



Bethlehem in the Nineteenth Century

By Khalil Shokeh



Throughout the ages, the Canaanite city of Bethlehem has held a prominent place in the history of the politics, religion, and archaeology of the Levant region. Best-known for being the cradle of the birth of love and peace, incarnated in Jesus Christ, Bethlehem is holy for Christians, Moslems, and Jews, followers of the three monotheistic religions. Thousands of pilgrims have visited Bethlehem since the fourth century. Historical Christian chronicles cite Bethlehem as one of earliest religious sites, revered since the second century. The history of the town's churches - particularly the Church of the Nativity, one of the oldest in the Christian world and in Palestine – as well as its monasteries and religious literature have attracted the interest of studious researchers.

Bethlehem also has a rich cultural history. The houses in Bethlehem have been destroyed times and again as a result of invasions, wars, and natural disasters; but they were reconstructed and the city has maintained its natural landscape with deep valleys and ravines in the north, east, and south and has preserved its sacred twinning with the holy of holies, Jerusalem. But detailed information on the economic and social life of the city - on the relations between the different segments of the population and on their diverse religious, professional, and family affiliations - is generally lacking. This article aims to present an overview of the major events that took place in Bethlehem in the nineteenth century, under the Ottoman rule, based on accounts and diaries of travelers who visited the city and eye-witnessed critical events. Back when Bethlehem was a small town, located on a hill,



View of Bethlehem from the mountains above David's Well. Photograph by Félix Bonfils.

that looked like a fortress surrounded by olive groves and vineyards, by almond, fig, and pomegranate trees, and by fields of grain, corn, and other crops. Travelers were held in thrall by the beautiful natural landscape of Bethlehem.

Leading up to the era of focus in this article, during the sixteenth century, Bethlehem had prospered like all other cities in Palestine at that time. In the seventeenth century, however, and until Napoleon's invasion of the city at the end of the eighteenth century, the *kasbah* of Bethlehem (a *medina* that is larger than a village and smaller than a city) and its population were adversely affected by a sequence of dramatic events and circumstances that included the tyranny of Ottoman rulers, the forceful imposition of high taxes, gruesome treatment by the authorities, bribery and corruption of authority officials and feudal lords, banditry, and Bedouin invasions. These practices had had a deleterious effect on the population and many had been compelled to leave the city.

In 1806, **Chateaubriand** talks about the topography and agricultural products of Bethlehem. He writes in his travelogue that Bethlehem was an isolated city with houses that were in a miserable condition, also mentioning the dilapidated tower of Saint Paula of which no traces exist today,ⁱ and that the Armenian Church had custody over the Church of the Nativity. When Chateaubriand left the city, he was escorted by six guards armed with daggers and rifles. He lauded the courage of the men of Bethlehem and denigrated the Bedouins who stopped him on his way to Mar Saba Monastery and forced him to pay entry tax.

Ali Bey visited Bethlehem in 1807 and in his travelogue relates his meeting with shepherds who were on their way to Jerusalem to lodge a complaint at the court against shepherds from Hebron who had attacked their cattle and stolen two camels. **Turner** (1819) talks about highwaymen who threatened to attack the monasteries for refusing to pay taxes. Had it not been for the intervention of Jerusalem's ruler, the monasteries of Bethlehem would have



The Old Market, possibly after the tremors of 1905 or the earthquake of 1927.

been pillaged and destroyed. Turner also speaks about crosses made of beads and mother-of-pearl by local craftsmen.

