RIVER OUT OF EDEN

The Jordan River has suffered an ecological collapse. This is a briefing for Christian educators and community leaders on what went wrong, why it matters, and how you can help bring life back to the valley.

ECOPEACE / FRIENDS OF THE EARTH MIDDLE EAST (FoEME)
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And he said to me, 'Son of man, have you seen this?' Then he led me back to the bank of the river.

Ezekiel 47:6
For Christians, the Jordan is a symbol of purity. Christ’s baptism in the river marks His revelation as the Son of God and the beginning of His ministry on earth. This is a river that flows through the heart of our spiritual tradition.

Today, the river has been all but destroyed. 96% of its flow has been diverted. What little water remains is polluted with saline and untreated sewage. The valley’s wetlands have dried up, its springs are failing, and half its biodiversity has been lost.

This is a man-made disaster – one that shows an utter disregard for the natural world, for our Christian heritage, and for our responsibility as custodians of God’s earth.

It’s not too late. EcoPeace / Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) asks you to join us in calling for a return of water to this river, and a return of life to the Jordan Valley.
Imagine the Jordan River.

For Christians, the name calls up an image that has been painted a thousand times: Jesus standing in the water, his head bowed in prayer, while John pours the water of baptism over Him. As Matthew tells us –

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”

Matthew 3:16-17

The river in which this baptism takes place is, in the Christian imagination, a mighty river – a river that, according to the book of Joshua, “overfloweth all his banks all the time of harvest” (Joshua 3:15).

Even more importantly, the river is clean. Baptism is primarily a ritual of cleansing and renewal. This is what has made the Jordan’s water into the very symbol of purity.

In our myth and memory, then, this is a river of miracles. A river of life.

A BLESSED LAND

Until about 50 years ago, the river looked much as it did in the time of John and Jesus. From its source in the foothills of Mount Hermon / Jabel Al-Sheikh the Jordan rushed south into the Sea of Galilee, and then meandered more slowly along the length of the Jordan Valley until it disappeared into the intensely saline lake of the Dead Sea – the lowest point on the surface of the earth.

All along the way, the Jordan River brought life to the valley. It created wetland habitats in which wild plants and animals flourished. It greened a corridor through the desert, connecting the eco-systems of Eastern Africa and Western Asia and forming a flyway used by some 500 million migratory birds each year. And it allowed the flourishing of human life and the emergence of urban civilization.
Some of the first people ever to leave Africa walked across this plain and drank from its springs. And it was here, too, that the first farmers began to plant and harvest grain in the alluvial mud north of the Dead Sea. Agriculture was the breakthrough that allowed villages to develop into the world’s first towns, Jericho among them. Jericho’s walls were built some 10,000 years ago, and it can claim to be the oldest continuously inhabited city anywhere in the world.

RIVER OF MIRACLES

The river also runs through the heart of the Christian spiritual tradition.

The earliest mention of the Jordan Valley comes in the book of Genesis, where the plain is described as “well watered everywhere...even as the garden of the Lord...” (Genesis 13:10).

Later, in the book of Joshua, an image of the river as a place of transcendence begins to emerge. The Jordan becomes a kind of divine threshold that separates this world from the paradise beyond. When Joshua leads his people across the river, its waters dry up to allow them to pass over into freedom. It is here on the banks of the Jordan that the Prophet Elias ascends to heaven in a whirlwind, and that the mantle of prophethood passes to his successor, Elisha. And here, too, in a story that has long been seen as a prefiguration of the Baptism, Naaman the Leper is healed by bathing in the waters of the Jordan.

The Jordan was part of the landscape that Jesus knew, and all of these stories would have been familiar to Him. The Gospel tradition draws on this image of the Jordan as a meeting place between heaven and earth. Through the story of Christ’s baptism, it is an image that has carried over into the painting, poetry, and song of half the world.

By any measure, then – ecological, cultural, spiritual - this river must be counted as part of the heritage of all humankind, and as a place of exceptional importance to Christians.
Neither the natural beauty nor the spiritual significance of the Jordan has been enough to save the river from being degraded.

In just over 50 years, the countries that share this watershed have dammed and diverted more than 96% of the river’s historic flow. What little water remains is polluted with saline, sewage, and agricultural run-off. In places - including the site at which John baptized Jesus - the river is not much more than a stagnant canal of effluent.

