

Holy Sites: Are They Authentic?

By Steve Ray

People always ask me: how do we know these are the real sites where Jesus and Mary lived and walked? It is a fair question, especially if people have paid a lot of money to visit these holy sites.



The earliest Christians realized the importance of these sites and immediately marked them as sites to be remembered and venerated. Small memorials were built, or places to pray and pilgrims came from around the world to remember these spots and to worship God and to pray.

In 135 AD Emperor Hadrian—in an attempt to wipe out Christianity and to obliterate the memory of the holy sites—tore down all the Christian shrines and built pagan temples in their place. Ironically, when he set out to destroy the holy sites, he actually marked them for future generations.

(Picture above: Entrance to Church of Nativity in Bethlehem; picture below: Steve and Janet touch the spot where Jesus was born.)

After Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity was in AD 313, his mother St. Helena was able to locate the holy sites by consulting with local Christians and their local traditions *and* by the fact that Emperor Hadrian had marked them all with his pagan temples. Queen Helena tore down the pagan temples of Hadrian and built magnificent churches in their place.

Tradition, archaeology and the ancient witness confirms their authenticity. To illustrate my point, here are a few examples relating to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was mentioned in a very enlightening side note by St. John Chrysostom in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, written in AD 370:

“ . . . Since that birth [of Jesus], men come from the ends of the earth to see the manger, and the site of the shed” (NPNF, 2nd series, 10:44). The early Christians remembered and preserved



the location of Jesus' birth, and pilgrims like us were visiting the birthplace even in the first centuries.

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia writes,

“The cave-stable is mentioned by Justin Martyr, Origen, and Jerome. After the Romans conquered Bethlehem anew (A.D. 135) the site of the Nativity was desecrated, probably under Hadrian (117–138; cf. Jerome Ep 58.3). Jerome lived for thirty-three years in Bethlehem (A.D. 387–420). Here he helped found and direct pilgrim hospices, convents for women, and a monastery” (Bromiley, G. W. (1988; 2002). *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Revised* (Vol. 1, Page 472). Wm. B. Eerdmans).

The Protestant reference work *The Tyndale Bible Dictionary* work says,

“The birth of Jesus possibly took place in a cave in the rocks outside the town. The early Christian writer Justin Martyr 9(10–165) thought so, as did Origen (c. 185–254) some years later. Origen frequently resided in the Holy Land and wrote, ‘In Bethlehem you are shown the cave where he was born, and within the cave the manger where he was wrapped in swaddling clothes.’ Jerome later described the grotto over which the Emperor Constantine had built a basilica.

In excavations in 1934–35, evidence indicated a second period of building in the reign of Justinian (AD 527–565), when Constantine’s basilica was extended beyond its original proportions. Steps lead down to the grotto, the rectangular shape of which suggests that Constantine’s builders reshaped the original.” (Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*. Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers).

An early pilgrim known as the Bordeaux Pilgrim visited Palestine in 333 and wrote,

“Where the Lord Jesus was born there a basilica was built on Constantine’s command” (Maria Teresa Petrozzi, *Bethlehem*, Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2000).

About 325 the great historian of the early Church wrote,

“For without delay [Empress Helena] dedicated two churches to the God whom she adored, one at the grotto which had been the scene of the Savior’s birth; the other on the mount of his ascension. For he who was ‘God with us’ had submitted to be born even in a cave of the earth, and the place of his nativity was called Bethlehem by the Hebrews. Accordingly the pious empress honored with rare memorials the scene of her travail who bore this heavenly child, and beautified the sacred cave with all possible splendor. The emperor himself soon after testified his reverence for the spot by princely offerings, and

added to his mother's magnificence by costly presents of silver and gold, and embroidered hangings."¹

In the early 5th century, Hermias Sozomen, the great historian of the Church wrote,

“About this period, the emperor, having determined upon erecting a temple in honor of God, charged the governors to see that the work was executed in the most magnificent and costly manner possible. His mother Helena also erected two temples,² the one at Bethlehem near the cave where Christ was born, the other on ridges of the Mount of Olives, whence He was taken up to heaven.³

Aegeria, the first woman pilgrim who left a written record of her travels in the Holy Land about 390 wrote at some length about the grotto in Bethlehem and the elaborate church built above it.

