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## BETHLEHEM

Bethlehem is the cradle of Biblical history. It is the world's most important small town. It has existed for about 2,400 years and so it is one of the world's oldest continuously occupied towns.

It is significant for three of the world's main faiths. King David lived there, Jesus was born there and the Prophet Mohammad prayed there on his way to Jerusalem.

Bethlehem, which is about 10 kilometres southwest of Jerusalem, is located on an ancient caravan route. It has long had many cultures. The old Hebrew name "beth lehem" means "house of bread" and its Arabic form "bet lahm" means "house of meat". Its good land has been a centre for sheep farming for thousands of years.

Bethlehem receives a mention in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, with the reference to the death of Rachel, the wife of early leader Jacob. Rachel's Tomb is one of the most important sites for Judaism. Jewish women in particular make pilgrimages to the site to pray that they may have children.

About 3,000 years ago, the family of young David the shepherd boy lived in the area. He acquired legendary status by killing the giant Goliath with his catapult. He later went on to become one of the country's greatest kings.

About 2,750 years ago, the prophet Micah predicted that the saviour would be born in David's royal town of Bethlehem. That prediction was largely forgotten. But the wise men from Arabia (present day Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia), who followed the star with three presents for Jesus, knew their prophets and so guessed that Jesus had been born in Bethlehem in accordance with that old prophecy.

About two thousand years ago, the Roman Emperor Augustus instituted a tax census and so all people in the Roman world were obliged to return to their own towns to register. Joseph took Mary from Nazareth in the northern part of the country down to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the David. Joseph was a descendant of the royal line of kings.

They had evidently fallen on hard times because they had no relatives to live with and not enough money to buy their way into luxurious accommodation. Eight days after his birth, when Jesus was presented at the Temple in Jerusalem as per Jewish custom, his parents were still



poor because all they could afford to buy as a sacrifice was a pair of doves – the lowest form of sacrifice.

Jesus was born in a cave. He was placed in manger. This is often depicted as a wooden construction but wood was scarce and expensive in those parts and so it was probably carved out of sandstone and it was a place from which animals would eat or drink.

Poverty also characterised the first people to hear the good news of Jesus' birth. Humble shepherds nearby were braving the cold looking after their flocks of prize lambs.

Archaeologists have recently helped us understand more about those shepherds and their lambs. Bethlehem was near the Great Temple in Jerusalem (destroyed by the Romans in AD70). The special pure lambs ("without blemish") that were sacrificed at the Temple were bred at Bethlehem. The lambs were under round the clock supervision and so there were always some shepherds keeping guard on them from wolves or thieves.

The lambs were in fields called Migdal Edar ("the Tower of the Flock"). Archaeologists have now found the remains of those special areas.

Christmas pictures often have the shepherds and the wise men all huddled together around the manger. Those pictures are wrong. The smelly shepherds were long gone by the time the wise men in all their finery arrived. Besides, by the time they arrived Jesus and his parents were now living in a house and so Jesus was by then a few weeks or even a few months old.

There have been Christians living in the area ever since the time of Jesus. About three centuries after the birth of Jesus, the Roman Emperor became a Christian. He arranged for a church to be built over the presumed spot where Jesus was born. There have been religious buildings on that site ever since.

When the Persians invaded in 614, they left the original church intact. They saw the pictures depicting the wise men, dressed much the same as they were dressed and so decided to leave the church alone.

But Islam swept through the rest of the Middle East. The European Crusaders conquered the Holy Land in the year 1100. They were driven out in 1291. The town was controlled by the Muslims, mainly as part of the Turkish (Ottoman) empire, until World War I.

The Muslims allowed Christian pilgrims to visit Bethlehem. It used to take about two and half hours to walk from the centre of Jerusalem into Bethlehem.

There is a story of a group of American Christian evangelists visiting that part of the Holy Land in the 19th Century. They were spreading the good news of Christianity. They were most impressed that the Bethlehem residents already contained Christians and so they enquired



who had done the conversion ahead of them. “Jesus” was the reply. They were descended from some of the world’s oldest Christian families.

For most of the recent centuries, the population of Bethlehem had been around 1,000. The population increased dramatically after 1948, when Jewish refugees flocked into the area. This took the population up to about 50,000. It is now around 100,000.

Bethlehem went under Israeli control following the 1967 Middle East War. In December 1995, the town reverted to Palestinian control under the terms of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Israelis still have access to Rachel’s Tomb.

Its main industry now is tourism and the manufacture of tourist souvenirs but the violence has reduced the number of foreign tourists. A university was established in 1973 that offers courses in both Arabic and English.

It used to take about 10 minutes to drive from central Jerusalem to Bethlehem. But the Israelis have now sealed off the town via a wall. Bethlehem is hemmed in. The Israelis claim that the wall is necessary to keep the Palestinian terrorists out of Israel. The tourist industry is again in the doldrums. There were 90,000 tourists in 2000 but now the figure is about 9,000.

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