

ST. GEORGE'S MONASTERY IN THE WILDERNESS OF JUDEA

By Heba Hrimat

The extra ordinary Monastery of St George, which can be seen hanging on a cliff and tightly embraced within the ancient rocks of the deep valley of "Wadi Qelt" [Wadi: Arabic for valley] in the Judean desert, happens to be not only one of the world's oldest Monasteries, but also one of the most inspiring Churches in the Holy Land. And if you are seeking solitude, calm, and true peace, then look no more because you are at the right place. This Monastery which is among only five Monasteries still manned in the Judean desert, lies on the main route from Jerusalem to Jericho. This well-traveled road is often referred to as "Ma'ale Adummim" or the "Ascent of Adummim", and the traveler is guided there by following the brown signs for Wadi Qelt. After going through the entrance gate, visitors will still have to walk for around 15 minutes down a winding path, which may not be so easy for seniors or people with disabilities, but there are usually plenty of locals hiring their donkeys for the ride.

The route itself "Ascent of Adummim" is mentioned a few times in the Holy Bible. It is believed that some biblical events have occurred there, including: David's flight from Absalom (2 Sam 15-16), Zedekiah's flight from the Babylonians (2 Kings 25:4), the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and Jesus' travel from Jericho to Jerusalem (Luke 19:28).

But what is the "Ascent of Adummim"?

It is mainly the road up to Jerusalem from Jericho, and some believe that its name [Adummim: "red places"] is probably due to the red rocks there. Another probability of the meaning of Adummim is that of Eusebius [a Greek Christian historian, who

later became the Bishop of Caesarea Maritima] who has identified the place as the road with a village named "Maledonmnei". The Latin name for this village refers to it as the "ascent of bloodstains", probably due to men's blood spilled there by thieves. Jesus used the Ascent of Adummim as the setting for the parable of the 'Good Samaritan', in which a Jew that had been robbed and beaten by thieves was ignored by two elite Jews (a priest and a Levite) and only the Samaritan stopped to help (Luke 10:27-37).

Being the fearful and uninviting place it is, the wilderness of Judea is referred to by Prophet David as the "valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23), and people avoided crossing it, unless they had no alternative shortcut to their destination.

Nevertheless, for others it has been a suitable place of seclusion. Monks have chosen it to be their new home following the 'Desert theology' of the Old Testament. For centuries, the wilderness of Judea has been the center for many Monks who followed the footsteps and life-style of Jesus, who departed to the desert for forty days where He prayed and fasted, to set us an example of how praying and fasting should be (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13). Monks also follow the footsteps of Prophet Elijah and St. John the Baptist, to whom they may connect most, since St. John was, in all four Gospels, referred to as the "voice crying in the wilderness," in fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy for the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah (Isaiah 40:3). In preparing the way for the King of Israel, St. John used the rough hills and rocky valleys of the Wilderness of Judea as a metaphor for the hard hearts of the people.

The desert Monks are often called 'Hermits', based on the Latin and Greek words 'eremita' and 'eremites' [meaning: of the desert]. Initially many of these Monks were pilgrims who toured the Holy shrines and became overwhelmed by the spiritual experience, resorting to a full devotion to God. In the beginning of the Christian era there were only a few

Hermits in the caves of the Judean desert. However, during the Byzantine period between the 5th and the 6th century, the Wilderness of Judea hosted more than 65 Monasteries with approximately 10,000 – 30,000 Monks.

There, in the middle of the Judean desert one can easily go back in time. Very few places in the Holy Land have sustained the landscape as it initially appeared for thousands of years. And probably one of the best places to stand and observe the Wilderness of Judea, might be the Monastery of Saint George.

This Greek Orthodox Monastery was founded in the late 5th century AD. It is believed that John of Thebes [who was an Egyptian Monk and had moved to the Judean desert in 480 AD] had started the Monastery after he met a group of Syrian hermits who were settling around the cave that is believed to be the place where Prophet Elijah was fed by the Ravens (1 Kings 17:5-6). On a different history account, the Bishop of Caesarea Maritima at that time 'Juanis', had abandoned his duties as a Bishop and came to the desert, and attracted many Monks there by his ascetic example.

