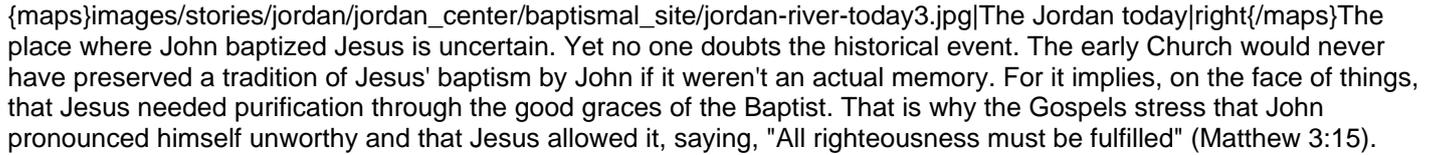


Where was Jesus baptized?

Contributed by Stephen Langfur with additional research and writing by Micah Key

The place where John baptized Jesus is uncertain. Yet no one doubts the historical event. The early Church would never have preserved a tradition of Jesus' baptism by John if it weren't an actual memory. For it implies, on the face of things, that Jesus needed purification through the good graces of the Baptist. That is why the Gospels stress that John pronounced himself unworthy and that Jesus allowed it, saying, "All righteousness must be fulfilled" (Matthew 3:15).

To Josephus Flavius (36 – 100 AD), Jewish general, one of two directing the revolt against Rome in Galilee. After Vespasian captured him, he prophesied the latter would be emperor. When this proved true, the Romans honored him. He then turned historian, writing *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities of the Jews* and many other books. John was the better known of the two. It is likely that the Church preserved his works because of the following passage:

Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's [Antipas's] army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only], but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when [many] others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of this army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure to him. (Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews* XVIII 5.2, translated by William Whiston.)

Note the reference to people coming "in crowds about him" and the "great influence he had." After John's death, we shall see below, these newly leaderless crowds may have been those for whom Jesus felt pity, calling them "sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34).

Matthew and Mark set the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River near the wilderness at a site accessible from Jerusalem . Luke 3:1-22 tells us that the Baptist received the Word of God in the wilderness and then "came into all the region around the Jordan." John locates the event precisely at "Bethany beyond the Jordan," but the name is unattested elsewhere.

The Baptismal Site in Matthew and Mark

Matthew (3: 1-17) has the Baptist "preaching in the wilderness of Judea," and "people from Jerusalem, all of Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him…. Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him."

But John would have hindered him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" But

Jesus, answering, said to him, "Allow it now, for this is the fitting way for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed him. Jesus, when he was baptized, went up directly from the water: and behold, the heavens were opened to him. He saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and coming on him. Behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Mark 1: 4-9 also places the event in the Jordan River, at a place accessible to people from Judea and Jerusalem.

In line with these two evangelists, tradition has recognized the baptism in the River Jordan east of Jericho. This area in the wilderness of Judea would have been most accessible to people from Jerusalem.

But where was the river 2000 years ago? It changes course unpredictably. In 1485 a monk named Francesco Suriano wrote: "At present the river has changed its bed by a mile" (quoted in Piccirillo). In addition, since the 1960's the Jordan has become much smaller, because Israel, Syria and the Kingdom of Jordan all make use of its sources.

We cannot know, therefore, where Jesus stood — near the east bank, near the west bank? We don't even know where the banks were. Some of the sites that are today shown on the east bank might have been on the west or hovering on arches above the river at floodtime!

Compounding the problem, our sources are Byzantine except for ^A Christian thinker (ca. 185-254 AD), the greatest to appear after Paul, who thought through the Christian faith from what he called "First Principles." He did most of his work at Caesarea Maritima. ^{Origen,} who is not helpful here. Byzantine traditions are not reliable unless supported by further considerations. Three centuries passed, after all, between the events of Jesus' ministry and the first pilgrim accounts, or the first commemorative churches. Tour guides, shopkeepers and purveyors of saints' bones all had a financial interest in finding Biblical places. When additional evidence is lacking for a place's authenticity, one must always ask, "Were Christians continuously present here during the three problem centuries, preserving the memory?" Seldom can such continuity be demonstrated.

