

**PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND: ISRAEL  
CHAPTER 9 – Bethlehem: Church of the Nativity**

**Ride to Bethlehem (Palestinian Authority) [Hwy. 60]**

**Marian: “Ahead of us we have the famous Turkish train line. The Turkish train line was built in the 1890s for pilgrims coming to the port of Jaffa. And it used to take the pilgrims about a week to get up to Jerusalem. As soon as the train was put in, it took them only four-and-a-half hours. But this train line – the train station is on the right hand side – was one of the jokes of Israel. I mentioned to you the first day when you came in at the airport (in Tel Aviv) that we don’t have a very good train system. We have an excellent bus system, but we don’t have a good train system. Until today, we don’t have a proper train to Jerusalem. So I told the joke on the bus how we had a candid camera, and we asked people to get off the train and push because it wasn’t going properly. But the stories about the train are enormous; for instance, we have stories where people would walk along the track, and the driver would say, ‘would not just get on the train, and I’ll take you to where you’re going.’ And people would say, ‘today we’re in a hurry, otherwise we would.’ (laughter) That’s how bad the train service was.**

**“So we are now putting in a train that will take 26 minutes from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. But we don’t have it in just yet.**



**A new security wall built between Israel and the West Bank. After scores of suicide bombings and daily terrorist attacks against its civilians that have killed more than**

850 people and wounded thousands more since September 2000, Israel's unity government decided to construct a security fence near the northern part of the pre-1967 "Green Line" between Israel and the West Bank to prevent Palestinian terrorists from infiltrating into Israeli population centers. The project has had the overwhelming support of the Israeli public which sees the barrier as vital to their security.

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Peace/fence.html>

"Now we're on the road that takes us south out of Jerusalem in the direction of Bethlehem. The Old City is behind us. Bethlehem today is a Palestinian Autonomy, so I cannot come in with you. It does not mean to say they're not my friends on the other side – they are my friends, I love them dearly – unfortunately, at the moment, I can't come in. And we just pray and hope that all that will change. However, they will come and pick us up on the Israeli side, and we will change into a bus that belongs to a person who owns the restaurant at the shop, and a guide – and everything – will happen on the other side.

"So, on the other side you will have a guide from one of the shops recommended by our company – there are lots of shops in Bethlehem, by the way. And I think the thing you're going to find most interesting there is the olive wood. Some of you may still be looking for other things, and I think it's a good idea to get more of the stuff that's special to Israel – I don't mean the scarves and blankets, and that kind of thing that comes in from India and China. (laughter) You can bargain. This is the Middle East. You don't take the first price. If you see something and you want it, you can bargain. Now you have to be, of course, respectful. You can't sort of give a ridiculous price and get them upset. The game is to sort of give them a price that you want to pay, and work from there. So, let's say, they say \$200, you say \$150. And you know you're going to have to pay probably \$160 or \$170, but certainly not the first \$200. Please don't tell them that Marian said, OK. (chuckle) You start bargaining, and they're not going down, and you say, 'but Marian said.' (chuckle)

"You see here, also, the thick concrete on the top of the roof, like we saw in Kiryat Shmona on the day we were on the bus to Dan and the Banus. And this is because this is the border with Jordan till 1967. Till 1967, three sides of Jerusalem were border with Jordan, and there was sometimes shelling, sometimes bombardment. So these buildings have a meter of concrete on top of the roof. There's your hot water system with the glass things that catch the heat – and that's about as much as I understand of that.

"In 1967 the whole mountain area that was known as the West Bank was conquered by Israel and became part of the country of Israel. When I say West

**Bank – Jordan, you know, was a country that was formed together with other nations at the end of World War I. And World War I created the country of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Persia (Iran) is an ancient country – their own ancient country. Egypt was ancient. And a little bit of Turkey was left in the area by Anatolia in what is Turkey today. Mostly, Great Britain was thinking of oil reserves, and that’s how she divided up the Middle East. It was not taking into consideration the populations living in the area.**

**“And the result was – that since then, it’s been war after war. Not just between us. You remember Persia (Iran) was fighting Iraq, and Iraq was going into Kuwait – there’s no end of these wars between the nations that were created after the first world war. Jordan, actually, was supposed to be everything east of the Jordan River. They arrived in this area in the War of Independence to fight against Israel, because the area that was supposed to be Palestine had no army. So the Jordanians said, ‘well, we will fight for you.’ And then, at the end of the War of Independence, they didn’t leave. So what was supposed to be Palestine before 1948 became Jordan. After 1967, Jordan didn’t want it back. And that remained the area of Israel, that today is under negotiations between the Palestinians and Israel as to who will actually get what.**

