



Bethlehem

- Burial place of Rachel
- Home of Boaz and Ruth
- Home of Jesse and his sons, the youngest being David
- Birthplace of Jesus
- Means “House of Bread” (“Beit Lechem”)
- Population during Bible times: Perhaps 1,000
- Population today: 25,000 inside the city limits, 60,000 in the general vicinity
- Religious affiliation: In the last century - and especially in the last two decades - Bethlehem has changed from a predominately Christian make-up to an Islamic one. Very few Christians remain in Bethlehem.



Nativity Square

Finding the Bible in Bethlehem is difficult. Instead of a typical nativity scene you might have been expecting, you’ll instead find a crowded city filled with churches, mosques and tourist shops. At “Nativity Square,” two large churches are built over the cave in which Jesus was said to have been born. You’ll get a better sense of the biblical environment at the “Shepherds’ Fields,” or in any cave along the ridge line of the Judean Mountains.

The Church of the Nativity was founded in 327 CE. The current building was completed in 565 and has been remodeled several times. It is currently in a remodeling stage that is anticipated to last several years. When you reach the grotto (cave), look beyond the ornate decorations to see the rough walls of the cave.

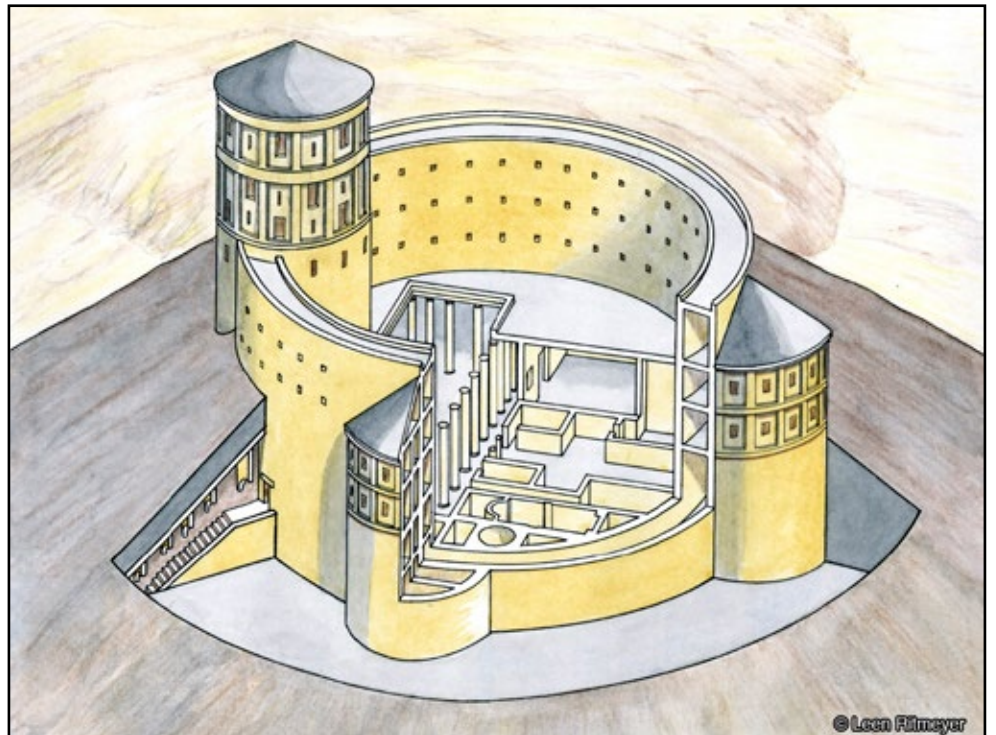
St. Catherine’s Church adjoins the Church of the Nativity. Go underneath the modern sanctuary to see more of the same cave in a more natural environment.

The Herodium

Perhaps the largest palace Herod ever built, the Herodium towered over the villages south of Jerusalem, including Bethlehem. A lookout at the top of the tower could have seen approaching danger from the Mediterranean in the West, Jerusalem from the North, or Edom in the Southeast.

- The mountain is man-made.
- The fortress could have supported 1,000 troops plus the royal family.
- Fresh water was delivered from Jerusalem via an aqueduct.
- Josephus said Herod was buried here some 19 centuries ago. However, his tomb was not discovered until 2007! Noted archaeologist Ehud Netzer found the tomb and continued to excavate there until suffering a fall from scaffolding at the Herodium in 2010. He died three days later, on Oct. 28.
- Herod died shortly after Jesus was born.

Impact on the biblical story: Matthew introduced Herod into his account of Jesus' birth in Matthew 2:1. Luke needed only five verses before he mentioned the powerful king (Luke 1:5). These writers assumed we knew that Jesus was born in the shadow of Judea's richest, cruelest and most powerful ruler! Look for the distinctive, cone-shaped hill when we're in Bethlehem.

