

*Original article***NEITHER BETHANY NOR BETHABARA BUT BETHANY BEYOND JORDAN
SITE OF JESUS BAPTISM**

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Abstract:

This study investigates Bethany beyond the Jordan, presently recognized as the site of Jesus' Baptism, and analyzes the scholarly debate surrounding the precise location of the baptism from the early Roman period through the late Byzantine era. Historical records from early pilgrims and travelers consistently identify Bethany beyond the Jordan as the traditional place of baptism. However, recent archaeological excavations within this area and its surroundings have uncovered substantial new evidence, including the remains of churches and associated religious structures, offering deeper insight into its historical significance. The main objective of this research is to refine the understanding of the actual geographical setting of Bethany, traditionally associated with the baptism of Christ. The findings suggest that both Bethabara and Bethany beyond the Jordan correspond to two distinct yet related locations situated east of Jerusalem and the Jordan River, respectively. This dual identification reflects the historical complexity of early Christian topography and textual references.

1. Introduction

Bethany Name of a town located in the vicinity of Jerusalem the hometown of Lazarus (John 11.8). Also, Bethany "Beyond the Jordan" is a place where John baptized and was questioned by envoys from Jerusalem concerning his self-claims (John 1:19-28/ 10:40), it seems we have two places called Bethany the first located east Jerusalem while the second is called Bethany beyond the Jordan and located east of Jordan River in Ghor el-kafrein opposite Jericho and not far away from the Dead Sea. The question raised is why Bethany was called Bethabara by some scholars as a third name for Baptism site? & where is this place? According to Madaba mosaic map dated 5-6th century A.D a place called Bethabara was located on the west bank of the Jordan River close to the point where Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea, (Avi-yonah 1952). These three names formed a hazy picture about the real name of site of Jesus Baptism near Jordan River. After field operations of survey, excavations, and assessment since 1996 till nowadays many things changed and a lot of information's was gained through particularly extensive excavations giving more data, and new evidence from pilgrims and travelers description shed lighter on this issue, as well as the Holy Text & results of lab analysis from recent archaeological discoveries made by the author and his team between 1996-2002.

2. Methodology

The procedure concentrates on documenting the discovered archaeological sites and its associated structures in Bethany

beyond Jordan through Wadi Khadar, and the surrounding area on the eastern part of Jordan River, also comprehensive discussion report on different names for the site through history and its symbolism given by early travelers and historians. Focusing also on some details mentioned by Origen and other early travelers. The sites will be registered, mapped, and properly dated and evaluated. The following activities will be conducted as follow:

- 1) Jordan antiquities database and information system (JADIS or MEGA) searching.
- 2) Library searching/Department of Antiquities of Jordan (DAJ)/American Centre of Oriental Research (ACOR)/British Council for Research in Levant (BCRL).
- 3) Field visits to the proposed areas.
- 4) Filed study.
- 5) Field documentation.
- 6) Data analysis and report preparation.

2.1. Bethany beyond Jordan & Bethabara

Origen is the first scholar who adopted this name (Bethabara), after his visit to the holy land, reported that he investigated the area beyond the Jordan, aiming to find the place named in the gospels as Bethany beyond the Jordan, where Jesus was Baptized, but failed to find any remain of a town with this name on the eastern side of Jordan River. He concluded that the text of (John 1:28) should read Bethabara instead of Bethany, a place pointed out to him on the west bank of Jordan River. Origen, 1896, (A.D. 185-254) in his commentary on John 1:28, admits

that the reading “Bethany” is found in almost all the manuscripts, but is convinced that the reading should be Bethabara. In support of this contention, he argues that Bethany, the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (Jn. 11: 1, 5), is near Jerusalem, not the Jordan River. In addition, he declares that there is no other place by the name of Bethany in the vicinity of the Jordan River, fig. (1).

