

**MANAGEMENT OF RELIGIOUS TOURISM IN THE BAPTISM SITE
JORDAN-SOUTH LEVANT**

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Keywords:*Management**Tourism**Excavations**Byzantines**Realign***Abstract:**

This study attempts to present and assess, the positive and negative impact of tourism activities and services on the cultural significance of the site, taking into consideration the area status and the site's particularity and capacities. This will be achieved through a general understanding of why the baptism archaeological site should be preserved, by evaluating its cultural significance, the existing conditions, defining the causes of deterioration and threats (natural and human), and understanding how the cultural significance and the attraction factors of the baptism site, should guide and direct the management plan.

1. Introduction

Religious tourism is one of the traditional types of tourism and is defined as visiting holy places for pilgrimage and religious issues as well as learning about the religion of a group or a country [1]. It is related to Archaeological tourism as it depends on archaeological remains [2]. The baptism site was one of the major pilgrimage destinations on the route pilgrims from Jerusalem to Mount Nebo passing through Jericho and other sites. It is a religious-based visitor attraction that is not only characterized by its buildings that were built for religious purposes and now attracting visitors, but also by the sacred Jordan River and Elijah's hill which witnessed several religious incidents. It is the site that offers a spiritual experience to pilgrims and visitors. Religiously, the baptism site is the one and only place in the holy land that witnessed prophets like John the Baptist and Jesus Christ [3].

2. Methodology

In the New Testament, two sites known as Bethany are mentioned in several passages. One is on the west of the river and the other is on the east. Bethany of the west bank is the home of Lazarus and Mary as comes in the New Testament [4] on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives. It is located near Jerusalem. In another passage in the New Testament, it is stated that Bethany is 3 km from Jerusalem "Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off" [5]. However, the one on the east bank was distinguished from that one on the west bank by calling it Bethany beyond the Jordan meaning on the other side of the River, and describing Jesus walking to it by "crossed the Jordan", especially in the Arabic versions of the New Testament. It is in the New Testament [6] where the Jordan is only stated, talking about the coming of Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan and his baptism there.

Saint John was baptized in several places as mentioned in particular passages in the New Testament. In John 10: 40 beyond the Jordan is described as the place where Saint John was first baptized indicating one or more other places where John was baptized later on. However, the major event that is the baptism of Jesus Christ is in Bethany on the east bank (*The Jordanian Bethany today*). This study is based on the data derived from a review of the written documents and the popular press from the site development projects and the cultural heritage, tourism, and urban development project. A short periods of fieldwork during which we visited the various sites and engaged in quantitative and qualitative observation

3. Names of the Baptism Site

The baptism Site was given many names, known from the New Testaments and the Byzantine texts:

- “Bethabara” is the name of the site as mentioned in the Old Testament Judges 7:24-25. Origen (185-254 AD) translates the name to “house of preparation” that is the site as the place where John the Baptist prepared people for the coming of Jesus Christ [7].
- “Bethany beyond the Jordan” as mentioned in the New Testament as in John 1:28 and referring to the place where John the Baptist used to baptize and beyond the Jordan refers to the east bank of the Jordan River. In the New Testament (John 10:40) “Beyond the Jordan” is the place where John the Baptist used to baptize and to where Jesus Christ went after he crossed the river.
- “Saphsaphas” is one of the ancient names of the baptism site. This name is depicted on the Madaba mosaic map of the Holy Land that goes back to the 6th century AD. The map labels it as 'Ainon where now is Saphsaphas' [8]. Thus, this name was given to the site in the Byzantine period after the word Saphsaph in Arabic that means the willow tree.

- Baptism site was also known as “Saint Elijah’s Hill” that is “Jabal Mar Elias” in Arabic. This name was given to it for its being the place from where Saint Elijah ascended into heaven.
- “Al-Kharrar Hill” or “Tall Al-Kharrar” in Arabic is the modern name of this major Holy site^(a), fig. (1).
- “Al-Maghtas” is the modern Arabic word that means the baptism site. It is the common name used by the Jordanians and the Arabic references that talk about the site.