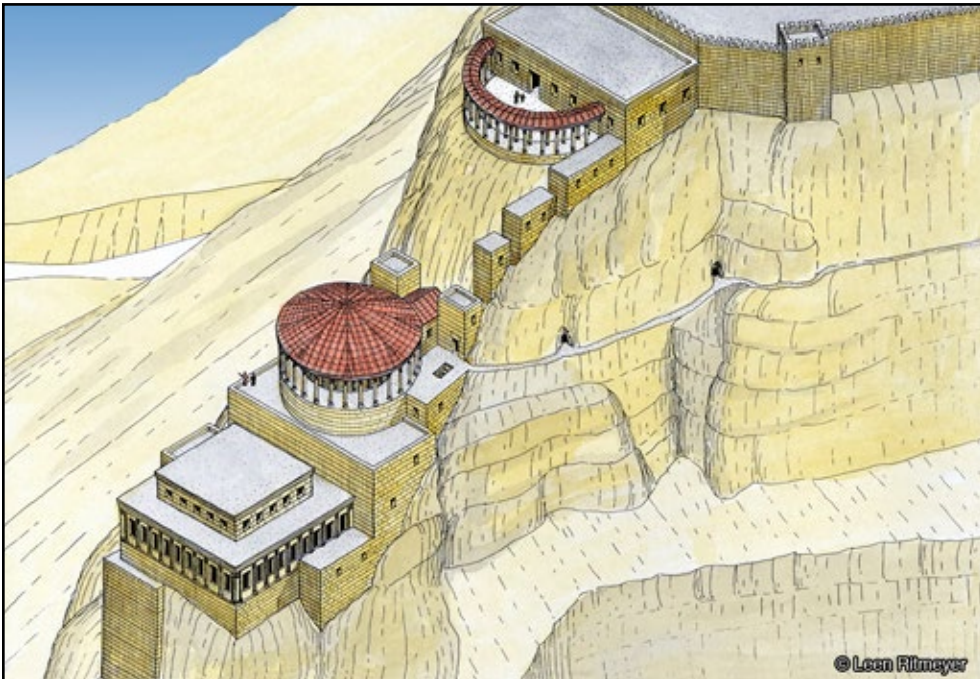


The swimming pool at the Herodium (left) was larger than an Olympic-sized pool, filled by fresh water from Jerusalem and featured an "island" oasis in its center. The luxurious fortress on top of the man-made mountain was only a short distance from the humble cave where Jesus was born.



Masada

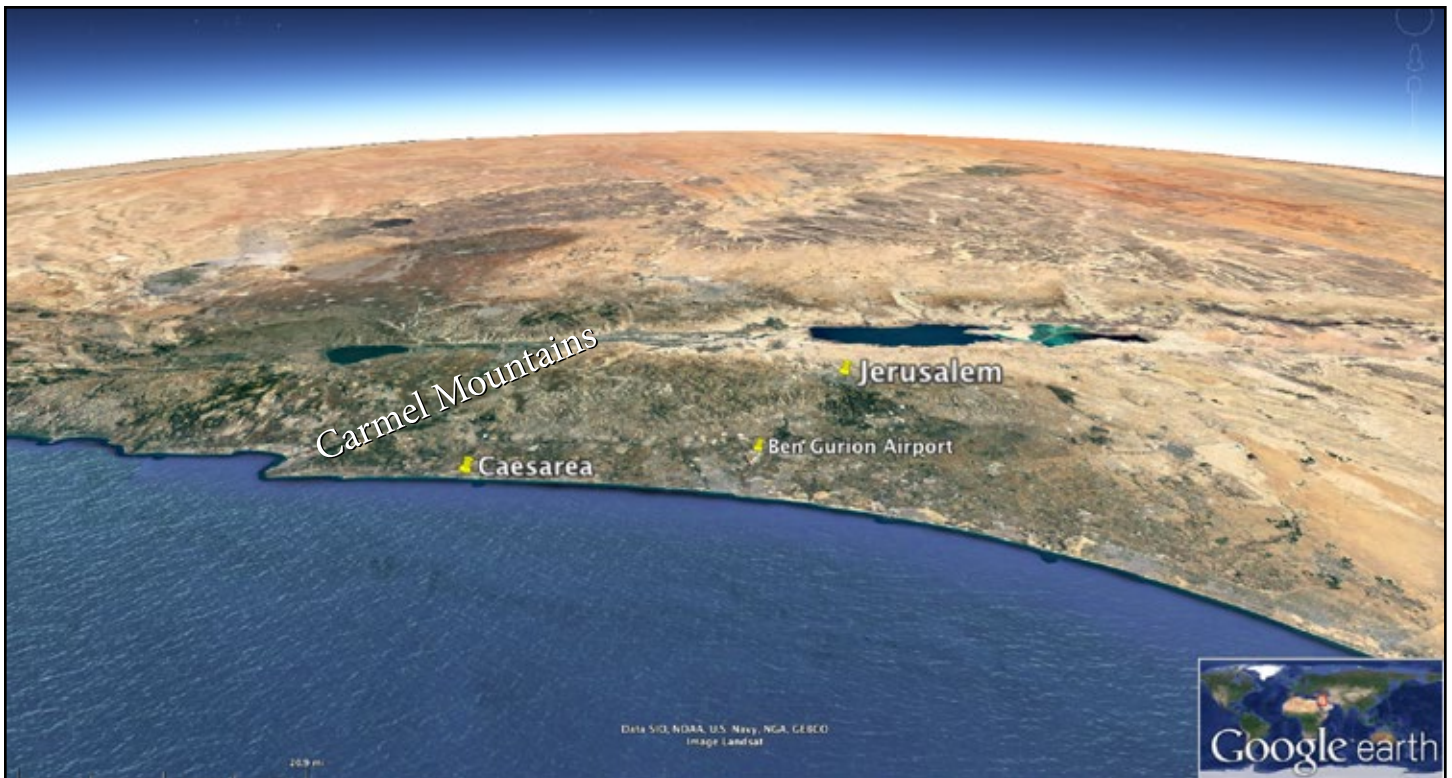
The most famous of Herod's palace-fortresses.