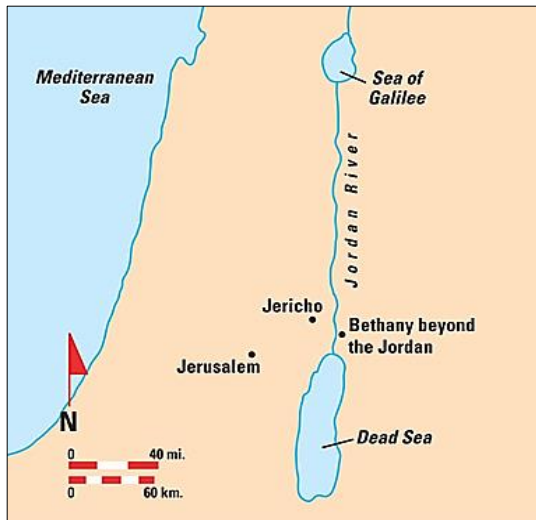


Figure (1) the location of Bethany beyond Jordan [1]

It seems that only Bethany he knew was the hometown of Lazarus, Martha and Mary near Jerusalem, around 3 km east slopes of the Mount of Olives. The modern town at this site is called by locals and Arabs El-Aziriyeh. While Bethabara should be located near the western bank of the river to replace the missing town of Bethany beyond Jordan. The second question raised here is why Origen adopted this name (Bethabara)? to answer this question, we should discuss the reasons which he based on during his investigations. First it seems he visited the area beyond the Jordan which means the area located east of Jordan River, includes Livia's, Rama, Kafrein ... etc. but we have no clear reference or information regarding this visit, and where he stood when he was looking for Bethany beyond Jordan, accordingly he didn't recognize the site or find any remains, neither the place of baptism nor the town or anything could convince him that there was a site called Bethany in this general area. Origen turned to the text and used the name Bethabara instead of Bethany beyond Jordan, possibly etymological factors influenced him & possibly derived from (Bet -Abara), house of the crossing "Beit el-Obour" in Arabic which points to one of the fords of the Jordan. It is logically to think that Origen influenced by the Old Testament text especially (Joshua 3:14) when Joshua crossed over the Jordan River opposite Jericho, and later by New Testament when Jesus Christ crossed over the Jordan to continue his Journey toward Bethany and last to Jerusalem. Here Origenes made two things, first replaced the name of Bethany beyond the Jordan (Bethany B.J) by Bethabara and, secondly changed the location of Bethany beyond the Jordan from the eastern bank to the western bank of Jordan River, and that John is said to have baptized there. Moreover Origenes didn't give any precise location for this Bethabara on the western side of Jordan River Origen suggested that the name of Bethabara is reasonable & suitable, since he found no remains on the eastern side of

Jordan River, and also in John 10:40. Bethany beyond Jordan according to him is not described as a village or town or city, but described as unknown place, from the text Jesus withdrew to that place possibly to be secure there, he went there before (John 1:28) and he returned to the same place as a known safe area in (Bethany beyond Jordan) may this explain why the place is under remind and unknown for most of the historians, since Jesus chose a place far away from Jerusalem and near this place of baptism where John the Baptist living there. Jesus gained in Bethany beyond Jordan many followers from the circle of the Baptist (John 10:40-42). So, he knows the route which leads to Bethany B.J. Jesus came from Cana and Capernaum (John 2:1-11/13) then he went to Bethany B.J, to be baptized by John then returned to Galilee through Samaria (John 4:1-6). After a period, he decided to leave Galilee to Bethany B.J, after reaching the site crossing the river from Bethany B.J to Jericho (Luke 19:1), then to Bethany near Jerusalem (John 11:1) and last to Jerusalem. The artists who executed Madaba Mosaic Map (MMP) depended somewhat on Origenes theory depicted Bethany beyond the Jordan as (Bethabara) with a church of John the Baptist on the western side of the river. Here again why the MMP neglected Bethany B.J. which reflects complete absence and missing of the found buildings, such as the churches, water installations etc. After deep assessment, comparative studies and analyzing the name of (Bethabara) found means (house of the crossing) this clearly refers to a place close to a river, and as mentioned above Bethabara depicted on the western bank while Bethany depicted on the eastern bank of the River as Aenon now Sapsaphas. Both places refers to a crossing area or spot near Jordan River, Bethany beyond Jordan (Aenon now Sapsaphas) in the time of Jesus during the Roman Period was settled by people from different places among of them Perea, Livias, Madaba and from west bank such as Jericho and even from north specially from Galilee, they had come to live by the river. This would explain why Jesus and the disciples, as Galileans, would find it convenient to stay here when visiting Jerusalem. Galilean pilgrims avoided potential conflict with Samaritans by traveling south on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Bethany beyond Jordan was the major station on their route to Jerusalem after crossing the river and taking the road through Jericho up into the highlands. A respectful distance around 30 km from the city, and on the pilgrim route, Bethany beyond Jordan was a most suitable location for a charitable institution. It is not surprising that several monasteries with different facilities had been established at Bethany to intercept and care for pilgrims at the end of the long and difficult journey from nearby villages and cities as well as from Galilee. The area witnessed the blessing of the children by Jesus. Thus, Bethany received its name because it was the home of crying voices in the wildernesses or as poor house for all believers gathering here to meet the prophets and disciples. It is reasonable to assume that Bethany B.J was known well to Jesus and John the Baptist as well as to disciples and close circles, but this place is not known to all people or even to the Romans at the beginning, possibly to offer more secure site to keep the circle of believers away from direct threats of the Jew & Romans. During that time few people

