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Evaluation of Usage and Management of Pilgrimage Sites in Israel and Jordan: a Comparative Study

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This study is looking for answering many questions:

1. Which country applies the best practices in managing christian pilgrimage sites in Israel and Jordan? Which country is better? Where can we talk about a sustainable tourism management?
2. Do the geopolitical situation in the region, the geographical environment or the Regime of country affect the management?
3. Why does management is primordial in pilgrimage sites? Why does Bethany beyond Jordan in Jordan lag behind Yardenit in Israel?

This research will use the descriptive methodology, basing on a wide range of references that enable us to understand the actual situation of two Christian pilgrimage sites in Israel and Jordan. Interviews with managers of the Baptism site Bethany beyond Jordan were conducted this year(2015).

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Introduction

There should only be one frame work for the management of the country's tourism. There is a well established way of looking at functions of management as divided between planning, organizing, directing, coordinating and monitoring (Doswell, 1997). It is necessary for countries to have a more balanced approach to planning and management than has existed in the past (Murphy, 1985). One should have the vision, the knowledge to manage a touristic site and we will add the imagination, the super vision to manage a pilgrimage site .how can we interpret the case of the American Jamie Buringhan who suggested to recreate the scene of the bible? To build **a bible themed tourist attraction** by constructing a scale model of Herod's temple he said « *we'll have the holograms of Jesus walking on the water and when they come by **the millions** they will hear the word of God* » (Pinsky, 2001).

A theme park attraction well managed can, if its construction was authorised and not opposed as what happened in 1999 by Jewish or Christians, could receive millions of visitors which exceed the number of visitors to the authentic holy land of Prophets!

A confusion of interpretation or a bad management would prevent visitors from travelling to the ideal place for religious practices e.g. Bethany beyond Jordan.

1. The management of the touristic site

The management of a site (GDT, 2006), means: "The organization of appropriate equipments of space to meet the needs of the peoples concerned." It is therefore all acts of local authorities and public institutions that aim to the organization of places, the comfort of people, obviously accompanied with economic prosperity sought by nations.

Several steps should be taken in consideration before pretending that we can start managing a touristic site:

1. We must understand **the significance of the site**, its historical, religious and cultural values. Once we determine the relative degree of site's significance we can commence other steps to maintain at least this significance.
2. The next step is **the interpretation of the site**; sometimes a wrong understanding of a site results in a decrease of visitors or a failure to attract **the potential visitors or pilgrimage!** The case of Bethany beyond Jordan is an example: in this Christian pilgrimage site if we make the inventory of facilities and infrastructure provided to pilgrimage we find: rest house, conference center, parking etc meanwhile the most important element is missing (**facilities for disabled pilgrims!**)

The managers of the site ignore that the existence of this facility is primordial and we don't exaggerate if we conclude that without this facility the site will lag behind Yardenit the baptism site in Israel which is conscientious of its importance.

In religious tourism and especially the Christian pilgrimage sites adaptation for people with reduced mobility is of unquestionable importance. Indeed, of the 37 miracles of Jesus Christ recorded in the New Testament, 21 are miracles of "Healing" leaving the sick (i.e. disabled) to be particularly attached to this type of pilgrimage in hope of a "miraculous healing" (Clowes, 1817). The example of the pilgrimage to Lourdes in France is striking, this pilgrimage site which originates 18 apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in the grotto of Massabielle in 1858, became one of the most important Christian pilgrimage sites, it attracted 120 000 pilgrims in 1872, **the site currently attracts over 6 million pilgrims a year** (Harris, 2001). Awareness experienced by Lourdes is mainly due to the many miracles of "Healing" reported by sick pilgrims who visited the site. This recognition, that a large proportion of pilgrims are sick and disabled, prompted the development of appropriate infrastructure to facilitate their movement.



