

BETHANY BEYOND THE JORDAN WHERE JESUS WAS BAPTIZED

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At this site, the past, the present, and the future meet. God and man meet in the path of salvation where the Old and New Testaments meet in an everlasting salvation path. Time will become one. A reality of soul and faith emerges stronger in the hearts of the believers as time goes on. The **Gospels** were clear to mark the place where Jesus was baptized and John the Baptist lived (the place had to be east of the Jordan River and opposite of Jericho city).

The mosaic map of the Holy Land, shows the former location of Aenon. Now Aenon is called Saphsaphas. Bethabara is depicted just west of the river; it is the place where John was baptized (That could be a mistake. Since it means “the house of crossing”, the exact spot did not make much difference as long as it marked the place of crossing, proximity to the Dead Sea and surrounding cities).

It is interesting to analyze the animals that are depicted on the map in the area of Bethany beyond the Jordan. We note two fish: one goes toward the Dead Sea while the other faces away. The logical explanation is that fish do not live in the Dead Sea so they move north in the Jordan River. Fish were commonly used as a symbol of Christianity and baptism.

The presence of fish specifically at this point in the river Jordan signifies the spot where Jesus was baptized. This is where Christianity started. As for the deer that is chased by a lion, one might see the scene as “evil chasing good” or “the strong threatening the weak”. In other words “Herod threatening John the Baptist who criticized his marriage with his brothers’ wife”(Mathew: chapter 14).

The Pilgrims’ and travelers’ accounts and **the archaeological discoveries** are among the above mentioned sources of information that

enable us solve the “jigsaw puzzle” and form a comprehensive view of the important events that took place at the site. The crowning event is the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Memorial Churches at the Place Where Jesus was Baptized (Fig. 1)

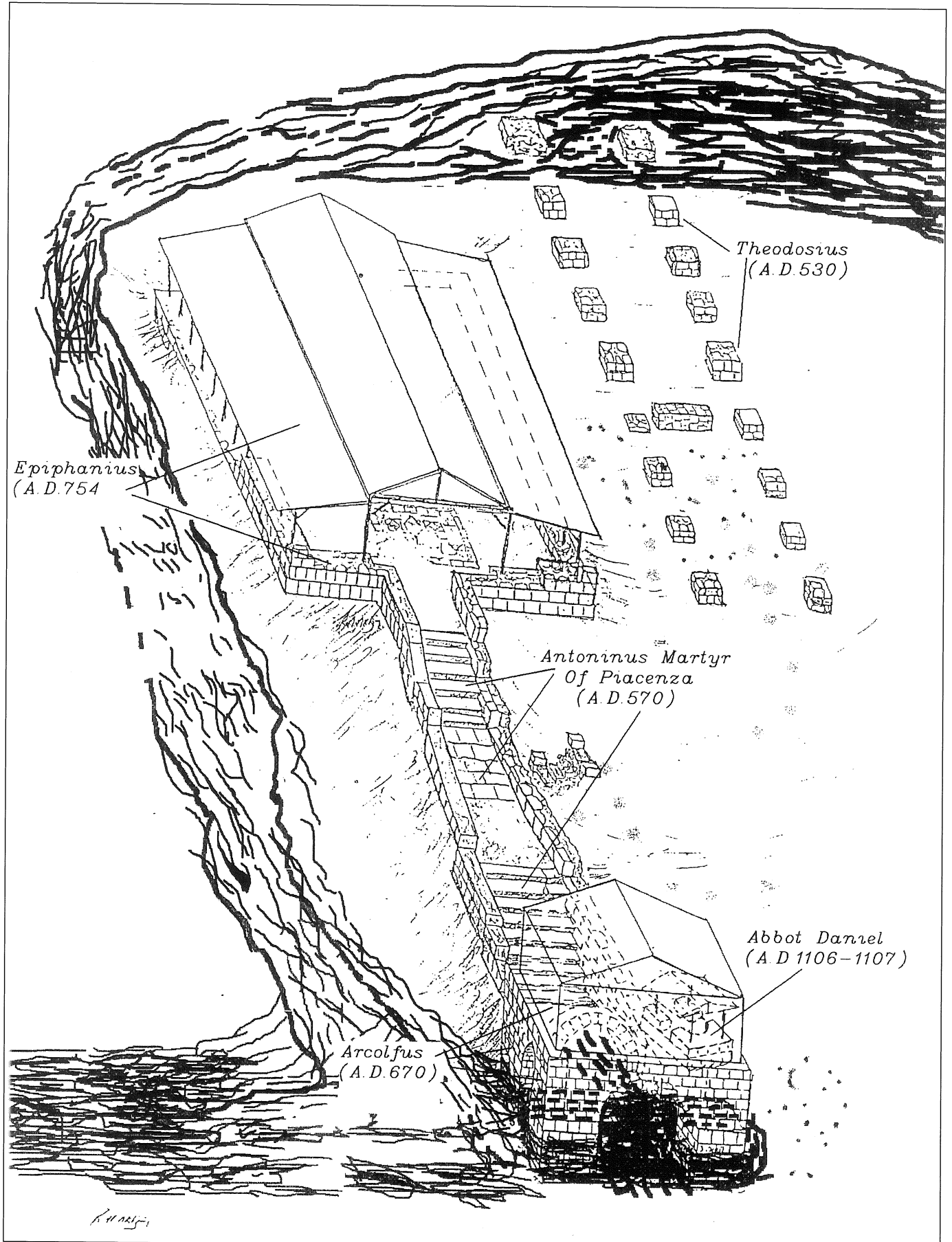
Five uniquely deigned churches were built at the spot where Jesus was baptized. It is very important to note that the river Jordan arrived here at the time Jesus was baptized. This is the same time that the churches were built.