The first extant pilgrim's account comes from the *Itinerarium Burdigalense* (par. 598), the anonymous report of a journey from Bordeaux in France to the Holy Land in 333 AD. The pilgrim mentions going five Roman miles upstream from the Dead Sea to the baptismal site of Jesus. He also mentions "a place by the river, a little hill upon the further bank, from which Elijah was caught up into heaven." [My italics — SL]. This would be Tel el-Kharrar, or the Hill of Elijah, which ^{It} happened, as they still went on, and talked, that behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. [2 Kings 2:11^{sets} on the east bank. The reference to its location on "the further bank" indicates that in this pilgrim's day, the baptismal site itself was located on the west.

And then we have a pilgrim named Theodosius, visiting the land between 515 and 530. He writes:

At the place where my Lord was baptized is a marble column, and on top of it has been set an iron cross. There also is the Church of Saint John Baptist, which was constructed by the Emperor Anastasius. It stands on great vaults which are high enough for when the Jordan is in flood. (Theodosius, *De Situ Terrae Sanctae*, 20).

Like the Bordeaux pilgrim, Theodosius locates the hill from which Elijah was taken up, which he calls Little Mount Hermon, across the river from the baptismal site.

A pilgrim named Arculf, around 680, also mentions a church on vaults. He gives this description (speaking of himself in the third person):

The holy, venerable spot at which the Lord was baptized by John is permanently covered by the water of the River Jordan. Arculf, who reached the place, and swam across the river both ways, says that a tall wooden cross has been set up on the holy place...The position of this cross where, as we have said, the Lord was baptized, is on the near side of the river bed. A strong man using a sling can throw a stone from there to the far bank on the Arabian side. From this cross a stone causeway supported on arches stretches to the bank, and people approaching the cross go down a ramp and return up by it to reach the bank. Right at the river's edge stands a small rectangular church which was built, so it is said, at the place where the Lord's clothes were placed when he was baptized. The fact that it is supported on four stone vaults, makes it usable, since the water, which comes in from all sides, is underneath it. It has a tiled roof. This remarkable church is supported, as we have said, by arches and vaults, and stands in the lower part of the valley through which the Jordan flows. But in the upper part there is a great monastery for monks, which has been built on the brow of a small hill nearby, overlooking the church. There is also a church built there in honour of Saint John Baptist which, together with the monastery, is enclosed in a single masonry wall. (Source .)

Clearly, Arculf identified the baptismal site on the west bank of his day, but we said we're not going to worry about banks, because the river shifts.

On today's east bank, near the river, stand the ruins of a church dating from the late Byzantine period. It was built near the remains of two earlier churches, the earliest of which was set on vaults. This was probably the church that was seen by the pilgrims Theodosius and Arculf.

Micah Key describes the setting: "The air here is warm and muggy. All around, flies buzz incessantly and the white clay-like soil softly crunches underfoot. Down by the banks of the muddy river grows a lush thicket of reeds, tough tamarisk and willows." The growth reminds us that we are in the Syro-African Rift. This is the kind of setting alluded to in Zechariah 11:3 as the "pride of Jordan." Lions used to be hunted here, and we think of "Behold, he shall come up like a lion from the jungle of the Jordan against the strong habitation: for I will suddenly make them run away from it; and whoever is chosen, him will I appoint over it: for who is like me? and who will appoint me a time? and who is the shepherd who will stand before me?" Jeremiah 49:19. A church at Madaba, today in Jordan, goes back to Byzantine times. In the 19th century, a mosaic floor was uncovered, dating to about 580 AD. It contains a pilgrim's map of the entire country, including Jerusalem. Madaba map shows a lion emerging from a thicket near the Jordan.

We follow Wadi al-Kharrar two miles to the east, passing a "laura," a complex of hermits' lodgings, mentioned by the 6th century Anonymous of Piacenza in his Placentinus:

In that part of the Jordan is the spring where Saint John used to baptize, and which is two miles from the Jordan, and Elijah was in that valley when the raven brought him bread and meat. The whole valley is full of hermits.

Next to the laura is large pool built with courses of sandstone. The wadi continues past two caves, both containing prayer niches for the use of hermits and monks. These caves figure in a 7th-century account by Johannes Moschus called the Spiritual Meadow. He tells of a monk who had started on a pilgrimage to Mount Sinai but had become feverish after crossing the Jordan. While he was recovering in a cave at the laura, the Baptist appeared to him and told him to cancel his trip, saying, "this little cave is greater than Mount Sinai. Our Lord Jesus Christ himself has come here to pay me a visit." Returned to health, the monk transformed the cave into a church for the nearby hermits. "It is the place which is called Sapsas near the Jordan" writes Johannes Moschus.