This Monastery was named after its two most famous Monks, St. John and St. George of Chozeba, who both were the main organizers and thanks to them the Monastery has flourished and attracted many Monks. The biography of St. George suggests that he left Cyprus at a young age to fulfil his dream of living the ascetic life in the Holy Land after both his parents died. During His time the Monastery became an important spiritual center in the 6th century.

In the 7th century the Monastery went through rough phases of destruction during the Persians occupation to the Holy Land, and all 14 resident Monks at that time martyred. When the Crusaders took over the Holy land they rebuilt the Monastery in the 12th century. Several years later the Monastery went under complete restoration campaigns which ended in 1901 under

the supervision of the Greek monk 'Kallinicos'.

It is noteworthy that the Monastery of St. John and St. George has witnessed the unfortunate deaths of great Monks and Priests who served and lived there. One of them was Father 'Antonios' who was killed when the stones of the walls fell on him during the restoration of the Church. There is also the incident of Father 'Germanos' who was murdered on his way to the Monastery from Jerusalem. Father 'Amphilochios', who was the Hegoumen at the Monastery, and had greatly contributed to the maintenance and renovation of this sacred place, had also died in the Monastery after being a Hegoumen there for 30 years.

Currently, the Monastery is being supervised and taken care of by Father 'Costantinos', who has been appointed as the Hegoumen of the Monastery by His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch Theophilos. Fr. Constantinos and his monks have successfully renovated the place to what our eyes can witness today.

This three-level Monastery complex has two main Churches, the Church of Theotokos and the Church of St. John and St. George. Both these Churches contain a rich array of icons, paintings and mosaics. However the second has a mosaic floor dating back to the 6th century and a glass casket encloses the incorrupt relics of St. John "the new Chozebite", who was from Romania and died in 1960. He was canonized a Saint by the Jerusalem Patriarchate in 2015. In His memory, an annual all-night Vigil is led by His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos.

Beside the two main Churches inside the Monastery, there are stairs from its inner court which lead up to a Chapel of Prophet Elijah [where it is believed he was fed by the ravens]. From this cave, a narrow tunnel provides an escape route to the top of the mountain. Also inside the Monastery there are couple of tombs for some of the Monks who had

previously lived and served there. Another story linking to this Monastery is the large cave above which it is believed that St. Joachim, father of Theotokos, had grieved over the barrenness of His wife, St Anne, until an angel appeared and assured Him that she would conceive.

Last but not least, this Monastery is well known for its hospitality for all pilgrims and visitors who come from all over the world.

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THE PALESTINIAN VILLAGE OF MA' LUL – REMAINS OF SHRINES

By Heba Hrimat

12 km to the west of the city of Nazareth, a rugged country road leads us to a hill covered with pine trees. As our vehicle starts to go through this pine forest, we may get the sense of domination and power. But as we ascend towards the top of the hill, 275 meters above sea level to be exact, this forest can't stop giving us a sad vibe of loneliness. We might get a little disappointed to see that there is no one or anything to welcome us as we step from our vehicle and walk around. Little do we know, that this piece of land was once overcrowded with houses. The origin of the spot where we're now standing dates back to the times of the Canaanites, and the origin of the hill we are about to explore used to be a village, and for a certain period of time this village was populated with Palestinian residents.

Since the village of Ma'lul is no longer inhabited, it may be almost impossible to find some or any of the elderly residents who usually take the responsibility of narrating the history of their villages and towns. Our only resort is books. And much to our surprise we find that the village of Ma'lul was mentioned in quite a few. For example, "Our country Palestine" by Mustafa al-Dabbagh, gives us a clue for the meaning behind the name 'Ma'lul', which may mean 'entrance' or 'gate'. Or it even may have descended from 'Ahalul', the original Roman village which is believed to have previously stood on the spot now taken on by Ma'lul. The evidence which led to such conclusion is due to the fact that there, near the village, stands a magnificent Roman mausoleum, then called "Palace of the monastery", and some consider it a proof that the place was peopled during the Roman era.

Ma'lul used to occupy a large piece of land if compared to other villages. In the year 1945 the total area of the village reached 4698 acres, 30 acres of which were occupied by roads and valleys, 2719 acres were Jews' property, and 700 acres were planted with olive trees. And although the people of Ma'lul used to cultivate and plow the land of their village, they did not own the land. They had to rent it from the Lebanese family of Sarsaq, whom had previously acquired the land.