**“The road we’re on is an ancient highway. It’s a modern highway, but it’s also an ancient highway. It marks the road of the Patriarchs. The road of the Patriarchs takes you from Jenin in the north, through Nablus (Shechem), and then to Bethlehem. And I say the Way of the Patriarchs – we have to skip Jerusalem, because according to the Bible stories, it wasn’t here. Many Bible stories are found along this road, and one of them is Elijah fleeing to the desert, and here on the left hand side you can see his monastery. This is where Elijah rested. [<http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/MarElias.html>] On the way back in I’ll show you where Mary rested. Everybody, who walked on this road, rested. (laughter) So, if Mary is coming to Bethlehem, she’s going to rest on the road. [Also called the Ridge Route because it follows the watershed ridge line of the Samarian and Judaea Mountains, it runs from Megiddo and Hazor south to Beersheba by way of Shechem, Bethel, Jerusalem, Ephrath and Hebron.] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Way\\_of\\_the\\_Patriarchs](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Way_of_the_Patriarchs)**

**“That’s Bethlehem ahead of us, now. And the mountain with the flat top you see to the left is called Herodian. And it’s where Herod the Great is buried. One of our archaeologists [Professor Ehud Netzer] searched for Herod’s tomb for something like 32 years. He didn’t give up. He decided that Herod was buried there, and he was going to find the tomb. And he did. And then sadly, he died in an accident on that very mountain a while ago (2010). But we now know that Herod was buried there, as Josephus told us. Herodian – just outside Bethlehem.**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ehud\\_Netzer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ehud_Netzer)

<http://www.jewishmag.com/93mag/herodian/herodian.htm>

<http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/Herodion.html>

**“We’re on our way to Bethlehem – it’s just that we have to take you to a back door. You have your passports with you – you probably won’t need them – I just say it’s always good to have a copy with you.”**

**Stan: “I don’t think so.”**

**Paul: “We have copies.”**

**Stan: “With us?”**

**Paul: “Yeh.”**

**Stan: “I don’t remember if I grabbed it, if I took it with me.”**

**Paul: “I told you it’s around your neck. That ID packet you have around your neck has your passport copy, and all your information, in it.”**

**Stan: “Are you kidding?”**

**Paul: “Nope.”**

**Stan: “OK, that solved my problem.”**

**[Digression -- Marian’s story of 72 virgins, actually a virgin who is 72-years-old. Nowhere in the Koran can one find a promise of 72 virgins to martyrs. The story of 72 virgins is a result of tradition, not theology. 2. Could the Koran have been misinterpreted, with an actual provision for just one 72-year-old virgin?]  
We change buses to go to the Palestinian side. Shepherd’s Field Tour bus - Driver George.**



**Shepherds' Field Tours in Bethlehem (part of Palestinian National Authority). We had to change buses when we stopped at the border between Israel-Palestine. The Shepherds' Field bus took us to Bethlehem.**

### **In Bethlehem**

**[arrive at Nissan Restaurant buffet lunch. John ("the Baptist") greets us]  
<http://www.nissanbros.com/restaurant.php#> [www.nissanbros.com/](http://www.nissanbros.com/)**

**John: "Aloha."**

**Pilgrims: "Aloha." (laughter)**

**John: "You are at the wrong part of the world. (laughter) OK. My name is John. I'd like to welcome you here in the city of Bethlehem. I know everybody is hungry right now, so basically, at the restaurant you have an open buffet for today. Basically, at the buffet there is too many options: your first menu option will be the \$11 option – that will include your bread, soup, salad, chick-pea falafels, and dessert for those who are vegetarian; the second menu option will be the \$14 option for those who would like to purchase a full buffet, which includes all that is in the vegetarian option plus seven hot meals that you can pick and choose from.**

**"So I am going to point for you – as soon as you walk in – the restroom facilities and your table where you can be seated. You can use shekels or dollars. As soon as you're done, I'll come back and hand you your local tour guide, who**

will be here around lunch time when you finish. Do not forget anything in the bus, because the buses keep rotating. They shuttle all over around the places. OK? So check your seats before you go.”

**Ken:** “What is your name?”

**John:** “My name is John – John the Baptist.” (laughter) OK, thank you.”



**Inside the restaurant. Mural of the Story of Bethlehem, the three wise men (kings) and the shepherds in the field who saw the Star of Bethlehem.**

**To Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem**  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bethlehem>

**Bus ride through the streets of Bethlehem.**

**[Guide Nadal greets us and goes with us on the bus to the Church of the Nativity]**

**Nadal:** “We are in Bethlehem, and we are going to the Nativity church, and this church is built, of course, over the place where Jesus was born. So we’re going to visit this beautiful church, and don’t forget – when we talk of the Nativity church, we’re talking about one of the oldest churches here in the Holy Land. The church is now about 1,500 years old.