This sacred spot was visited by pilgrims who used the pilgrimage route between Jerusalem and Bethlehem up to Mount Nebo where Moses died. Among the Pilgrims who carefully described the spot are:

Theodosius (AD 530) wrote: “5 miles north of the Dead sea ...in the place where the Lord was baptized there is a single pillar and on the pillar an iron cross has been fastened, there too is the church of S. John the Baptist, which the Emperor Anastasius built: this church is very lofty, being built above large chambers, on account of the Jordan when it overflows”.

Forty years later (AD 570) **Antoninus of Piacenza** added: “By the side of the Jordan,... where the Lord was baptized, at the place where the water returned to its bed, ... marble steps descend into the water”.

One hundred years later **Arculfus of France** (AD 670) gave important notes, saying “At the edge of the river is a small square church, built, as is said, on the spot where the garments of the Lord were taken care of at the time when He was baptized. This is raised, so as to be uninhabitable, on four stone vaults, standing above the waters which flow below” (*We can see the 2 northern piers; the foundations of the southern*



1. A drawing of the five memorial churches built at the place where Jesus was baptized. By Engineer Rustom Mkhjian.

piers were discovered recently. We have a huge cruciform baptismal pool, where pilgrims would descend through the marble steps to be baptized. In fact this is the only cruciform baptismal font on earth that used the river Jordan water, "running water", for baptism).

Important remains were also found at the same spot. We can now identify the remains of two basilicas, partly built on the remains of John the Baptist Church and uniquely designed. The basilicas are linked by marble steps to the east linking them with the monumental cruciform baptistery that used running water for baptism. Here the mantle church was built.

Epiphanius (AD 750-800) mentioned a huge church (the church of the trinity) being built at the bank of the river, a mile west of John the Baptist Monastery (Elijah's Hill) where he stayed overnight.

After the destruction of the 4 churches mentioned above, a chapel was built on the remains of the northwestern pier. **Abbot Daniel** (AD 1106-1107) wrote "The place where Christ was baptized is distant from the river Jordan as far as a man can throw a small stone. There is a little chapel with an altar. This marks the place where John the Forerunner baptized our Lord Jesus Christ".

The succession of uniquely designed churches at the edge of the river is a testament to the forces of nature and to the determination of the believers to build memorials at the place where they believed Jesus to have been baptized.

It is also worth mentioning that these remains were used by pilgrims from the 5th century until the beginning of the 12th century. This is a sign of Christian-Moslem tolerance and coexistence still found in Jordan today.

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