As the river has dried up, the Jordan Valley has suffered an ecological collapse. Half the valley’s biodiversity has been lost. The Dead Sea, sustained only by inflowing water from the Jordan, is sinking by more than a meter every year.

This is not just a tragedy for wildlife. Springs that irrigated farmland for thousands of years have started to falter and fail. Wells used for generations have run dry. Refused access to the river and denied a fair share of the water pumped from beneath the land, Palestinian communities have seen fields turn to dust, livelihoods lost, and families forced to migrate.

The neglect of this river shows a disregard for our own spiritual heritage, as well as a failure to meet our moral responsibilities as custodians of God’s earth. It also exacts a heavy price from the nations that share the valley, crippling the growth of an economy that could be supported by tourism and exacerbating the political conflicts that divide the region. This is an ecological collapse whose severity and cost – economic, ecological, human – we are only now beginning to count.

“The neglect of this river cripples the growth of an economy that could be supported by tourism and exacerbates the political conflicts that divide the region”
THE DESTRUCTION OF THE JORDAN
SOME FACTS AND FIGURES

- The Lower Jordan River begins at the Sea of Galilee (also known as Lake Tiberius or Lake Kinneret) and flows south for about 120km before reaching its end at the Dead Sea.

- The Lower Jordan Valley is divided between Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Palestinians have no access to the Jordan and do not receive water directly from the river.

- Until about 1950, some 1.3 billion cubic meters of water flowed through the valley every year.

- 96% of that flow has been diverted.

- Untreated or poorly treated sewage has been dumped or allowed to leak into the river for over 50 years from Israeli, Jordanian, and Palestinian communities.

- The diversion and pollution of this water has caused an ecological collapse - more than 50% of the valley’s biodiversity has been lost.

- The dying of the Jordan is also causing the Dead Sea to disappear - it is now sinking at the rate of approximately one meter per year.

- FoEME estimates that Israel diverts about half of the river’s average annual flow, while Syria and Jordan take the rest.
Why has this happened? How have we allowed this to happen to a place of such exceptional beauty and value?

At the root of the problem is conflict. The basin that drains into the Jordan River is divided between Lebanese, Syrians, Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians. Instead of seeing the valley as a single, trans-boundary watershed, these nations have raced to capture the greatest possible share of the Jordan’s water. FoEME estimates that Israel diverts about half of the river’s average annual flow, while Syria and Jordan take about a quarter each. Palestinians, denied access to the river, take almost nothing.

Given the intensity of conflict in the region, this zero-sum struggle for the valley’s water might seem inevitable. But it is, in the long term, an approach that will undermine the interests of all concerned. This is a single watershed: the flow of its streams does not correspond to the borders drawn on our maps, and its rain and rivers cannot be sustainably managed through a process of competition.

The degradation of this valley also reveals a profound lack of respect for the natural and non-human world. It exemplifies an attitude in which nature, including its water and all its forms of life, is seen as nothing more than a collection of resources to be mined for human use.

This is surely not what was meant when God gave man dominion over the earth. As Father Lanfranco Serrini, the leader of the Franciscan friars at the time of the Assisi declarations on nature, has written -

"...man’s dominion cannot be understood as license to abuse, spoil, squander or destroy what God has made to manifest his glory. That dominion cannot be anything other than a stewardship in symbiosis with all creatures...At the risk of destroying himself, man may not reduce to chaos or disorder, or, worse still, destroy God’s bountiful treasures."

On the contrary, our special place in God’s creation carries with it a responsibility
to cherish this earth. In the words of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I -

We are called to be stewards, and reflections of God’s love by example. Therefore, we proclaim the sanctity of all life, the entire creation being God’s and reflecting His continuing will that life abound...For humans to cause species to become extinct and to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation, for humans to degrade the integrity of Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands, for humans to injure other humans with disease, for humans to contaminate the Earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life with poisonous substances—these are sins.”

The lack of a sense of wonder, the loss of reverence for life, the abandonment of our responsibility as custodians – all this has contributed to the demise of the Jordan. The revival of the river, then, requires not just a shift in policy, but a renewed spiritual effort to honor the creation that God has entrusted to us.