could reach that site which was identified in (John 10:40) as (the place where John was at the first baptizing). Origen tried to reach this place but did not recognize it due to the above-mentioned reasons and the continuo's seasonal accumulation of sand and mud over the site made it unseen or visible through history. Now it is clear the most of the MSS of Origenes time read Bethany B.J. not Bethabara. Recently this reading adopted and considered to be original because Bethany is extant in codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus of the 4th century and large number of the MSS with considerable geographical distribution. Now it is clear and evident to trace Bethany B.J back to the first, second, and third century. Also the place named Bethany beyond Jordan is mentioned in the Gospel of John 1:28 as being located on the east bank of the Jordan River. Its exact location is now clear through archaeological systematic field excavations of several seasons; in fact, the only mention of this "Bethany beyond Jordan" "is to be found in that one verse. In the King James Version (KJV) (following the Texts Receptus of the New Testament) the place where John the Baptist was baptizing in John 1:28 was not called Bethany, but Bethabara. The KJV is the only English version of the New Testament that refers to "Bethany on the east bank of the Jordan River", as "Bethabara". Most other English versions (including the Douay-Rheims, NIV, NASB, NLT, RSV, IBS, and Darby) call it "Bethany beyond Jordan".

2.2. Bethany of Lazarus

In the New Testament the well-known Bethany is perhaps "house of the suffering" and recorded as the home of the siblings Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, as well as that of Simon the Leper, Lazarus is a village on the slope of the Mount of Olives near Jerusalem, while Bethany beyond the Jordan was mentioned only in the Fourth Gospel. Of John (John 1:28) the best and earliest manuscript read Bethany as mentioned above, there is also variant reading of bethabara this reading preserved only in some late manuscript, sinaitic and Curetonian Syriac dated to eighth-ninth centuries, Origen added that Bethany & Bethany beyond the Jordan (Commentary on John) was the town of Lazarus. The question here, if this is true, and again where is the place of baptism? According to Gospel of John 1:28 the place of baptism is around Jordan River on the eastern bank, while Bethany of (Lazarus) is around 20 miles distant from the River of Jordan on the eastern side of Jerusalem. Bethany but not Bethany beyond the Jordan or Bethabara has traditionally been identified as the burial cave in al-Azareyah (tomb of the gospel account since at least the 4th century AD). (Arabic, meaning "Place of Lazarus"), site of the reputed tomb of Lazarus, located about (3 km) to the east of Jerusalem on the south-eastern slope of the Mount of Olives. Both the famous historian Eusebius of Caesarea Taylor [2] and the pilgrim of Bordeaux in the [3] (c. 333) refer to the tomb of Lazarus in this location in al-Azareyah. While some scholars think that the present village of Bethany east Jerusalem does not occupy the original site of the ancient village; but that it grew up around the traditional holy cave which they supposed to have been at some distance from the house of Martha Mary and Lazarus in the village [4], places the site of the original ancient village of Bethany higher up on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives, not far from the known site of Bethpage,

