Baptism in the Jordan River: immersing in a contested transboundary watercourse

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As the boundary of the Holy Land and the site of the baptism of Jesus Christ, the Jordan River is the most important river in Christianity. For centuries, pilgrims have traveled long distances to immerse themselves in this holy water and despite its relatively small size, the image of the ‘mighty’ Jordan has come to dominate popular imaginations. Over the past century, however, the Jordan has fallen victim to the ongoing regional conflict and suffered severe environmental degradation. Once a meandering river full of rapids and cascades, the Jordan has been extensively developed, with dams, diversion canals, and large-scale irrigation projects on the river, its tributaries, and headwaters. As a result, flow has been reduced to about one tenth of the historic value and water quality has sharply deteriorated, with raw sewage, saline flows, and agricultural run-off polluting the remaining water. Yet despite the river’s changed physical state, the Jordan’s mythical status and its association with defining moments of Jewish and Christian history continue to dominate collective imaginations in the religious realm, with nearly a million annual visitors at the three baptism sites in Israel, Jordan, and the West Bank. Why is there such a disconnect between the physical river and its spiritual counterpart? How can the sense of indifference and lack of awareness about the degradation of this holy river be explained? And what can be done to restore the Jordan River?

INTRODUCTION

Compared with other well-known transboundary rivers in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region such as the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Nile, the Jordan River was never more than a stream (Box 1). Yet from biblical times, its cultural–religious significance as the boundary of the Holy Land and the site of the baptism of Jesus has dominated popular imaginations, magnifying the river to mythical proportions well beyond its physical size. Over the centuries, the image of the ‘mighty Jordan’ has been elaborated through hymns and songs, which were mainly written and sung by people who lived in distant places and had never seen the river before, thus further increasing the discrepancy between the physical river and its symbolic counterpart. The river’s symbolic significance became even more layered in the 20th century, as the physical river and its tributaries underwent far-reaching infrastructural changes that severely reduced water levels and impaired water quality. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jordan River was drawn deep into the Arab–Israeli conflict. It became one of the most contested transboundary rivers in the MENA region, and, after 1967, a heavily militarized political border between Jordan to the east and Israel and the Palestinian West Bank to the west. Hydrologically, large-scale unilateral water resource development in Israel, Jordan, and Syria transformed the river into a utilitarian and largely artificial

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water resource system made up of dams, drinking water conduits, irrigation canals, and sewage drains. However, in the religious realm, the Jordan River’s mythical status and its association with defining moments of Jewish and Christian biblical history continued to dominate collective imaginations. Today, nearly 1 million pilgrims continue to visit the Jordan River every year to remember the baptism of Jesus Christ and immerse themselves in the river. This article explores contemporary practices and beliefs surrounding baptism in the holy but polluted Jordan River, highlighting the impact of infrastructural developments and ongoing regional conflict. It also looks at efforts to rehabilitate the river as a single, interconnected ecosystem.

BOX 1

THE CHANGING COURSE OF A HOLY RIVER

From its sources at altitudes of around 2000 m on the slopes of Mount Hermon, the Jordan River winds its way through the Jordan River Valley over a distance of about 223 km to discharge into the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth at 422 m bsl1 (Figure 1). The river’s headwaters, the Dan, Hasbani, and Banias, originate in Israel, Lebanon, and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights respectively and meet inside Israel to form the Upper Jordan River. From here the river flows south into Lake Tiberias (also known as the Sea of Galilee or Lake Kinneret), Israel’s largest freshwater reservoir that supplies approximately one third of the country’s annual water requirements. South of Lake Tiberias, the Lower Jordan River covers a distance of 143 km to the Dead Sea. Historically, this part of the river was fed by water from Lake Tiberias, the Jordan River’s largest tributary the Yarmouk River, and several seasonal wadis. However, large-scale regulation and diversion works in Israel, Jordan, and Syria since the 1950s have reduced the Lower Jordan River’s annual flow to an estimated 20–30 MCM. Moreover, this part of the river is now heavily polluted and most of the fresh water has been replaced with saline flows, sewage, water from fishponds, and agricultural run-off.2

THE HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE JORDAN RIVER

The Jordan River plays an important role in the Old Testament as the border of the Land of Israel and the place where the Israelites crossed into the Promised Land. In the New Testament, John’s baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River marks a seminal moment in the life of Christ and a defining event in the Christian Church. But while in the Old Testament the Jordan River functions as a territorial marker dividing Israel from other lands and separating home from exile, in the New Testament it marks the division between heaven and earth, which Jesus bridges by descending into the Jordan and emerging reborn to receive the Holy Spirit as the heavens open up.3 The baptism of Jesus also transformed the spiritual value of the Jordan River; early Christian writers asserted that through his act of immersing in the river he had sanctified its water. In the words of a first-century bishop, Jesus was ‘born and baptized, in order that by his passion, he might purify water’.4 The third-century Christian theologian Origen saw the baptism of Jesus as the model of Christian baptism and extolled the qualities of the Jordan River, which was ‘of sovereign virtue and very good to drink. Just as no man is good save God the Father, so no river is good except the Jordan’.5 Up to this day, the Jordan River is considered to be the source of all holy water in Christianity. Moreover, it is the only water that does not need to be blessed in order to be holy.

