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## Chapter 2

# Pilgrimage to the Jordan and “Sacred Geography”

After Christianity became the imperial religion (380 CE) and when Palestine became part of the Byzantine Empire (395–640 CE) and the Terra Sancta, the church strove to lend Palestine, and particularly Jerusalem, a Christian complexion by invoking the so-called “Jerusalem liturgy” through festivals, rituals, and traditions about exemplary deeds and “sacred geography.” Baptism in the Jordan River claimed a place of honor in this new reality. Contributing to the shaping and dissemination of this conceptualization was Cyril of Jerusalem, the third bishop of the city (350 CE onward), who gave the Jordan a symbolic status. Water, he wrote in the *Second Catechism*—about baptism—is “a grand thing, and the noblest of the four visible elements of the world.”

John the Baptist practiced baptism in the Jordan, where all of Jerusalem went to enjoy the “first-fruits of baptisms.” But it was Jesus who sanctified baptism by being Himself baptized. “When going down, therefore, into the water, think not of the bare element, but look for salvation by the power of the Holy Ghost: for without both thou canst not possibly be made perfect.”<sup>1</sup>

1 *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, translated by Edwin Hamilton

Cyril repeats the account of Peter's visit to the home of Cornelius in Caesarea (Acts 10), and in that account it is stated that the benefits of baptism are accrued to Gentiles, too:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water. They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days (Acts 10:44–48).

Peter then commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ "in order that, the soul having been born again by faith, the body also might by water partake of the grace" (Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures*, 3.3–5).

From the fourth century onward, pilgrimage to the Terra Sancta became a folk phenomenon, performed both by the high-and-mighty and by simple people despite the difficulties that stood in their way. From the outset of their pilgrimage, they fixated on "sacred geography" or, more correctly, "sacred history"—traditions about the three aforementioned events that occurred at or near the Jordan: the Israelites' crossing, Elijah's ascent heavenward, and the baptism of Jesus. The groups of pilgrims were sometimes joined by guides and guards. The stories they wrote and told

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Gifford, Second Series, Vol. 7, 1894; rpt. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 15–16.

merged seamlessly into the world of the Christian pilgrims who followed them and of those who read them in the travel literature. Some of the pilgrims settled in Palestine (usually in monasteries); most of them, however, came to visit the holy places and then went home. After a nearly total hiatus during the rule of the Islamic caliphates in Palestine (634–1099), pilgrimage resumed during the tenure of the Crusader Kingdom (1099–1291) but dwindled again when the Mamluks took over (1260–1516). The true efflorescence of pilgrimage, as we show below, occurred during the Ottoman era (1516–1917), the new empire charging a road-use tax but also providing escorts to protect the pilgrims from bandits.

The pilgrims, travelers, and tourists (a new phenomenon that began in the eighteenth century) made their way on donkeys and horseback, came well-equipped, and, as noted above, did not follow the Jordan southward along its banks, instead visiting only parts of it—from its sources to the Sea of Galilee and from Jericho to the traditional baptismal site and then onward to the river’s mouth at the Dead Sea. However rich the travel literature is, it gives no evidence of travelers who followed the Jordan all the way down on foot or horseback. Furthermore, until the middle of the nineteenth century, no one, it seems, tried to navigate the river due to its sinuosity. Therefore, the texts we present here do not give a complete description of the Jordan River.

The first to write about his pilgrimage was the Pilgrim of Bordeaux, who visited the Holy Land in 333 CE and produced a travel account titled *Itinerarium a Burdigala Hierusalem Usque*. He had visited, so he said, “the place where the Lord was baptized by John and above the far bank at the same place is the hillock from which Elijah was taken to heaven [...] the place of the Ark of the Covenant and

the twelve stones that the Children of Israel lifted from the Jordan.”<sup>2</sup>

He was followed by the Spanish [probably] nun Egeria (or Etheria), who visited the Holy Land in 381–384. In her *Peregrinatio Aetherae*, written after she came home, she tells that she and her companions were led by deacons, priests, and monks to the place on the Jordan “where the children of Israel made their crossing,” and then to the place “where the children of Ruben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasses had built an altar.” After crossing the river, she identified the baptismal site as being adjacent to a settlement called Aenon (spring), there she found a pleasant valley in which a spring of pure water flowed. St. John the Baptist had been there; of that she was certain.

On the way I saw a valley running down to the river Jordan, remarkably beautiful and very well kept, and it was full of vines and trees because there was plenty of good water there. [Not far from it was] a well-kept valley to a very neat apple-orchard, and there in the middle of it [...] a good clean spring of water which flowed in a single stream. There was a kind of pool in front of the spring at which it appears holy John Baptist administered baptism.

Traveling through the valley, Egeria and her companions saw the “city of the holy prophet Elias, namely Thesbe, from which he took the name Elias the Thesbite.”<sup>3</sup>

- 2 About the Pilgrim of Bordeaux and other medieval pilgrims, see Thomas Wright, *Early Travels in Palestine* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), Introduction, pp. vii–xxi.
- 3 *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage*, translated and annotated by George E. Gingras, in *Ancient Christian Writers 38*, USA: Newman Press,