If compared to the first census conducted in 1596, we find that Ma'lul had little population during that time (only 77 people). But these numbers started to grow slowly and gradually as time passed. And since the village had both Christians and Muslims, we notice that their numbers were close, at the beginning. For example, in 1912 there were approximately 235 Christian Orthodox and 296 Muslims, both living the simple life of farming and ranching. However, in 1945 these numbers went down to reach 200 Christians and 490 Muslims. The last census of 1948, the year that witnessed the Palestinian Exodus, shows that Ma'lul had a total of 800

people.

And since staying was not an option, in the wake of the 1948 war, people of Ma'lul had to leave their homes and resort to the nearest safe point. Some of them resorted to Nazareth and Jaffa, while others took shelter in Syria and Lebanon, or by the Palestinians in the villages of Lower Galilee., According to the Israeli historian Benny Morris, Ma'lul was occupied during the second phase of 'Dikal' military operation on July 15, 1948, one day before the city of Nazareth.

Today, the village of Ma'lul is completely empty, and the houses have been settled to the ground. All we can find when we visit the site are two Churches, a wrecked mosque, and few tombs belonging to the old Islamic cemetery.

One of these two Churches belongs to the Melkite Catholics, but the second one, which lies there on top of the hill surrounded by pine trees, is an Orthodox one, its history dates back to more than 350 years ago. And carries the name of 'The Ascension of the Lord' and 'Prophet Elijah'.

Despite the lack of definite facts about this Church, it can be expected that it might have been affected by the overall situation that prevailed in the region at that time. As a result, the Church of Ma'lul is covered with wild plants and weeds on the outside, and cracked eroded walls on the inside. The reason for the Church to reach this unfortunate state was due to the fact that the Israeli Army had an absolute occlusion over the area of the village, where no one and nothing were allowed inside. The Patriarchate of Jerusalem has lost all control over the Church. However, thanks to continuous and sincere efforts from His Beatitude, The Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III, and the support of the Hagiotaphite, the Patriarchate regained control over the Church once again, and carried out an immediate rehabilitation project.

Starting off with extensive cleaning campaigns to remove the weeds and trash, a long and arduous process followed, to restore the Church of Ma'lul inside out. The rehabilitation project was completed in 2014, under the command of His Beatitude the Patriarch of the Holy City Theophilos III, with the funding of the Hagiotaphite Brotherhood.

Last but not least, it is very important to note that the Divine Liturgy is celebrated on a monthly basis in the Church of Ma'lul. Although the village is currently uninhabited, this does not affect the desire of the Jerusalem Patriarchate to revive the legacy of the Christian faith in one of the villages that was once home for some faithful Orthodox Christians.

The annual Feasts at the Church of Ma'lul are, the Ascension of the Lord, usually held on the same day of the Feast, and is led by the Most Reverend Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth and the Feast of Prophet Elijah, which is usually held on a Saturday (either the one before or after the actual day of the feast). This one in particular is led by His Beatitude our Father and Patriarch of Jerusalem Theophilos III, with co-celebrants the Metropolitan Kyriakos of Nazareth, the Most Reverend Archbishop Aristarchos of Constantine and Geronda Secretary-General and the Hegoumen of the Holy Monastery of the Transfiguration in Mount Tabor Archimandrite Hilarion, who happens to be the patron of the Church of Ma'lul, as well as a number of other Hagiotaphite Hieromonks, and Deacons. These Feasts are usually attended by members from the community of the city of Nazareth, and occasional pilgrims.

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THE TOWN OF SABASTIYA: HISTORY, ARCHAEOLOGY AND ITS RELATION TO ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

By Heba Hrimat

The town of Sabastiya, which is located 12 kilometers northwest of the city of Nablus, may seem just another modest town at first. However, this quickly starts to alter as we approach the 'Historic Site' of the town. Just as we draw nearer to the public square, which is located at the heart of the town, a huge ancient building welcomes us from the north. The building has the name of 'The Mosque of Prophet Yahya' (Yahya is Arabic for John), but the exterior of this building does not suggest it is a mosque, except for the minaret part, of course. The reason behind this is simple: it was not meant to be one. Originally, the building was one of the largest Cathedrals built in The Holy Land by the Crusaders, second biggest to be exact, after the Cathedral they built for The Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. The reason behind that may be because it held such a significant meaning, that they had no choice but to prioritize it before other holy sites. In that Church lies the tomb of the greatest among the Prophets, St. John the Baptist.