The Jordan River became an important Christian pilgrimage site, especially after the rise to power of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine in the fourth century AD. Testimonies from early pilgrims such as the sixth-century Piacenza Pilgrim give an impression of the baptism site during that period: ‘There is an obelisk there surrounded by a screen, and in the water […] stands a wooden cross. On both banks there are marble steps leading down to the water. The eve of Epiphany is a solemn vigil with an enormous congregation. They begin matins at the fourth or fifth cock-crow and at dawn, when matins is over, the ministers come outside, and accompanied by deacons, the priest goes down into the river’.6 The Piacenza Pilgrim further described how ship owners from Alexandria sent men to the site on Epiphany to draw holy water that was sprinkled on their ships before they set out to sea. The sick and disabled came to the Jordan for healing, and for those who were too sick, water could be drawn from the river and brought to them.7 By the later Middle Ages, the Jordan was venerated almost exclusively as a relic. Writing in 1483, Felix Faber described how several knights of his party had jumped into the Jordan fully clothed, convinced that their clothes would become impenetrable to enemy weapons. Others dipped bells in the river and believed that these would be able to stave off lightning or thunder if they were rung.
FIGURE 1 | Map of the Jordan River, Ghazal Lababidi, 2013.
Pilgrims took bottles of holy water and burial shrouds dipped in the river home with them and cut branches off the reeds on the riverbanks. Thus over the centuries, the powerful imagery that developed around the abstracted river rapidly overshadowed the river \textit{per se}, creating a discrepancy between the mythical holy river and the reality of an increasingly modest muddy stream. As the American Reverend J. L. Leeper wrote when he visited Palestine in 1900: ‘Least beautiful and least useful perhaps of all rivers, there is none the world will go so far to see’.\footnote{8}

\textbf{THE JORDAN RIVER IN THE 21ST CENTURY}

The Jordan River has undergone far-reaching changes over the last century. It is no longer simply a river and a pilgrimage site, but also a geopolitical border, a contested transboundary watercourse, a threatened ecosystem, and a tightly regulated water resource system. The strength of these different geopolitical, hydrological, environmental, and religious narratives is sharply crystallized on the Lower Jordan River where holiness, pollution, hydropolitics, and national boundaries collide. Yet at the same time, public awareness of the demise of the Lower Jordan remains low. The main reason for this is that the river itself has been largely inaccessible and thus invisible since 1967. As the geopolitical border between Jordan to the east and Israel and the Palestinian West Bank to the west, the Lower Jordan River remains a largely closed military zone, with several minefields along its course. The only place where Jordanians can visit the river is at the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site just north of the Dead Sea, a site that has only been accessible since 1994. Israelis have no access to the Jordan River south of the Yarmouk River, whereas Palestinians can only access the river at the Israeli-controlled baptism site in the West Bank, Qasr al Yehud.\footnote{9} The fact that the physical river has been largely out of sight since 1967 further enhances its abstract representations and increases the disconnect between the two.

