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Bethlehem changed since Jesus' time

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By Mark Wingfield

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (ABP) -- This Christmas, thousands of Christian pilgrims will descend upon the no-longer-little town of Bethlehem to mark the event that put the village on the map 2,000 years ago.

Bethlehem is more than a name in the Bible or the subject of Christmas carols. It is an actual place -- a city of 50,000 residents on Israel's Palestinian-controlled West Bank. About 1.25 million tourists visit Bethlehem each year, with heightened interest at Christmastime.

Actually, make that Christmas times three, because Christmas Day is celebrated three times each year in Bethlehem. Catholics and Western Christians commemorate Jesus' birth there on Dec. 25; Orthodox Christians mark the day on Jan. 6; and Armenians celebrate Jan. 18.

Bethlehem's focal point is the Church of the Nativity, a Greek Orthodox Church built in 530 A.D. by the Byzantine emperor Justinian I. The church is built on what is believed to be site of the ancient inn where the Bible reports Mary and Joseph sought lodging when they journeyed to Bethlehem to register for a census decreed by Caesar Augustus.

According to Luke's Gospel, Jesus was born in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.

That manger was likely a cave rather than the wooden stall depicted in most Christmas Nativity scenes, according to biblical scholars.

"In that day, inns were built around caves, usually enclosed in a big quadrangle with a courtyard area in the middle," said Wayne Ward, senior research professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a frequent visitor to the Holy Land. Animals often were kept in these limestone caves adjoining the inns, he said.

Ward said he is convinced the site marked by the Church of the Nativity is authentic.

The site was first permanently marked by Helena, mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, in about 325 A.D. After Constantine's conversion to Christianity, his mother traveled across Palestine to locate all the sites revered by the Christian community. She and others erected ornate church buildings on many of those holy sites.

"The oldest and surest site she picked out was the inn at Bethlehem," Ward said.

Biblical archaeologist Joel Drinkard, professor of Old Testament interpretation at Southern Seminary, agreed that the Bethlehem inn is one of the most reliable locations related to Jesus' life and ministry.

Nevertheless, Drinkard pointed out, Helena marked the site 300 years after the birth of Christ. "The gap from the birth in 5 or 6 B.C. down to 300 A.D. is an awfully long gap," Drinkard said. "We have an awfully hard time proving this is actually the site. Likewise we have a hard time proving it is not."

That gap isn't as huge as it appears, though, Ward said, because there were signs of earlier veneration of the site predating Helena's visit. Also, a village the size of Bethlehem would likely have had only one inn, and everybody would have known where it was, he said. And unlike nearby Jerusalem, Bethlehem never has been destroyed by war.

"I don't think there's any doubt about that location," Ward said.

Whether the small silver stars embedded in marble in the grotto beneath the Church of the Nativity mark the exact spot of Jesus' birth and of the manger, as tradition holds, really isn't the point, added Rusty Cherry, vice president of Dehoney Travel, a Louisville, Ky., firm which organizes Holy Land tours for Protestants.

"What we want people to come away from this site with is that this is an event that occurred," said Cherry. "It occurred somewhere near here. This is kind of representative for us as we think through the story. This can be our visualization of the space."

What tourists see today at the Church of the Nativity, however, bears little resemblance to the Bethlehem during Mary and Joseph's time.

In modern Bethlehem, the Church of the Nativity sits off a square. Visitors stoop to enter the church through a four-and-a-half foot doorway called the "gate of humility." It actually is the result of precautions taken centuries ago. According to the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, the church's wooden door was built in 1272 by the Armenian King Hetron to protect the site from invaders.

During a previous invasion of Bethlehem, horses had been stabled inside the church.

Just inside, some areas of the floor are pulled back so visitors can look down on mosaic tiles from a previous, significantly older, floor.

The older floor dates to the original fourth century church. One mosaic features the Greek word for "fish," an acronym for Christ which Christians used as a secret code during Roman persecution.