As we continue our on-foot tour towards the Historic Site, we reach a large square, with no modern buildings but two souvenir shops. There, a long historical journey begins, one that takes us back in time to the early Bronze Age (3200 BC), and something about this place forces us to feel different,

perhaps because we are standing at the spot what witnessed the succession of many historical periods and the passage of glorious civilizations, dating back to more than 10,000 years ago. Canaanite, Israelite, Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine civilizations, all have succeeded in leaving their very own imprint on the town.

This series of monuments continues to the top of the hill, which contains the remains of an ancient Greek Orthodox Church, also used to be a Byzantine Cathedral. This one tells the story of St. John the Baptist's beheading by order of Herod Antipas.

Being at the top of the hill, every step ahead gives us a vision of what this modest piece of land has witnessed, a Hellenistic Tower on the right, then Roman Steps to what used to be the Temple of Augustus lie just around the corner, before we descend the stairs to meet a Roman amphitheater, and our tour comes to an end. But as we take few steps forward we realize that we go back to where everything started.

The first attempt to build the city on which Sabastiya currently stands (it did not acquire this name until 27 BC), was in 876 BC by King 'Omri', the sixth king of the Kingdom of Northern Israel. Since it was located on a hill and completely isolated, therefore easy to defend, Omri decided to move his home from 'Tirzah' to his new strategic city, which he later called 'Samaria' and made it his capital. The Hebrew name for Samaria is 'Shomron' which is derived from the individual [or clan] Shemer, from whom King Omri purchased the site (1 Kings 16:24).

After Omri's death, his successor 'Ahab' was influenced by his Phoenician wife, Jezebel of Sidon, to build a temple in honor of Baal (1 Kings 16:32). Causing Ahab to eventually abandon the worship of Yahweh and encourage idolatry instead, which provoked the wrath of Prophet 'Elijah' who prophesized of the heinous death of Ahab and his wife.

During the reign of King Jeroboam II, Samaria flourished economically. His long reign saw the development of aristocracy, which became a symbol of decay in the eyes of the prophets Hosea and Amos. Prophet Micah predicted the fall of Samaria in the hands of the Assyrians in the book of Micah (1:6): "And I will make Samaria as a heap of stones in the field when a vineyard is planted. And I will bring down the stones thereof into the valley, and will lay her foundations bare."

The prophecy of Micah was fulfilled in 721 BC. When the Assyrians captured the city after a three-year siege, defeating the last king of Israel 'Hosea', and leading to the downfall of the kingdom of Israel. The Israelites were captured and carried to Babylon and the land was peopled with Chaldeans.

In 331 BC, Samaria was destroyed by Alexander the Great, during his series of battles against the Persian Empire. The city got converted to a Hellenistic village after the king brought thousands of Macedonian soldiers into it. Some previous excavations revealed three round towers (see photo 14) and huge fortifications with square towers as well as many artifacts dating back to the Hellenistic era.

However, the Macedonian fortifications did not last long and were later destroyed by the Maccabean commander 'John Hyrcanus', who following his success in capturing the city of Madaba [in Jordan] after a siege lasted six months, headed north towards Shechem and Mount Gerizim. There, he launched a violent campaign targeting the Samaria area. The siege lasted for a long, tiring year in which Hyrcanus refused to surrender until he captured and destroyed Samaria completely in 108 BC. The city was later rebuilt again by the political and military leader of the Roman Empire Pompey in 63 BC.

The city started to become glorious again after Emperor Augustus (the founder and first emperor of the Roman Empire)

presented it as a gift to King Herod the Great (king of Judea at that time) in 27 BC. He started renovating and improving his new city, and settled 6000 inhabitants in it. Herod, later and in honor of Augustus, changed the city's name to 'Sebaste', Greek for 'Augustus'. He also dedicated the great temple he built in the city to the emperor. (See photo 16)

Herod, who was well known for his love of luxury, built a theatre, stadium and many other public edifices. However, most of his buildings were later rebuilt in the 2nd century AD, under the rule of the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus. Sebaste was also expanded and many new structures were constructed. Even today, we can still view the ruins of the basilica and the forum colonnade from that earlier time period. (See photos 12, 13, 15)

It is important to note that after the resurrection of Christ and his ascension to heavens, Philip, was the first to preach the gospel in Sebaste, with such success that soon Peter and John the Apostles joined him in the field. There, many citizens were baptized and received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8).