\textbf{Baptism in the 21st Century}

A similar disconnect exists in the religious realm where the reality of a diminished, polluted river does not appear to affect the spiritual value of the water. The three baptism sites—the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site in Jordan, Qasr al Yehud in the West Bank, and the Yardenit Baptismal Site in Israel—present themselves as religious sites focused on biblical history and archeological remains, and gloss over the multiple other narratives along the river. Yet the region’s recent history flows just beneath the surface. Just north of the Dead Sea, the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site in Jordan and the Israeli-operated Qasr al Yehud site in the West Bank lie a few meters apart on the two banks of the river with an invisible border running between them (Figure 2).
The Al Maghtas/Baptism Site, Jordan
As one of the earliest Christian pilgrimage sites, the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site was largely abandoned after World War I because of regional tensions and conflict. After the 1967 Six-Day War, it even became part of an inaccessible military zone and the area was only demined and ‘rediscovered’ after Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994. Extensive archeological work uncovered a series of churches, monasteries, and other sites, including the cave where John the Baptist retreated in the desert and the church described by the Piacenza Pilgrim. Together with further textual references, these archeological findings have led the Jordanian authorities to declare the site to be Bethany Beyond the Jordan, mentioned in the Bible as the place where John the Baptist conducted his baptisms in the Jordan River. The Jordanian claim to authenticity has been further strengthened by a series of ‘letters of authentication’ from world religious leaders, and visits by two popes and numerous monarchs, heads of state, and other dignitaries. Moreover, the Jordanian government’s move to donate national land for the establishment of 12 churches of different denominations on the site adds a layer of modern mythology to the layers of biblical, archeological, and historical mythology. The fact that a range of denominations have ‘endorsed’ Al Maghtas through the construction of places of worship reinforces the site’s claims to authenticity and its image as a space for religious dialogue where communities can gather to pray, baptize, and meditate. In the words of the site’s director Dia al-Madani, the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site is ‘the fruit of peace on the land’ and an opportunity to ‘rewrite the future’ (Dia al-Madani, personal communication, June 2013).

Qasr al Yehud, West Bank
Just as its transboundary neighbor, the Qasr al Yehud site in the West Bank, which was fully reopened to the public in 2011, uses archeological remains and historic accounts to prove that it is the authentic site of Jesus’ baptism. It refers to the sixth-century Madaba Map, which places ‘Bethabara’ (Bethany Beyond the Jordan) and the church of John the Baptist west of the Jordan River. Palestinians consider this to be the Palestinian baptism site, and the late President Yasser Arafat outlined plans in the 1990s to restore it on time for the visit of Pope John Paul II in 2000. However, owing to Israeli restrictions, lack of funding, and corruption this never materialized. While the site at Qasr al Yehud could in the future become a Palestinian site as part of a peace settlement, for the time being it remains firmly under Israeli control, as it has been since 1967. Like the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site in Jordan, the area around Qasr al Yehud was affected by the regional conflict and became an inaccessible military zone after 1967, cordoned off by a security fence and surrounded by minefields. After 1980, limited access was granted to local church communities who came to celebrate Epiphany and Easter. During the rest of the year, pilgrims could only visit the site by appointment with a military escort. However, after the papal visit in 2000, Israel decided to refurbish the site, a project that was jointly implemented by the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority and the Civil Administration, the Israeli body that governs the West Bank. Funding for the project came from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry for Regional Cooperation, a controversial move, as part of the $2 million budget was effectively drawn from funds reserved for West Bank development, ‘meaning that money for Palestinian infrastructure has been diverted to the development of an Israeli tourist site’. Thus in addition to being a biblical site, Qasr al Yehud also makes a number of political statements, as it competes for authenticity with its Jordanian neighbor, but also reiterates and reinforces Israeli presence in the West Bank.

The Lower Jordan River
The river that runs between the two sites has become a more complex and layered space since the 1950s. Its image as a holy river has been overshadowed by narratives of infrastructural development, which framed the river as a utilitarian water resource system that was to be harnessed to meet the demands of a growing population in the region. In this view the river was a commodity, an economic asset, and a development opportunity that was to be mechanized, controlled, and appropriated. It had also become a transboundary resource after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and was soon drawn into the regional conflict as a contested resource. Israel forcefully imposed the construction and operation of its National Water Carrier, prevented Jordanian, Lebanese, and Syrian attempts to develop the river, and entirely barred Palestinians from accessing it. Meanwhile Syria, which lost access to the Upper Jordan River and Lake Tiberias with Israel’s occupation of the Golan Heights in 1967, turned to the development of the Yarmouk River and its tributaries, where it built 38 dams in the following decades. Jordan started diverting water from the Yarmouk and Zarqa Rivers into the King Abdullah Canal. Unsurprisingly, the first victim of these unilateral development strategies was the Lower Jordan River, which has been reduced to around 2% of its...
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FIGURE 3 | Raw sewage being released into the Lower Jordan River at the Alumot Dam, Francesca de Châtel, 2013.

historic flow. Water quality in this part of the river has also been severely impaired. About 2 km south of Lake Tiberias at the Alumot Dam, Israel releases partially treated sewage and saline flows diverted from the shores of Lake Tiberias (Figure 3). Further downstream all communities along the Lower Jordan River release agricultural run-off, water from fishponds, and poorly treated sewage.2 Salinity levels also continue to increase along the river course, reaching more than 20 times over the international guideline for salt-sensitive crops and making the river unsuitable for use in any sector.1