The church sits above the spot where the inn of Bethlehem's stables are believed to have been. Visitors descend a narrow stairway to the grotto, where one small area is marked off with a silver star embedded in marble to mark the spot where Jesus is believed to have been born.

American Protestants often find the appearance of the site discomfiting at first, noted Drinkard. "To us, there's nothing very worshipful about the idea of the marble, the hanging lights, the silver of the star encrusting the location. That doesn't speak to most of our Baptist feelings of worship. Nonetheless, those are the most ancient indications we have of veneration of this site as a place of worship."

And ultimately, the most important aspect of a visit to the Holy Land is to increase the pilgrim's sense of worship, Drinkard added. "That's what these churches and the traditions tied to these churches do. They help make it concrete."

He compared a visit to the sacred sites of Israel to searching for family genealogies and finding some of the cemeteries where previous generations were buried.

"It's the same way with the connections with our family of faith," Drinkard said. "Granted, you are not always really walking where Jesus walked, because you've got 10 feet, or in some places 25 feet, of debris underfoot. But in some places you are seeing and touching remains that were present during the time of Christ or the Old Testament prophets. That helps concretize and make much more real these biblical narratives to us. ... Every time I've been I've been very much moved."

Church of Nativity historical time line

-- In the second century A.D., Christian apologist Justin Martyr made a reference to Joseph having taken quarters in a cave near Bethlehem when Jesus was born.

-- Writing in the fourth century A.D., Jerome noted that even before the time of the Emperor Hadrian (117-145 A.D.), the cave now identified as the birthplace of Jesus was revered by Christians as the authentic site. Jerome reported that Hadrian, in an effort to stamp out Christian worship on the site, ordered a pagan shrine to Adonis, the god of fertility, erected there.

-- About 325 A.D., after Constantine's conversion to Christianity, his mother, Helena, traveled across Palestine seeking to mark the sacred sites of the faith. She built a church on the current site of the Church of the Nativity.

-- In 530 A.D., a larger church was erected on the site by Justinian. That building is largely still intact today, and is what visitors to Bethlehem see.

-- At the time of the Persian invasion in 614 A.D., other buildings in the area were destroyed. However, when the soldiers saw mosaics on the outside of the church with the Wise Men dressed in what appeared to be Persian attire, they spared the church.

-- During the Turkish invasion, horses were stabled in the church.

-- The "gate of humility," the current wooden door to the church, with a low opening of only four-and-one-half feet, was built in 1272 A.D. by the Armenian King Hetron.

-- Today, Bethlehem is controlled by Palestinians. However, Holy Land pilgrims regularly pass the checkpoint between Israeli-controlled Jerusalem and Bethlehem, with only occasional disruptions.

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Journey to Bethlehem must have been grueling

By Mark Wingfield

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (ABP) -- Today, a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem takes two or three hours by car. But 2,000 years ago, when the Bible says Mary and Joseph traveled to participate in the census of Caesar Augustus, the trip could have taken eight to 10 days.

"Back in the times when they would have been doing it by camel or donkey or horseback, it would have been a significant journey," said Rusty Cherry, vice president of Dehoney Travel, a Louisville, Ky., firm which organizes Holy Land tours for American Protestant groups.

The exact route used by Mary and Joseph is not recorded in the Bible story. The most likely route, said Wayne Ward, senior research professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, would have been straight through the Jordan Valley.

While that route would have forced the devout Jewish couple to pass through the despised region of Samaria, it offered a straighter path with fewer ups and downs.

Nazareth lies about 1,200 feet above sea level. A traveler leaving Nazareth descends to about 700 feet below sea level in a short amount of time.

Passing over Mount Tabor, Mary and Joseph would have headed then for Bet Shean, a modern architectural site where digging has uncovered the accumulated debris of 28 civilizations layered on top of each other. This is

the place where the Old Testament says Philistines hung the bodies of King Saul and his three sons on the city wall after their defeat at Mount Gilboa.

From there, Mary and Joseph might have traveled down the Jordan River Valley to a crossing known as the Adam Bridge. Here they would have connected with the Pilgrim Road running along the east side of the Jordan and then crossed the Jordan again at Allenby Bridge.