According to the Orthodox Christian tradition, it was in Sebaste that King Herod Antipas held the infamous banquet, to celebrate his birthday. And in which Salome danced. [Salome was the daughter of Herodia. The wife of Herod Antipas, who had previously been married to his brother Philip]. According to Mark (6: 21-29), when she danced she impressed the king who swore to give her anything she asked for, that's when she went out and asked her mother what she should ask for, to which Herodia immediately answered: "The head of John the Baptist". Herodia had resented St. John and wanted to kill him, because he was fiercely opposed to Herod's marriage to his brother's wife, but she could not carry out her intentions since it was Herod who feared John and protected him, knowing he was a righteous and holy man. So she got her golden opportunity when Herod could not retreat after he swore in front of his dinner guests, she got the fulfilment of her demand on a silver

platter. The evangelist continues to narrate the details of the event "When John's disciples heard about this, they came for his body and laid it in a tomb."

A Greek Orthodox Church was erected at the site of the beheading, and was named 'The Church of the Head'. A Byzantine Cathedral dating back to the fifth-century was built on it. Its ruins are still present to this day on the southern side of the Roman Acropolis (see photos 1-4).

From early Christian days, the tradition holds that the body of John the Baptist was buried in a tomb adjacent to the graves of the prophets 'Abdias' and 'Elijah'. As mentioned in the translation of 'The Guide to The Holy Places' [compiled by Eusebius] where Jerome describes Samaria/Sabastiya as "the place that guards the remains of St. John the Baptist." In the fourth century AD, the town of Sabastiya included a Christian community that was proud of the fact that the tomb of St. John the Baptist was in their town next to the tombs of the two prophets. But all that remains of that society today is one Christian family consisting of a father, a mother and three children.

According to the accounts of the historian 'Rufinus' in 362 AD, it is reported that the pagans desecrated the tomb during the persecution against Christians led by Emperor Julian the apostate. Not only did they burn the remains of St. John, but they also scattered the ashes to the wind. Luckily, some monks [of St. Philip Monastery in Jerusalem] were passing by and were able to save some of the relics of the glorious Saint. A Byzantine Cathedral was built around the tombs, but the Persians destroyed it in 614 AD.

After the success of the Crusaders in their first campaign in 1099, they established the Kingdom of Jerusalem, which formed their largest kingdom in the East and lasted for two decades. During their reign, they restored the Byzantine Cathedral (in 1165) which contains the tombs of the Saints as well as some

Roman royal tombs. This Cathedral became the second largest Church in the Holy Land after the Holy Sepulcher Church in Jerusalem.

However, following the defeat of the Crusaders before Saladin in the battle of Hittin in 1187, the Cathedral was converted into a mosque (see photo 6) bearing the name of the 'Prophet Yahya' (Yahya is Arabic for John). This mosque, which was rebuilt in 1892, still contains the tomb of St. John the Baptist inside a small building topped by a dome in the courtyard of the old Cathedral/current mosque (see photo 5). The tombs can be reached by descending 21 steps (see photo 9) and enter the tomb chamber (see photo 10) with six burial niches set in the wall (see photo 11). As is commonly known, the tomb of St. John is located in the lower row between the tombs of the Prophets Abdias and Elijah (See photo 17).

In spite of the many changes that have occurred to the Cathedral, one can clearly see its distinctive features, including: the large part of the western facade with large sections of the wall (see photo 7), a number of columns (see photo 8) and the apse of the old church. Other ruins the town of Sabastya still holds are: ruins of the colonnaded street (see photos 12, 13), Hellenistic Tower (see photo 14), Roman Forum and Basilica (see photo 15), steps to where the temple of Augustus stood (see photo 16) and remains of a Roman amphitheater.