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Father Lanfranco Serrini
The starting point of any new approach must be to see this river and its tributaries as a single, interconnected ecosystem. If we want the Jordan to survive – if we want to use this water to sustain farms and families and economies – we have no choice but to manage it sustainably through cross-border cooperation.

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FoEME has a different vision for the Jordan Valley - a vision in which a clean, living river runs from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea; in which the valley’s plants, birds and animals are afforded the water they need to flourish; in which the springs flow as they have for millennia; and in which water extracted for human use is divided equitably between the nations that share this valley and amongst the people who live here.

This is a vision that reflects the image of the valley that we see in the Gospels. A vision that honors our heritage and that expresses reverence for God’s creation.

Given the scarcity of water in parts of this region and the state of relations between the countries that share the valley, realizing this vision will not be easy. But difficulty cannot be an excuse for inaction. To do nothing is to leave a landscape irreparably damaged by our own neglect.
FoEME is also developing the first cross-border master plan for the management of the Jordan River Valley – a plan that takes account of the valley’s fragile ecology as well as recognizing the legitimate human need to draw on its water resources.

The plan puts scientifically sound and economically realistic policy recommendations behind our vision for the Jordan. Key recommendations include the return of 400-600 mcm (million cubic meters) of fresh water to the river; an end to the dumping of raw or poorly-treated sewage, saline, and other effluents into the stream; and the establishment of functioning international mechanisms for the joint management of the valley’s water. With the support of national governments, this master plan can become the blueprint for the revival of the river.

2013 also saw the first release of clean water into the Jordan River in 49 years. The Israeli Water Authority has agreed to allocate 30mcm (million cubic meters) of fresh water every year from the Sea of Galilee to help revive the river. This sets an important precedent for future allocations, but it falls far short of FoEME’s recommendation that Israel release 220mcm of water, and Jordan a further 90mcm, as part of an international effort to rehabilitate the Jordan.

In the last 3 years we have seen the first signs of progress in the struggle to revive the river.

Responding to years of advocacy, national governments and municipalities are now working to prevent the dumping or leaking of untreated sewage into the river. New treatment plants are in development in Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian communities throughout the Jordan Valley. If this commitment is maintained, half a century of using the Jordan as a sewage canal can now be brought to an end.

A MEASURE OF PROGRESS

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FoEME believes that a living Jordan River can bring economic prosperity as well as ecological health to this valley, and that the management of the valley’s water provides a practical opportunity for regional cooperation and for the advancement of justice and peace.

We believe the Jordan can be revived without weakening the valley’s agricultural economy or causing a shortage of water for human use. In the countries that share the valley, FoEME has identified over a billion cubic meters of water that could be saved (see the fact box on page 7) and used to restore basic water rights to the Palestinians, to revive the Lower Jordan River, and to save the Dead Sea.

In the past decade FoEME has opened eco-parks – ideal places to stay and learn - on both sides of the Jordan. We are now working towards the creation of a trans-boundary ecological peace park centered on one of the river’s historic crossing points, on the border between Israel and Jordan. This reserve will welcome visitors from both sides of the valley, providing a much-needed point of access to a river which, for much of its length, remains a closed military zone.

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Reviving the Jordan River is a challenge that requires real political commitment from leaders on all sides of the valley.

And that’s where you come in.

We need to push this issue up the political agenda – to raise our voices and let Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian decision-makers know that we care about this river and that we expect them to act.

The Jordan River flows through the heart of the Christian tradition, and for that reason its revival is not simply a question of politics – it is also a moral and spiritual challenge for Christians everywhere. If we want the river to survive, we cannot remain silent.

**HOW TO JOIN THE CAMPAIGN**

- **Get together.** Establish a circle of friends, classmates, or co-workers from your community. You might be a group of three or three hundred. It doesn’t matter. Together, you can make a difference.

- **Get inspired.** When you’ve got a group, you need to tell them what happened to the river, why it matters, and what they can do about it. FoEME can provide films, presentations, and fact sheets to help you tell this story. For faith groups we have published sourcebooks (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) that include scriptural quotations, essays, and sample sermons that you can use to engage your congregation.