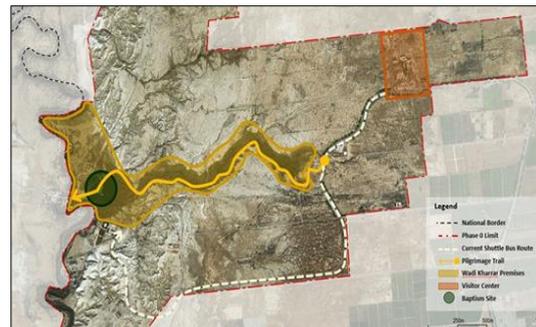


Figure (1) Shows Wadi Al-Kharrar

4. Results

Through history of surveys and excavations; the baptism site was surveyed for the first time during East of Jordan Valley survey, conducted by Mu’awiya Ibrahim, James Sauer and Khair Yassine in 1975 mosaics & architectural remains were observed. The site was dated to the early roman, late roman, early byzantine and late byzantine periods. According to JADIS and the surveys, the baptism site was given the number 201 [9]. Department of Antiquities team under direction of Mohammad Waheeb and his team depended on the Gospels, pilgrims’, explorers and travelers’ accounts that visited the area in suggesting the location of the baptism site of Jesus Christ north of the Dead sea and on the east bank of the Jordan River in particular [10]. Archaeological fieldworks were conducted by department of antiquities team headed by Mohammad Waheeb. Field works took place in Ghor Al-Kafrein including Wadi Al-Kharrar, Wadi Al-Kafrein, Wadi Rum and Wadi Gharaba. In 1995 and 1996 surveys and preliminary excav-

ations took place in the area between the Jordan River in the west and Al-Rama and Al-Kafrein in the east. The concentration was on Al-Kafrein, Al-Rama and Gharaba Wadis. The surveys located more than 21 archaeological sites scattered over 2 km² dated back to the following periods:

- *Chalcolithic-Early Bronze Ages (3300-2300 BC)*
- *Iron Age I-II (1200-918 BC)*
- *Early to Late Roman Periods (1st-4th century AD)*
- *Early to Late Byzantine Periods (4th century-636 AD)*
- *Islamic Period (641-750 AD) [11].*

The survey in Wadi Al-Kharrar that extended from the Jordan River to Wadi Gharaba located several Byzantine sites, tab. (1). Surveys and test soundings revealed the fact that the region was successively inhabited and a number of sites were located during the in 1996-1997 fieldworks, tab. (2). In March, 1997 an emergency survey and systematic excavations in the area were conducted by a team from the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities of Jordan headed by Mohammad Waheeb [12,13]. The archaeological works were also supported by The Authority of the Jordan Valley. Surveys were the major activities in this season and covered the surroundings of the baptism site and resulted in several archaeological sites, fig. (2). The results were finding well-dressed stones that indicated to an archaeological site as well as a water cistern made of sandstones [14]. The second season in 1998, detailed excavations uncovered major remains. The remains of three churches, of which one located near the river and has significant mosaic floors and marble floors. Three caves were identified. Two of them are near the River on its east side. At end of 1998 the third season took place and resulted in finding the Church of John the Baptist east of the river. Documentation of baptism site continued & during the 2015 the site was listed as a World List Heritage Site. It is good to add that geophysical surveys were done in June 1998