After the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the early 16th century, the town of Sabastiya joined the rest of Palestine under the Ottoman rule, as it appeared in the tax records in 1596 as a part of the area of Mount Sami of the Nablus Brigade. During the British Mandate era, the mandate authorities conducted population censuses for the region and the total number of the town in 1922 was 572 people, including 10 Christians and 562 Muslims. These numbers rose in the next census, which took place nine years later, reaching 20

Christians, two Jews and 731 Muslims.

In the modern days, Sabastiya was under Jordanian annexation after the Arab-Israeli war ended and according to the Armistice Agreement in 1949. The situation continued like that until the 1967 war, known as the Six-Days War, when Sabastiya became part of the Israeli administration as part of Area C, and part of 'Judea and Samaria District' according to the Israeli administration term used to designate the West Bank territories except for East Jerusalem.

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THE TOWN OF NISF JUBEIL

By Heba Hrimat

Within the chain of villages that surround the Governorate and city of Nablus, lies the village of Nisf Jubeil in the north-west part of Nablus City, just a few kilometers from the historic village of Sebastya.

According to the testimonies of the villagers, as narrated to them by their forefathers, the current village of Nisf Jubeil was built on the ruins of an ancient village dating back hundreds of years ago. However, that village was completely destroyed, and vanished by a flood that ravaged the region at an indefinite time in the distant past. Therefore, due to nature factors, the landscape was changed and the current village of Nisf Jubeil has been formed in a way that does not suggest anything of the original village and its landmarks. Hence, there is no real tangible evidence to suggest the

occurrence of the flood, except for some previously conducted excavations in the region, which traced the presence of some rooms and walls under the existing village houses.

The village of Nisf Jubeil is known for the wide variety of its olive trees; villagers say that the annual harvest yields at least 30 tons of extra virgin olive oil, harvested from the trees which witnessed the good and bad times among the historic events that dominated the land.

The history books make no mention of the first inhabitants of the village, nor of its age, so it might be assumed that the place was not of significant historic importance. Unfortunately the fate of the Christians in this village seems to be similar to the historic mentioning of Nisf Jubeil. The elderly villagers believe that the original population of the village was only Christians, who were mainly farmers and shepherds. But as time passed by, changes came, making the younger people interested in having a different kind of life and the unstable living conditions of the town must have led them to flee, resulting in the significant decrease of the overall numbers of Christians in Nisf Jubeil. For example, in 1838 there were more than 200 Christians, of whom the vast majority were Orthodox, alongside the appointed priest for the Church at that time.

Later, during the British Mandate era, population statistics showed a decrease, with numbers to reach 105 Christians. The numbers kept dropping, till they reached their lowest count. Today, the town of Nisf Jubeil is left with only two Christian elderly women, in their eighties. One of them travels back and forth between her house in Nisf Jubeil and the houses of her sons in other cities, while the health condition of the second lady does not allow her to move as much, so she chose to stay in her house surrounded by her 500 Muslim neighbours.

Currently the only reminder of the ancient existence of Christianity in Nisf Jubeil, besides the two elderly women, is

the Orthodox Church of St. George, located in the eastern part near the entrance of the village. This Church was built in 1880, and went under restoration recently in 2014, when it was officially reopened with the attendance of His Beatitude Patriarch Theophilos III (see photos 5,6,7), and Mr. Basem with his wife Muna Hishmeh, who financially supported the restoration project along with The Jerusalem Patriarchate.

The Church of St. George had its own Priests until the year 1963, when the late reverend Father Nikola Khouri rested in the Lord, and was buried in the small cemetery inside the Church courtyard. Afterwards, it became a tradition that the Priest who was responsible for the Orthodox Church in Nablus City, would also be responsible and celebrate the weekly Divine Liturgy at the Church of Nisf Jubeil.

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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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THE CITY OF TUBAS

By Heba Hrimat

Tubas is a Palestinian city a few kilometers to the west of the Jordan River. Its history dates back to the Canaanite era, that`s when it was originally named `Tuba Syoys` which translates `shining star`. Tubas is also mentioned in the Book of Judges (Chapter 9) in the Old Testament under the name `Thebez`, when the ruler of Shechem at that time King `Abimelech` fled from Shechem after destroying it and killed its citizens.

