

The Church of the Nativity - Holiest of Holies

by **Sir Knight Robert M. Wolfarth**

We drove up a gentle hill in what is now suburban Jerusalem in the occupied West Bank to the literal birthplace of Christianity. This was Bethlehem. The town looked no different from many others in the Middle East with short white houses, mosques, and narrow, winding roads.

My Palestinian friend parked his car, and we got out. As we walked away, he kept glancing back at his car and then at a cop on duty nearby. Finally he said he was going to ask the officer if he parked legally. He pointed down the cobble stone square, enclosed on three sides by ancient walls, to a tiny doorway. "There," he said quietly. "In there is where Jesus was born. I'll catch up with you." Then he turned and disappeared. I stood in an empty Manger Square, gazing at the ancient wall about seventy yards ahead of me. I became aware of the silence and slowly began walking toward the structure, beginning to tremble with the impact of his simple words: "In there is where Jesus was born." I had traveled across the world, after all these years, for this moment. I walked forward alone with God as my guide.

The Church of the Nativity façade is stone, looming and stark. No markings, no signs, just a monolithic, aged white wall. The entrance to the church is a small opening in very thick stone. One must stoop to enter through the Door of Humility, designed to ensure a reverent bow by pilgrims who enter and to keep invading horses out. Once inside, the church is long, cavernous, and dark. No pews, no Bibles, no gift shop at the door.

My footsteps echoed slightly. At the far end, Greek glass ornaments hung over the altar. This holy structure is currently managed by three denominations: Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and the Armenian Church.¹ The détente is awkward, with each denomination jealously guarding its mandate while coveting that of the others. A section of the old wooden floor is hinged back to expose a tiled floor dating from the fourth century. For obvious reasons, this church is all about history.

After St. Justin Martyr announced this spot in the second century as Christ's nativity place, the first church was built around 333 AD by decree of Emperor Constantine the Great. It was one of three magnificent churches on Christian holy locations; the Nativity in Bethlehem, the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, and the Ascension, also in Jerusalem.

A church did arise under Constantine, but the times were unstable. Christianity had only been legal in the Roman Empire for 20 years. Unfortunately, the Samaritan Revolt destroyed the building, leaving us nothing to remember her by. Yet the belief that this spot is holy persevered, and the present church was erected where the first one stood by order of Emperor Justinian in 565.²

Amazingly, it has stood on the same location for almost 1,500 years, battlehardened after waves of invasions, yet honored regularly by awestruck pilgrims. During that time, the

structure has been administered and protected by various factions. And yes, maintained and defended by Knights Templar, among others. Crossing the nave, one cannot help but yearn to hear stories these walls could tell, if only they could speak, but the walls remain silent. I descended steep steps at the right of the altar into a small stone room, the "grotto." Three or four people were quietly exiting as I entered, leaving me there alone. What sounded like a vent fan was the only noise - a low hum. The room is simple and serene. This is the very spot where the manger lay, where wise kings knelt, where Mary gave birth to my Savior.

I stood silently with naught but God and my thoughts for company, gazing down upon a tiny marker where Jesus was born - a fourteen-pointed star on a raised hearth with candles suspended above it. There was nowhere else in the world I wanted to be. It was an intensely personal experience. At last, I emerged from the grotto. My devoutly Muslim host stood in the nave, smiling. The site is sacred to both religions, as is Jesus. He clearly understood the emotion I must be feeling, and he was very happy for me. He showed me around the building-and reported that his car was now legally parked. We chatted amiably, not about the Crusades or the building's contentious history, but about the religious philosophies we have in common. Yet I still wondered how this structure could have lasted through the ages, and what brave men built and defended it.

It is commonly believed that the Order of Poor Knights of the Temple of Solomon, or the Order of the Temple, was founded around 1119 in Jerusalem. Many have speculated about the role that the knights of this order (the Knights Templar) had in the erection, upkeep, and protection of this church. It has been stated that around 1150, Knights Templar "participated in an extraordinary building boom in the Holy Land; fortresses, palaces and churches, including the new Church of the Holy Sepulcher and a redo of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem".³

The leaders of the Crusades wanted to establish an enduring presence in the Holy Land. Building fortresses and churches was one way to accomplish this goal. Although we do not have a clear picture of the degree of their involvement, Crusaders including Knights Templar and operative masons of the order unmistakably had a hand in renovations of the church.⁴ We cannot conclusively credit the walls, altar, or other structures to these knights, but we can thank them for the enduring presence of the building. Even so, the building has been invaded.

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Even so, the building has been invaded or conquered over the years by Persians, Byzantines, Muslims, Crusaders, Mam-uks, Ottomans, Jordanians, British, and Israelis.' Who, by right, owns it? The debate may rage for another thousand years. Deed of trust aside, it is an astonishing structure to marvel at when one considers that it has stood relatively unchanged by the ravages of time, wars, earthquakes, and fire since Emperor

Justinian built it in the sixth century. The land it sits on is today called Palestine by some, the West Bank by others, but occupied and thus contentious by any definition. Tension hangs in the air, however peacefully the grotto may lie. Bethlehem is no sanctuary of tranquility.

Yet, as we sing romanticized Christmas carols in America, the church structure is in peril. Sheep still graze in nearby fields while the holy Church of the Nativity slowly disintegrates. "The roof of the church is in a decayed condition and its timbers are rotting," says Dr. G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville,⁶ "Rainwater seeps into the building and damages its structural fabric and the precious 12th century wall mosaics and pillar paintings. An emergency such as a fire caused by the damp wiring in the building could result in heavy casualties as visitors struggle to escape. Moreover, the amianthus asbestos curtains throughout the Grotto of the Nativity pose a health hazard..."

To you and me, Knights Templar of a different age, who are patterned after the operative knights who came before us, this situation should be alarming. Yes, the church was substantially renovated in the sixteenth century, and 1500 years is a remarkable testament to the good work done by noble Knights and operative masons. Yet knight templar prayers alone will not support this most sacred of churches. It cannot last indefinitely. It needs urgent attention.

To this end, my Palestinian friend, a Muslim custodian of the holy City of David, and I, a Knight Templar of a new era, have left our historic differences behind. We now break bread together and speak of our partnership in history-and our shared duty to protect and defend this sacred building, for if we fail to join hands in this cause, our sons may not have the same holy church to visit.

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Sir Knight Robert M. Wolfarth, 32', a native Texan, now calls Salt Lake City home. After six years working in defense and foreign policy for the US Congress in Washington, Robert moved into the medical device industry. He is fascinated with systems of ethics as influenced by different societies and religions, and is a writer by passion. He is a Knight Templar and a Noble of the

Mystic Shrine. Robert is active in his community, the United Methodist Church, and serves Wasatch Lodge /41 as editor of "The Trestle-board," and Argenta Lodge 43 as Junior Deacon. You can reach him at: CornWineOil@gmail.com

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