The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is one of the oldest churches in the world. The structure is built over the cave that traditions mark as the birthplace of Jesus Christ, the first basilica on this site was built by St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine in 333 a.d. but it was burnt down during the Samaritan Revolt of 529. In 565 the current basilica was reconstructed by the Emperor Justinian I. According to legends, when the Persians invaded the city in 614, they unexpectedly did not destroy the structure, their commander was impressed by the golden wall mosaic depicting the Three Magi wearing Persian costumes, and commanded that the building be spared.

The church is administered jointly by Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Armenian apostolic authorities. The actual compound is a combination of two churches erected over the Grotto where Baby Jesus was born.

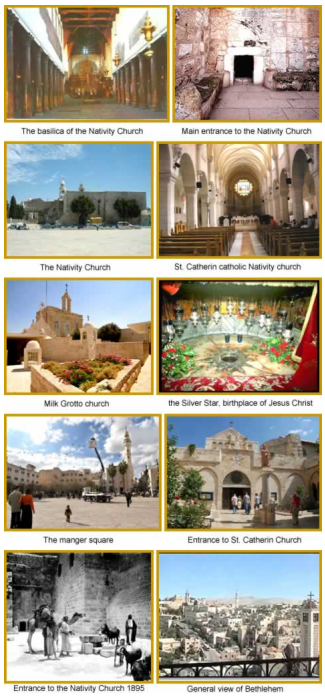
The main Basilica of the Nativity is in custody of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. It is designed like a typical Roman basilica, with five aisles and an apse in the eastern end, where the sanctuary is. The church features golden mosaics covering the side walls and the floor. The basilica is entered through a very low door, called the "Door of Humility." Originally the door was much larger but in the 17th century it was reduced to its actual size to prevent Turkish troops from entering the church mounted on their horses. The basilica also features a large collection of silver and gilded ancient icons, and a complex array of silver and gilded olive oil lamps hanging dawn from the wooden rafters of the ceiling which were donated by King Edward IV of England together with the lead sheets to cover the roof; however, this lead was later confiscated by the Ottoman authorities who melted it down for ammunition during World War I.

The adjoining Church of St. Catherine, the Roman Catholic Church, was built in a more modern style; this is the church where the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem celebrates Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

The Grotto of the Nativity, an underground cave located beneath the basilica, enshrines the humble site where Baby Jesus was born. The exact spot is marked beneath an altar by a 14-pointed Silver Star set into the marble floor and surrounded by silver olive oil lamps. Another altar in the Grotto marks the site where Virgin Mary laid the newborn baby in the manger.

Numerous Chapels are found in the compound as well, including the Chapel of Saint Joseph, commemorating the angel's appearance to Joseph, commanding him to flee to Egypt (Matthew 2:13); the Chapel of the Innocents, commemorating the children killed by Herod (Matthew 2:16-18); and the Chapel of Saint Jerome, where he translated the Holy Bible into Latin.

The large Manger Square in front of the church is the site where huge crowds from all continents will gather on Christmas Eve to sing Christmas carols and celebrate the rebirth of Jesus Christ.


The basilica of the Nativity Church
Main entrance to the Nativity Church
The Nativity Church
St. Catherin catholic Nativity church
Milk Grotto church
the Silver Star, birthplace of Jesus Christ
The manger square
Entrance to St. Catherin Church
Entrance to the Nativity Church 1895
General view of Bethlehem