Christian pilgrims to Lourdes in France

Source: <http://www.dici.org/actualites/france-le-pelerinage-du-christ-roi-a-lourdes>.
Accessed August 19, 2012

The lack of infrastructure suitable for people with reduced mobility in the Jordanian side has negative consequence. Unlike the Israeli site which is equipped with appropriate infrastructure for persons with reduced mobility, with passages allowing wheelchairs moving easily.

3. The third step is about site evaluation so that experts in preservation can interfere. In this stage we should determine natural deterioration, human

deterioration (traffic congestion, urbanization etc). We should determine exactly to which degree physical damage attained.

4. The fourth step includes conservation measures, which comprise preventive measures and interventive conservations. It should be noted that preservation must precede tourism.
5. The fifth step is about developing the site to receive visitors and pilgrimage. These days we are talking about sustainable development, which takes in consideration all the dimensions: the environment, the society and the economy. Development of the site depends largely on the country which trace the general policy to develop it and monitor the implementation of the appropriate strategies besides development depends on available resources : financial and human resources .the location of the sites plays a major role also .above all we should not forget the geopolitical situation.
6. Finally, the management comes at the last step:

Managing marketing;

Managing product development;

Managing human resources development;

Managing public awareness programmes.

Here many issues should be considered as the carrying capacity of the site, security and assurance considerations. All these components should be respected.

The subject of usage of the site is a sensitive subject, when managers decide how to use? Do we need a new usage? To which type of users should we introduce the site? How to use the setting of the site? We should be aware not to compromise on the assets because assets are the site itself.

Definitions of pilgrimage often use the ascribed status of the destination as a way to classify the status of the journey. Pilgrimage is a well-known phenomenon and exists in all religions worldwide, but is especially prominent in Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Judaism. The polarities on the pilgrimage-tourism axis are labeled "sacred" and "secular;" in between lay almost infinite possible sacred-secular combinations, with the central area now generally termed religious tourism (Collins-Kreiner, 2006).

2. A comparative study between two Christian pilgrimage sites in Israel and Jordan

In this research we choose to compare two pilgrimage sites in Israel and Jordan the choice of case studies is logic as

1. It compares between two sites designated for the same types of visitors and Christian pilgrims, Regardless where Jesus Christ was baptized the two sites

pretend the authenticity providing archaeological and biblical evidences. Jesus coming to Bethany beyond Jordan where John was baptizing and being baptized at the site. (John 1:28 / John 3:26).

2. Their geographic proximity and physical similarities in two sites.
3. They share the same river (the Jordan River) which is one of most popular tourist destinations, especially for Christian pilgrims.
4. The position of these two sites in both countries: Bethany beyond Jordan occupies the third place in term of number of visitors after the site of Petra(a world heritage site) and Jerash(one of Decapolis cities). The site receives the attention of the Royal family. It took ten years of continuous work (1998 -2008) taken by a team of experts in archaeology to rehabilitate it.
5. Yardenit is one of the Israel's most popular tourist destinations. According to results of our research it gives the best example of a successful management of a Christian pilgrimage site.

Firstly, In terms of number of visitors, the site Yardenit receives on average 4 times more visitors than the Jordanian site as you can see in the table below :

	Jordanie	Israel
Average number of visitors (2007-2011)	125 000	500 000
Nember of visitors in 2010	160 000	700 000
Main markets	USA (16,3% des visites)	N.A.
	France (10,3% des visites)	N.A.
	Italie (10,2% des visites)	N.A.
	Russie (7,3% des visites)	N.A.
	Espagne (5,5% des visites)	N.A.
Saisonalité	March, April, May, Oct, Nov	March, April, May, Oct, Nov

Number of visitors and saisonality of the Baptisme site

Source: Personal elaboration developed in reference to official statistics of Yardenit (Israel) and Bethany beyond Jordan(Jordan)

3. The case study of Yardenit site



Location of Bethany Beyond Jordan, Jordan

Source: The Management Office of The Baptism Site, Jordan 2012



Location of Yardenit, Israel

Source : Israel Ministry of Tourism, 2009

Site identification: The baptismal site is located at the Jordan Valley, southern of the Sea of Galilee. The temperature in summer is very high. In the afternoon (11:00 am till 14:00), there are fewer visitors, this cause a high concentration of visitors during the morning and after 15:00 pm.

