

THE CHURCH OF THE TEN LEPERS IN THE TOWN OF BURQIN

By Heba Hrimat

In a town that merely inhabits in its humble neighbourhoods 68 scattered Christians alongside their 7000 Muslim cohabitants, lies one of the world's oldest Churches, a few metres away from the historic centre of the town of Burqin on top of a downhill. The Church is named after the Great Martyr Saint George the Triumphant, just like most other Orthodox Churches in Palestine, but it may be best known under the name `The Church of the Ten Lepers`.

The reason for this name is that in this very ordinary town and specifically inside a cave which used to serve originally as a Roman cistern (and currently dates back to more than 2000 years ago), the miracle of the healing of the ten lepers took place. The afflicted men were exiled inside this cave in order to prevent spreading the most contagious disease of leprosy to others, and on a second account because this disease represented uncleanness according to the Judaic faith. Leprosy is a disease of the skin, manifested as white patches on the skin, running sores, and the loss of parts of the body which have become necrotic. Lepers were disenfranchised from their community. They were not allowed to enter the temple, not even come near nor touch a Jew. Someone who came close to a leper or touched him would be considered unclean. These ten men happened to meet Jesus Christ when He was on His way to Galilee, they approached Him, and He healed them (See photo no. 6).

According to the Gospel of Luke [17:11-19] "While Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, He was passing between Samaria and

Galilee. As He entered a village, He was met by ten lepers who stood at a distance; and they raised their voices and called out, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When He saw them, He said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were healed and made clean. One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, glorifying and praising and honoring God with a loud voice; and he lay face downward at Jesus' feet, thanking Him. He was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Was there no one found to return and to give thanks and praise to God, except this foreigner" Jesus said to him, "Get up and go. Your faith has restored you to health."

The first Christians were practicing religious services and prayers in secret, since their community was ruled by the strict Roman Empire that oppressed Christianity. In accordance, the cave which witnessed the miracle of healing, was used as their temple. This situation continued until the Byzantine era, when Constantine the Great legalized Christianity, and later his mother Saint Helen visited the location and decided to build the first Church to cherish the spot that witnessed the great miracle of the Lord. Therefore the first Church of the Ten Lepers was established in the fourth century.

The first Church of the Healing of the Ten Lepers is no different than other historic Churches in Palestine, which once built, later on faced revolutions and persecution, were knocked down, and reconstructed several times. After the initial building in 336 by Saint Helen, the Church was demolished by the Persians in 614 A.D. It was rebuilt later in 900, then demolished again. The current construction of the Church was built in the period between 1300 and 1800 A.D., as told By Mr. Mo`en Jabbour, who has been serving in the Church for over 10 years alongside monk Vesarion who has recently been appointed by the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate to take

care of the Church and its 68 people.

During His Beatitude`s first official visit to the Church after being appointed Patriarch of the Holy City in 2006, Patriarch Theophilos III adopted the restoration project of the Church of Saint George. The construction project began soon afterwards. The first part to be restored was the outer wall in order to keep the Church safe, then the interior restoration began. In 2011 the restoration was completed and the Church was finalized to its current status (See photos no. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7).

Next to the main Church of Saint George, there`s a small room with an unusual story (See photos no. 16, 17). This room was the first school to be founded in the Town of Burqin 120 years ago. According to the story, a naughty student was locked in that room as a punishment for his misbehaviour by his teacher, and was not allowed to go to the school trip with the rest of the class. The boy started cursing his teacher when St. George appeared to him and informed him that he would remain silent until he asked his teacher for forgiveness. If the teacher forgave him he would speak again, otherwise he would remain silent for the rest of his life. When the teacher with the rest of the class returned from the trip the boy did as he was told, the teacher forgave him and he was able to speak again.

This room is now used as a Sunday school for children, it has a small library and can also serve as a small chapel to celebrate Divine Liturgies for the visitors of the Church (See photo no. 18).

Moreover, the Church of St. George (The Church of The Ten Lepers) has rare antiques that make it more special:

1. The Baptismal font: it`s nearly 900-years old, located in the centre of the old well, and is still in use to this day (See photo no. 8).
2. The Patriarch`s Throne: the only Church throne in

Palestine that is made of stone instead of wood (See photo no.9).

3. The wall of the Holy Altar: it is also made entirely of ancient stone, same as the Patriarch's Throne. The stone is believed to be at least 900 years old, and is still preserved in its original posture and design (See photo no.10).
4. An icon of Jesus Christ: it is 250 years old, and kept inside the holy Altar (See photo no.11, the icon to the right).
5. Relics of former Priests: When the Church was under restoration in 2010, in the underground area of the well, remains of three Priests and a small child were found, autopsies later showed that these relics were buried five decades ago. Relics of two other Priests were found later in the yard of the Church. All relics were gathered and buried in a tomb adjacent to the outside wall of the Church (See photo no.12).
6. Old antique pieces: Found alongside the Priests' relics, including: A Gospel in Arabic, an old wooden Cross, a Roman cresset, a Byzantine ring, and two small bottles filled with blessed oil. These antiques are believed to be at least 500 to 600 years old. They are currently kept in a glass box inside the Church (See photo no. 13).
7. A Roman well: during the reconstructions and the restoration of the Church in 2007, a Roman well was found in the yard outside the Church, with three underground rooms and two doors. It is believed that this well also served as a place for worship during the decades of persecution (See photo no. 14).

Lastly, the two holes in the ceiling of the well through which food and water was dropped to the lepers, can still be seen

clearly when visiting the Church (See photo no. 15).

It is worth mentioning that the Church of St. George in Burqin has witnessed a remarkable increase in pilgrimage visits compared to previous years. According to Mr. Jabbour who says that "in the past, the Church had pilgrimage visits only twice to three times a month, but now more pilgrims are coming, almost every day."

The Church is open to visitors who come from different parts of the world from 8 am to 6 pm. After a guided tour inside the Church, they are hosted in the newly constructed parish hall, where they`re given refreshments and answers for their possible questions (See photo no. 19, a Canadian group of pilgrims visited the Church on June 17th).

To celebrate the memory of the Lord`s healing miracle of the Ten Lepers, an annual festal Divine Liturgy is held in the Church by His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III, Archbishops and Priests. Divine Liturgies are also celebrated on a weekly basis by Archimandrite Galaktion (Ilyas) Awad, who is originally responsible for the Monastery of the Transfiguration of Christ in Ramallah.

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