**“This street that we actually are on right now leads to the Nativity church. This is one of two main streets crossing Bethlehem: this street here we call it the Manger Street. And we know the manger is where they wrapped baby Jesus in swaddling cloths. To the west from here we have another street called the Hebron Street, and it leads to another city called Hebron simply, and Hebron is the burial place of the Patriarchs, where Abrahan, Isaac, Jacob are all buried in Hebron.**



**“Five minutes or less, we’ll be very close to the Nativity church. Since we are in Bethlehem, you must realize that we have many names concerning Bethlehem: the biblical name, or the oldest name, is known as Ephratah, and this name was mentioned when Rachel died here in Bethlehem – and she was buried here at the northern entrance. And we know Rachel died while giving birth to her son Benjamin. So, at that time, the name of Bethlehem was Ephratah, and Ephratah means ‘fertile.’**

**<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ephrath>**

**“If you look to your left hand, you will notice that we are actually on the verge of the Judean desert. We have the Judean desert, the Dead Sea mountains, all the way at the end of the horizon. And in the valley – what you see – all the way to the barren mountains, this area we call it the Shepherd’s Field. This is where the angel appeared to the shepherds, and told them the good news that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Luke 2:8-11). Now, we can see old buildings built up, but this was what we called before, the Shepherd’s Field.”**



**View of the Shepherds' Field near Bethlehem. Many believe the site of The Shepherd's Field to be the place where angels of the Lord visited the shepherds to announce the birth of Israel's King and Savior. (Gen 35:16-20 48:7 Ruth 1 Sam 16:1-12; 17:12 Micah 5:2 Luke 2:1-7, 8-20 Matt 2:1-18)**

**Ellen: "This part right here, or the part towards the Dead Sea?"**

**Paul: "No, this one on the left."**

**Nagal: "Far left, way back."**

**Wilfred: "How many people live in Bethlehem?"**

**Nagal: "In Bethlehem we have about 50,000 inhabitants. 65% Muslim community, and about 35% Christians. And you'll notice when we reach the Nativity church, that we'll see the Greek Orthodox – we have Christians, the Greek Orthodox community, we have Armenian Orthodox, we have Catholics – those are the Christians living right here in Bethlehem."**

**"Just remember – we're getting close to the church – please, everybody, shorts are not allowed in the church, shoulders need to be covered, and as we leave the bus, don't leave anything on the bus. Because, sometimes we actually change buses, and this bus will probably go back to the check-point to pick up some other tourists. Take all your things with you."**

[Arrive at the church – Manger Square, a large paved courtyard in front of the Church. Walk to the Church of the Nativity]  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church\\_of\\_the\\_Nativity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_the_Nativity)



**Sign: “Welcome to Bethlehem. We welcome you on your journey as we welcomed the Prince of Peace. Pray for the Freedom of Palestine.”**

**At Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity. Bethlehem is a town six miles southwest of Jerusalem. It is sometimes called Bethlehem-judah or Ephrath (Gen 35:19; Micah 5:2) to keep it from being confused with another city, Bethlehem of Zebulun. Located in Judah, Bethlehem was one of the towns that played a key role in history. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, which was a fulfillment of prophecy (Micah 5:2; Luke 2:1-7). Bethlehem was also the place of death and burial for Rachel. It is also known as the City of David, as David was both born and anointed there (1 Sam. 16:4, 13; Luke 2:4, 11). The name Bethlehem actually means “house of bread.”**



**Nagal: “This is the Nativity church, which is built over the place where Jesus was born, as I explained to you on the bus. And, more or less, it is now about 1,500 years old. This church was built in the year 540 AD. It was dedicated by the Emperor Justinian in the Roman Byzantine period. [commonly known as Justinian the Great, Byzantine Emperor from 527 to 565] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justinian\\_I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justinian_I) [entrance through western door]**

**“You look over there, and you notice people going in through a small door. But this is not the original door of the church. When this church was built, the door was big – you see the lintel above the arch? That was the original door in the 6th century. Then, in the 12th century, we have the Crusaders, and when they came they made the door smaller – you see the arch door? This is from the 12th century period. And then we are all going through the small door from the Turkish period – or the Ottoman Empire – 16th century. We call it here, ‘the door of humility’ – so that people when they go inside bow as a respect for the church. OK? The ‘door of humility’ also has a defensive mechanism – at the time people used to go inside the church with their horses, so to prevent them from doing so, they made the door so small.**

**“Now, once we go inside we have to be very quiet; please everybody, remember it’s a church. It’s a holy place. And I would like to ask the gentlemen, hats off once we go inside – only for the gentlemen. And for everybody – watch your head, watch your step.**