The overdevelopment and degradation of the Jordan River has seriously affected ecosystems and caused a 50% reduction in biodiversity.2 Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) has drawn attention to the severe degradation of the Lower Jordan River through several detailed studies and a wide-reaching international campaign to rehabilitate it. In 2010, it warned that ‘[o]rganic pollution is present in extremely high concentrations in the northern river segments and in levels that pose seasonal risks to public health in the southern segments—including at the southern baptism sites’.2 This led to a flurry of media coverage over whether the river was safe for immersion at the baptism site in the West Bank.11–13 The Israeli authorities subsequently issued statements declaring that the water was regularly monitored and safe for immersion. But as neither the Israelis nor the Jordanians make comprehensive long-term data publicly available, it is easy to speculate about the degree of pollution and whether it poses a public health threat. At the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site in Jordan, a monitoring station set up by Mutah University in cooperation with the Baptism Commission continuously measures water quantity and quality on the basis of seven parameters. The Jordan Valley Authority also carries out quarterly tests. In Israel, the Ministry of Health analyzes water samples from the Qasr al Yehud site on a weekly basis. However, none of this data is publicly available.

The Yardenit Baptisma Site

The Yardenit Baptisma Site in Israel is far removed from such unsettling reports of polluted holy water and the history of conflict and shifting borderlines. Situated just south of Lake Tiberias before the Alumot Dam, Yardenit gives a bucolic impression of the Jordan River as a free-flowing, tree-lined river (Figure 4). The water here is essentially the same as that in Lake Tiberias and therefore close to drinking water quality. According to the Yardenit website, this is one of the many places where the river still flows naturally, even though from a hydraulic point of view the river here is an artificial reservoir, regulated by the upstream Degania Dam that controls inflow from Lake Tiberias, and the Alumot Dam, 1.5 km downstream. The site presents a bright and uncomplicated narrative around its ‘pristine’ setting, merging spirituality, tourism, and consumerism into a seamless modern-day religious-retail experience. The visitors’ center, designed in the shape of a church’s nave, includes a large gift shop selling everything from bibles and holy water to ‘I Was Baptized in the
Jordan River’ T-shirts. Across from the gift shop, the Manna Restaurant serves ‘biblical food’, including St. Peter’s Fish and dates produced at the nearby Kibbutz Kinneret. As Yardenit is more than 100 km from the two southern sites, there is less need to legitimate it as the authentic site of Jesus’ baptism—tourists who visit as part of a day tour may not even be aware that there are any other sites. Yet, by omitting any biblical references to Bethany Beyond the Jordan and emphasizing the ‘scenic landscapes [described in the Bible…] that have been preserved to this day’, the site’s tourist brochure implicitly suggests that this is the authentic baptism site, or at least the place where the baptism can be relived most authentically. Like the two southern sites, the Yardenit Site also weaves in subtle political narratives, firmly rooting the story of baptism into ancient—and, implicitly, more recent—Jewish history in the Holy Land. The site’s location on the grounds of Kibbutz Kinneret, the second kibbutz founded in Mandate Palestine, ties the biblical event of the baptism of Jesus into Zionist narratives that ‘framed the kibbutz founders as intrepid pioneers who, like the ancient Israelite tribes under the leadership of Joshua, were crossing the Jordan to an era of independence and national settlement’.3

Thus, although the three baptism sites present themselves as religious sites that focus on biblical history and offer a space for spiritual reflection, each also represents particular political, nationalist, and economic interests, while at the same time glossing over the profound changes to the holy river itself.

Pilgrims in the 21st Century
Despite the environmental degradation and changes to the river, the Jordan continues to play an important role as a pilgrimage site, with nearly 1 million pilgrims a year visiting the three baptism sites.6 Pilgrims perform baptism in the Jordan River for a variety of reasons: some seek forgiveness of sins, others see it as a renewal of faith, and to many it is a way of following in the footsteps of Christ. Despite the obvious physical changes to the river, its water is seen as eternally and unchangeably holy, and awareness of the relentless environmental degradation remains low, both among religious leaders in the region and pilgrims. For example, at the Al Maghtas/Baptism Site in Jordan, visitors have the option of performing baptism in specially designed pools, which contain desalinated, chlorinated river water. However, according to the site’s directors, the pools are hardly ever in use as 90% of adult visitors choose the Jordan River. According to Msgr. Maroun Lahham, the Latin Patriarch Vicar General of Jordan, the ritual of baptism in the Jordan River is a spiritual act: ‘There is a distinction between the physical state of the water and the sacred realm. From a religious perspective it does not matter whether the water is dense or light, clear or cloudy, polluted or not polluted. This does not touch upon the aspect of faith. […] Pollution is a Western concern, it is Cartesian. Descartes’ influence stopped on the northern shores of the Mediterranean’ (Maroun Lahham, personal communication, June 2013). Most religious tourists who visit one of the baptism sites as part of a whistle-stop tour of Jordan Valley or the biblical sites...
in the Galilee have little time to reflect on the state of the river. Rose Horton of the Touched by Grace Ministries, who conducts baptisms at the Yardenit Baptism Site in Israel, said that while she tries to raise awareness of the state of the Jordan River, she realizes that most people have other priorities. ‘They’re coming for Jesus, not because there’s water issues in the Middle East. Guides may mention it, but with the overload of information that people get during their visit to Israel, how much of this will they remember?’ (Rose Horton, personal communication, June 2013).