The refusal of Bethlehem's residents to pay unbearable impositions of taxes brought years of disobedience and conflict with the Ottoman Empire. From 1802 to 1803, the *mutassalem* (Ottoman-appointed administrator) of the Jerusalem *sanjak* (district) was Mohammad Al-Marq, a despot who oppressed not only Bethlehem's population but also Christian pilgrims visiting the city. He imposed heavy taxes that burdened the population, and thus the people of Bethlehem revolted and brought their complaints to the governor of the Levant. The imposition of taxes that amounted to ten times of what the population could afford caused the Al-Quds Revolution and from 1825 to 1826 again, the people of Bethlehem rebelled against the Ottoman authorities - which resulted in further difficulties for the *mutasalem* in collecting the taxes. Peasants and farmers - headed by sheikhs from the Bani Malik tribe,

the Abu Gosh family - and the sheikhs of Bethlehem, eventually managed to overthrow both the *mutasalem* and his successor, which caused the governor of Al-Sham (Greater Syria) to order his army to head to Bethlehem and levy the taxes. Fearful of the governor's vengeance and wrath, the population of Bethlehem, the leaders and farmers, took refuge in the monasteries and refused to surrender; whereupon the governor of Al-sham threatened to blow up the monasteries, the monks acted as mediators - and the population was forced to pay taxes as usual. However, no sooner had the governor left the area, when the rebels resumed their disobedience and occupied Jerusalem's citadel, as the community leaders in the city again refused to pay the tithes. This time, the Ottoman authorities subdued the rebels, hitting Jerusalem with artillery from the Mount of Olives.

Taxes played a major role also in conflicts during Egyptian rule. In 1831, the Egyptian forces of Mohammad Ali led by Ibrahim Pasha took control of

Palestine and Syria. Ibrahim Pasha introduced reforms in the administrative system, cancelled some taxes, and engaged the population in the government by appointing local leaders as administrative rulers. On 25 April 1834, he issued orders to recruit one out of five young men for the Ottoman army and sent out instructions to collect all weapons in order to limit the authority of sheikhs and local leaders. Lastly, he imposed new taxes. In the ensuing discontent of the population, village leaders and sheikhs held a meeting and decided to revolt against Ibrahim Pasha and his army and to refuse, again, to pay taxes. The revolution broke out on 28 April 1834. The rebels surrounded Jerusalem and warned the Egyptian guards of the citadel to leave; but the guards refused and a battle ensued that went on for several days. The rebels were victorious, entered Jerusalem, and looted the barracks of the Egyptian army after fierce street fights. When Ibrahim Pasha returned to Jerusalem, the revolution had already spread

A girl from Bethlehem. Photograph by Félix Bonfils.



E. Robinson reports that the number of weapons that Ibrahim Pasha had asked the population of Bethlehem to submit far exceeded the number of weapons people actually had and that, as a result, they were forced to buy additional weapons to hand over to the Pasha, lest they would be imprisoned, banished to Egypt, or would have their property confiscated. Robinson also relates that Ibrahim Pasha ordered before him ten of the elders and notables of Bethlehem – bound in chains – rebuked them, and imposed a fine of one hundred piasters on them. **Tobler** writes that Ibrahim Pasha succeeded in

Hundreds were killed. Aftershocks lasted for ten days. **C. Ritter** relates that the people of Bethlehem suffered much from earthquakes that devastated the city; and **Tobler** writes that many people died as a result of the earthquake when “Bethlehem lost many of its men.”

But Bethlehemites managed to recover their town from hardship. In 1839, **Robinson** wrote that the city of Bethlehem had several narrow entry points, its economy was thriving, and its houses were strong. He added that Bethlehem’s population worked mainly in agriculture, but that they also made



Nativity Square 1895, with view of the old government buildings, saraya, and the Omar Mosque. The old houses were demolished in the 1960s.

quelling the revolution using merciless power. He adds that the population of Bethlehem dropped dramatically as a result of wars, exile, and diseases - the cholera broke out in Bethlehem in 1839.

But Bethlehem suffered not only from man-made destruction. On the morning of 13 May 1834, during the revolution against Ibrahim Pasha, an earthquake hit Palestine and caused severe damage to buildings, houses, churches, and monasteries. The belfry (Al-Rasas) of Bethlehem was entirely destroyed and houses were made unfit for residence.

beads, crosses, and other artifacts from olive wood and mother-of-pearl. “The people of Bethlehem are restless,” Robinson concluded. In 1850, **Spenser A.** expresses astonishment about the quality, solidity, and size of the houses of Bethlehem. And in 1858, **J. Arezzo** describes the people of Bethlehem as “simple, committed to Sunday service, and some of them go barefoot. The women of Bethlehem cover the chests and heads with a scarf, and the men wear a coarse garment.” He adds, “Probably tailors in Bethlehem have

very little work to do.” According to Arezzo, Bethlehem had a school for boys, where they also had their meals, and another school for girls, overseen and funded by the Custodian of the Holy Land. **Guerin** writes that Bethlehem was divided into eight quarters: Al-Farahiyye, Al-Najareh, Al-Anatra, Al-Fawaghreh, Al-Qawawse, Al-Tarajme, Al-Hreizat, and Al-Deir.