and near that of the Ascension of Jesus. Zaneccchia convinced that ancient Bethany may have been located closer to Bethphage [4]. The root and real meaning and origin of the name Bethany, Bethany beyond the Jordan & Bethabara has been the subject of much scholarship and deep discussion: Dixon in his book *The Holy Land* (1866), devotes a multi-page the meaning of Bethany as "house of dates," which is attributed to Joseph Barber Lightfoot [3]. According to Dixon, Deutsch gives another interpretation suggests that Bethany, a word transcribed in Syriac script whose meaning he gives as "House of Misery" or "Poor-house". E. Nestle's in his notes in *philological sacra* (1896) suggests that Bethany is derived from the personal name Anaiah [5]. In his version of Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, the meaning of Bethany is defined as *domus afflictions* or "house of affliction" [6]. Another suggestion, arising from the presence of nearby Bethpage ("house of unripe figs"), is that its name comes from Beit hini, meaning "house of figs" [7]. Brian J. Capper mentions that this is a Latin derivation from the Aramaic Beth 'Anya, which means "house of the poor people" or "house of affliction/poverty", also, semantically speaking, "poor-house." He concludes, depending on historical recourse and references, that Bethany may have been the site of an alms house (Poor & Poverty) [8]. Some linguistic difficulties or changes arise when the Anaiah/Anaiah, "house of figs" or "house of dates" according to some scholars like Capper and Deutsch, is compared against the Bethania form used in Greek versions of the New Testament, while Aramaic Beit 'Anya is the form used for Bethany in Christian Palestinian and Syriac versions of the New Testament. Given this, and Jerome's familiarity with Semitic philology and the immediate region, it is reasonable to say that "house of poor or Poverty ...etc. "Meaning, as documented by Jerome, refers to the use of the village as a centre for looking after elderly, sick people, and helping the destitute and pilgrims crossing the river to the wilderness of John the Baptist as a place for crying voices.

2.3. Bethany beyond the Jordan was discovered again, through archaeological excavation

Both the Pilgrim of Bordeaux (333) and Theodosius (530) are explicit and in agreement in localizing at a determined spot along the river the site of the Baptism of Jesus. Both indicate the site as being five miles from the Dead Sea shore, "from the site where the Lord was baptized, to the site where the river Jordan pours into the Dead Sea, there are five miles" - writes Theodosius. The Pilgrim of Piacenza (570) is the first to note that the site of the Baptism was in front of the monastery of St. John: "not very far from the Jordan where the Lord was Baptized, there is the monastery of St. John, very big; in it there are two hostels for the pilgrims" [9]. The topographic annotation is also found in the "Life of St. Mary from Egypt". The penitent, in her intent to follow the voice she had heard inviting her to cross over the Jordan to find peace, left Jerusalem through the eastern gate and went towards the river. "And saying these things - recounts the saint - I heard the voice of someone who shouted from afar: 'If you cross over the holy Jordan, you will find peace' Mary the Egyptian visited the church of John the Baptist during her journey to the river, possibly around 420-423. then she lived in solicitude and died there. Modern archaeological exploration carried out by various scholars favors the presence of Bethany beyond

