

Reluctant pilgrim: A visit to the Jordan

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

Since ancient times, travelers have journeyed to sites of religious significance in order to deepen their faith. But I've never been much of a pilgrim. I was raised a Pentecostal, and in one regard our brand of faith was very modern: unlike most premodern people, we did not recognize any "sacred places." For us, all places were alike to God because God had created them all. All places were sacred to humanity because God could be experienced anywhere.

I was 45 when I first visited Jerusalem, the Holy City, where centuries of history vital to our faith occurred, culminating in our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. The city was a huge disappointment. The holy sites struck me as inauthentic in two ways. First, it was often doubtful that the events in Jesus' life had actually happened at those sites. Pious legend rather than historical evidence linked events in the life of Jesus with the sites.

Second, and equally important, the sites themselves offered little help for those who sought to grow in holiness. How is one to benefit spiritually from a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre when it is divided up and run by a quarrelsome group of monks, a situation that presents visitors with the exact opposite of the message of reconciliation conveyed by the cross? What is one to make of the ubiquitous merchant stands with their gaudy religious objects? By marketing him, the merchants seemed to mock the very Jesus Christ with whom the pilgrims seek a spiritual encounter. Didn't he cleanse the temple because merchants had turned the house of God into a den of robbers?

When my oldest son Nathanael and I decided to take a father-son trip to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, one of the first stops on our itinerary—on the way to the pleasures of floating in the Dead Sea—was a visit to the Baptism Site. Why did I, a reluctant and skeptical pilgrim, take my son to a holy site and on a pilgrimage? The Baptism Site, the historic location where Jesus reportedly was baptized and

began his ministry, is different from other “holy” sites.

For one, the scriptural, archaeological and documentary evidence to support the historical authenticity of this particular site is strong. The Gospel of John states explicitly that John was baptizing on the eastern bank of the river Jordan, at “Bethany across the Jordan” (John 1:28; see also 10:40). In 1996, archaeological discoveries helped locate with relative certainty where John the Baptist lived and where he was baptizing. On the eastern bank of the Jordan River, they found the ruins of the ancient church (c. AD 500) dedicated to John the Baptist, as well as the remains of two basilicas linked through marble steps to a cruciform baptistery designed for baptisms in the flowing water.

Further support was provided by the writings of an early pilgrim (AD 333): “Five miles from the Dead Sea in the Jordan is the place where the Lord was baptized by John, and above the far bank at the same place is the hillock from which Elijah was taken up to heaven.” Sure enough, a mile or so away is Elijah’s Hill. Remains of an ancient monastery and churches were discovered on this hill where Elijah is reported to have been taken up into heaven by a whirlwind in a chariot of fire. In the vicinity is Wadi al-Kharrar, believed to be Kerith Ravine, where God commanded Elijah to seek refuge from King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. All of this is on the historic Christian pilgrimage route connecting Jerusalem and Mount Nebo, the mountain from which Moses surveyed the promised land before he died.

To my surprise, I was completely taken by the Baptism Site. Aside from recognizing the likely historical authenticity of the place, I was struck by its spiritual authenticity. There we were, at the foot of Elijah’s Hill, and all we could see in this austere desert place were the archaeological remains of a monastery, a church, a prayer hall. My mind was drawn to Elijah and John, the two great prophets of the Old and New Testament, and their struggles against Ahab and Jezebel, Herod and Herodias. We strolled down the pedestrian trail that meandered through the ancient trees of Wadi al-Kharrar toward the remains of the Church of John the Baptist, and then to the Jordan River, and we sensed that we were in a different world. We were moved by the knowledge that here, near the shores of the Dead Sea—the lowest point on the surface of the earth—the ministry of the One who was to reunite heaven and earth began.

The modern Baptism Site is relatively new as a place of pilgrimage. New churches, a monastery and a pilgrimage house are being built on the grounds—provided free of

charge by the Jordanian government—including the two Roman Catholic churches whose cornerstones Pope Benedict XVI blessed during his recent visit. Wisely, these structures are placed at a distance from the holy sites; they are there to aid pilgrims as they seek spiritual refreshment in connection with the sites themselves, not to get in the way of that goal. Moreover, until now the Royal Commission of the Baptismal Site has resisted what must be immense pressure to turn the site into a marketplace for religious memorabilia. You can still purchase souvenirs, but only at the visitor's center, not at the sites themselves.

Two small caves were discovered a few hundred yards away from Elijah's Hill, at the edge of Wadi al-Kharrar. They were dug into the upper layers of the Lisan marl cliffs as dwellings for hermit monks, equipped with prayer niches carved into their eastern walls. If you stand at the mouth of the cave, you see the Baptism Site and, across the Jordan River, Jericho. On a clear day you can even see Jerusalem in the distance. Here, anchored to sacred places and nourished by sacred memories of Christ's life and sacred hopes of his coming, hermits sought to draw closer to God by weaving their own lives into the larger narrative of God's dealings with humanity.

In very small measure, this is what the Baptism Site did for my son and me: it turned us into pilgrims because it presented itself to us as a sacred space—a space free from the mercantile culture in which we are drenched and a space inscribed with sacred narratives that point a person to the spring of living water and the tree of true life. As Nathanael wrote in his journal that evening: "I felt somehow connected with Jesus."