The total population of Tubas currently reaches approximately 25,000 people, however the Christians of this region do not exceed 50 people, although their number has reached at one point up to 400 people. According to some of the Christians who still live in Tubas the main reason behind the decline in the number of Christians in the city could be due to the lack of employment opportunities, which forced people to move to

neighboring cities or to migrate completely from Palestine to countries with potentially better education and job opportunities such as Canada, The U.S.A and Germany.

This small Orthodox Christian community owns an Orthodox Church named after the Holy Trinity, in the northern part of the city, which was built in 1976.

The outer construction does not suggest the building is a Church, and the interior decoration is very humble. The two-floor building also includes a parish hall where the Congregation gathers after the Divine Liturgy on Fridays. The Jerusalem Patriarchate has assigned Father Tou'ma Dauod to serve in the Orthodox Christian Community in al-Zababidah.

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THE TOWN OF ZABABDEH

By Heba Hrimat

To the north of the West Bank and 15 km to the south-east of the City of Jenin, lies the town of Zababdeh or al-Zababida. The history of this small town dates back to no longer than two centuries. The first people who inhabited this land had fled their countries due to the oppression they suffered at that time.

These people worked in agriculture and livestock until they decided to purchase the land from its original Muslim owners, and named it later Zababdeh. After a period of time they felt

the need for a Priest to celebrate the Divine Liturgy and hold the rest of the Church services. According to this request, the Patriarchate of Jerusalem sent them the first Priest to serve in Zababdeh, the Reverend Father Nasser Mikhail Hanna from Beisan, who rested in the Lord in 1913. Later his son, the Reverend Father Ibrahim Hanna succeeded his father.

Therefore, the first ever Christian community to be established in al- Zababida was the Orthodox community, and the Church of St. George which still exists until now was the first Church to be built in this town. Of course the Church was not as it is today; it was hosted in a Cave with a narrow door, and the engraved inscription on the construction stone of the Church shows that it was built in 1874. However, the extensions were not built until early 1992, when Father Tou`ma Daoud, the current Priest of the Church, was designated to serve in the town of Zababdeh.

The visitor to the Church of St. George in Zababdeh can observe the simplicity of the construction design. Although the Church may not be as old as other historic Churches in Palestine, however the overview suggests the age of the place, and probably the cemetery at the end of the church, where the bodies of five former Priests are buried, has something to do with that feeling.

The most distinctive feature which makes the simple town of al-Zababida outshine other regions, is that it holds the largest Christian community among the cities and governorates of the northern part of the West Bank. The Orthodox community, which is larger than any other Orthodox community in other northern cities or towns, includes about 1000 people, while the share of the Latin parish in Zababdeh is the largest of the Christian doctrines, with approximately 1200 people. The Anglican community follows with approximately 100 people, and the Catholic parish with approximately 70 people. Each doctrine owns only one Church.

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THE CHURCH OF JACOB'S WELL

By Heba Hrimat

The Church of Jacob's well is located in Tel Balata in the eastern part of Nablus city. The 41 meter-deep well can be accessed by entering the Church, and descending the stairs to a crypt containing the well by a small winch and a bucket.

The Church was named after the well. According to Genesis 33: 18-20, when Jacob returned to Shechem, he camped before the city, and bought the land on which he pitched his tent and erected an altar. However the religious significance of Jacob's Well Church lies to the fact that it was built on the land where Jesus Christ set His feet. According to St. John's Gospel 4: 5-6 Jesus "came to a city of Samaria called Sychar, near the field which Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there." John's Gospel continues to describe a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman (later called Photeini, according to the Orthodox tradition), which took place while Jesus was resting at the well after a tiring journey.

The jar of water carried by the Samaritan woman still exists to our day, preserved in a glass frame on top of one of the pillars inside the Church, which the visitors can see clearly, also a small relic of St. Photeini's forehead is preserved within a beautiful reliquary of glass and metal.

There is a historic account of a long and debilitating

struggle to build and maintain the Church of Jacob's Well, which dates back to more than sixteen centuries ago. The first attempt was made by St. Helen in the fourth century, but the Church was demolished in the 15th century by the leaders of the Samaritan rebellion in Nablus on the Day of Pentecost, when the first Bishop of Nablus was killed, along with twelve Priests and 11,000 Christians, and the Church was seized afterwards.