Sapsas means willow in Arabic. At the head of Wadi al-Kharrar are five or six springs. On the Madaba map, this place is called "Ainon, where now is Sapsaphas" (place of willows). Ainon or Aenon means "springs" in Aramaic. But there is another Ainon on the Madaba map just south of Scythopolis; it is called Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea Maritima, places "Ainon near Salem" at the eighth milestone on the road leading south from Scythopolis, "near Salem and the Jordan." (Eusebius, Onomasticon 40:1)|Ainon near Salem, which corresponds to John 3:22-26, naming Ainon near Salem as a place where John baptized:

After these things, Jesus came with his disciples into the land of Judea. He stayed there with them, and baptized. John also was baptizing in Ainon near Salim, because there was much water there. They came, and were baptized. For John was not yet thrown into prison. There arose therefore a questioning on the part of John's disciples with some Jews about purification. They came to John, and said to him, "Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified, behold, the same baptizes, and everyone is coming to him."

Jesus' baptism occurred, then, on the opposite side of the Jordan from "Ainon near Salem." If this Ainon lay west of the river, then the passage is consistent with John 1:29 — Jesus was baptized at "Bethany beyond the Jordan."

The Madaba map places the baptism of Jesus, however, on the west, at a place called Bethabara, "place of the crossing." Could it be that the mapmaker put another Ainon on the east side so as to keep it opposite the place of the baptism? Or were there two Ainons? We cannot know.

And why Bethabara? (If you think you're getting caught in the thicket of the Jordan, just wait.) Origen, ca. 250 AD, read in the best textual versions of John 1: 28 that Jesus was baptized at "Bethany beyond the Jordan," but the only Bethany he or his informants knew at the time was the one near Jerusalem. He saw that a few later versions of the text gave the name as Bethabara. Origen wrote, "Near the Jordan river there is no site of the same name of Bethany; it seems, however, that near the river of Jordan they show Bethabara, where John is said to have baptized." Perhaps he was also influenced by the fact that Bethany can be taken to mean "the place of the boat" and Bethabara "the place of the crossing." (The Jordan could be forded about 800 meters south of here in summer and early fall, but in winter and spring people needed a ferry.)

Yet despite John and Origen, by 333 the Bordeaux pilgrim found the baptismal site near the west bank, as did Theodosius around 530 and the maker of the Madaba map. Perhaps the Jordan had shifted.

Let us try to emerge from the thicket!

We return to the springs at the head of Wadi al-Kharrar. Nearby, to the south, are ruins of a village which, to judge from the pottery, was inhabited in Roman and Byzantine times. It lies on and around Elijah's Hill (Tell Mar Elias or Tell al-Kharrar). The area includes a walled monastery which at one time had four churches. One of these has a freestanding arch, recently built, over the foundations of a 4th or 5th century church; here the late Pope John Paul II celebrated mass on his pilgrimage in the year 2000.

One would think that this small village would have had enough water from the springs in the nearby wadi. Yet archaeologists found ceramic pipes that conveyed water several miles from other wadis. Once the water reached the monastery, it was channeled into settling tanks and then into three large pools on the hill's northeastern side. Perhaps the pools and abundant water were used to baptize pilgrims.

Could this village have been Bethany beyond the Jordan? The possibility is intriguing. There remain, however, nagging questions: If it was Bethany, wouldn't its name have been known to Origen? Yet he found no trace of a Bethany near the Jordan in the area indicated by Matthew and Mark. Perhaps the name had been changed. But the village had a significant Christian community in the Byzantine period, as indicated by the monastery and churches. Wouldn't the Christian inhabitants have remembered with pride that their town had been the Bethany-beyond-Jordan where Jesus was baptized? And wouldn't the Byzantine pilgrims have mentioned this? They refer to the place as Elijah's Hill and "the place where John baptized," but never as Bethany.

It seems reasonable, on the other hand, to connect the springs at the head of Wadi al-Kharrar with another passage in John. In 10:40 we read about "the place beyond the Jordan where John was baptizing at first" (John 10:40). Let us look at the passage in context (10: 39-42):

They [the Jews of Jerusalem] sought again to seize him, and he went out of their hand. He went away again beyond the Jordan into the place where John was baptizing at first, and there he stayed. Many came to him. They said, "John indeed did no sign, but everything that John said about this man is true." Many believed in him there.

Then Jesus hears about Lazarus' death. He stays at the place beyond the Jordan for another two days. On the fourth day since the death, he comes up to Lazarus' town of Bethany near Jerusalem.