**[The pilgrims follow guide Nadal through the ‘door of humility’ – bowing low to prevent themselves from hitting their head on the stone entrance.]**



**(1) Bethlehem was only a small village when Jesus was born (Matt 2:1-16; Luke 2:4-6, 15; John 7:42). Joseph had to go to Bethlehem because he was part of the family of David (Luke 2:4), under orders of Caesar Augustus. It is said that the birth of Jesus might have taken place in a cave in the rocks outside town, as agreed upon by Christian writers Justin Martyr and Origen. Another early Christian writer, Jerome, described the cave where the Roman Emperor Constantine had built a church. Some evidence was found near Bethlehem that suggested a second period of building in the time of a later emperor, Justinian (AD 527-565), in 1934-35. Constantine's church was then extended past its original boundaries. There were steps that led down to the cave, which were artificially shaped into a square, probably by Constantine's builders. There is, however, no description of the cave from before the construction of Constantine's church. (2) Low door ("Door of Humility") entrance into church, said by our Bethlehem guide, Nadal, to be a lesson in humility (i.e. you have to bow low to enter the holy site where the Divine Child was born).**

**"In order to visit the place where Jesus was born in the stable, we have to stay here in the line [queue to the right side of the columns]. If we move out, we lose our place. OK? And you can see groups coming, and eventually this will take you more time. With this kind of line, it's an average of one hour wait – it depends on the movement of the pilgrims. OK?"**



**Inside the Church of the Nativity. The rectangular prayer hall is approximately 200 by 90 feet, with four rows of twelve brown Bethlehem stone pillars. Devotional**

reading: “And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed...” (Luke 2:1-15). “Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was?” (John 7:42). “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem...” (Matt 2:1-16). Herod the Great died in 4BCE.

“In the meanwhile, I’m going to explain this church, and I’m ready to answer all your questions. As I told you before, this beautiful church was built in the 6th century by the Emperor Justinian. That’s why if you look around – all around – when we talk about the stone structure, this is the same as it was built in the year 540 AD. When you talk about these columns, and the wall, nothing has been changed from that year. Since 540 AD, the church has remained the same. So everything is original. But, the original roof of this church – when it was built in the 6th century – it was wooden, the same as the one you see right now. This is not the original roof, simply because wood wouldn’t last this long. So it has to be changed more than once. And what you see – this is actually from the 17th century.

[the line moves forward a little bit, about 2-3 meters closer to the entrance to the grotto]

“All along, this is the Justinian church. This is the 6th century church, and when I told you it was built about 1,500 years ago, most of you thought it was a very old church. Right? But, this is not the first church built here. The first church was built by an emperor – his name is Constantine. It was dedicated by his mother, Queen Helena. That was the first church built here in Bethlehem. And that was in the 4th century – to be exact, 339 AD, when it was dedicated by the Queen Helena. Unfortunately, it was destroyed. It was destroyed in the 6th century by a group of people called the Samaritans. Samaritans – they still exist – in the city called Nablus (Shechem). At that time, they were huge in numbers; they made a huge revolt and destroyed the first church.

“In the year 1933 – and even before 1933, we had an earthquake in 1927 – we had another earthquake in 1933. After the second earthquake, archaeologists wanted to come to check the bases of the church, and the columns. So what they did – you see the open wooden doors over there – they used to be stone slabs, like this one, all over. They took them off and started digging all the way down to check the bases of the columns. And just by accident – over there (pointing to a section of the wide nave) – they discovered the original floor of the church. So, over there you’re going to see a very old mosaic floor, more than 1,700 years old. When you look at it, you’ll notice it’s still in very good condition, as if it was just done like ten years ago. Because, the color is so vivid, and the geometrical designs you’re

going to see is one of the rarest in this place. Talk about mosaics – it’s simply small colored stones put together to have the design you’re going to see over there. So, I’m going to send you to see this beautiful mosaic while we are still in the line. Since we are forty people, I’m going to send you ten people at a time, to go over there to look at the mosaic. And when they come back, I’ll send another group of ten. This is the best way to keep our place in the line.

[Ten people at a time go to look at the mosaic floor that is covered with thick glass to preserve the mosaic floor, and for pilgrims to look through the glass and get a good look at the geometrical designs]



Original mosaics from the original 4th century church were discovered after an earthquake in 1933. The mosaic was all the way under the church.

“What you saw over there was only a small part of the mosaic floor as a whole – that which was opened up so the pilgrims would have an idea of the mosaic floor. The mosaic floor of the first church goes all the way under the current church – all the way to this line (near the side wall). We still have wooden doors where I’m standing (Nadal hits the floor with his shoe to demonstrate the sound of wood underneath his feet). This is to indicate that we still have mosaics here, and in the center (nave) they have a wooden door to indicate the mosaic all the way under this church. OK?”

