

The Church of the Nativity, or Basilica of the Nativity, is a basilica located in Bethlehem in the West Bank. The grotto it contains holds a prominent religious significance to Christians of various denominations as the birthplace of Jesus. The grotto is the oldest site continuously used as a place of worship in Christianity, and the basilica is the oldest major church in the Holy Land. The church was originally commissioned by Constantine the Great a short time after his mother Helena's visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem in 325–326, on the site that was traditionally considered to be the birthplace of Jesus. That original basilica was likely built between 330 and 333, being already mentioned in 333, and was dedicated on May 31, 339. It was destroyed by fire during the Samaritan revolts of the sixth century, possibly in 529, and a new basilica was built a number of years later. The Church of the Nativity, while remaining basically unchanged since the Justinianic reconstruction, has seen numerous repairs and additions, especially from the Crusader period, such as two bell towers (now gone), wall mosaics and paintings (partially preserved). Over the centuries, the surrounding compound has been expanded, and today it covers approximately 12,000 square meters, comprising three different monasteries: one Greek Orthodox, one Armenian Apostolic, and one Roman Catholic, of which the first two contain bell towers built during the modern era. The silver star marking the spot where Christ was born, inscribed in Latin, was stolen in October 1847 by Greek monks who wished to remove this Catholic item. Some assert that this was a contributing factor in the Crimean War against the Russian Empire. Since 2012, the Church of the Nativity is a World Heritage Site and was the first to be listed by UNESCO under 'Palestine'. The Grotto of the Nativity, the place where Jesus is said to have been born, is an underground space which forms the crypt of the Church of the Nativity. It is situated underneath its main altar, and it is normally accessed by two staircases on either side of the chancel. The Grotto is part of a network of caves, which are accessed from the adjacent Church St Catherine's. The tunnel-like corridor connecting the Grotto to the other caves is normally locked. The cave has an eastern niche said to be the place where Jesus was born, which contains the Altar of Nativity. The exact spot where Jesus was born is marked beneath this altar by a 14-pointed silver star with the Latin inscription *Hic De Virgine Maria Jesus Christus Natus Est-1717* ("Here Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary"-1717). It was installed by the Catholics in 1717, removed – allegedly by the Greeks – in 1847, and replaced by the Turkish government in 1853. The star is set into the marble floor and surrounded by 15 silver lamps representing the three Christian communities: six belong to the Greek Orthodox, four to the Catholics, and five to the Armenian Apostolic. The Altar of the Nativity is maintained by the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches. The significance of the 14 points on the star is to represent the three sets of 14 generations in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. First 14 from Abraham to David, then 14 from David to the Babylonian captivity, then 14 more to Jesus Christ. In the middle of the 14 pointed star is a circular hole, through which you can reach in to touch the stone that is said to be the original stone that Mary laid on when she gave birth to Jesus. Roman Catholics are in charge of a section of the Grotto known as the "Grotto of the Manger", marking the traditional site where Mary laid the newborn baby in the manger. The Altar of the Magi is located directly opposite from the manger site. The passageway which connects St. Jerome's Cave and the Cave of the Nativity was expanded in February 1964, allowing easier access for visitors. In April 2002, approximately 50 armed Palestinians wanted by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) took refuge in the church. Christians in the church gave refuge to the fighters, giving them food, water, and protection from Israeli military forces stationed outside. Israeli media claimed that the Christians inside were being held hostage, however, parishioners inside the church say they and the church were treated with respect. The church's joint owners undertook a major renovation starting in September 2013, probably to be completed in 2021.