Jordan on the eastern bank of the river. The first one to arrive at the site was Fr. Féderlin towards the end of the last century. In 1899, at the estuary of Wadi Kharrar, the priest of the White Fathers of Jerusalem noted and photographed the foundations of a chapel built on arches which he placed in relation to the church mentioned by Arculfus: "Having been twice to the Jordan for the feast of the Epiphany, I endeavored to take advantage of the boat pertaining to the St. John the Baptist Convent; the boatman agreed, after being tipped, to take me across the Jordan and allow me to reach the ruins of a church remembered by Arculfus and built on an small old branch of the river Jordan. During the 1899 Easter holidays ... going beyond, to the west, the ruins of (Saphsaphas) ... after about 150 m we arrived at a sort of canal or small branch of the river ... There we found the ruins of the chapel described by Arculfus ... All the lower part of the chapel still stands". The ruins were visited in 1913 by M. Dalman: "A hill overhangs this valley on the south side, upon which there are ruins of a building, which undoubtedly had been a church" [10]. Buzzy came here on the 5th October 1930 and connects the ruins with the church built by emperor Anastasias: "At a distance of fifty paces from the shore one can see the remains of a square shrine, with four-meter sides, built on arches. This could be the chapel built by the emperor Anastasias (491-518), the 'parva quadrata ecclesia' seen by Adamnanus. We hope that in the not-too-distant future, it will be possible for us to excavate and study this venerable ruin, as it well merits". In 1932 the delta of Wadi Kharrar was visited by Fr. F.M. Abel who still saw the arches: "One comes across the peak of paired arches, the remains of an under-structure, upon a branch of the Jordan which is blocked today but which is re-created in a certain manner during the flood season" [11]. To justify the identification of the ruins with the church built by Anastasius or with the quadrangular one described by Arculfus, the explorers invite us to keep in mind the level of the water of the river, which is different according to the different seasons as well as the capricious path of the river that could change after every flood. This could cause a church built on the waters (like the one described by Arculfus) to find itself isolated on dry land (now of the visit of Willibald) or vanish completely in the soft riverbed eroded by the water. In 1485 Brother Francesco Suriano writes: "A small chapel had been built Where Christ was baptized. Today the river has changed into an island and lies at the centre of the river. And in that place, I believe that Christ was baptized. At present the river has changed its bed by a mile", figs. (2).

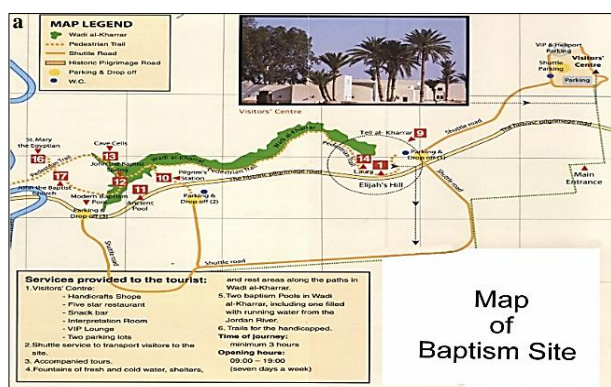


Figure (2) a. the plan of Bethany beyond Jordan after touristic development, b. remains of Roman remains found during excavations near Tell Mar Elyas (1st-4th AD) [12], c. the traditional spot or in Jordan River [12]

To clarify the exact location of Bethany B.J field operations included survey, investigations, and excavations were conducted on the eastern side of Jordan river 8 km to the north of the famous Dead Sea in 1996. The results of excavations on Tell mar Elyas & near the eastern bank of Jordan River will be presented here to clear the location and to cover the gaps of information's. Excavations started at the site of "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (UTM coordinates: 0743979 e/3526317 n; elev. -304) is located east of the Jordan River, west of the modern village of al-Kafrayn, and within sight of the town of Jericho west of the river. It is situated at the head of Wadi al-Kharrar and eventually feeds into the Jordan River around 1.800 km to the west. Due to the springs an oasis dominates the beginning of Wadi al-Kharrar and the site of Tell al-Kharrar, fig. (3).



Figure (3) a prayer hall discovered near Elijah's hill near Tell Mar Elyas [12]

Moreover, thick and green vegetation is characteristic of the entire length of the wadi. As recent archaeological activity shows, the place of Bethany beyond the Jordan was located at or around the natural hill called Elijah's.

This recent archaeological activity in the Jordan Valley, east of the Jordan River in Wadi al-Kharrar, has identified remains of churches, water systems, prayer halls, monk houses, caves, etc, dating from the Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods. These remains indicate that the area was inhabited during the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. They also show that monks and hermits lived in the region during the Roman, Byzantine periods, fig. (4) and the beginning of early Islamic times [13-24].