“So we have a few of you asking, ‘how do we know that this is the spot?’ Very good question. And how do we know this is the place, this is the stable? When Jesus

was born, we have – what you call them – the Judeo-Christians. Jews who were converted to Christianity. They were the first ones to come to these caves. Again, we're going to see a cave, and it's actually a small part of the stable as a whole. That's what we're going to see over there (pointing to the grotto). So the Judeo-Christians used to come to these caves, and these caves were considered here to be the original church, cause this is where the early Christians used to come to venerate, to pray, and to give devotion for Christ. Before building any church – whether the Constantine church we have seen over there, the floor, or this church which was built later – the Christians used to come to these caves, to this stable.

“This cave remained until the year 70 AD. And do you know what happened in this year? The destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem. Right? (response, ‘yes’) It was destroyed by Titus. And Titus – after he destroyed the second temple – he banished most of the Jewish community from Jerusalem and Bethlehem mostly to the north. So the Judean community around the Judean desert was banished after the destruction of the second temple. And when he came here, he noticed those early Christians coming to these caves. He wanted to do something in order to prevent them from coming to these caves.

“But this task was left to another Roman emperor – his name is Hadrian, and he reached here in the year 132 AD. Hadrian, when he came to Bethlehem, immediately – in order to keep the Christians from coming to these caves – he ordered to build a pagan temple over this spot. A Roman temple – a pagan temple – by the name of Adonis or Tammuz, which is for the farmers. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tammuz\\_\(deity\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tammuz_(deity))

“So Emperor Hadrian is considered to be the emperor who actually did Christianity a favor. Because, he's the one who marked the spot for 190 years, until we have the Emperor Constantine, and his mother, who came and built the church – the first church over there (pointing to the shrine or grotto). So, that's why we know – for sure – that this is the area of the stable and the caves that go around.

“We're standing here to visit part of the stables, and we're going to see a silver star down there (pointing to the grotto) that marks the traditional spot, cause nobody knows the exact spot where Jesus was born. But we know that he was born in this part of Bethlehem, and we know that this was the stable. But we don't know where he was born exactly in this complex. OK?”

[Question about the Crusader period]

**Nahal: “When we stopped outside, we talked about the three doors. Remember the middle door – the arch door from the Crusader period? We call it from the Crusader period because it was on the 15th of July, 1099 AD that the Crusaders controlled the Holy Land. And they controlled Jerusalem and Bethlehem and the Holy Land. And when they came, they found this church already built, cause this existed in the 6th century. So, the Crusaders when they came to the Nativity church – the church that we are in right now – all that they did was they added this mosaic that you see up there (points to wall mosaics). You see the beautiful mosaic with a golden background, glittering a little bit, and the greenery colors on the wall – this is from the 12th century period, the Crusader period.**

**“When they came, of course, they did not just put pieces like you see. No. It was covering all around the upper part of the church. There was no restoration ever done to this church from the Crusader period, so most of the mosaics fell down. That’s why we’re left with this part you see on this side (across from us) – the angels between the windows. When we go out, you’re going to see another part of this side of the wall – in the northern transept of the church – there’s a part of this mosaic that goes back to the Crusader period. So this is a 12th century mosaic from the Crusader period.**

**[Question about ?? – couldn’t be heard because of the constant hum from the crowd]**

**Nadal: “This was some of the decisions that were taken – we call it the decisions that were about the nature of Christ. Like the provincial council . . . [not clear discussion] Arian controversy, etc.  
[Nadal points out another mosaic that has mother of pearl and glass]**

**Nadal: “It’s a wonder that this church is still standing today. It is one piece – a monolith, we call it. It’s all one piece. So if you have visited the other churches or temples around the world, you may have noticed that they are made of blocks, and then they’re plastered together in order to have the shape of one piece. But this is one piece – one stone piece.”**

**[in answer to another question ?? – not sure which question]  
Nadal: “When Justinian came, he wanted to build a bigger church. So he covered the original floor to make his church bigger than the Constantine church.**

**“As I told you, this church is a working church – it’s not only for the tourists (and pilgrims). It’s a working church for the community of Bethlehem. And you notice it is divided between three Christian communities: where we’re standing –**

**all around – belongs to the Greek Orthodox church; then a small part on that other side (opposite – northern side) – we’re going to see it on our way to the stable – belongs to the Armenian Orthodox church; and then a third part – we can’t see it from where we’re standing – belongs to the Roman Catholic church. So three Christian communities controlling this church.**

