



*Pope Francis stands by the
Jordan River at Bethany
Beyond the Jordan.*

JORDAN

*A place of history,
mystery, and pilgrimage*

BY MARGE FENELON

What comes to your mind when someone mentions the Holy Land? If you're like most people, you'll think about the many places in Israel where Jesus lived and died. With the exception of Bethlehem — which is in Palestine — many of the milestones in our Lord's life took place there.

However, there's another Holy Land that is as beautiful and mysterious as it is important. That land is Jordan, often referred to as "The Other Holy Land," and rightfully so.

"The stories of Abraham, Lot, Moses, Job, David, Ruth, Elijah, John the Baptist, Jesus, the apostle Paul and many others cannot be told without including events

that took place in Jordan,” said Christine Moore, consultant for the Jordan Tourism Board.

“This is the area of the Crossing — the area of the Jordan River, just north of the Dead Sea, where the Israelites crossed over after their long Exodus journey. And there are so many other biblical events that took place in Jordan. The Bible says Jesus preached, taught, healed and traveled throughout the region east of the Jordan River, where most of the cities of the Decapolis were located. My hope is that every pilgrim to the Holy Land would follow the Bible and the early Christian pilgrims — rather than modern maps — to make an authentic Holy Land pilgrimage that includes Jordan.”

Jordan’s heritage is rich, indeed. Experts have located the Garden of Eden along the banks of the Jordan River in the northern Jordan Valley near Wadi Rayyan, an area known for its lush flora and abundant animal life. It is believed that the Jordan

Valley is the garden referred to in Genesis, and the Jordan River is the river that flowed out of Eden to water the garden. Legend has it that Adam stood for 40 days in the waters of the Jordan River after the Fall, praying and begging God’s forgiveness.

Jordan is the land of the prophets and of the First Covenant through Moses. Here Moses delivered the Ten Commandments to the Israelites and later in his life gazed upon the Promised Land from the heights of Mount Nebo. In this region Jacob wrestled with the angel, and God appeared to his people in the form of a whirlwind, pillar of fire, cloud of light, and voice speaking to the prophets. Jordan was designated by God as a place of peace and refuge. Thus the prophets journeyed from the east bank of the Jordan River — the “wilderness” — to the west bank — the “Promised Land.”

In New Testament times, Jordan was home to the last of the prophets — John the

A pilgrim prays on the Jordan River bank.



Baptist — who carried out his mission and was imprisoned and murdered by Herod there. Jesus began his public ministry in Jordan, preached, performed miracles, and called five of his disciples, including Peter.

“In Jordan, we find the geography of salvation,” said Father Nabil Haddad, a priest in the Melkite Catholic Church and founder and executive director of the Jordanian Interfaith Coexistence Research Center. “Seventy-five to 80 percent of biblical events took place in this region, and it is the birthplace of Christianity. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but Christianity was proclaimed at Bethany Beyond the Jordan. It was there also that the Trinity

was proclaimed. It is in Jordan that one can see the chapters of the Old Testament and New Testament unfold.”

Time and again the Old and New Testaments converge in Jordan, but the one area where that is most prominently seen and felt is Bethany Beyond the Jordan. Not to be confused with the Bethany where Martha and Mary lived, Bethany Beyond the Jordan is located on the eastern side of the Jordan River in southern Jordan.

One of the most important sites in this area is Elijah’s Hill, the place where Elijah ascended into heaven on a chariot of fire. John the Baptist lived in a cave on the western side of the hill, and the area has been restored to look much like it did in John’s time. The reeds so often mentioned in the Bible are present throughout the

Rustom Mkhjian, assistant director of the Baptism Site Commission, guides Pope Francis at the site of Jesus’ baptism.



year, as well as the small bushes that are habitat to bees — a reminder of the locust and wild honey that sustained him. From here John began his ministry of preaching conversion, baptizing, and heralding the coming of the Christ. Since the Bible predicted that Elijah would return before the Messiah's coming, it's no wonder that the people were initially confused about John's identity!

Because of its holiness, a monastery was built on the site in the fifth century, becoming the first monastery on the east side of the Jordan River and resting along the early Christians' pilgrimage route between Jerusalem and Bethlehem on the west and Mount Nebo on the east. One of the most notable things about the monastery is that the monks were allowed to live there unprovoked during the period of Islamic rule. That peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims continues to this day in Jordan and is an example for the rest of the world.

