

Bethlehem

Icon of Palestine



By Issam Juha

Although the history of the city can be traced back to the Bronze Age, Bethlehem is most renowned for being the place that witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ. This event marks the beginnings of Christianity and makes Bethlehem one of the holiest places in Christendom. The birth event, which took place in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, has been a reference for the international calendar that is used by the majority of humanity.

Since at least the second century AD, people have revered the location where the Church of the Nativity stands as the place where Jesus was born. One particular grotto located underneath the church is traditionally believed to be the exact birthplace. The original church was built over the grotto in 333 AD by Empress Helena, mother of the Roman emperor Constantine. Its structure was arranged with the church's octagonal eastern end surrounding the grotto to provide a view of its interior. The current structure was built by Emperor Justinian in 527 AD, after the original structure had been partially demolished during the Samaritan Revolt. Given the almost 1,500 years of its history, the church is considered the oldest Christian church in continued daily use. Over the course of time, it has undergone many alterations. In

2012, a significant restoration process was launched through a decree of President Mahmoud Abbas that resulted in the preservation of the cultural and aesthetic value of the church. Major restoration works have targeted the church's timber roof and the plaster on the walls; parts of wall mosaics were discovered under layers of plaster that in fact had served to protect them. Today they have been restored to their original splendor.

Over the past 1,700 years, Bethlehem and its surroundings have been a pilgrimage destination. This distinction has brought about an abundance of cultural sites that represent and reflect the rise and fall of the successive civilizations that have marked the history of the area.

Encompassing the Church of the Nativity, the historical center of Bethlehem contains an unusual array of towers, belfries, domes, spires, and houses of worship of all kinds, in addition to the red-tiled roofs of monasteries and convents. Along its steep streets and lanes, daily life flows through its marketplace and retail shops. The narrow Bethlehem roads are paved with stone tiles, and some are topped with rocky arches supported by house walls from two sides. They provide visitors with an idea of the architecture of former days and overlook the cultivated lands and agricultural fields. The narrow side streets that run between the clusters of houses on the steep slopes around



Historical town of Bethlehem. Photo by Rami Rishmawi.

the historic city center embrace flights of stone stairs that connect the various parts of the built-up areas with the agricultural fields that once served as the main source of livelihood for Bethlehemites.

In 2012, Bethlehem was inscribed on the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger as the "Birthplace of Jesus: Church of the Nativity and the Pilgrimage Route, Bethlehem." It was thus the first site to be registered under Palestine on UNESCO's World Heritage List, after Palestine had become a UNESCO member state on November 23, 2011.

Photo by Palestine Image Bank.





The Church of the Nativity and the western forecourt. Photo courtesy of CCHP.

Palestinian Dishes

Couscous

In Palestinian cuisine, couscous is known as *maftoul*, and it is one of the traditional staple foods in Palestine. *Maftoul* is an Arabic word derived from the root *fa-ta-la*, which means to roll or to twist, which accurately describes the method used to make *maftoul* by hand, rolling bulgur with wheat flour.

Couscous is a traditional dish of steamed semolina (tiny granules of durum wheat). A staple in many North African countries, couscous was known to the Nasrid royalty in Granada as well. And in the thirteenth century, a Syrian historian from Aleppo included four references for couscous in his texts. Couscous was taken from Syria to Turkey in the sixteenth century and is eaten in most of the southern provinces.

Every September the famous Couscous Festival is held in San Vito Lo Capo, Italy. In 2001, the late Chef Jacob Salbis won the first prize representing Palestine at the Couscous Festival. In 2016, Chef George Srour and Chef Elias Basous who represented Palestine, jointly won the Couscous Festival that was held in Sicily. Every October, the Maftoul Festival is held in the West Bank village of Birzeit, where women from 15 different Palestinian villages prepare couscous dishes in their own traditional way.



As one enters Bethlehem from Jerusalem, the Apartheid Wall is impossible to miss: an eight-meter-high concrete wall that besieges Bethlehem and separates it from its twin city Jerusalem.

Notably, however, Pope Francis made an unexpected and surprising detour when he stopped his procession to pray at the Wall during his visit in 2014. Such a gesture was a clear declaration against this symbol of division.

The surfaces of the Wall have been utilized by artists and activists – locals and internationals – to comment, criticize, and make statements about the ongoing political strife. Banksy, the quasi-anonymous English graffiti artist, painted a collective of nine images on the Wall.

The handicrafts of Bethlehem, dating back to ancient times, have developed as part of its culture and traditions, directed by tourism and affected by historical trade routes



The Apartheid Wall at the northern entrance to of Bethlehem. Photo by Elias Halabi.

that pass through Palestine. Bethlehem's specialized products include a wide range of handmade olive-wood and mother-of-pearl articles. Most of these products are manufactured locally in small workshops that use labor-intensive techniques. Furthermore, intricate stone carving and colorful hand-embroidered Palestinian traditional costumes are unique in the Bethlehem area. Notably, Bethlehemite craftsmanship is passed on from generation to generation, and handmade crafts are now considered one of the main sources of income for the local economy.

Bethlehem cuisine has been influenced by the diffusion of cultures and civilizations that have interacted with the region in a way that is similar to other Levantine cuisines – namely, Lebanese, Syrian, and Jordanian. West Bank cuisine is characterized primarily by substantial meals that include *taboon* bread, rice, meat, lentils, and *mahshi* dishes, along with traditional *mezze* salads, hummus,



Hand carved olive wood statues representing different biblical figures. Photo by Elias Halabi.

and falafel. Arabic or Turkish coffee, with its unique cardamom flavor, is consumed throughout the day. Arak and beer are among the common and traditional alcoholic beverages.

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The Nativity scene displayed with mother-of-pearl. Photo by Elias Halabi.

Palestinian Dresses

Dresses of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour

Thob al-Malak is a bridal dress that is distinguished by gold and silk embroidery (*tahrereh* and *qasab*) on the collar, sides, and sleeves, as well as the *qiwar* decorations on the chest. The dress is topped by a jacket known as *al-taqssireh*. The headdress, *shatwa*, is a part of the bridewealth. The *shatwa* is embroidered and decorated with coral as well as gold and silver coins and a beautiful necklace known as the seven souls.

Thob Ambar is an everyday dress that is known for its red embroidery and Canaanite star motifs.



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