



The Half Shekel Journals of 2022 by Pastor Ed Rice
#14 Fri 4 Nov pm Bethlehem.

On our way to Bethlehem it was good to stop and eat at Ruth's Restaurant right near Rachel's tomb. Recall that Ruth came to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law, and met a man named Boaz to set up a Biblical documentation about what a kinsman redeemer is all about, and to establish a lineage for the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, born in Bethlehem 1,312 years later. Also recall that Rachel died in childbirth in Bethlehem; giving it the surname Ephratah (אֶפְרַתָּה) (Micah.5:2) which means “an ash heap that brings forth fruitfulness”; a very appropriate title for the birthplace of the Messiah, the Saviour of the world.



Some of us loved the fine kosher dining we found everywhere in Israel, others, not so much. In twenty-three years of military travels, involving mess-halls all over the world, I have found that, in general, everyone has a carnal, hedonistic, complaining nature about food they are served. There are some who have victory over this carnal nature and can say *“Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content.”* (That rhymes with my grandmother's line, “Eat what's put before you!”) Others are still complaining about the non-existent Israeli cheeseburger. We loved our late lunch break after a long emotional and moving morning.



In only a couple hours of walking we could have walked the six miles south from Golgotha and the Garden Tomb to Bethlehem. On clear days one can see the hills of Bethlehem from the Mount of Olives. It was moving to visit the place of our Saviour's birth right after visiting the place of his cross and his resurrection; pondering, in our mind's eye, three of this world's greatest miracles in one fell swoop.¹ God became flesh and dwelt among

¹ A “fell swoop” here is an appropriate one-piece idiom used by the playwright Shakespeare to liken a hawk swooping down on defenseless prey bringing sudden cruel and ruthless death on the innocent.

us, was crucified in our place, and arose triumphant over death. Moving only begins to describe it.

Bethlehem, the Biblical birthplace of Jesus, is today three things; it is a tourist commercial hot-spot, a Roman Catholic religious quagmire, and a Palestinian tinder box. As a city in the West Bank of Palestine it falls under the Palestinian Authority and has a border crossing that is hostile to Israel and accepts no Israeli passport. Bethlehem has an inlaid silver star in a small cave under the 6th century Church of the Nativity; the cave, thought to once contain a manger, now holds the Roman Catholic claim of being the “exact spot” of Christ's birth.² The Basilica shares Manger Square with the 15th century Church of St. Catherine, across the square from the 1860 Mosque of Omar. And



further, Bethlehem is an outstanding tourist magnet that has more than two million visitors per year, with gift shops selling an

2 Again the Roman emperor, Constantine, and his mother, Helena, by pagan mysticism, declared this to be the 'exact spot.' “Constantine and his mother, Helena, built a magnificent and majestic church adorned with beautiful marble and mosaics. Later, during the 6th century, the Byzantine emperor Justinian built a new and even more intricate church on the same spot. During the Persian invasion in the 7th century, the church was spared destruction. By the 11th century, the Crusaders raised their flag above the Basilica of the Nativity and renovated it.” From www.bethlehem-city.org/en/churchofthenativity accessed 3/10/2023.

estimated four million hand carved olive wood manger scenes annually, and an equal number of other trinkets, I'm sure. Since "O little town of Bethlehem" is today laden with these three cumbersome burdens, we made our way to a more secluded sanctuary near Shepherds Field two miles east of Bethlehem. There, "in the same country," beside a shepherd's cave, on a very likely hillside where were "shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night," we worshiped.

Our Guide Joe, eloquently defined, described and defended the location here at Shepherds Field, and Pastor Charlie opened his Bible and taught a moving message about our Saviour's birth.



Luke 2:1 ¶ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the



city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

8 ¶ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.



13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. 16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

We left Shepherd's Field and headed out for one of several souvenir shops in the area. Guide Joe and Pastor Charlie had an ongoing discussion of just where we should end up. They stopped at one, and turned it down after a short chat, the next one was very welcoming and Pastor Charlie negotiated a group discount that was so good I'd be embarrassed to tell, in this journal, the total discount that we got on every item in the



large store. I'd tell the name of the store here, but all my receipts, and there are several, are written in Hebrew. It is amazing what all they carve out of olive wood in Israel. Amazing indeed.

Everyone clutching packages, we made our way back onto the bus. Eiad pointed her back towards Jerusalem and we got back to the Dan Hotel at dusk. That was one of the best days, but it is becoming very hard, and all too subjective, to call any one day the very best. They all stand out, they all capture the title "best day ever." And our gourmet kosher buffet supper was, how do you say, the best meal ever.