at Tall Al-Kharrar by the Geophysics Division of the Natural Resources Authority of Jordan. The aim was to map and locate the buried structures and artifacts and to define the places to carry out excavations and finally to evaluate the use of geophysics in archaeology for the study of history [15]. In the fourth season in 1999, many archaeological sites near the River and in Wadi Al-Kharrar and 10 other sites on the sides of Wadi Gharaba were found. Referring to the archaeological fieldworks in Wadi AL-Kharrar, the area bordered by the River Jordan to the west and the two villages of Al-Kafrein and Ar-Ramah to the east, resulted in finding remains of Churches, water installations, caves and other buildings that go back to the Roman and Byzantine periods [16,17]. The buildings found in Wadi Al-Kharrar and on the northern shore of the Dead Sea are involved in the historical and religious records. Magnetic and resistivity geophysical surveys at Tall Al-Kharrar took place by the Geophysics Division of the Natural Resources Authority of Jordan [18]. The focus in this study is the Roman and Byzantine sites in the Wadi and its vicinity. Stressing on the point that the area witnessed the most remarkable human occupation during these periods of history. Thus, it is important to mention that the survey resulted in finding two Roman sites and eight Byzantine sites [19]. Similarly to Jerusalem and Jericho, the area of Wadi Al-Kharrar is involved in the life of Jesus Christ. After his baptism in on the eastern side of Jordan River, fig. (1), the Holy Trinity appeared as mentioned in the New Testament Matthew 3: 16-17. Then Jesus went to the wilderness and stayed for 40 days for temptation as comes in the New Testament. It was in the Byzantine period when the baptism Site was known to be on the east bank of the River north of the Dead Sea, something known from the Madaba mosaic map, the visits of pilgrims and their accounts as well as the commemorating structures, and the pottery sherds found in the site that most of them are dated to the Byzantine period. It is good to mention that Madaba

mosaic map serves as floor of the church of Saint George that was built in 1896 over the remains of a 560 CE Byzantine church [20]. After the Byzantine period, before the rediscovery of the baptism site in Jordan and before uncovering the archaeological evidence, Christians used to baptize on the west bank, directly across the River, at Qasr el-Yahud (Jericho). The baptism site is one of many religious sites in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The historical and religious incidents that took place at this part of the Holy land make it one of the major religious sites in Jordan and the entire world. Large numbers of people attended the ceremony held at the

site after its rediscovery, fig. (3). Interest in the baptism site started in 1996 when the Jordanian team with direct support of Department of Antiquities started archaeological survey on the eastern side of Jordan River, to protect the archaeological sites along Wadi Al-Kharrar from direct and indirect threats of destruction caused by human and natural factor. Limited excavations conducted in selected locations during 1997 revealed the presence of more than 10 archaeological sites scattered in the area. The Significance of the finds was properly understood by the team and early schemes were submitted to develop the site as a tourist destination.

Table (1) Byzantine sites located in the 1995-1996 survey

Site	Description
Site 1: The Baptism Site	Byzantine pottery sherds on the surface.
Site 2: Al-Zor 1	Byzantine pottery sherds were found. Parts of the site are buried.
Site 3: Al-Zor 2	Walls, floors, pillars.
Site 5: Al-Kharrar 1	Byzantine pottery sherds, mosaic tesserae were observed. Well-dressed sandstone scattered on the surface. Archaeological remains.
Site 10: Starts from Wadi Al-Kharrar to Wadi Gharaba	Byzantine pottery sherds of water pipes.
Site 11: Gharaba 1	Medium sized water pool on the southern edge of Wadi Gharaba.
Site 12: Gharaba 2	Byzantine and Umayyad pottery sherds. Remains of foundations.
Site 13: Gharaba 3	Walls. Byzantine and Umayyad pottery sherds. Remains of stone foundations of a 500 m long channel that held water from Wadi Gharaba to the pool in site 11.
Site 14: Gharaba 4	Byzantine and Umayyad pottery sherds.
Site 16: Gharaba 6 (Sand hill on the northern edge of Wadi Gharaba)	Wall foundations on the surface and subsurface. Byzantine pottery sherds. Walls built of small stones and that form a rectangular structure (20x40m). Byzantine pottery sherds. It is a modern graveyard.
Site 19: Al-Kafrein graveyard (on the northern edge of Wadi Al-Kafrein)	Well-dressed and well-cut sandstones. Roman and Byzantine pottery sherds.
Site 20: Livias or Tall Al-Rama (500 m south of Wadi Al-Rama)	Iron Age II; Roman, Byzantine, Umayyad, Ayyubi, and Mamluki pottery sherds
Site 21: Tall Al-Kafrein or Tall Al-Sharab (north of Wadi Al-Kafrein)	Walls, foundations remains. Iron Age II and Byzantine pottery sherds.