The second attempt was by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, but this time it was destroyed by the Persians, who also destroyed 364 other Churches in Palestine and killed 5000 monks. A third attempt to build the Church was made by the crusaders in 1172 but it was again demolished after their defeat by Saladin in the Battle of Hattin 1187. In 1860 the Bishop of Gaza purchased the site and returned it to the Jerusalem Orthodox Patriarchate, construction began again, but this time an earthquake destroyed the Church in 1927.

The Church built in 1908 was still incomplete by 1979 when Archimandrite Philomenos who was serving there martyred for the Lord and was canonized a Saint by the Orthodox Church in 2009. His Holy relics, which have been working many wonders, are safely kept in a reliquary inside the Church.

In 1980, after the martyrdom of St. Philomenos, Father Ioustinos was sent by the Patriarchate to serve the Church of Jacob's well, with the goal to complete its building. Having faced many obstacles, he was finally granted the permission by the late Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to continue the building of the Church, as an honor for his help to the Palestinians during their uprising.

In order for the Church to reach its present state, Father Ioustinos worked "as an architect, a contractor, a beggar, and a painter" as he says, and truly he worked on every single detail from the design and the shape of the Church, to collecting donations for the construction, painting the icons,

etc. All in all, it took him 11 and a half years to finish the Church inside out. And despite being exposed to repeated aggression and violent attacks and the numerous attempts of theft and destruction of the Church, Father Ioustinos refuses to retreat or bow.

Therefore, In honor of the magnificent importance of the Church Jacob`s Well, there`s an annual Festal Divine Liturgy held and celebrated in the Church on the 5th Sunday after Easter of each year, officiated by the Patriarch, with co-officiating Bishops and Priests, among the presence of local Christians and pilgrims who come especially to attend this annual Feast.

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NABLUS

By Heba Hrimat

Nablus is a city located in the northern West Bank, about 49 km to the north of Jerusalem, and lies between the mountains of Gerzem and Ebal.

The name of this city, which is nearly 2000 years old, dates back to the Roman emperor Vespasian, who named it 'flavia neapolis' which translates 'the emperor`s new city'. From then on, the city`s name kept changing until its current name 'Nablus' was established. Nablus is mentioned in the Bible under its` Hebrew name 'Shechem', however Shechem was moved 2 km from the initial location of the city after its annihilation

during the first Romanian-Jewish war.

Many historical periods have passed on Nablus, each has left its own imprint on the city, and some of the very notable sacred historical sites in it are Joseph's Tomb and Jacob's Well, where a Church was built under the same name.

The number of residents in Nablus are 146, 493, the vast majority of whom are Muslims, and about 500 Samaritans, and 650 Christians centered in Rafidia region in the western part of the city. The Christians in that district are divided into four denominations, the largest of which are, the Orthodox (300 people), then Latin Catholic and the Anglican community (with approximately 150 people each) and a minority of Roman Catholics (approximately 48 people).

The city has four Orthodox Churches, the oldest being Jacob's Well Church which is located in Tel Balata with its construction dating back to the fourth century, then comes the Church of St. Moses the Abyssinian in Rafidia (currently under restoration), and the Church of St. Demetrius in the old city of Nablus, while the most recent is the Church of the Annunciation of the Theotokos, also located in Rafidia.

The Churches of other denominations are listed as follows: St. Justin's Latin Church, St. John the Baptist Church for the Roman Catholics, Churches of the Good Shepherd and St. Philip's for the Anglican community.

There is also an Orthodox Association, which dates back to the 1960s. It is managed by a committee of seven people, who are responsible for the preservation of the Church and community property, the funding of university fees for students in need and currently working on a residential complex establishment project.

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ABOUT THE PILGRIM DANIEL THE RUSSIAN (10TH CENTURY)

The Patriarchate website posts an article of Miss Elisabeth Koulinsky, daughter of a Priest and Russian speaking student in the School of Theology of Athens, in the Russian language, about Daniel the Russian who came as a pilgrim in the Holy Land in the 10th century and wrote in his Intinerarium his pilgrimage impressions and experiences, which are quite useful regarding the Holy Shrines. For the article please follow the link:

<https://en.jerusalem-patriarchate.info/ru/2017/05/03/37583>

From Secretariat-General