**“You have visited Jerusalem – the Holy Sepulcher church – over there you notice six Christian communities controlling the place.”**

**Question (Wilfred?): “Why only three here – and six there? How did they divide it up?”**

**Nadal: “Well, if you want to go to the history of why actually this church – why here there’s three Christian communities, and over there six Christian communities – this takes us back to the 18th century. OK? And this land was under the Turkish rule – the Ottoman Empire – cause the Turks governed the Holy Land from 1517 until 1917. And in 1917, we have the British Mandate to the Holy Land.**

**“So in the 18th century, the Turks were controlling the Holy Land, and unfortunately, there was a lot of fighting between the Christian communities about the one who controlled the holy places. So, a law was issued by the Turkish government – we call it here, ‘the status quo.’ The name of this law ‘status quo,’ it means ‘the current situation.’ And by this law, if any Christian community can prove that this part was occupied by him and restored by him, he can control it. So the Greek Orthodox managed to stand their case on this spot – so they took it. Armenians had that part (pointing to the northern part). The Catholics – just to tell you how religion is so fragile in this part of the world – the Catholics also ruled that part over there and was restored by them, of the Greek Orthodox as well (points to a section of the northwest corner). But due to what we call ‘the marriage of convenience’ between the Turkish government at that time and Russia – and Russia considered itself the patron of the Orthodox Christian – so what the Turks did, was they gave the whole part right here to the Greek Orthodox. Anyway, the Catholics remained with no part in this church.**

**“That’s why they actually went on that side (points to northern side), and they built the Catholic church. The Catholic church that we’re going to see later is the newest part – it was built in 1881.”**

**Tony: “I got a question for you. What is the purpose of these five holes over here?”**

**Nadal: “Very good question. This column has the five holes, making the shape of the cross. Like I told you, this church was built in 540. In 614, we have the Persian army conquer the Holy Land. We know Persians – which is Iran today – the Persian army came, and they destroyed many churches in the Holy Land. When they came to this church – there is a legend that says out of these holes came a swarm of bees that attack the Persian army and they left. OK? So that’s how the church was saved and not destroyed by the Persian army.**

**“Of course, I tell my tourists this is not the true story. The true story might be – why this church wasn’t destroyed by the Persians – that it was simply a mosaic picture depicting the three magi. Remember the three magi? Originally from Persia, they brought gifts to baby Jesus: myrrh, gold, and frankincense. The western façade – the way we came in – we used to have this mosaic picture, but unfortunately we lost it. So when the Persian army came and saw this mosaic picture – their ancestors in traditional costumes – they had respect for their ancestors, and this prevented them from destroying this church. They left Bethlehem and the Nativity church and went directly to Jerusalem, and over there they destroyed the Holy Sepulcher church. In 614, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, it was destroyed, and mainly what you see over there is from the Crusader period. OK? So this is what might be actually why this church is still standing until today, and wasn’t destroyed by the Persians.”**

**Tony: “Thank you for the explanation.”**

**Paul: “Did you like that explanation?”**

**Tony: “Yes.”**

**Dennis: “Is that the name of the angel under the angel mosaic?”**

**Nadal: “No. What you see over there at the foot of the angels in the middle – one of the angels over there (pointing to the mosaic on the wall) – is actually the name of the artist who did this mosaic in the Crusader period. It’s like his signature. His name is Basilius Pictor.**

**[Fragments of high-quality wall mosaics dating from the 1160s decorate both sides of the nave. Each side once had three registers, of which we know the details because of a description made in 1628. The lowest depicted the ancestors of Jesus; the middle contained the decrees of provincial and ecumenical councils; and the top has a series of angels between the windows. The name of the artist, Basilius Pictor, appears at the foot of the third angel from the right on the north wall.]**  
**<http://www.sacred-destinations.com/israel/bethlehem-church-of-the-nativity>**



**In 1099 AD, the Crusaders took control of the Holy Land from the Muslims. They found the church already built and preserved. The story was told that the Persians in 614 AD spared the church from destruction because there was a mosaic of the Magi in Persian dress. No basic changes were made by the Crusaders, except for the decoration of the church with paintings on the upper wall around the central court (narthex).**

**[discussion about the Crusaders]**

**Paul: “So why were they crowned here and not somewhere else?”**

**Nadal: “You know, I looked for this answer for many years.”**

**Paul: “And you found it.”**

**Nadal: “And I found it. You know...”**

**Paul: “But you’re not going to tell us.” (laughter from listeners)**

**Nadal: “So, I’m going to tell you. So the question is: why they actually chose to be crowned here, and not in any other church? If you go to the history of the Crusaders, Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher church were the main targets always. OK? And that was the most important for them – Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulcher church. But they refused to be crowned over there. And to answer your question – why they refused to be crowned over there – out of respect. Because,**

over there they believed that Jesus had the crown of thorns, and they refused to be crowned over there and put on the crown of gold and jewelry where Jesus had the crown of thorns. So they preferred to come to the Nativity church, which was second in importance to the Crusaders, and they were crowned right here in this church.”

