



Bethlehem: Then and Now

By Warren Krag

**November/December
2007**

It is nighttime and shepherds are out in some fields near the village of Bethlehem in Judea taking care of their sheep.

Suddenly the darkness of night is shattered as the sky is lit up by a group of angelic beings with an awesome message.

"Christ the Lord has been born that day in the town of David, an angel tells the shepherds. Obviously encouraging them to visit the newborn Savior, the angel says that they will find Him lying in a manger wrapped in strips of cloth.

"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened," the excited shepherds tell each other. So, leaving their sheep, the men hurry into the village and become eyewitnesses to the birth of the long-awaited Messiah.

Bethlehem—Big Honors for a Little Town

Bethlehem hardly seemed like a suitable location for an event of such magnitude. It was just a little village, located five or six miles southwest of the much larger city of Jerusalem in the hill country of Judea.

The prophet Micah had prophesied centuries before concerning Bethlehem that "out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel" even "though you are small among the clans of Judah." (Micah 5:2)

Yet, the honor of being the birthplace of Jesus Christ was not the first time this little

community was blessed by God.

It was near Bethlehem (also called Ephrath) where Benjamin, youngest son of Jacob, was born and where Jacob's wife, Rachel, died. (Genesis 35) A site thought to be the location of her tomb today lies along a road near Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was the home of Naomi and Boaz, who married Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth. Their descendants included King David and, of course, Jesus.

Also, it was to Bethlehem that the prophet Samuel went at God's direction to appoint David as the second king of Israel (1 Samuel 16).

So, the little village of Bethlehem had its claim to fame even before the birth of Jesus there. Yet, the birth of the Savior is what we most remember about this little community.

Bethlehem at the Time Of the Birth of Jesus

When Jesus was born Judea was a Roman state or province over which the infamous Herod the Great, an Edomite, was appointed a "king" in exchange for his loyalty to the Roman Empire. The emperor was, of course, Caesar Augustus and the governor of Syria who also ruled over Judea was Cyrenius (Luke 2:2).

The fact that all those living in Judea were subject to the Roman emperor is shown by the fact that as a result of a decree by the emperor, Mary and Joseph had to leave their home in Nazareth to go to Bethlehem, their ancestral home, in order to pay taxes.

While the exact date of Jesus' birth is unknown (note that not all Christians celebrate it on December 25), if it happened during the winter in Palestine, the temperatures out in the fields where the shepherds were working may not have been much above freezing. According to wikipedia.com, average temperatures in January can get as low as 33 degrees F.

Bethlehem Today

Bethlehem today is part of a region called the West Bank of Palestine. Anyone following current news knows that there is plenty of political unrest in the area. A Web site that appears to be favorable to the Palestinians (<http://lexicorient.com>) declares Palestine to be a republic with Mahmoud Abbas as president. It says that about 100 nations recognize Palestine but not most Western powers nor the United Nations. It admits that large parts of the country are occupied by Israel and the final status of Palestine is uncertain.

Christianity at one time was the dominant religion in the area, but Christians appear to be leaving in large numbers. Depending upon whom one believes, this trend is either the fault of the Muslims (www.cnsnews.com) or the Israelis ([National Catholic Reporter](http://NationalCatholicReporter)).

Bethlehem has about 30,000 residents (2003 estimate) with estimates of the Christian population ranging from about 3,000 to 10,000. It is an agricultural market and trade town as well as a pilgrim and tourist center. There appears to be an increase in attempts to attract more tourists. The city Web site says that "Compared to other cities and towns in Palestine, Bethlehem is a relatively quiet place." (www.bethlehem-city.org)

The most visited place in Bethlehem is the Church of the Nativity which is believed to be built over the site of Jesus' manger. This church is owned and managed by three different Christian denominations: Armenian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Greek Orthodox.

Because our beloved Savior was born there, Bethlehem will always occupy a warm spot in the hearts of Christians. *LSI*