

Who was born in Bethlehem?

Moshe Dann writes:

The answer echoes familiar Christmas carols, shopping day count-downs, Santas and reindeer. Christmas Eve, December 24, thousands of Christians flock to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem to celebrate. Built in the early Byzantine period (the fourth century CE) by Queen Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine ("The Great"), this church commemorates the birth of Jesus. Jewish history, however, offers another perspective.

When the Patriarch Jacob, 'father of the Jewish people,' his wives and family, returned to Eretz Yisrael, heading back to Hebron, his ancestral home, a tragedy occurred. Near Bethlehem ("House of Bread"), in the area of Efrata, Rachel died in childbirth; her baby, Benjamin, survived. "And Jacob buried his beloved wife on the way, and placed a monument on her grave." (Gen., 35:16-20)

Revered as a holy site for many centuries by Jews and even some Moslems, a cenotaph (a large stone memorial structure built during the Mamluke period, around 800 years ago) was built over the grave. In the mid-19th century Moses Montifore built a small domed building around the grave.

After 1948, when Jews were prohibited from visiting the site, local Arabs built a cemetery, homes and shops around it. Since 1967, they have expanded building throughout the area, along with many Jewish communities.

Due to attacks on worshippers at the tomb, a fortress-like building was built around the earlier structure. And, despite these difficulties, tens of thousands of Jews continue to visit the site. A kollel yeshiva studies there during the day. The city of Bethlehem, just a few hundred meters away, is controlled by the Palestinian Authority and is prohibited to

Jews.

Hundreds of years after Rachel's death, after the Jewish people had left Egypt and entered the Eretz Yisrael, Bethlehem was a flourishing Jewish village. According to the Book of Ruth, during the time of Judges there was a famine in the land and one of Bethlehem's most prominent families (Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and two sons, Machlon and Kilyon) moved across the Judean desert to the land of Moav, in what is now Jordan. The boys married non-Jewish women (Ruth and Orpah); soon afterwards all the male members of the family died there.

Widowed and alone, Naomi decided to return to her home town, accompanied by her daughters-in-law. On the way, however, Orpah turned back; Ruth begged to stay. "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you stay, I'll stay with you; your people will be my people, and your God, my God." (Ruth 1:16)

This powerful statement of faith identifies Ruth as a source of inspiration and perhaps the first 'convert.'

Life was not easy for the two widows. They gathered food from corners of fields left for the poor. But Boaz, leader of the community in Bethlehem and a descendent of Peretz, who was a Judge/Sage during the time of Moses, noticed Ruth and fell in love with her. They married and had a son named Oved, who was the father of Yishai, the father of David.

Yishai lived in Bethlehem during the reign of King Saul. When it became clear to Samuel the Prophet that Saul was no longer an appropriate ruler he went to Bethlehem to look for a successor. (I Samuel, 16:1) Samuel went to Yishai's house and asked to examine his sons. Yishai proudly displayed seven, each more noble, wise and worthy than the other. Yet Samuel was not satisfied. "Any more?" he asked. Reluctantly Yishai brought in his youngest son, David, from his work tending sheep and goats. When Samuel saw him, he immediately anointed him heir-apparent in front of his family; Messiah (Moshiach),

means 'the anointed one.'

According to Jewish tradition, 'the Messiah will come from the House of David,' meaning the Davidic lineage. Interpreted literally, however, this may explain why the New Testament originates the story of Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem.

Who comes from Bethlehem? Rich in Christian history and significance, its roots in Jewish history ought not to be forgotten or ignored.