

Much of Jordan River polluted with sewage: Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian mayors join hands to call for solution

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [December 13, 2005](#) issue

At the Alumot Dam on the edge of Kibbutz Deganya, a cooperative community located a couple of miles south of the Sea of Galilee, you can smell the Jordan River long before you see it. Once you are there, two Jordan rivers come into view.

North of the dam, the water is clean enough for swimming, and every year tens of thousands of Christian pilgrims flock to Yardenit, the picturesque baptism site on the Israeli side of the Jordan, the river in which Jesus was baptized.

South of the dam the river is tainted with untreated and partially treated sewage, saline water and fish pond effluents that tumble from large drainage pipes built into the riverbed. The stench is choking.

This pollution, coupled with the diversion of much of the river's clean water by Israel, Syria and Jordan, is endangering the river—the backdrop of many biblical narratives—to the point of extinction.

“In the summer, the Lower Jordan River [the river below the Galilee] is dry in certain places, and this is a totally man-made problem,” said Gidon Bromberg, an Israeli environmentalist, as he watched the toxic water drain menacingly into the river, which meanders another 200 kilometers from this junction.

“The lower river is an open sewage canal, and the sad irony is that the sewage water is keeping the river flowing. Being baptized in the water below the dam—something that takes place on the Jordanian side of the river—cannot be too spiritually uplifting,” said Bromberg, who heads the Israeli branch of Friends of the Earth Middle East.

The Old and New Testaments speak of the lush Jordan River Valley, which stood in stark contrast to the parched desert landscape beyond, as the gate to the Garden of Eden.

The book of Genesis says that Lot decided to settle in the valley because he found it “well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord.” Moses dreamed of crossing the river into the Promised Land but died in Jordan, atop Mount Nebo. The Bible says John the Baptist found refuge by the river, where he baptized countless followers, including Jesus. It’s the place where, Gospel writers say, the spirit of God “descended like a dove” on Christ.

The Jordan River’s main water source is precipitation from Mount Hermon, a snow-covered peak shared uneasily by Israel and Syria in the north. Three streams originating in Lebanon, Israel and the contested Golan Heights also feed the river. On its way to the Dead Sea, its final destination, the Jordan swells the Huleh Lake and the Sea of Galilee and waters the Jordan Valley.

The river’s slow but steady decline began in the 1950s, when Israel started to divert the water for agriculture and other domestic use. Jordan and Syria built a series of dams and canals on the Yarmouk River, the Jordan’s main tributary, further cutting the flow to the river. Yet another large Jordanian-Syrian dam is slated to open by 2006, a fact that makes the issue that much more urgent for environmentalists.

Prior to the diversions 50 years ago, the average amount of water that flowed down the Jordan to the Dead Sea each year was 1.3 billion cubic meters, according to environmentalists. Today it’s just 50 million to 100 million cubic meters annually.

“In summertime up to half of that flow is untreated sewage from communities in Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority,” Bromberg noted.

The diversions are also endangering the Dead Sea region, another biblical backdrop. The salt-filled sea, whose shores abound with spas that offer medical treatments for skin ailments and other conditions, has lost a third of its surface area during the past half-century. As a result, sinkholes are literally swallowing up some of the land adjacent to the sea.

If it were up to environmentalists, countries in the region would import more produce in order to save the Jordan and other water sources in the water-deprived Middle East.

“Agriculture accounts for just 2 percent of Israel’s GDP [gross domestic product], yet it utilizes 30 percent of the fresh water in the country,” Bromberg said, pointing out an Israeli grove of banana trees within sight of the Yarmouk River. “In Jordan, where agriculture accounts for 6 percent of the GDP, 70 percent of the fresh water is used for crops. The economies would benefit more from tourism projects.”

Friends of the Earth Middle East, one of the few successful partnerships between Israelis, Palestinians and Jordanians, has recently stepped up its efforts to bring the Jordan River’s sorry state to world attention. One July publicity stunt saw Jewish and Arab mayors from local municipalities jumping into the clean part of the river, hand in hand.

“Water can be a bridge for peace,” Nader Khateeb, the organization’s Palestinian director, told a group representing 200 nongovernmental organizations during a September 27 seminar at the United Nations. “The water resources are so scarce in the Middle East that we have to work together with our Israeli neighbors in order to help guarantee that we as Palestinians get our fair share of water and all together stop the pollution of the water resource.”