Figure (4) a. the discovery of a small church on the eastern bank of the river [12], b. an aerial photo of Elijah's Hill /Tell Mar Elyas with several architectural remains dated to the Roman-Byzantine ages

3. Results

The study emphasized the importance of the location of Bethany, as it represents a religious, archaeological, and historical site situated on the eastern side of the Jordan River. The study also confirmed the significance of the various names that have been given to the place throughout the ages, such as Bethany, Bethany beyond the Jordan, and Bethabara, along with the interpretations associated with these designations. The results of archaeological excavations conducted at the site since 1997 indicate the presence of multiple urban structures, particularly the remains of religious buildings like churches and halls of worship, as well as baptismal pools. Additionally, intricate mosaic floors have been discovered, underscoring the historical importance of this area dating back to the first century AD. It is noteworthy that many old and modern travelers have described the region in great detail, suggesting a correlation between the archaeological findings and the accounts provided in the Holy Gospel, as well as the narratives of these travelers. The findings of this study point to a promising future for the site in terms of tourism development, particularly in the realm of religious tourism. It is anticipated that the site will become a focal point of attraction for local, regional, and international visitors.

4. Discussion

Now Bethany beyond Jordan rediscovered again represent the exact location of Tell Mar Elyas (Tell Kharrar) & John the Baptist church which is depicted on the Madaba Map as well as remains of monastery of St. John, which was built on the eastern bank of Jordan River, in addition to several remains were discovered here in the plains of Livias, Rama, & Kafrein. The later writings of the Byzantine period, witnessing to the existence of the village of Bethany beyond the Jordan, can be seriously considered. This, notwithstanding the historical weight of the witness given by Origen, who probably precipitously gave heed to his informers and had concluded that the village did not exist on the eastern bank of the river. He also proposed emending the Gospel text substituting Bethany with the toponym Bethabara. Two topographic realities which do not exclude each other, Bethabara at the river Jordan and Bethany at the spring of Wadi Kharrar, as we read in the Madaba Mosaic Map. It is quite certain that Bethany, the present village of (Al-Azreyah) Lazarus formed the traditional tomb of Lazarus, which is in a cave in the village. The identification of this cave as the tomb of Lazarus is merely possible; it has no strong intrinsic or extrinsic authority. The site of the ancient village may not precisely coincide with the present one, but there is every reason to believe that it was in this general location, mostly by the local villagers who have become dependent on hearsay than on fact. The inscription on the Madaba Map refers to Bethany beyond Jordan as Aenon now Sapsaphas on the eastern side of Jordan River which was discovered during 1996-2002 excavations and refers to Bethabara the church of St. John the Baptist on the western side of Jordan River. The "monastery" destroyed by earthquake and rebuilt by the emperor Manuel Comnenus during 1143-1180 and mentioned still standing in the 16th century. Later the monastery demolished and rebuilt in 1882 by the Greeks and affected again by the earthquake of 1927 and repaired in 1955. The present structures on the eastern bank of Jordan River represent Roman & Byzantine remains, while the western modern church represent a fortress shape and generally called Qaser el-yehud (palace of the Jews), fig. (3). The loss of the real Bethany beyond Jordan through ages pushed Russian and Greek pilgrims to move to the so-called traditional spot in the river near Maghtas ford and Hajlah ford to bath themselves in the river, later after the discovery of Bethany beyond Jordan during 1996 they moved to the present site of Jesus Baptism and built their churches and monasteries by support of government of Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

5. Conclusion

Intensive archaeology works performed at Bethany beyond the Jordan between 1996 and 2002 have revealed the true place where Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist on the east bank of the river Jordan. The discovery of churches, baptismal pools, prayer halls, mosaics, and water supply systems of Roman-Byzantine times proves that this place, not Bethabara, is the Bethany beyond the Jordan mentioned in the Gospel according to John (1:28). The study concluded to rectify the misunderstanding arising due to the work of Origen, who had made a mistake in relocating the place to the west and renaming it Bethabara. The results obtained are consistent with the accounts of ancient pilgrims, Madaba map, and Holy Scriptures. It is recommended to preserve the discovered monuments, continue studies in this area, and create conditions for development of tourism.

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