- Herod had two palaces atop Masada, including the “Northern” palace pictured here in the photo and illustration. The fortress was completed in 31 BCE.
- The fortress seemed to be impenetrable. Some 1,300 feet high on the eastern side and 300 feet high at the closest distance on the western slope, direct assault against the fortress seemed impossible.
- Years of food and water was stored away for those in the fortress, but in scarce supply for anyone seeking to attack it.
- The fortress was taken by nationalistic Jewish rebels in 66 CE in the earliest days of the Jewish rebellion against Rome.
- Romans laid siege to the fortress and reclaimed Masada in 73. The Romans used Jewish prisoners of war to build a siege ramp on the western side of the mountain.
- Choosing to die in freedom rather than dying at the hands of the Romans or to be held in slavery, the rebels elected to carry out a mass suicide pack. When the Romans broke through the last barrier, they found the bodies of 960 men, women and children. Only two women and five children were found alive.

“Let our wives die before they are abused, and our children before they have tasted of slavery; and after we have slain them, let us bestow that glorious benefit upon one another mutually, and preserve ourselves in freedom, as an excellent funeral monument for us. ... Let us spare nothing but our provisions; for they will be a testimonial when we are dead that we were not subdued for want of necessaries, but that, according to our original resolution, we have preferred death before slavery.”

- From the final speech of Eleazar Ben Ya'ir, leader of the rebel forces.



Note the smooth coastline of Israel. Herod the Great decided to build a world-class seaport even when no natural harbor was available.

Caesarea Maritima

Caesarea by the Mediterranean was the crown jewel of Herod the Great's building projects. Even now the 2,000-year-old ruins bear witness to an amazing city that would have been favorably compared to any port in the Roman empire. Indeed, Josephus the historian said it equaled the port in Athens.

- With no natural harbor south of the Carmel Mountain Range, Herod determined to build a man-made harbor at this location. A small fishing village already existed here. Destroying the village, Herod's engineers and builders devised a way to stack a type of volcanic rock under the water as the foundation of an artificial breakwater wall.
- Finished within a decade of Jesus' birth, Caesarea was four times larger than Jerusalem in the First Century.
- The city featured a theater looking out over the ocean and a hippodrome that ran parallel to the beach. Gladiatorial games were held at the hippodrome. After the Jewish revolt of 70 CE was repressed, one historian says 2,500 Jewish prisoners were slaughtered in staged "games."
- Herod named the city in honor of Augustus. A temple to honor Augustus as god was the most prominent building in the harbor, the landmark for every ship that crossed the horizon.
- There is no natural fresh water source for the city. Three aqueducts brought water from fresh water sources to Caesarea.
- Jesus never visited Caesarea, but the city plays a major role in the New Testament church. Philip the evangelist visited the city (Acts 8:40). Saul shipped out to Tarsus shortly after his conversion from this port (Acts 9:30). Peter visited Cornelius the centurion at Caesarea (Acts 10-11). Many of the "missionary journeys" of Paul either began or ended at the port (Acts 18:22 is an example). Most famously, Paul was imprisoned at Caesarea for two years as Roman authorities debated what to do with him. Eventually, they put him on a ship and sent him to Rome (Acts 23-27).

Aqueducts brought fresh water to the city.



The theater was for concerts and speaking events.



The Hippodrome hosted chariot races and deadly gladiator games.



Remains of the man-made harbor are still easy to identify.



Herod's palace featured a swimming pool complex that juttred out into the ocean.