

## Revisiting Bethlehem to Find God's Heart in History

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Fourteen years ago the “Holiday Season” took on a new meaning for me. I visited Bethlehem just before Christmas in 2003 to participate in a Global Peace rally called, [“Heart to Heart for Peace in the Middle East”](#). Ever since then I’ve thought differently about Jesus’ birth, life and death.

The passing on of cultural traditions has a way of sugar coating reality, and I’m not placing judgment on that. But I’m a realist, so understanding harsh realities gives depth to my beliefs. I went into the deep cavern where Mary lay on the stone cold ground to give birth to Jesus. Having given birth to 3 children myself with the aid of modern comforts, the stark roughness of the drafty underground stable was jarring to my senses. It made the Nativity scenes we’re so familiar with today look comfortable.



### **A Very Different Light**

I walked the streets of Jerusalem, and went to Galilee and other regions on a bus tour. I contemplated Mary’s pre-birth donkey journey to Bethlehem as I viewed the severe landscape from the bus window. Our group entered a heavily guarded Palestine with special diplomatic permission. Now, then, and in Jesus time, the middle east has been shrouded in conflict.

Amidst the bomb tattered buildings and Palestinian military presence there was an occasional window with Christmas lights or a Santa decoration. It was so out of place that it was touching. Faith held

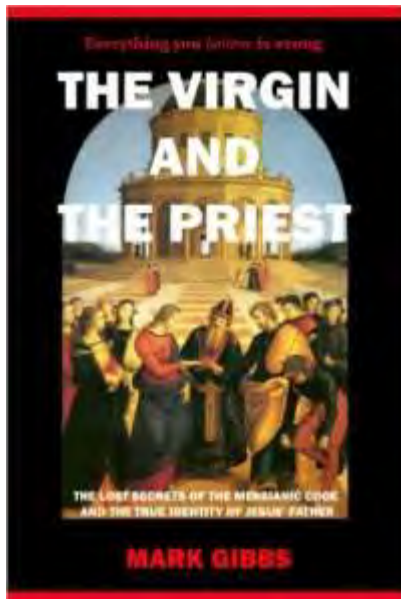
captive within the conflict of politics and religion—a recurring human theme.

However, faith seems inextinguishable because it's light continues to appear beyond time, place, circumstance and belief systems.

### **The Silent Teacher**

It's a pity we don't learn from the past because it has much to teach us. History is the silent instructor that waits to be found. It's wisdom doesn't come knocking on the door, but remains for us to seek it. While we readily soak up traditions and culture without a second thought, how often do we challenge our own understanding?

Two books I've read in the past few years opened the doors of Biblical and religious history for me. One is called [“Before Bethlehem”](#), and the other is [“The Virgin and the Priest”](#) (linked to reviews). I recommend these books as often as I can because they offer new insight into the life and times of Jesus. Regardless of your brand of theology or worldview, discovering small historical facts can broaden your understanding and deepen your faith—as long as you're not afraid of new ideas.



### **Standing on History**

Jesus brought new ideas. He stood on the foundation of Jewish history, but he trampled the religion and culture of the time because it was passing on false beliefs. Jesus birth was a gift to humankind—that we might know God's love more deeply. Yet he was scorned, beaten and crucified because his new ideas threatened the status quo.

Religion is meant to be a doorway for spiritual development, but it's problematic. When religion becomes an institution it's doors close. It creates thought boundaries for the fearful, and barriers to spiritual development for a naive follower. However, those who are brave of heart and spirit can transcend the political positioning that happens in almost every organization by looking at history.

We must be careful not to hold an organization or institution responsible for our personal belief system. Every person is responsible for their own spiritual growth, on the foundation of their

own cultural and historical roots, and their own conscience. There are many paths to restoration because it's complicated.

### **The Everlasting Love from Bethlehem**

As a lifelong student of religion and spirituality, I find it essential to look for the heart of God in every person, place and experience I encounter. To be open to new insights and to be uninhibited by what other people think. I seek only to inherit and share as much of God's heart as I can in my lifetime. Bethlehem, and these books, deepened my compassion for God and others.

God's heart, and the divinity of the true human heart, have a way of persisting beyond the chaos and conflict of politics and religion. History is messy, ugly, and painful—but God can be found there. The present moment may also be uncomfortable, sad, and confusing; but God can also be found here and now. God is the absolute and everlasting love that can't be extinguished. We just have to look more deeply to find it.