It is clear that the place across the Jordan where John had first baptized was near Jerusalem, a day's journey away. This would fit well with the springs at Wadi al-Kharrar and the nearby village. However, the place "where John had baptized at first" should not be conflated with Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan, where John baptized Jesus. For this event occurred toward the end of John's life. The phrase "at first" could not have served to distinguish the place if John had continued baptizing there throughout his mission. What's more, the Baptist was itinerant. He worked throughout the region of the Jordan (Luke 3:3), for example at Ainon near Salem and, somewhere across the river, at elusive Bethany.

The Baptism of Jesus according to John

Having placed the baptism of Jesus at "Bethany beyond the Jordan" (John 1:28), the evangelist goes on to write that two of the Baptist's disciples heard him call Jesus "the Lamb of God." They followed Jesus, who invited them to stay with him. "They came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day. It was about the tenth hour" (1:39). The tenth hour would have been 4 p.m. John is following time very closely.

One of the two was Andrew, who fetched his brother Simon. Jesus gives Simon the name Cephas, meaning Peter. Then we read:

On the next day, he was determined to go out into Galilee, and he found Philip. Jesus said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, "We have found him, of whom Moses in the law, and the prophets, wrote: Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

"The third day" (John 2:1) Jesus attends the marriage at Cana of Galilee. How could he get from the region of the Jordan near the Dead Sea to Cana of Galilee in a single day, or even in three (if Laney is correct in thinking that the "third day" would be the third day after Jesus decided to go to Galilee)? It is 70 miles as the crow flies, but at least 85 with the roads. To make such a journey within three days, even on a very cooperative donkey, seems a bit of a stretch. Besides, all the people mentioned near the baptism are northerners. Frankly, it just doesn't sound as though John had the southern end of the Jordan River in mind. It is difficult, therefore, to reconcile his account with those in Matthew and Mark. Note this too: Matthew and Mark don't mention the first disciples at or near Jesus' baptism in Judea; he first encounters them later, in the north.

An alternative suggestion has been made by a number of scholars, including R. Steven Notley in Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge, Jerusalem*, Carta, 2006, pp. 350-51. He proposes that the references to Jerusalem and Judea in Matthew and Mark derive from the early Church's connection of the Baptist with the voice of one who calls out, "Prepare the way of Yahweh in the wilderness! Make a level highway in the desert for our God." (Isaiah 40:3) The Baptist is seen not as the leader of his own movement, but rather as the prophesied "voice in the wilderness" preparing the way for Jesus. In "You who tell good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who tell good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with strength. Lift it up. Don't be afraid. Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold, your God!'" (Isaiah 40:10) this voice speaks to the people of Jerusalem, and so, suggests Notley, Matthew and Mark mention the Jerusalemites at the baptism. This mention is thought to reflect the early Church's understanding of the Baptist as Isaiah's "voice in the wilderness" and ought not to be taken as a clue for locating the historical event.

The naming of Bethany-beyond-Jordan in John, however, is a definite clue. Released from the need to reconcile Matthew and Mark with John, Notley searches elsewhere for Bethany. He takes up an old idea: the Bethany in question was not a town but a region: Bashan, between Mount Hermon and the Yarmuk. Both "Bethany" and "Bashan" are rendered in Greek (by Josephus for instance) as "Betanea." Moreover, in the Greek translation of the First Testament (3rd century BC) (Septuagint) version of Deuteronomy 4:47 and Joshua 9:10, the region of Bashan-Betanea is demarked as "beyond the Jordan."

This interpretation also provides a new context for understanding the situation at the start of Jesus' public mission. According to Josephus, we have seen, the Baptist had attracted crowds. Here is Notley (*Sacred Bridge*, p. 351):

John [the Baptist's] calling to the crowds to repent and ritually immerse in the regions of the Jordan above the Sea of Galilee may also explain the large crowds that Jesus encountered on the plains near Bethsaida, where he withdrew upon hearing of the Baptist's death (Matthew 14:13). According to Mark, when Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion for them, "because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mk 6:34). With these words the Evangelist hints both to the relationship of the crowds with the recently deceased John, and the popular notion among some that John was the anticipated prophet-like Moses (Deut 18:18; Jn 1:25). Mark's creative use of the phrase "sheep without a shepherd" is intended to echo the same words spoken by the Lord to Moses in Numbers 27:17 … to emphasize the need for new leadership after his death.