Yardenit, the baptismal site on the Jordan River was constructed by the Ministry of Tourism and Kibbutz Kinneret. Kibbutz reagent the site and more than fifty percent of the Yardenit Staff are members of the Kibbutz. The Yardenit CEO, was born and is an active member in the Kibbutz Kinneret.

The Operational model in the site is: CEO, Commercial Manager, Human Resources Manager, Baptism Site (area) Manager, Shift Manager (rotate among four operators), Employed at the site.

It is important to note that upon the managers is the Directorate of Tourism, whose members are: Chairman, Yardenit CEO, Directors of Tourism Areas, Representatives of the owners. The Directorate **determine the policy and approve investments in Yardenit site.**

4. Infrastructure of the site

Entrance to our site is free and both groups and individuals are welcome. Our facility includes: modern change rooms, showers and a buffet on the esplanade for our guests convenience.

In the site also is situated the 'Jordan River Restaurant', which is directed by franchise. The restaurant can accommodate 200 guests in one seating (indoor) and another 70 guests (outdoor).

From next year 2013, the restaurant will be adapted styling to biblical food and furniture from the biblical era.

The approach to the baptismal pools is via a visitor's center built of natural limestone in the shape of a nave of a church.

The main building consists of a gift shop with unique religious items including holy water from the baptismal site and foodstuffs eaten during biblical times, plus a restaurant which serves amongst other delicacies, St. Peter's fish.

Accommodation:

1- Ohalo Manor Hotel 3*. 1 Km far away from yardenit with 79 rooms.

2- Maagan Holiday Village Kibbutz Hotel 3*. 3 km far away from yardenit with 148 rooms.

Preparation of the site before opening: In May, the site which is believed to be the place where St. John baptized Jesus was reopened to the public after 11 years of planning and coordination with government officials. Before, pilgrims were allowed at the site only three times a year, under special arrangements with the military because of the site's proximity to Jordan and the presence of land mines left over from a period when terrorists attempted to infiltrate the border (National Catholic Reporter, 2011).

The management of Yardenit has taken the extra precaution of enabling the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Water to check the water quality constantly in order to ensure that all the Pilgrims experience a safe sense of purification and spiritual rebirth.

At Yardenit the water flows from the Sea of Galilee into the Jordan and the quality of the water at the baptismal site is of the same high standard as the water in the Sea of Galilee

Israel removes 40-year-old landmines and makes improvements to the area.

"It is a very sensitive place politically and religiously and is of importance to both Christians and Jews," said Lt. Col. Ofer Mey-tal of Israel's department of Civil Administration, which oversees the project. Located in a closed military area near Jericho, the site—called Qasr el Yahud - has been revered since the fourth or fifth century as the place where John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the Messiah. Jewish tradition holds that this site is also where the ancient Israelites crossed into the Promised Land following their flight from Egypt. So far, various Israeli government agencies have spent \$2.9 million on the site, Mey-tal said, including an effort to remove landmines that were placed by Israel in the 1970s under threat from Jordanian incursions. For now, other landmines will remain behind clearly marked barbed wire fencing.

Accessibility management: managers cater to the handicapped with special places to park, and an inclinor down to one of the baptismal pools (Berman, 2008).

There is also a eucalyptus grove to the south of the baptismal site where private prayer meetings may be conducted. Additional funds, Mey-tal said, will finance shower facilities for pilgrims, a larger parking lot, more shaded areas and accessibility to the river for those with disabilities (Brent, 2011).

