



Ceremony at the Syrian Orthodox church

Getting There

The baptismal site is located on the west bank of the Jordan River, east of Jericho. To get there, turn north at the Bet HaArava Junction with road 1, and take road 90 toward Bet She'an. About 2.5 km north of the entrance to the Deir Hijleh Monastery, turn right (east) and drive for about 1.5 km to the site's entrance gate. Continue straight eastward to the site.

Please respect the site and the following rules:

- Follow the instructions of Israel Nature and Parks Authority personnel.
- Use only official roads. It is dangerous and prohibited to go off the road, even to the shoulders! Park only in the parking lots.
- The site has facilities for baptismal ceremonies. Please respect the ceremony and the worshippers.
- Baptism is allowed only in the designated area. Crossing the river is prohibited.
- The Jordan River water is not drinkable.
- Please maintain quiet and dress suitably.
- Pets are not allowed.
- Food is not allowed in the baptismal area.
- Keep the area clean.
- Do not light fires.

Opening Hours

Summer: 8:00–17:00 Winter: 8:00–16:00

On Fridays and holiday eves the site closes one hour earlier.

Warning

There are landmines in the area. They are surrounded by marked fences. Do not cross the fences!

Text: Yaacov Shkolnik; **English translation:** Miriam Feinberg Vamosh

Photos: Cover - Abir Sultan / FLASH 90, Doron Nissim, Yaacov Shkolnik, INPA Archive

Production: Adi Greenbaum

© Israel Nature and Parks Authority



Qaser al-Yahud

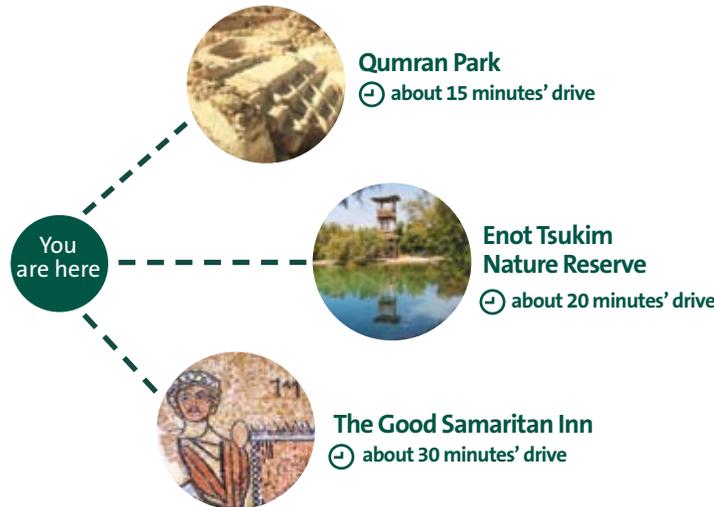
Baptism Site

BUY AN ISRAEL NATURE AND PARKS AUTHORITY SUBSCRIPTION FOR UNLIMITED FREE ENTRY TO 55 NATIONAL PARKS AND NATURE RESERVES.

www.parks.org.il | *3639 |



Nearby Sites:



www.parks.org.il | *3639 |

e-mail: atar.t@npa.org.il

Baptism Site, Tel. 02-6504844

Welcome to Qaser al-Yahud Baptism Site

In the heart of the Jericho steppes the Jordan River snakes through soft, white rocks that nearly disintegrate to the touch, creating a green strip of life – a tangle of trees and reeds where birds and many species of animals find shelter. Thanks to its uniqueness, the area was proposed as a nature reserve (during the British Mandate period), preserving the rich natural world on the Jordan's banks. Along the slowly flowing river is the site known in Arabic as Al Maghtas (place of the baptism) or Qaser al-Yahud (the palace of the Jews).



Tradition and Sanctity

The baptismal site here on the banks of the Jordan is believed to be Beth Bara (Judges 7:24), where the Israelites crossed the Jordan River following Moses' final speech on Mount Nebo. After 40 years of wandering in the desert, the river symbolized the end of their nomadic existence and the move to permanent settlement.