Reviving the Jordan River

Yet despite the continued zero-sum struggle for the river’s water, efforts are being made to revive the Jordan River. FoEME has developed a comprehensive rehabilitation plan for the Lower Jordan River based on extensive multisectoral research in the three riparian countries, Israel, Jordan, and Palestine. The plan outlines concrete steps to remove pollutants from the river, return fresh water to it, and ensure Palestinian rights to a share of the river’s water are fulfilled. It highlights the crucial importance of cross-border cooperation and of treating the river basin as a single interconnected ecosystem that transcends political boundaries and disputes. Partly as a result of FoEME’s advocacy efforts, Israel started releasing 1000 m$^3$/h of fresh water from the Alumot Dam into the Lower Jordan River in May 2013, with a commitment to increase this amount to 30 MCM/year. The Israeli Ministry of Environment has also outlined a master plan for the upper part of the Lower Jordan River up to the Bezeq Stream, the border with the Palestinian West Bank. In addition, the operation of a new sewage treatment plant near the Alumot Dam by 2015 will remove sewage from the river. If Jordanian and Palestinian plans to build wastewater treatments plants in their part of the watershed are realized, ‘half a century of using the Jordan as a sewage canal can now be brought to an end’.$^{15}$ However, as FoEME points out, the removal of the various effluents discharged by Israel, Jordan, and Palestine could cause the drying up of the river. The organization therefore recommends that 400–600 MCM/year of fresh water be returned to the river and that the river be allowed to flood once a year in order to maintain a healthy ecosystem. While critics argue that none of the riparians are willing or able to give up their acquired share of the river, FoEME has identified over 1 BCM of water that can be saved in Israel, Jordan, and Syria. The organization is advocating for the establishment of an international commission to manage the Lower Jordan River basin and is currently developing a cross-border master plan. The Jordan River Rehabilitation Project also seeks to engage and involve Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders both in the region and internationally in an effort to raise awareness of the importance of preserving the Jordan River Valley as a site of shared religious and cultural–historical heritage. In November 2013, the organization published a series of Faith-Based Toolkits (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim), which religious leaders are encouraged to use in their sermons and activities to engage faith communities in the region and beyond. Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders from Israel, Jordan, and Palestine also gathered at a regional conference on the Dead Sea in Jordan in November 2013 where they endorsed the Covenant for the Jordan River drawn up by FoEME. The document calls upon regional governments to work toward the rehabilitation of the Lower Jordan Valley, which ‘must be counted as part of the heritage of humankind’.15

CONCLUSION

Just as the image of the ‘mighty Jordan’ historically dominated the reality of a much smaller, irregular river, today in the religious realm the river’s holiness continues to overshadow the reality of pollution and degradation. In addition, the river’s ongoing inaccessibility makes it easy to focus on the concept of the Jordan River as a source of holy water, while ignoring the reality of its rapid demise. Moreover, the unsolvable regional conflict continues to dominate other development efforts in the region, so that tackling environmental issues is often made to appear futile and irrelevant, and is in any case rarely a priority for the respective governments.

Yet against all odds, the first steps toward reviving the Lower Jordan River have been taken. And while the Jordan River will never return to its natural state, it could again becoming a living river and a carrier of holy water that is not only worshipped in a religious context but also revered and respected as the key to life and livelihood in this arid region.

NOTES

b Based on verbal communications with staff at the three baptism sites, Yardenit in Israel receives 500,000 visitors annually. The Al Maghtas/Baptism Site in Jordan received 250,000 visitors in 2010. This number fell to 120,000 in 2011, following a drop in overall tourism numbers in Jordan as a result of unrest in the region. Visitor numbers at Qasr al Yehud in the West Bank were estimated at 800 a day in summer and...
3000 a day in winter, equivalent to a total of about 700,000 per year. According to media sources, annual visitor numbers in 2010 before the site was reopened were around 100,000.

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FURTHER READING