Carrying capacity of the site: Yardenit welcomes over 600,000 Pilgrims who come to be baptized or to rededicate their vows in the Jordan River, each year. Nestled under the boughs of giants eucalyptus trees are numerous baptismal pools that can accommodate up to 1,000 pilgrims at once, but the location is large enough to maintain a feeling of tranquility, harmony and spiritual renewal. Visitors to Qasr el Yahud have tripled since 2004, numbering almost 60,000 last year and some 44,000 in the first four months of 2011, said site manager Saar Kfir, who works in the Civil Administration.

At the Yardenit baptism site, a section of the Lower Jordan River near the Sea of Galilee. Visited by 600,000 people a year, mostly Christian pilgrims, Yardenit is an area of clean water where the faithful can take a dip amidst diverse local fauna and flora. Based on this section of the Jordan River, one might get the impression that the Jordan River remains robust and vibrant from when it exits the Sea of Galilee until it arrives to the Dead Sea.

The Israeli authorities' long-term plans for the site envisage 600,000 pilgrims a year - it is already open on some feast days.

But there is one big deterrent to tourism and pilgrimage here; unlike the Jordanians, the Israelis have not dismantled the area's military infrastructure.

The old Christian Pilgrimage Route in Jordan

Historic sites such as “Tell Nemrin & Tell Al-Hammam” surround the site. Many other sites are linked with the site historically, archaeologically and religiously like “tell Al-Rama” and Mount Nebo that are part of the old Christian Pilgrimage Route, Madaba that hosts The Mosaic Map of The Holy Land, Macharius where John was beheaded, and “Al-Zara” where the remains of Herod’s palace were discovered.

5. The case study of Bethany beyond Jordan

The history of tourism in Jordan extends back to the 4th Century when Christian pilgrims started arriving to church built on Mount Nebo (Fischer & Khan, 2009). The heritage that was unearthed by a local team of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan starting the year 1997 received the attention it deserves both locally and internationally. The site is unique in importance being the Land of Prophets for the three monotheistic faiths and the place where Christianity started and spread all over the world.



Bethany beyond Jordan

Source: The Management Office of The Baptism Site, Jordan 2012

6. The Rediscovery

A Royal vision

The Authenticity of the baptism site is as pure as the testimonies of the Gospels, the pilgrims' accounts, the mosaic map of the Holy Land, and the archaeological discoveries at the site since 1997. All of these sources are crowned by official documents sent both

to H.M. King Abdullah II and H.R.H. Prince Ghazi Bin Mohammad by heads of Churches throughout the world saying that Jesus was baptized east of the Jordan and the baptism site is one of the holiest sites for Christianity, asking for pieces of land to build their new churches, monasteries, and pilgrims' houses at the site, bringing back the spirit at the site after it was abandoned for quite some time.

Site identification:

Location:

- District: Shuneh /Salt Governorate
- Area: About 4 Km²
- Grid Reference: E 742049; N 3522412

The land is a Christian Waqef Belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church. The by-law of the Jesus Christ Baptism site Board number 48 for the year 2001 and its amendments had identified that pieces of land of the site where some of the pieces of lands belonging to the treasury were added to the site. Beside it worth mentioning that an agreement was conducted with the Jordan Valley Authority in its Law to keep all the pieces of land surrounding the site as Farm Unit.

The site is located in the Jordan valley near the (Shuneh Al Janubiyeh) village, the region named (Al Kafrein) east of the river Jordan about 9 Kilometers north of the Dead Sea. And it is about 50 Kilometers from Amman. Jericho can be clearly seen about 14 Kilometers to the west. Due to the springs an oasis dominates the beginning of Wadi al-Kharrar and the site of Tell al-Kharrar. Moreover, thick and green vegetation is characteristic of the entire length of the wadi.

The site has now been identified on the east bank of the Jordan River, in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and is being systematically surveyed, excavated, restored, and prepared to receive pilgrims and visitors. Bethany Beyond the Jordan is located half an hour by car from Amman.

Site significance: The Bethany area sites formed part of the early Christian pilgrimage route between Jerusalem, the Jordan River, and Mount Nebo (JTB, 2008).