When in 1840, after the Egyptian withdrawal, the Ottomans returned, they were impressed by the reforms Egypt had implemented and introduced their own reforms that historically became known as the Ottoman Charitable Organization, or *Islahat (Reforms)*. Furthermore, the Ottoman authorities issued law reforms and edicts that included the Land Act of 1867, the Land Registry Law of 1868, the Provincial Administrative Regulations of 1864, and the Law of Proprietorship for Foreigners of 1868, all of which regulated ownership of land for individuals and the state.

Also, the Ottoman authorities introduced procedures and administrative regulations to the government such as the establishing of local and regional councils and the election of elders councils. In fact, the election of the first council in Bethlehem - consisting of elders from the three religious communities: Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Moslems - took place in 1876. But also in 1876, the Ottoman authorities prohibited the public assemblies that elders had used to hold in the squares that existed in each quarter in order to discuss the matters pertaining to the quarter. Another main development in light of the reforms was that in 1888, Bethlehem became a directorate (*nahiya*) ruled by a director. At that time, Bethlehem comprised the villages of Beit Sahour, Beit Safafa, Beit Jala, Artas, and Sur Baher, as well as the tribes in the suburbs. As municipalities were established in larger cities, the first municipal council in Bethlehem was

formed in 1895 and the first mayor of Bethlehem was Hanna Mansour Abu Khalil, followed in 1899 by the famous Suleiman Jacer who was elected for two consecutive terms.

Following the issuance of the law allowing foreigners to own property, several western religious and civil organizations started to build monasteries, schools, and hospitals. The St. Joseph’s School was founded in 1853; The Salesian School in 1863 and its church in 1877; the Omari Mosque in 1864; the Carmelite Sisters Convent in 1876; the English School in 1886; the French Hospital in 1891; the La Salle Christian School in 1892; the Lutheran Christmas Church in 1898; and the Casa Nova Guesthouse in 1906. The Saraya, or Government House, was renovated in 1897 and included the police station and the headquarters of Bethlehem’s municipality. Furthermore, the Ottoman authorities established a post office in 1899 and constructed new roads in Bethlehem and Hebron. Around 50 vehicles carried passengers and the luggage of merchants to the train station in Bethlehem from where trains commuted to Jerusalem and back.

Looking back to socio-political developments in the middle of the nineteenth century, we notice that the phenomenon of partisanship became stronger and that the villages were traditionally divided into two major organizations that reflected the power of tribes and their elders, the strongest of which were in Hebron (Qais) and in the area of Jerusalem the Yemen. Lack of security on the roads, weak authorities in the countryside, and Bedouin invasions were among the main reasons for the emergence of the tribal system that was characterized by frequent battles and conflicts, also among different followers of Yemen tribes such as the people of Abu Gosh. Count **De Volney** discusses tribal disputes in the Bethlehem area at the end of the nineteenth century

and mentions that around 600 men in Bethlehem were fully armed in order to resist the tyranny and despotism of belligerent villages. He adds that common interests among the people were more important than the religious differences between Christians and Moslems. Mr. Finn, the British consul himself acted as a mediator in one of these disputes.

