Shepherds' Fields in Bethlehem

Introduction

The roads descending to the east of Bethlehem lead through the mostly Christian village of Beit Sahour (or Bait Sahur), which includes the Shepherds' Fields: the fields identified since ancient times with the shepherds who received the Good News of Jesus’ Nativity.

History

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." (Luke 2:8-10)

The fertile fields of Beit Sahour are believed to be where this biblical scene took place. There are two rival locations for the exact site, one run by the Greek Orthodox and the other by the Franciscans. Both sites have been excavated, and there have been churches and monasteries on both sites since the 4th century or earlier.

This site interested the earliest Christian pilgrims; in 384 the pilgrim Egeria was shown the church called "At the Shepherds" in a valley near Bethlehem. She reported, "A big garden is there now, protected by a neat wall all around, and also there is a very splendid cave with an altar." The pilgrim Arculf remarked in 670 that this site was "about a mile to the east of Bethlehem." The Orthodox site seems to correspond better with Egeria and Arculf’s accounts.
This area is also believed to be where the Hebrew matriarchs Ruth and Naomi gleaned in the fields behind the harvesters on their way to Bethlehem from Moab (Ruth 2-4). Ruth married Boaz, and they became parents of Obed, the father of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David, who was born in Jerusalem. Thus Bethlehem became known as the "City of David" and it was predicted that the Messiah would be born there (according to Micah 5:1-5).

**What's to See?**

The Greek Orthodox site of the Shepherds' Fields is at Kanisat al-Ruwat in the middle of fields 2 km southeast of Bethlehem. The ruins at al-Ruwat include a cave used as a church from the 4th century, of which the barrel-vaulted roof (5th century) still survives. It is approached by a flight of 21 steps and has three apses with traces of mosaic and old frescoes. The mosaic floor includes crosses, and therefore must predate 427, when this was forbidden as impious.

The church at al-Ruwat served the Orthodox community from the 5th century to 1955. It is the only 5th-century church outside Jerusalem to survive intact. Above it a Byzantine chapel was built, and was in turn replaced by a larger church, which was then destroyed in 614. It and a monastery were rebuilt in the 7th century and survived until the 10th century. Today, a new large church has been built, the 4th-century lower church has been restored, and the remains of the upper church and monastery have been preserved.

About 600m to the north of al-Ruwat is the site the Roman Catholics (Franciscans) identify as the Shepherds' Fields, at Khirbat Siyar al-Ghanim. Here there is a low natural cave or rock shelter in pleasant surroundings and with a fine view of the hills.
The cave, with soot-blackened roof, has been partly enclosed to make a modern chapel. Above is a modern church (1954) shaped like a tent and decorated with a bronze angel.

To the north are ruins of a rectangular monastery founded on a site occupied by nomadic shepherds in the 1st century. An early phase is dated from the late 4th century to the early 5th century and a second phase (which used stones from the original apse of the Church of the Nativity) to the 6th century. Only the apse of the church survives, and a large lintel decorated with crosses. The monastery had winepresses, a bakery, cisterns and animal pens. Scholars tend to believe this was probably not the site described by Egeria, but simply one of many Byzantine monasteries of the Judean desert. It may have been where Palladius began his monastic life with the miracle-worker Poseidonius in 419. It was not reoccupied after being destroyed by the Persians in 614.

There is also a third site, which has no ancient remains. The YMCA of Beit Sahour, east of the town center on the north side of the road, is where many Protestants commemorate Shepherds' Fields. There is a grove of pines, a cave, and a view (not exceptional) toward Jerusalem and the desert.

Also of interest nearby is a small walled monastery at Khirbat Abu Ghunain, located about 3km northeast of Bethlehem. A church with a single apse lies on the north side of the monastery, which may be that of Photinus-Marinus, founded in the 5th century by the brothers Marinus and Lukas, disciples of Euthymius. This is one of many Byzantine monasteries founded in the area; there is another 2km northeast of Bethlehem at Bir al-Qutt. This is a larger complex with a church on the north side, dated to the 6th century and with Georgian inscriptions indicating a dedication to St. Theodore.