

# Navigating Geopolitical Barriers: Religious Tourism in Bethlehem

*Lecture: 03-01 Navigating Geopolitical Barriers: Religious Tourism in Bethlehem  
Under Checkpoint Closures and Settlement Expansion | Israel 2026*

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## SITE OVERVIEW

**Location:** Bethlehem (modern name), including surrounding areas such as the Hinnom Valley, Kidron Valley, Shepherd's Fields, and Area A of the Palestinian Authority

**Date of Visit:** On or around 2026-02-28 (the Sunday immediately preceding the content creation date of 2026-03-01), inferred from Speaker 4's remark "Because it's Sunday" and contextual references to closures

**Biblical References:** None cited with specific chapter and verse during this recording segment; implicit references include:

- Shepherd's Fields (Luke 2:8–20, implied by context)
- Gehenna/Hinnom Valley (referenced in discussion of hell theology; cf. Matthew 5:22, 18:9, Mark 9:43–48, broadly)

## HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

**Hinnom Valley (HINNOM):** Dr. Schilling references this valley in connection with the traditional Via Dolorosa, asserting that the traditional route is incorrect if the historically accurate understanding of the site is accepted. (Flagged as Dr. Schilling's interpretive position; speculative without further sourcing)

**Kidron Valley (KIDRON):** Mentioned briefly for geographical orientation alongside the Hinnom Valley.

**Shepherd's Fields:** Dr. Schilling notes that he previously brought tour groups to a specific shepherd's field featuring caves with rocks covering doorways — consistent with ancient pastoral shelter practices — but access has since been revoked. The area has since been built over with residential housing.

**1948 Israeli Statehood:** Speaker 3 provides a lay explanation of post-1948 land settlement dynamics, noting that Israel's declaration of a homeland for all Jews prompted large-scale Jewish immigration and subsequent land claims — including

in areas where Palestinians held prior settlement rights. This is offered as contextual background for the contemporary Palestinian situation. (Flagged: simplified lay summary; not peer-reviewed historical analysis)

**Bethlehem:** Currently under the jurisdiction of the Palestinian Authority. Noted as undergoing significant renovation and construction activity.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

**Shepherd's Fields caves:** Dr. Schilling references caves with stone-covered doorways near Bethlehem that were previously accessible for tours. These have since been built over, eliminating direct physical access to the site.

**Hinnom Valley:** Referenced as the geographical origin of hell (Gehenna) theology — the valley's physical features (as a refuse/burning site) are cited as the material basis for later eschatological language.

No formal excavation reports, artifact finds, or stratigraphic data were discussed in this segment.

## DR. SCHILLING'S KEY POINTS

**Via Dolorosa critique:** Dr. Schilling states he is “convinced” that if the correct geographical understanding of the relevant site (implied: the Praetorium location) is accepted, then the traditional Via Dolorosa route through Jerusalem is incorrect. (Flagged as Dr. Schilling's interpretive argument; speculative without supporting citation in this recording)

**Hinnom Valley and hell theology:** Dr. Schilling (and Speaker 3 elaborating) note that some scholars interpret New Testament references to hell (Gehenna) as metaphorical allusions to the Hinnom Valley — a physical trash-burning site — rather than a literal eschatological place. Speaker 3 notes this interpretive move did not emerge until approximately 600 years after Jesus, contextualizing it as a later theological development rather than the original intent. Dr. Schilling does not explicitly endorse or reject this reinterpretation in the transcript; Speaker 3 frames it critically.

**Access restrictions:** Dr. Schilling notes that security measures and checkpoint closures — described as intensified following an unspecified recent attack — have significantly altered standard tour routing through the Bethlehem area, including closure of the main gate and Beth Sauror on the east side.

**Area A signage:** Dr. Schilling directs the group's attention to red warning signs prohibiting Israeli citizens from entering Area A of the Palestinian Authority, noting these are explained in his field guide alongside a map of the separation wall and license plate color-coding by zone.

**Itinerary:** Lunch at Abu Ali restaurant in Bethlehem (noted for fresh lamb slaughtered and served same day), followed by a gift shop visit, then the Church of the Nativity area and Shepherd's Field on the return route.

## **GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT**

Hinnom Valley runs toward the sea (direction noted by Dr. Schilling)

Kidron Valley is distinct from and situated alongside the Hinnom Valley; both flank Jerusalem

Bethlehem is visible from the surrounding road at roughly the two o'clock position; the main entrance through the separation wall was closed, requiring a detour around the left side

Shepherd's Fields lie in front of the approach road to Bethlehem; formerly open pastoral land with visible cave structures, now largely covered by residential development

Beth Sauror is located on the east side of Bethlehem

Area A (Palestinian Authority full civil and security control) is demarcated by prominent red warning signs; the group entered via an alternate checkpoint route

Separation wall: Dr. Schilling references a map in his field guide detailing the wall's routing

## **QUOTABLE MOMENTS**

"If that in fact is the correct idea, which I am convinced it is, then the traditional Via Dolorosa is wrong." — Dr. Schilling, on site location and route interpretation

"They slaughter the lamb in the morning and serve it for lunch and dinner, so it's fresh meat." — Dr. Schilling, on Abu Ali restaurant, Bethlehem

"It's kind of funny that they're selling local beer and local wine in Palestine because alcohol is forbidden in the Muslim faith." — Dr. Schilling, observational aside on cultural context

"Bethlehem is under the authority of the Palestinian Authority, so these policemen work for the Palestinian Authority." — Dr. Schilling, clarifying political jurisdiction

## **PERSONAL NOTES**

Follow-up needed: Identify the specific scholarly basis for Dr. Schilling's claim that the traditional Via Dolorosa is incorrect; which alternative Praetorium location is he referencing (Herod's Palace vs. Antonia Fortress debate)?

Follow-up needed: Source the claim made by Speaker 3 that Gehenna-as-trash-heap theology emerged "600 years after Jesus" — this figure warrants verification

Follow-up needed: Obtain Dr. Schilling's field guide for the Areas A/B/C map and license plate color-code reference, as these were cited but not described in full

Note: Much of this recording consists of informal group conversation, logistical commentary, and off-topic exchanges. Academic content is interspersed and limited in this segment. A more structured lecture setting would yield denser notes.