Disputes, conflicts, and competition have frequently characterized the relations among the various Christian denominations, as each was seeking custody over the holy places and striving to have exclusive rights for the renovation of existing holy sites and the construction of new monasteries and churches. **M. Russel** and **de Vogue** wrote in 1860 about conflicts that took place during Christmas celebrations, relating how the midnight mass on Christmas Eve was cancelled because of a violent fight. In 1869, a fire broke out in the Church of the Nativity and the curtains were burnt, causing serious disputes between Greek Orthodox and Catholic priests as to which party had the right to buy new curtains for the church. In 1873, Greek Orthodox monks attacked Catholic priests, and

both the local authorities and the French Consul had to intervene to put an end to the fight. And in 1877, two conflicts ensued between Armenian and Greek Orthodox priests, one over who would clean the walls of the church and another one over putting a carpet on the floor inside the Church. To regulate relations among the different denominations, eventually a Status Quo System was issued.

Many travelers, including **A. Tristram** (1857), **Munk** (1863), **Qasatli** (1874), **Thomson** (1875), **T. Dumas** (1880), and **Bazelaire** (1894) spoke about the manufacture of religious relics, such as crosses and beads, made by skillful Bethlehem artisans in several workshops and sold to pilgrims and tourists in many souvenir shops. Some merchants displayed their goods on Manger Square in front of the Church of the Nativity and some participated in international exhibits such as the Vienna Exhibit of 1873. The brothers Michael and Gabriel Dabdoub took part in the Chicago Exhibit in 1893, the Handal brothers exhibited in Philadelphia in 1896 and in Saint Luis in 1904, and Suleiman Jacir and partners in Paris in 1913. Moreover, commercial stores

A family wedding in front of the Church of the Nativity. Photograph believed to be taken in the 1940s.



Rachel's Tomb, at some time between 1898 and 1905.

were opened by people from Bethlehem in European cities such as Paris, Rome, and New York, with some going as far as the Philippines.

When the political situation had stabilized and the city of Bethlehem showed signs of prosperity, people started to move outside the historical boundaries of the old city, first towards the Ras Fteis road (today Star Street) to the south, then also to the north and east. Families who were successful in making and trading religious relics left to the US and Europe to do business, among them the Dabdoub, Handal, Jacir, Michael, Jaar, and Abu Khalil families. Many did well and became wealthy; and some returned to Bethlehem for investment, building extravagant houses and palaces.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Church of the Nativity and monasteries were the only large buildings that existed. When the city expanded, some people renovated and expanded their houses. Families such as the Ghazawi, Sabbagh, and

Qattan families built and expanded their large houses inside and some built outside the old city, which changed the urban landscape. The following palaces have become landmarks around Bethlehem: the Saleh Giacaman Palace, 1908; Hermas Sons Palace, 1912; the Suleiman Handal palace, 1912; the Jacir Palace built in 1914; and the Anton Jaar Palace, 1914.

Scholch talks about prosperity in Bethlehem late in the nineteenth century, explaining that Bethlehem was constantly changing and developing as a result of European influx, the marketing of religious goods, construction activities, and the arrival of pilgrims and tourists to the city. According to **Tobler**, at the end of the 1840s, Bethlehem had 400 craftsmen who made beads, crosses, and other souvenir items, while **Lortet** says there were 500 craftsmen. In 1894, Schloch cites Palmer in the following categorization of professions in Bethlehem:

Bethlehem was foretold that it would be great among the nations and it has

Profession	Number of Professionals in 1894	Ratio
Farming	300	27%
Constructors	333	30%
Craftsmen	213	19%
Services and Trade	256	23%
Food Producers	11	1%

proven so, if not in size, in the wealth of its history and culture. Bethlehem will proceed as a milestone on the road to a culture of peace in Palestine.

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and administrative staff at Bethlehem University before being appointed director general of the first Palestinian Ministry of higher Education and then director general of Bethlehem's Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Mr Shokeh is currently also working to archive electronically the material in the archives of the Bethlehem Municipality. He has published several social historical books and articles, most notably History of Bethlehem during the Ottoman Period (1517-1917); in November 2015 his new book A Tour in Battir Village was published.

¹ At the time of Saint Jerome, Paula was a wealthy woman who built this tower so she could have a place to live and pray near the birthplace of Jesus, since at that time women were not allowed to live in monasteries.

The market on Nativity Square at the end of the nineteenth century.