**Paul:** “Oh, that’s a good one. Good answer.”

**Kathy:** “Even if he made it up, that’s still a good answer.”

**[Orthodox choir begins to sing – liturgical chanting, men and women]**



**Paul:** “Is that Greek Orthodox?”

**Stan:** “Sounds like it.”

**Paul:** “It sounds Russian!”

**Nadal:** “Yes, Russian Orthodox. Greek or Russian, they’re Orthodox, the same. There’s no difference between Greek and Russian Orthodox.”

**Paul:** “Except for the language. The Russians would say there’s a big difference.”

**Ellen: “There is a big difference.”**

**Paul: “Yes, I know, my grandfather was Russian Orthodox.”**

**Ellen: “My cousin goes to this Greek Orthodox church, and she says the Greek Orthodox use Greek, no matter where they take it.”**

**Paul: “Exactly.”**

**Ellen: “The Eastern Orthodox used the language of the country they were in; they adopted the language.”**

**Paul: “I was in a Greek Orthodox church, and I’ve been in a Russian Orthodox – very different – although the icons are there, some of the songs (liturgical) are there, and the theology is similar...”**

**Ellen: “The experience is different.”**

**Paul: “Yes, and also, their saints are different. There’s the Greeks saints, and the Russian saints, so each one develops their own sainthoods.”**

**Steven: “Are they singing in Russian?”**

**Paul: “They’re using Church Slavonic – that’s the language I had to learn when I got my Master’s degree in Russian. Then when I started working with the Russian Old Believers as a teacher of their children, I was able to read their holy books that were written in Church Slavonic. They still use Church Slavonic in their churches.”**

**Ellen: “They still use that language?”**

**Paul: “Yes, it’s an ancient form of Russian – Glagolitic they called it, when Cyril and Methodius came to bring the Slavic language to Russia. They had a form of Church Slavonic that they translated, and Russian developed later.”**

**Ellen: “Like Old English.”**

**Paul: “Exactly. Like Chaucer, so if you learned to read Chaucer, you learn how the English language developed. Same with Old Church Slavonic and Russian.”**

**Wilfred: “So you’re good with languages.”**

**Paul: “A few. Church Slavonic was interesting for me because it gave me an idea of what the old Russian looked like, and sounded like. It’s kind of beautiful when you hear it sung.”**

**Ellen: “Yes, it’s very beautiful.”**

**Steven: “What are they singing?”**

**Paul: “I’d have to get closer to understand it. When I was working with the Old Believer children, I went to their churches to do research for a book, and I learned that according to the holy day they were celebrating, they would have different songs. So if this has to do with the nativity, they’d be singing some liturgy having to do with the nativity story.”**

**Ellen: “Their a capella singing is beautiful.”**

**Paul: “And the interesting thing about the Russian Orthodox churches I used to go to – to see how they did their services – it was always a capella. They never allowed musical instruments.”**

**Ellen: “So they really learned how to sing.”**

**Paul: “And use their voices.”**



**At the entrance to the Grotto. Nativity of Our Lord Icon. The icon of the Nativity tells the story of Christ’s birth from the Scriptures. It also shows that all creation**

is taking part in Christ's birth. The angels give thanks with their song; the heavens give the star; the Wise Men give their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The poor, humble shepherds give their praise and amazement; the earth gives the cave, and humanity gives the Virgin.

This Holy Icon is an icon with many scenes. First, it stresses the importance of the Theotokos, the Mother of Jesus. She is placed in the center and is the largest figure in the icon. She is wearing a robe with red (earth) and blue (sky) colors, symbolizing the union of heaven and earth. The Christ Child, in the center of the icon, is in swaddling clothes and is lying in the manger. In the background is the dark cave where He was born. In the cave are an ox and a donkey guarding the newborn Babe. The long ray of light from the star points directly to the cave. On the left hand side of the icon is another scene. The Wise Men, who were led by the star, are riding horses to bring their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to Jesus. The upper part of the icon shows a heavenly choir of angels, and to the right an angel proclaims the glad tidings to a humble shepherd. The background shows a very rugged terrain. In the lower part of the icon are two more scenes. In the right hand corner are two women bathing the Christ child. Opposite the bathing of Jesus scene sits a sad and worried Joseph. There is an old man (Satan) talking to Joseph, and disturbing him. The tree, which is in the middle of the lower part of the icon, is a symbol of the Tree of Jesse (House of David).

