

DE-MINING THE BAPTISM SITE WITH THE HALO TRUST.

By Anna Koulouris

Every day of the year, pilgrims from around the world can be seen filling shrines of the Holy Land, stepping in, touching and venerating the sites where Jesus Christ once was physically present.

However, at the Baptism Site on the Jordan River, also known as Qaser al Yahud, eight dilapidated church structures that line the one million square meter stretch of desert alongside the river, have not been touched in nearly 50 years. They are filled with concealed traps, while the land between and surrounding them holds close to 4,000 anti-tank and anti-personal mines. The area is closed off to all.

Mines were first laid in the area of the West Bank before 1967 by the Jordanians, who were trying to protect strategic areas from Israeli encroachment. During the Six-Day War, when the Israelis subsequently pushed the Jordanians to the other side of the river, they packed the Jordan Valley with minefields in order to maintain the new frontier.

The Baptism Site was one of the areas filled with landmines by the Israeli Army, blocking access to the land and churches, which in the past had been refuge points for pilgrims, especially in the early centuries of the Church.

It's not an uncommon theme in the Holy Land to see sacred spaces intertwined with remnants of war. But besides the obvious danger, this unfortunate fact undermines the nature of the holy places and deprives faithful people from experiencing them fully.

The first churches and monasteries there were built around the year 400 to commemorate the place where Saint John the Forerunner baptized Jesus Christ in the Jordan River, during which the Holy Spirit was manifest. Since this example during the life of Christ, baptism has become a fundamental, living sacrament of the Orthodox Church. According to His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos of Jerusalem, it's through baptism that one joins the body of the Church and receives his or her Christian name and identity.

The act of being baptized is referred to as "putting on Christ," as articulated by Saint Paul the Apostle, meaning that a person is metaphorically clothed with the Holy Spirit:

"For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye all are one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:26).

It is in this way that a Christian understands the importance of the Baptism Site, not only as a site where a historical event took place, but rather, where the Lord Jesus Christ gave instruction, through His example, for a Christian life and ultimately for union with Him.

In addition to the founding of the Christian sacrament, the Baptism Site supports the Old Testament and New Testament connection so greatly acknowledged in Christianity and by religious scholars.

Qaser al Yahud, whose etymology is often misattributed in modern day Arabic, actually means "crossing of the Jews," or "crossing place of the Jews." It was the place where the Old Testament Jews, led by the Biblical prophet Moses through the desert, made their final crossing into the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua ben Nun.

Whereas in the Old Testament this place on the Jordan River

was the entrance of the Jews into the Promised Land, in the New Testament it is Jesus Christ who is considered the entrance to the Promised Land. Typologically speaking, the Church is the spiritual Promised Land in Christ, and Christians enter into their spiritual Promised Land (i.e. the Church) via the waters of the Jordan.

As a proof of this connection, and where physical meets spiritual, several churches and Byzantine ruins can be found on both sides of the Jordan River.

“Our monastery is not built in that particular spot out of the blue,” says Patriarch Theophilos, “It was most likely originally built on a site where the ancient Israelites had set up an altar for prayer.”

The site of Qaser al Yahud also happens to be where the Prophet Elijah went to heaven with his carriage, and his disciple Elisha crossed and succeeded him. It is later, of course, where Saint John baptized Jesus, and also where Saint Mary of Egypt went to spend her life of repentance.

From the surrounding desert came the origins of asceticism and monasticism so revered in Orthodoxy, with the first example of Saint John the Forerunner, who when asked about his identity said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord (John 1:23).”

But Qaser al Yahud, whose winds once carried voices of prophets and whose waters embraced their bodies, now holds beneath its vast stretch of earth thousands of devices designed to kill. It doesn't seem fitting that this is where the story should lead.

For this reason, with the push of Patriarch Theophilos and with support of the Churches, the HALO Trust, a non-profit humanitarian mine clearance organization based in Scotland and the United States, has stepped in to demine the entire area. It is one of a few projects they have conducted in the West

Bank, and one of many around the world.

Over the course of a year, the HALO Trust has obtained approval from the respective Israeli and Palestinian governmental authorities, mine action authorities, as well as the heads of the Greek Orthodox, Franciscan, Armenian, Russian, Coptic, Romanian, Ethiopian, and Syrian Churches, who each have a property on the site.

With this full cooperation as its backdrop, the HALO Trust has now entered the beginning stages of fundraising for the two-year, \$4 million endeavor.

There are some challenges on the horizon. The land, bleached and cracked under the summer sun, shows signs of having been flooded during the rainy season. When the river rises, the land shifts, which means that mines have likely also shifted over the course of 50 years. The land, which the HALO Trust mostly demines manually with local workers, is checked meter by meter.

The concealed traps within the church buildings also present uncertainty, since there are no maps of where they've been laid or how they've been set. Experts will look for metal rods and other conspicuous fragments to decipher where they are and how to dismantle them. The goal is to preserve the buildings as much as possible, while making sure no threats are left inside.

When the HALO Trust raises enough of the proposed budget to begin work, a team of hired locals will be trained to excavate and destroy the mines.

In addition to the benefit of clearing the land, the employment opportunities for local people are a boost to their families and communities.

Once the Churches take back their properties and land, they hope to revive the entire area to be an oasis for locals and

the more than 300,000 pilgrims who visit a small, shared and open piece of the Baptism Site each year. They will finally be able to provide refuge and refreshment to visitors, as they once did long ago.

Part of HALO's mission is to leave areas they've demined better off than they were before. When owners are handed back their land, they're able to reclaim their livelihoods. For example, a recently cleared area near Bethlehem, a town called Hussan, has been handed back to the original landowners – or rather, the landowners' now grown children. They were taught by experts, provided by the HALO Trust, how to cultivate the land to grow the most diverse and wage-yielding crops.

Anyone who wishes to make a contribution to the clearance of the Baptism Site can do so through The HALO Trust official website:

<https://www.halotrust.org/baptismsite/>