These places were remembered! People did not forget the places where such holy things had taken place. But let me give you two other examples, these from the Old Testament.

Cave of Machpelah

When Abraham's wife Sarah died around 1850 BC he bought a cave in Hebron as a tomb to bury his wife. Abraham was also buried in the cave along with his son Isaac and Isaac's wife Rebecca, Isaac's son Jacob and his wife Leah. About 500 years later when the children of Israel came back from slavery in Egypt they knew where it was. The Jews know that location for almost four millennia.



(Picture to right: Abraham and Sarah's Tomb, the Machpelah in Hebron.)

It is now in Hebron, the city of Abraham. It was remembered in Genesis 49 over 400 years later when the Israelites returned from Egypt. The city of Hebron was built around

¹Schaff, P. (1997). *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. I*. Eusebius: Church History, Life of Constantine the Great, and Oration in Praise of Constantine. (530). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

²Eus. *V. C.* iii. 41, 47; Soc. i. 17.

³Schaff, P. (1997). *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. II*. Socrates, Sozomenus: Church Histories. (259). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems.

this tomb and King Herod eventually built a huge monument over the graves of Abraham and his family which still stands today in the heart of Hebron.

Scripture tells us,

Abraham bought the cave with the words *“That he may give me [Abraham] the cave of Machpelah, which he owns; it is at the end of his field”* (Genesis 23:9).

“After this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah east of Mamre (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan” (Genesis 23:19).

“Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre” (Genesis 25:9).

“...in the cave that is in the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place” (Genesis 49:30).

“...for his sons carried him to the land of Canaan, and buried him in the cave of the field at Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite, to possess as a burying place” (Genesis 50:13).

And you can still visit it today. It is a place of worship of both Jews and Muslims.

But just as impressive, let’s take a look at the tomb of Rachel.

Rachel’s Tomb



Notice that Jacob buried Rachel in Bethlehem and the location of the tomb was still known 800 years later—after the Israelites returned from Egypt. Do you think they forgot its location over the subsequent centuries? It is still there today.

Around 1800 BC Rachel died: *“So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)”* (Genesis

35:19).

“And Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day” (Genesis 35:20).

After Jacob buried his wife Rachel his sons were taken to Egypt where they eventually became slaves. They dwelled in Egypt for 400 years. Then they wandered in the wilderness of Sinai for another 40 years. After they crossed the Jordan River and possessed the land of Israel the Ark of the Covenant resided for over 350 years in Shiloh.

(Picture above: Rachel's Tomb in the 1800's; picture below: Steve in Rachel's Tomb in 2005.)

So, eight hundred years after the fact—most of which time which they were far removed from the land—did they remember where their matriarch Rachel had been buried?

Read it for yourself in 1 Samuel 10:2. Saul had lost his donkeys and notice what the prophet Samuel told him to do. Where did he tell him to go?

"[Samuel said to Saul] When you depart from me today you will meet two men by Rachel's tomb in the territory of Benjamin at Zelzah [Bethlehem]"

How did Saul know where Rachel was buried? The Semitic people did not forget such important facts! They passed on the tradition! They venerated these sites.

These are just two examples from the Old Testament to show how these holy sites were venerated and remembered. How much more so for Jesus the Son of God who became flesh!



When I take people on pilgrimage through the Holy Land, I show them these holy sites with great confidence. I have little respect for the skeptics who trash the wisdom of the ancients and disregard the tradition of the past. Archaeology continues to confirm what has been known all along. God's people remember. We can remember too.

We can walk on Holy Ground and when we do we join those of the past in remembering and adoring the God who condescended to leave heaven and become one of us. He came down from heaven in space and time and left his footprints in the sand—and we will never forget!