From Jericho, Ward said, Mary and Joseph would have followed the Roman road running along the Waddy Kelt. This is the area where King David tended his father's sheep as a child, and the site of deep canyons which some think were David's inspiration as he wrote about the "valley of the shadow of death" in the 23rd Psalm.

From the floor of the Jordan River Valley near Jericho, about 1,300 feet below sea level, the couple would have traversed Mount Olivet, which at its peak is 2,800 feet above sea level.

"When you walk it, you wonder what kind of physical condition those people had to be in," Ward said.

It is unlikely that Mary and Joseph would have passed through Jerusalem on their way to Bethlehem in their day, Ward believes, because of the threat posed by King Herod. "People going to Bethlehem would not have gone through Jerusalem, except maybe into the temple area," Ward said.

Instead, they would have taken a cut-off leading to Bethlehem just outside Jerusalem.

Along this road, archaeologists recently discovered the remains of a fifth century church building marking the location of a rock where tradition has it that Mary sat and rested on her journey.

While finding the site interesting, most Baptist scholars are unlikely to proclaim it a holy site on par with others, such as Christ's birthplace in Bethlehem.

This is what scholars call a "traditional" site rather than a historical site. Cherry explained that the Holy Land is full of traditional sites venerated by one group or another, all with varying degrees of reliability.

The site of Mary's resting place is impossible to determine, said Joel Drinkard, biblical archaeologist at Southern Seminary. "How would anyone know where Mary stopped and rested? That one doesn't even have a biblical basis for it."

Overall, the journey would have been close to 100 miles, Ward said. Jesus and his disciples later would make the same journey many times in three days, he said. "But someone like Mary, in her condition, they'd want at least seven or eight days, at least a week or more."

Ward and his wife, Mary Ann, have lived in Israel three times and visited dozens of other times. "We've walked many times on the old Roman road the family would have used" from Jericho to Bethlehem, Ward said. Sometimes they have heard the clippety-clop of donkeys along that road, carrying pregnant women, he added.

"We have seen women, sometimes riding a donkey, that you would think were heading for the maternity ward," he said. "It's amazing; they go right on."

Based on what he's seen, Ward said the journey to Bethlehem would have been difficult, but it could have been done. "It's certainly possible."

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Sites in Nazareth linked with Christmas

NAZARETH, Israel (ABP) -- Bethlehem isn't the only holy site associated with the birth of Christ.

Although the Bible says Jesus was born in Bethlehem, it wasn't his home. According to Luke's Gospel, Mary and Joseph lived in the village of Nazareth in Galilee both before Jesus' birth and after they returned from hiding from Herod in Egypt.

The most strongly supported historical site in Nazareth, according to Baptist scholars, is Mary's well. Today a Greek Orthodox church stands on this site, marking the place some believe the angel Gabriel announced to Mary her impending pregnancy.

The Roman Catholic Church maintains another site in Nazareth said to possibly be Mary's home, another potential location for Gabriel's announcement of good news, often called the annunciation.

It is impossible to know whether Gabriel appeared to Mary at either site, said William Tolar, distinguished professor of biblical backgrounds at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"There is an early Catholic tradition that Mary would have been at home when Gabriel came to her," he said. "And the Greek Orthodox have a strong early tradition that she was drawing water at the spring."

But both views are merely traditions, he said. "Scripture does not say where Mary was."

The one thing that's certain is that Mary would have drawn water from the well today called Mary's well, according to Tolar and Wayne Ward, senior research professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"What you have in Nazareth is the certain site of Mary's well," Ward said. "We can't claim that's where the angel appeared to Mary, because the Bible doesn't say. But what you can say is that young girls like Mary went to get water at this well. ... There is not any doubt that Mary would have come to this well every day to get water for her family."

One reason that is certain is because this well was the only source of water in Nazareth for centuries. In fact, when Ward first visited Nazareth in 1953, it still was the only source of water.

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