Table (2) Successive settlement in Ghor Al-Kafrein [13]

Site	Chronological period
Um Hthr near Al-Kafrein Dam	Chalcolithic Period
Tall AL-Sadd West	Early Bronze Age
Tall Al-Suwwan	Iron Age
Tall Al-Sadd	Hellenistic and Roman Periods
The Baptism Site in Wadi Al-Kharrar	Roman, Byzantine and Islamic Periods

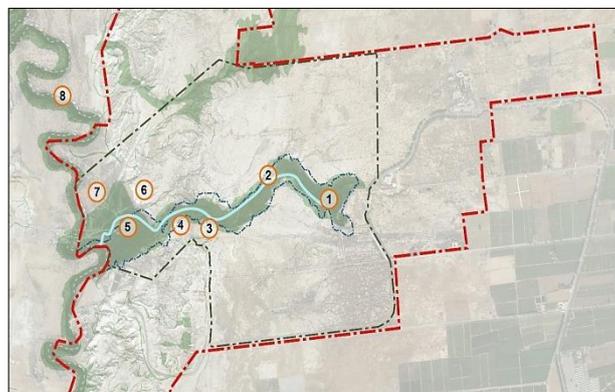


Figure (2) Shows archaeological Features of the Site (After: Waheeb, 1998 [14])

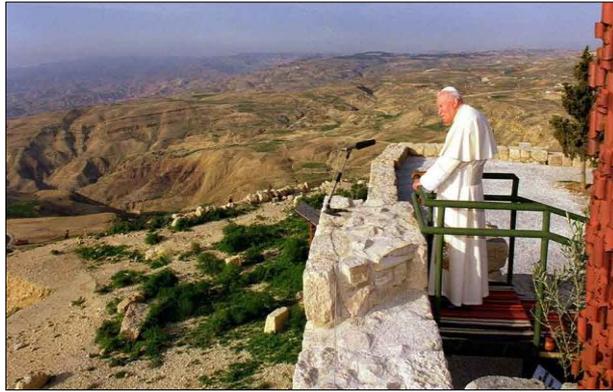


Figure (3) Shows pope John Paul II overlooking Mount Nebo

5. Discussion

The management plan specifies the total number of visitors who can visit the baptism site at one time as 200. It also divides the visitor route into four stopovers: Tall al-Kharar; the baptism pools; the Byzantine church near the Jordan River and the Jordan River, with an estimated 40 people at each stopover at one time [21]. However, the baptism attractions and significance attract visitors in unexpectedly high numbers for religious celebrations. This may cause a destructive impact on the cultural and religious environment of the baptism archaeological site, the water resources, the vegetation, the wildlife and bird watching, the landscape and even on the quality of the visitor experience. Baptism site/Bethany beyond the Jordan development plan includes paths, roads, shelters, limited buildings, facilities, on-site used traditional designs, instead of new designs. The following facilities were constructed in Bethany beyond the Jordan as follow:

- 1) Visitor centre including:
 - a) *Guesthouse*
 - b) *Ticket office*
 - c) *Five star restaurant*
 - d) *Three star fast food outlet*
 - e) *Souvenir shops*
 - f) *A heliport*
 - g) *Separated building for (VIP) arrivals.*
- 2) Other facilities on-site as follow:
 - a) *Sites to carrying out baptism*
 - b) *Waste water treatment plant*
 - c) *R.O unit*
 - d) *Building 2-view point courtyard.*