The entry to the Promised Land is described in the Bible as a great miracle. As long as the feet of the priests remained in the river, the Israelites could cross safely. The miracle was much greater because it occurred during harvest season, when the Jordan was at its peak flow. As the Bible says:

So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and as those who bore the ark came to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests who bore the ark dipped in the edge of the water (for the Jordan overflows all its banks during the whole time of harvest), that the waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at Adam, the city that is beside Zaretan. So the waters that went down into the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, failed, and were



cut off; and the people crossed over opposite Jericho. Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan (Joshua 3:14–17).

Ancient traditions connect this site with the place where Elijah the prophet ascended to heaven in his fiery chariot after passing on his prophetic powers to Elisha (2 Kings 2). This is where Naaman, the Aramean king's leprous Syrian general, came seeking a cure. On Elisha's recommendation, he immersed himself seven times and was healed (2 Kings 5). Elisha's act is a hint that immersion in the Jordan has purifying power.

The site's sanctity and the images of Elijah and Elisha must have been at the forefront of the mind of John the Baptist, who chose an ascetic life in the desert. John, the scion of a priestly family and a relative of Jesus, lived in the 1st century CE, calling people to repent before the coming day of judgement. As part of that process, he baptized people in the Jordan River. Famously, John baptized Jesus at that time.

Baptism was adopted as the ceremony by which people enter Christianity, and the site where John baptized Jesus took on major significance for Christians. To this day, many believers ascribe healing powers to the Jordan River; many also take home water from the river as a sacred souvenir.

History and Archaeology

During the Byzantine period (4th–7th centuries), numerous pilgrims, following in the footsteps of Jesus, visited the baptismal site. Baptism in the Jordan was one of the high points of pilgrimage, a ceremony still held today on the holiday of Epiphany. Over the years, churches and monasteries were built along the river, providing religious services and accommodations. During the Early Islamic period (7th–11th centuries CE), pilgrim traffic declined considerably, but flourished once again during the Crusader period (11th–13th centuries CE). In the 19th century pilgrims once again visited the area under Turkish rule and later, under the British Mandate and the Jordanian government.

After the Six-Day War (1967), the Jordan River became the border between Israel and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Due to ongoing and bloody battles against terrorists who crossed the Jordan River into Israel at that time, the "land of the pursuits," as the area became known, was made a closed military zone. The monasteries built here to commemorate John's baptizing and to extend hospitality to pilgrims stood abandoned. The area was fenced off and mined, and the baptismal site was closed to visitors.

After the peace treaty with Jordan was signed in 1994, the Civil Administration of Judea and Samaria began to permit visits to the site, which underwent extensive development in preparation for large numbers of visitors. Since 2011 the site has been open year-round with regular hours. On Epiphany, between January 12 and January 24, and on Easter (in April), colorful mass baptisms are held here by various Christian denominations, attracting thousands of pilgrims and visitors.

The Jordan Monasteries

Remains of monasteries are scattered along 1.5 km on both sides of a paved road; they are off limits due to possible landmines.

The first monastery, at the junction of the road descending to the baptismal site, about 350 m from the Jordan River, is the fortress-like Greek Orthodox Monastery of John the Baptist. This is the structure known in Arabic as Qaser al-Yahud ("the palace of the Jews"). Built on the foundations of an earlier, Byzantine monastery, this is the largest of the Jordan River monasteries. According to 6th-century evidence, it was built during the reign of Emperor Anastasius I, who ruled from 491 to 518 CE. The monastery was destroyed in an earthquake in 1024 CE, but was rebuilt in the 12th century CE by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel Komnenos. The Knights Templar gave the monastery its fortress-like appearance to protect the monks who lived there.

Farther along the road are more abandoned monasteries and churches, including the Syriac Orthodox and Coptic monasteries, the Russian chapel, the Ethiopian monastery and the Romanian church.

