

JESUS, I BAPTIZE YOU



Rain tank discovered close to the chapel where John the Baptist lived. Water canalizations, a well as mosaics have also been discovered.

BIBLICAL TEXTS as well as the writings of pilgrims dating to the beginning of our era indicate that the place where John the Baptist spilled holy water on the head of Jesus Christ was found in the "Betania behind the Jordan" (John 1:28). Nevertheless, the Christian tradition that is born on the III century always identified the place in the western bank of the river, in a backwater that forms before ending in the Dead Sea. The place where the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Saint John dating back to the XV century and a Franciscan chapel of 1933 can be found.

But it is really the other part of the river, **the Jordanian**, the one that hides the more important archaeological treasures in a territory that goes from the River Jordan to the environs of Monte Nebo. The Biblical importance of the place always was recognized and, now, the zone has become a true center of archaeological excavations that are revealing important findings. The most significant of which is the discovery of the **true place of the baptism of Jesus** in the same way that is told by the old writings and the testimonies of pilgrims. "Now we definitively know that the transjordan part is a sanctuary of very important Biblical findings. It is something that was suspected from always, but due to the fact that the area was uninhabited for centuries, and mainly due to the Arab-Israeli conflict, was impossible to carry out excavations in a strongly militarized place. Not only the Jordanian part but also the Israeli side of the border has strongly been guarded by the armies of both countries. The important thing of these discoveries is not to indicate the exact place of the baptism of Jesus, it is to discover the archeological remains. I believe that Christ was baptized in the Jordan River and this fact has been commemorated in the two borders from old times ". They are words of father Manuel Bárcena, director of the Christian Information center of Jerusalem that maintains the same position as the conciliator on the dilemma of the baptism, who happens to be my personal friend Michelle Piccirillo. This Holy Land Custodian, member of the Biblical Franciscan Institute, is an expert in Biblical archaeology and collaborates for years with the Department of Antiques with the Ministry of Jordanian Tourism in this project.

The dilemma on the true place of baptism is resolved when a Jordanian archaeological team, headed by Doctor Mohammed Waheeb, discovered in the transjordan shore, 5 miles North of the Dead Sea, the remains of two Byzantine churches that, in agreement with the old testimonies of the pilgrims, rose in the same place where Jesus was baptized. "We have discovered them step by step, studying the texts of the Messiahs since he left Jerusalem towards Jericho until finalizing in the valley of the Jordan. There he crossed a river where

he found his cousin, John the Baptist, who baptized in the same stream that ends at the Jordan, the Wadi-Kharrar where the tradition also says that Prophet Elias ascended to skies. It cannot be in another place, since in no document one says that John baptized the Messiah in the river, but in a stream that flows to a River. In addition, so and as it is stated in the Bible, the waters are clearer when they flow from the mountain streams. In two years I will be able to demonstrate the evidences of my words ", says Waheeb, the director of the project of the Baptism, ready to clear once and forever an error with so many centuries of use. Later archaeological findings, like the ruins of four small chapels, one on them in which John the Baptist lived in, water canalizations, numerous mosaics, currencies and ceramics of the times of John, as well as a rain tank have come to give an answer on the baptism dilemma and the existence of a Betania behind the River Jordan. "If one were to consider the Betania of Israel – the doctor comments- John the Baptist would have to walk about 300 Kilometers every day to baptize people; however the valley is a plain that is cut in this place, being a great refuge and only five kilometers of the Roman city ". This fact also is recognized by Piccirillo Father: "All the archeological findings suggest that there was a community established during the first century. Thus the idea of the Byzantines that the Betania was behind the River Jordan could be very possible ".

THE OTHER SIDE

Answer of Israelis, that do not want to lose the honor that traditionally has belonged to them, reacted immediately with an excavation plan on this zone. But the results have not been the desired ones, something that has arose mockery within the Israeli colleagues and Jordanian neighbors. "Across the river they are a little stirred up because no matter how hard they excavate, they do not find anything, I whenever I dig, I find new remains and, most important, just the same way as they are described in biblical texts. It is a discovery not only for Jordan but for everybody, believer or not. This problem is solved because the facts demonstrate it archeologically. I hope that sooner or later the Israelis recognize the importance of the findings ", affirms proud Waheeb. The case is that the Israelis are not going to recognize it easily.

The discovery exceeds its religious and historical meaning and settles in the cold economic and political reality as the following facts demonstrate it. First, the mobilization of teams of Israeli archaeologists towards the River Jordan area and the fact that, since the Israelis opened about three years ago, thousands of Christian visitors go there annually to make their dream come true. The dream of being baptized for the second time, in the same waters where John the Baptist baptized the Messiah. The prices range from 100 Euros (USD130) per baptism and up to 1000Euros (USD 1300) for a complete dip in blessed waters. It is not easy that the Israeli Government resigns to this particular "miracle of breads and fish" in baptism version.

In the Jordanian part, the machinery worked from the first indications making available to Waheeb a complete archaeological equipment (financed by the own Jordanian Government, the United States and the Geographic National Center) and a commando of elite of the Jordanian Armed Forces, that are in charge of the monitoring of the zone as well as the cleaning of buried antipersonnel mines during the Arab-Israeli conflict for the complete security of the archaeologists. This has not prevented doctor Waheeb, although he did not undergo physical harm, to experience the effects of this armament, and other surprises, not archaeological indeed.

The Jordanian diplomacy has also acted quickly. It has **obtained that the Vatican officially declares the authenticity of the findings** and has already prepared some celebrations for the next millennium, as a papal visit to sanctify the zone of the findings." At the beginning we were surprised, but when we did not find in the Betania of Israel anything that could closely demonstrated that Jesus Christ was baptized there, the Vatican has declared the authenticity of the findings. They recognize that in Biblical texts it is spoken of the baptism to the other side of the River Jordan ".

Also, a project denominated Baptism Park of Wadi-Kharrar was approved in the old sanctuary of Sapsafas, zone of the findings, by initiative of Father Piccirillo who counted with the total collaboration of the Jordanian authorities and on the sponsorship of deceased King Hussein. The previous Jordanian monarch named a Real Commission presided over decree by who is today king, his son King Abdullah composed by

ten members, among them the minister of Cult, one of Tourism, a representative of the Holy Land Custodian and another one of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The objective was to construct a great center of peregrination that with the claim of being the true place of the baptism of Jesus Christ it would attract tourists worldwide. The initial plan anticipated the construction of a center of pilgrimage hosting; an ecumenical statue dedicated to John the Baptist, a small chapel and an amphitheatre to lead believers towards a baptismal fountain and to the Jordan River. After the death of King Hussein the construction of the project has undergone important delays and modifications. Nevertheless, with or without these works, the Jordanian authorities hope to open to their doors the next year in the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the 2000.