Nowadays the Jordan River is a great deal smaller than it was and therefore visitors to the site are taken to both the river and the churches built in memory of the baptism of Jesus (since they are no longer connected by the swollen river).

7. Archaeological activities

Restoration, preservation & maintenance Works Carried out at the site 1998-2012

Works have started at the site since 1998 by a local team of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

At the beginning a site survey was carried out, then some test trenches at selected areas, followed by archaeological squares, digs and discoveries.

The six-day war of 1967 resulted in this area of the river Jordan becoming a fortified zone and thus off limits to civilians. With the peace treaty between Jordan and Israel in 1994, the area was once again opened up for explorations (Waheeb, 2012).

1- Rhotorius Monastery 2_ The Pilgrims' Station 3-The Pool 4-Hermit Cells 5-The Site of Saint Mary of Egypt 6-The Site of The Baptism of Jesus: At a distance of tens of meters east of the river Jordan the remains of five uniquely designed churches were discovered alongside with a unique cruciform baptistery.

Preparation of Bethany beyond Jordan: But it is also unique in the natural and human risks that might threaten it. Therefore great attention is given by the Department of Antiquities to preserve it according to international charters for generations to come. The modern Baptism Site is relatively new as a place of pilgrimage. New churches, a monastery and a pilgrimage house are being built on the grounds — provided free of charge by the Jordanian government —including the two Roman Catholic churches whose cornerstones Pope Benedict XVI blessed during his recent visit. Wisely, these structures are placed at a distance from the holy sites;

They are- there to aid pilgrims as they seek spiritual refreshment in connection with the sites themselves, not to get in the way of that goal. Moreover, until now the Royal Commission of the Baptismal Site has resisted what must be immense pressure to turn the site into a marketplace for religious memorabilia. You can still purchase souvenirs, but only at the visitor's center, not at the sites themselves (Volf, 2009).

The site is considered as an attraction to many naturalists. 1757 had visited the site during the eighteenth century, who was attracted by the Jordan River Drainage and reported on certain cichlid fish from Lake Tiberias.

Well preserved vegetation in comparison to the surrounding areas due to the fact that this site was protected for a very long time being a military and NO-GO Zone.

Opening of the site to visitors: The site was officially opened on the 1st of July 2002 after being prepared to receive pilgrims and visitors without causing any harm to the site or its visitors. Heads of churches started sending letters of authentication to the Baptism Site Commission saying the site was one of three most important sites for Christians on earth;



Baptism site plan/visitor circulation and car parks

Source: The Management Office of The Baptism Site, Jordan 2012

Principles of sustainability: mid and long term plans to receive increasing number of pilgrims are prepared to ensure the sustainability of the site (Archaeological sites and the wilderness of John the Baptist) for generations to come. "Our aim here at the baptism site is to once again make this a place of pilgrimage as well as conserving it so that visitors may see it the way Jesus would have. Visitors, having enjoyed the wilderness of John the forerunner who described himself living in, can see the important archaeological remains. They may also be baptized in the river or in baptism pools or fonts which use river water after it undergoes reverse osmosis process. Baptism water is then released back into the wilderness to preserve the ecosystem"

Rustom makhijian ,assistant of the Director of the site. The religious, cultural and touristic value of the site arises from baptizing peoples. A water system was constructed to feed the several ancient baptism pools in the site. An intricate system of Earth channels between the Baptism pools was constructed to cover the whole area. The source of baptism water is a ground water well to the east of wadi Al-Kharar. A pipe line is connecting the well to the mouth of the Wadi, where it will fill the first Baptism Pool near the church. The pipe will run underground to the second Baptism pool near Al-Kharar spring and then to the third pool near the Jordan River.

The return Baptism water will be piped back upstream of Wadi Al-Kharar and then runs in Earth Channels in the wadi to continue being a source of water for the wetland. This added amount of permanent water flow in the wadi system increases the amount of water and thus preserves the ecological features of the site against any possible drying in the future

Facilities :vip lounge and management office, rest shelter , store and maintenance area, trail to 19 souvenir shops owned by the private sector, restrooms, baptim site conference center, disalliation plant, shrine.