A visit to the baptism site gives the chance to see the place where many religious events that are mentioned in the New Testament happened. In addition to that it enables the visitors to see churches, water installations, baptismal pools, cisterns, colored mosaic floors, stone piles and caves in one site. Moreover, baptism at the site can be held. It is also interesting to add that Christians baptize in the Jordan River since a long time until now, fig. (4). Visitor circulation starts from the visitor centre to the Jordan River and so includes visiting *Tall Al-Kharar*, *Wadi Al-Kharar*, the Pilgrims station, John the Baptist spring, the Byzantine structural complex, caves, John the Baptist church, site of Saint Mary of Egypt and the Jordan river.



Figure (4) Shows the small church with its staircase leading down to the water of Jordan River

5.1. Water facilities

Many water installations, as well as a place where monks lived and provided pilgrims with facilities at the edge of Wadi Al-Kharar on their way to Tall Al-Kharar were found. In addition to that, the team finds out the Saphsaph spring.

5.2. Site for events & baptismal ceremonies

Places with religious significance are also revered pilgrim places. Tourism and religion are historically related through the institution of pilgrimage, from which later the phenomenon of religious tourism emerged. The baptism site was one of the major pilgrimage destinations on the pilgrim route from Jerusalem to Mount Nebo, passing through Jericho and other sites. When baptismal ceremonies and events occurred at the site, the area became the centre of attention. However, the archaeological finds and ruins, especially the pottery shards that are dated to the late Byzantine era, draw the attention to the idea of continuity (some other pottery shards are dated to the eighth century AD. This may indicate that there was civic continuity at the site and that the site had been in use until the recent past [22]. Nowadays, two kinds of contemporary uses take place at the baptism site: **1)** The regular use of the archaeological site of baptism by navigating through the site with a guide helping to interpret the historic, religious and environmental site values. **2)** Special events that have been affiliated with the baptism archaeological site, such as the day-long baptismal ceremonies which started in January and March 2000. Statistics show that about 20,000 visitors attended a ceremony held at the site after its rediscovery when the site was listed by the Vatican as an official pilgrimage site in Jordan in 2000. More than 10,000 visitors attended the ceremony held at the site in January 2009. In conclusion, the baptism archaeological site of Bethany beyond Jordan, is still serving—in some cases—the purpose for which it was designed for, as a place of gathering of ritual events and baptismal ceremonies.

5.3. Supporting attractions

During the construction phase between 1996-2002, the following facilities were completed fig. (2). The John the Baptist Research Centre was established. A visitor centre which includes a guesthouse, ticket office, five-star restaurant, three- star fast

food outlet, souvenir shops (souk), a heliport with separate building for VIP arrivals and an electricity generator. The visitor centre is approx. 700 m from the first main archaeological site (*Elijha's Hill*) and is linked by small roads as well as footpaths. Several shelters, footpaths, wooden staircases, sites for carrying out baptism and two viewing-point courtyards, a water tank, a (distant) wastewater treatment facility and landscaped parking for an estimated 32 coaches and around 80 private vehicles were constructed to protect both the archaeological remains and visitors.

5.4. Integrated management plan

Integrated management plan includes:

- 1)** Conservation plans for religious/historic sites.
- 2)** Plan for environmental improvement.
- 3)** Regulations for architectural design, techniques and materials.
- 4)** Field guide for the protection and preservation of the site to educate people before and during events and festivals

5.5. Religious tourism and Christian pilgrimage destinations in Jordan

Jordan includes many historical sites linked to the Christian pilgrimage in the region as Mekawer (Machaerus), Mount Nebo, Sanctuary of our lady of the Mount, and Mar Elias [23]. In the historical visit of His Holiness late Pope John Paul II, in 2000 the baptism Site was declared by His Holiness as one of the five sites within Jordan that can be considered Christian pilgrimage destinations, as they have witnessed significant historical events, fig. (5) [24]. Since then, the Jordanian government started to pay great attention to supporting Christian religious tourism, where it was clear to what extent the impact of this type of tourism in creating a high benefit for the development of sustainable tourism and the connection between environmental impacts and sustainability issues. Approx. 80% of the baptism Site visitors are international visitors; followed by an equal percentage of Arab and local visitors, 10% each, fig. (6). The economic and political developments in the region clearly indicate that

