After the Arab occupation in 638 and the Omar treaty, Christians and Muslims lived harmoniously in Bethlehem as the

latter honoured Christ as a Prophet and respected the Theotokos. In 1250 the Mamluks succeeded the Ayyubid Dynasty in Egypt. As a consequence, the Christians of the city suffered heavy persecution and hardships, while during the Ottoman Empire occupation there was strong conflict between the Latin and the Greek Orthodox Christians for the ownership of the Church of the Nativity and the Holy Cave. In 1757 with a decree from Sultan Osman iii, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem receives complete ownership of the Church and the Nativity Cave and strives to sustain this right through many adverse conditions.

The Holy Monastery of Prophet Elijah

The Holy Monastery of Prophet Elijah is on the way to Bethlehem. The monastery was built by Patriarch Elijah in the 6th century and after recurring destructions it was reconstructed by Byzantine Emperor Manuel Komnenos in 1160 A.D. The monastery was met with more structural damages due to the war assaults. In 1860 The Patriarchate saw to its full restoration, while another refurbishment took place by the memorable Archbishop of Ashkelon, Arkadios. The monastery has kept many traditions such as the following;

- The three Wise Men from the East had reached the site of the Monastery having lost their way, when suddenly they saw a bright star redirecting them towards the birth place of Christ. Near the monastery there is the cistern of the Wise Men.
- In this place Joseph brought the Theotokos in order to abandon her when he found out about her pregnancy. However an Angel appeared to him and changed his plans by informing him that the conception was “from the Holy Ghost” (Matthew 1:20-21).
- Prophet Elijah had slept on that place on his attempt to escape the rage of the irreverent king Ahab and his wife Jezebel. An angel of the Lord told him then: “Arise, eat

because the journey is too great for you" (1 Kings 19:7).

In the Holy monastery there is a piece from the healing chain of Saint George as well as the relics of an anonymous chained monk. The chain was a means of ascetic striving for the monk. South of the monastery there is the "chickpeas field". As the Lord was passing by, he met somebody sawing chickpeas. When Christ asked him what he is sawing, he received the ironic answer that he was sawing stones. Then Christ said unto him: "Reap what you saw". Indeed, when the harvest time came, the farmer reaped stones the size of chickpeas.

On Christmas Eve, the Patriarch with the Holy Synod, the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood and faithful people start the procession from Jerusalem to Bethlehem with a stopover at the Monastery of Prophet Elijah. Then they continue their way to the Church of the Nativity for Great Vespers.

The Holy Monastery of the Shepherds in Beit Sahur

The village Beit Sahur is located almost one kilometre east of Bethlehem in a small valley with the Shepherds' olive tree fields; some of the trees are 2000 years old. In the middle of the valley there is a cave which Saint Helen had converted to a Church dedicated to the Theotokos and it celebrates on 26th December. That was the cave of the Shepherds who on Christmas night heard the Angels' hymn: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14).

This cave was one of the many churches Saint Helen built in 325 A.D. when she came to the Holy Land to find the Lord's Sacred Cross. Historically we mention that out of all the churches the Saint had built, this cave is the only one that still keeps its original form. All others have been destroyed and reconstructed over the centuries. This cave served as a shepherds' shelter initially, later on as a place for their worship and from the 4th century onwards it has been used as a

church by the Christians. Consequently, as the cave is associated with Christ, it has been honoured as a holy place since the first Christian years. The chronicles of the first Christian pilgrims reference the cave, the first of which is that of Etheria, and mentions the one kilometre distance of the cave from the Basilica of the Nativity.

According to archaeological findings, the church is dated back on the first Byzantine period and it is the first Christian building in the area.

Nowadays the Holy Structure is comprised of five churches:

- The natural cave which was converted into a church on the second half of the 4th century
- The church of the cave, dated back on the 5th century
- The Roof Chapel, also dated back on the 5th century
- The 6th century Basilica
- The church of the monastery, dated back on the 7th century

Finally, the new three-aisled church was built next to the underground church. Archaeological research in 1972-73 brought to light colourful mosaics which covered the floor of the natural cave. They belong to the 4th century and are similar to those of the Basilica of the Nativity.

From the 6th century onwards, the “Fields of the Shepherds” had been one of the most important and venerated shrines. Its relevantly easy access from the main road that leads to the monasteries of the desert and Judea from Jerusalem and Bethlehem and its physical proximity to the Basilica of the Nativity (the two places were joined together with a Litany on Christmas Eve), contributed to the decision of building a bigger Church here. Up to the beginning of our century, the Patriarch and the Holy Synod with thousands of Orthodox clergy

and laymen came to the church of the cave, which is dedicated to the Theotokos and celebrated the Christmas Eve Divine Liturgy. Afterwards they would form a procession towards Bethlehem for Christmas' Great Vespers. Today the schedule is different.

On Christmas Day afternoon, a Bishop from the Patriarchate of Jerusalem together with many members of the Brotherhood comes to Beit Sahur to celebrate the Great Vespers of the Theotokos' Gathering.

The Holy Monastery of Saint George in Al-Khader

The village Al-Khader, inhabited by Muslims, is located southwest of Bethlehem. In this village there is an Orthodox Monastery in honour of Saint George. Saint George is honoured by both Christian and Muslims because they consider him to be a local and greatly miraculous Saint. The nearby to the monastery fields belonged to the Saint's mother. A healing chain of the Saint is kept in the monastery.