International visitors queuing to be baptized in Bethany beyond Jordan's site
Source: The Management Office of The Baptism Site, Jordan 2012

Epiphany where we can observe that there is no special services for aging visitors or disabled ones

Management of the site:

It is of essential necessity to control the tourist activities in a sustainable fashion and within the carrying capacity of the site to conserve the cultural and natural assets of the site according to that a management plan for the site was prepared in 1999.

Legal and Management Framework:

By-law of the Jesus Christ Baptism site Board number 48 for the year 2001 and its amendments and the role of the Board in protecting the site:

According to this law the following were identified:

- The pieces of land which comprises the Baptism Site.
- The Jordan Valley Development Law
- Agricultural Law/Role of RSCN
- Water Authority Law
- Military Zone

Environmental Management Plan: Evaluation of the Implementation

The site is a protected religious heritage which extends over an area of 10 square kilometers, forming with the neighbouring region of the site the Authority Baptism Site, headed by Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad (a member of the Royal family in Jordan) The Jordan Valley Authority delivers basic infrastructure services for the site: road connecting the highway, as well as water and electricity and telephone a center for visitors contains all the services required to manage the site, and provide required services for visitors.

Planning for the future:

Management in Jordan is typical of that in an Arab country. It is affected by the culture and way of life, and so is different in several respects from that of western countries. In a recent study, Al-Faleh⁴ identified several characteristics of Jordanian management, including:

(i) The importance of status over ability, (ii) a rigid hierarchy, (iii) the strength of kinship ties in decision-making, (iv) reactive management. Planning for the future is, consequently, not an integral part of managerial style Discussions are underway between the Jordanian government and UNESCO to classify the site as a "heritage of humanity".

The site has tremendous potentials to be managed as a National Park with World Heritage Site status. The amount and diversity of resident and migrant birds qualifies it to become an important bird watching area in the Jordan Valley.

The cultural and natural values of the site advantage it over other areas in the Jordan Valley to become and Eco-tourism base in Middle Ghor district. The site also should be developed for wetland study and management as a core for the Jordan River Ecosystem.

Conclusion

Yardenit present the model for sustainable tourism management as it take in consideration the basics of management: the carrying capacity . The assistant manager of Bethany said “we are ready to receive 3000 vistoris daily! “During all the interview managers were talking about sustainability but it seems that they don’t realize that mass tourism can’t be applied in this sacred site ;the baptism site is not the site of Petra .In Yardenit they use to apply the **anticipated reservation** to control the visitors flow to the site .This measure reflects a big awareness of the concept of carrying capacity of the site.

Bethany beyond Jordan imposes entrance fees while entrance to Yardenit is free. This measure of exemption of entrance fees reinforces the feeling of spirituality for pilgrims. Jordanian managers justify this policy by keeping a financial resource to preserve the site.

Accommodation facility doesn’t exist actually in Bethany beyond Jordan while we can find two types of accommodation in Yardenit site: Ohalo Manor Hotel and Maagan Holiday Village Kibbutz Hotel 3*.

We found that the Regime in Jordan support the marketing management of the baptism site His Majesty King Abdullah and the Prince Ghazi Bin Mohamed participate personally to promote for this site.

Finally the most important point that contradict with the *raison d'être* of the site of Bethany is the absence of facilities to disabled people In religious tourism and especially the Christian pilgrimage sites adaptation for people with reduced mobility is of unquestionable importance. Indeed, of the 37 miracles of Jesus Christ recorded in the New Testament, 21 are miracles of "Healing" leaving the sick (ie disabled) to be particularly attached to this type of pilgrimage in hope of a "miraculous healing". The example of the pilgrimage to Lourdes in France is striking, this pilgrimage which originates 18 apparitions of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette Soubirous in the grotto of Massabielle in 1858, became one of the most important Christian pilgrimage.

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