Jordan's tourism future is strongly linked to religious tourism. It is important to find an integrated tourism product that meets the needs of Christian pilgrims as Bader suggested in his Ph.D. by Creating trails in the five pilgrimage sites connect them together to make them more accessible to tourists who want to see all the sites in a timely and efficient manner [25].

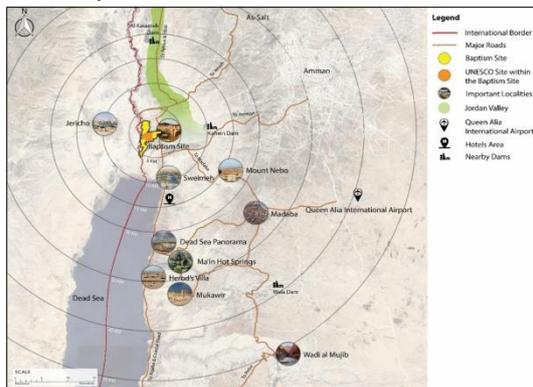


Figure (5) Shows Christian pilgrimage in Jordan

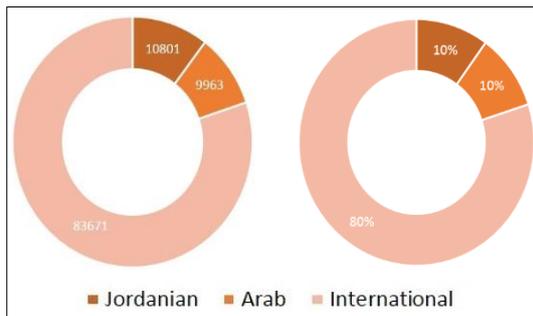


Figure (6) Shows baptism site visitors / 2017

6. Conclusion

Baptism site requires a deep understanding and evaluation not only of outstanding universal value (OUV) and of the cultural significance and attraction factors of the site (respect for the diversity of the natural, cultural, spiritual, and religious values of the whole site) but also a respect for the local community and the diversity of the visitors. The baptism site become one of the most popular stops on the regional Holy Land tourism circuit, as it has the capability of linking to its surrounding religious and eco-sites. However, the most important key strength for the baptism site should not only rely on the 15 discovered archaeological sites, but on the documentation, conservation, and restoration work presently being undertaken within the rich context of the natural site. The site should also be developed with an aim to improve the environs of the archaeological sites and promote them as an eco-tourism destination. An integrated management plan should explore

and deal with the particularity of this eco-religious site, in cooperation with the local authorities for the development of the tourist infrastructure to achieve the overall goal of comprehensive religious and eco-tourism. The main components for the assessment of the baptism archaeological site should also highlight issues of monitoring and re-assessment and analysis of the visitation characteristics of the site, besides the issues of conservation, restoration and maintenance, interpretation and presentation, and promotion and marketing. Taking into consideration the protected area status in relation to the site's capacities, and to avoid any alteration of the physical and natural environment of the site to achieve a "sustainable eco-site", enhanced law enforcement and regulation are required to clarify the role of each authority concerning the activities of the tourism sector, particularly in terms of respect of the authenticity of the site, as both an archaeological, spiritual and natural park and as potentially a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In other words, in terms of a balance between the assets and needs of the site, the needs of the visitors, and the local community, the following main issues are urgently needed for the Jesus baptism site: Historic and Cultural Trails, Eco Trails, Religious Trails and Leveraging the existing natural assets and reserves in the Baptism Site.

Endnotes

- (a) The authors are thankful to the MOTA to allowed them to use the photos in this study

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