"Christian communities have continued to live here in peace nonstop for 2,000 years, and it was to Jordan that the early Christians fled during the first persecution," Haddad said. "Here Christians and Muslims live together, telling a great story of harmony and love of neighbor under one God."

Diana von Glahn, host and producer of *The Faithful Traveler* television series, attests to Jordan's culture of biblical history and modern-day welcome.

"I've been blessed to travel to the amazing Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan twice in my life. Jordan is a jewel in the Holy Land that, unfortunately, too many pilgrims bypass. I cannot recommend it enough as a place of pilgrimage and fun. It's the only country in the entire Middle East where the government is making a concerted effort to bring peace among Muslims and Christians, and you can tell just walking along the streets. I long to return to Jordan."

Von Glahn's documentary, *A Papal Pilgrimage in the Holy Land*, features extensive footage of her trip through Jordan.



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In spite of its predominantly Muslim population, the Jordanian government is committed to restoring and preserving the Christian holy sites within its borders. That commitment is especially evident at Bethany Beyond the Jordan, including the site where Jesus was baptized.

The Jordanian government has declared the site a legally protected national park and has instituted the Baptism Site Commission, an independent board of trustees appointed by King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein and chaired by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad. The commission has a paid, full-time staff dedicated to its continued restoration, preservation, and development. Its goal is to make the site accessible to pilgrims of all faiths and from all over the world, allowing them to see the area just as Jesus and John saw it.

Bethany Beyond the Jordan reflects not only the beauty and history but also the mystery of Jordan.

A pilgrim

“Is there any mystery greater than the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?” asked Moore. “Surely this great mystery of the divine relationship — first revealed to mankind at the baptism of Jesus and recorded in all four Gospels — has permeated this land of the baptism. Bethany Beyond the Jordan, the wilderness of John east of the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized, is like no other place on earth. According to Scripture, the heavens opened twice here — first as Elijah was taken up to heaven on a chariot of fire, and second at the baptism of Jesus, when the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon Jesus, and our Heavenly Father proclaimed his beloved Son.”

But for a time that place of mystery was lost. From the era of John the Baptist until the 14th century, Bethany Beyond the Jordan was a well-known pilgrimage site. After the Crusades and subsequent

weakening of the Byzantine Empire, the area came under the control of local tribes and was no longer safe. Eventually, pilgrimages stopped entirely, and its exact location was forgotten.

In 1897, a scholar from Jerusalem discovered the Madaba Map, a sixth-century mosaic named after the city in which it was discovered and depicting a map of the Middle East. This discovery renewed interest in locating the site of Jesus' baptism, and the search began. However, World War I, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, World War II, and then the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973 again curtailed the search, leaving the area desolate and filled with land mines left over from battle.


A chance meeting between a monk and a prince after the signing of the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty turned things around. While on pilgrimage to Mount Nebo, Bin Muhammad met the archaeologist and monk Father Michele Piccirillo, who convinced the prince of the importance of relocating the baptismal site of Jesus Christ. Bin Muhammad agreed and initiated further investigation, including help from the local Bedouin tribes (who knew the territory) and from the military to clear the land mines to make the area safe for exploration.

The search proved fruitful. Pottery, mosaics, caves, and marble were discovered, as well as the remains of five different churches, dating all the way back to the first century. Based on the writings of a number

of early-century pilgrims, archeologists were able to identify the exact spot upon which our Lord was baptized by John the Baptist.

A chance meeting between a monk and a prince after the signing of the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty turned things around.

“Because Jordan is the Holy Land, four popes visited the area — Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and recently Pope Francis,” said Ra’ed Bahou, regional director for the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. “All of these visits show clear evidence that Jordan is a Holy Land worth visit-

ing at least once in a lifetime [even for popes].” 

Marge Fenelon is a Catholic author, columnist, and speaker. She writes for a number of publications and is a regular guest on Catholic radio. You can learn more about Marge at MargeFenelon.com.

TO LEARN MORE:

The Baptismal Site of Jesus Christ: Bethany Beyond the Jordan (official site)

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