[paraphrased from <http://stinnocentorthodoxchurch.org/feast-of-the-nativity-of-our-lord-and-savior-jesus-christ/>]



[Finally, we enter the grotto and tour the birth place; a 14-pointed silver star marks the spot of birth; the 14 points, according to one source, symbolize the genealogy of Jesus (i.e. 14 generations, between David and Jesus). The altar of the

**manger is a trough of stone; it's not the original manger; the central iconostasis was made by the Russian Orthodox in 1767.]**



**(1) The exact spot is marked beneath an altar by a 14-pointed silver star set into the marble floor and surrounded by silver lamps. This altar is denominationally neutral, although it features primarily Armenian Apostolic influences. The 14-pointed star supposedly (??) symbolizes the 14 branches in the genealogy of Yeshua (14 generations from David to Jesus). (2) Another altar in the Grotto, which is maintained by the Roman Catholics, marks the site where traditionally Mary laid the newborn Baby in the manger.**

**Origen of Alexandria (185 AD–ca. 254) wrote: In Bethlehem the cave is pointed out where He was born, and the manger in the cave where He was wrapped in swaddling clothes. And the rumor is in those places, and among foreigners of the Faith, that indeed Jesus was born in this cave who is worshipped and revered by the Christians. (Contra Celsum, book I, chapter LI). The first basilica on this site was begun by Saint Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine I. Under the supervision of Bishop Makarios of Jerusalem, the construction started in 327 and was completed in 333. That structure was burnt down in the Samaritan Revolt of 529. The current basilica was rebuilt in its present form in 565 by the Emperor Justinian I.**



**After spending some time at the grotto meditating about the significance of the birth of the Christ in the "cave of our heart," we exit through the Catholic church.**



**Adjacent to the Church of the Nativity is the Franciscan Chapel of St. Catherine of Alexandria, restored by Antonio Barluzzi in 1933. From this Franciscan chapel Bethlehem's annual midnight mass on Christmas is broadcast all over the world. This church is said to have been built on the site of Jesus' appearance to St. Catherine of Alexandria and his prediction of her martyrdom (320 AD).**

**Outside there is a statue of St. Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin, known as the Vulgate, at the site. The statue had an inscription: “S. Hieronymus” (St. Jerome). A father with the Church of the Nativity, Jerome, noted before his death in 420 AD that the holy cave was at one point consecrated by the heathen to the worship of Adonis, and that a pleasant sacred grove was planted there in order to wipe out the memory of Jesus. Some modern scholars dispute this argument and insist that the cult of Adonis-Tammuz (Ezekiel 8:14-15) originated the shrine and that it was the Christians who took it over, substituting the worship of God. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St.\_Jerome]**



**Above the main entrance to the church is an inscription in Latin, saying: "SANCTAE CATHERINAE VIRGINI ET MARTIRI DICATUM" ("dedicated to Saint Catherine, Virgin and Martyr")**

**Once again, I take a look at the large billboard outside the Manger Square: “Welcome to Bethlehem.” The picture of Shepherd’s Field, with angels appearing to the shepherds, singing “Peace on Earth, Good will to all” is a beautiful message**

that I wish would come to this tumultuous region of the earth. And to all the people on Earth.

Last thing we do in Bethlehem – visit the Nissan family souvenir shop. Fantastic woodwork from olive wood: mangers, etc.



A visit to Bethlehem store run by the Nissan family. The souvenir shop is filled with kitsch religious objects, like the various depictions of the Last Supper.



**The most popular items are the fine carved olive-wood crib scenes (nativity) that local craftsmen have produced for centuries.**



**An impressive wooden Ark of the Covenant carried by Levi priests.**

**Cross the border – exchange buses, again. Return to hotel.**

**At dinner, I talk with Dr. Ron Moseley about biblical concepts. I told him I'd like to give my book (God in Three Persons: A Spiritual Odyssey) as a gift to him for teaching me about Hebrew baptism and performing that baptism for me at the Jordan River.**

**Ron: “Yeshua is the redemptive power of the heavenly father!” Ron tells me about his book on Yeshua.**

**[Yeshua: A Guide to the Real Jesus and the Original Church by Ron Moseley](http://www.amazon.com/Yeshua-Guide-Jesus-OriginalChurch/dp/1880226685/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1362162528&sr=1-1&keywords=Dr.+Ron+Moseley)**

**[http://www.amazon.com/Yeshua-Guide-Jesus-](http://www.amazon.com/Yeshua-Guide-Jesus-OriginalChurch/dp/1880226685/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1362162528&sr=1-1&keywords=Dr.+Ron+Moseley)**

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