- **Identify your target.** You need to let decision-makers know that you care about the river and want them to act. It is crucial to address this message to the right person. If you’re in one of the countries that border the river, this might be a mayor or minister. If you’re part of a religious congregation, it might be the most senior representative of your community. If you’re outside the Middle East, you might need to address your elected representatives, or the national ambassadors from the countries that share the river. You are in the
best position to make this call. Discuss it with your group, and come up with the names and addresses of the political, religious, or civil society leaders you are going to approach.

• Get the message across. When you know what you want to say and who you want to say it to, you need to decide how to get the message across.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

WRITE
Old-fashioned paper mail is more effective than email, and personal, hand-written letters tend to have more impact than mass-printed campaign blurb. Pictures, poems and postcards can all help your letter to stand out. On our website you’ll find sample letters, fact sheets, and stories to help you make the case.

MEET
Why not invite your representative or leader to a meeting, so s/he can learn more about the issue and start to work with you on the campaign?

GET NOTICED
Organize a creative, peaceful, attention-grabbing stunt to bring the Jordan River to the attention of political leaders. Remember to invite the local media, and to get your message as clear as possible. FoEME has used this strategy to great effect in the Middle East – you are welcome to contact us for ideas and advice.

LEARN, CREATE, EXHIBIT
If you are a schoolteacher or faith leader, you may want to design an educational project about the river. This could produce paintings, poems, songs, films, or photos that you can exhibit to raise awareness about the state of the Jordan. Think about which religious or political leaders – as well as which media outlets – you could invite to such an event. A module of this kind is not only raises environmental consciousness; it can also offer young people an education in global citizenship, grassroots activism, and participation in the democratic process.
USE YOUR IMAGINATION
These are not the only ways to raise awareness about the state of the Jordan River. Use your imagination. Make some noise. And keep it positive - you’ll be more effective if you address political leaders as partners, and ask them to join you in this effort, rather than treating them as an obstacle.

OTHER WAYS TO HELP

• Spread the word. Use your social networks to call for the revival of the Jordan River. Let people know what the problem is, why you care, and what you’re doing to help. On our website you’ll find videos, photos, and even sample posts to help get the word out – but your own voice is the most powerful. Please tell us what you’re doing via Twitter and Facebook - it helps us build momentum behind the campaign.

• Invite FoEME to speak to your community. Get in touch if you would like someone from FoEME to speak to your community about the Jordan River.

• Come to the river. If you want to get more deeply involved, organize a journey to see the Jordan River for yourself. FoEME runs eco-parks – ideas places to stay and to learn - on both sides of the valley. A journey like this will equip you with first-hand knowledge that you can use to advocate for the river in your home community. We can also put you in touch with tour operators and local partners (including environmental and faith groups) that’ll help make your trip safe and successful.

• Donate to FoEME. We need your financial support to continue this effort. You can donate directly at www.SaveTheJordan.com or, better still, use your local campaign to raise funds.
REVIVING THE JORDAN

• FoEME recommends the release of 400-600 million cubic meters (mcm) of fresh water into the river every year.

• In addition, the Jordan needs to flood at least once each year in order to keep the river’s ecosystem healthy (100m³/sec for 24 hours).

• FoEME recommends that Israel release 220mcm of water into the river each year, Syria 100mcm, and Jordan 90mcm. FoEME also recognizes that Palestine, as a riparian to the river, has a right to a fair share of the Jordan’s water.

• FoEME’s analysis has identified over a billion cubic meters of water that could be saved by these countries (primarily through reduction of leaks, improvements to irrigation efficiency, water harvesting and grey-water recycling, and demand management) and used to revive the river and to restore Palestinian water rights.

• The revival of the river requires that Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian decision-makers implement national policy strategies to manage their own demand for water, and to cooperate in the implementation of a comprehensive trans-boundary master plan for the river.

• This master plan should determine levels of water flow, set water quality standards, identify ways to eliminate pollution, define ecological corridors, support environmental rehabilitation programs, and advance plans for the development of eco-tourism in the Jordan Valley.

• Implementation of a master plan requires the establishment of a functioning trans-boundary commission to manage the valley’s water resources, resolve disputes, and strengthen the mechanisms of cooperation.
CREDITS

BIBLICAL TRANSLATIONS
All English-language translations of the Bible, Old and New Testaments, are taken from the King James Bible, with the exception of the quote on the front cover (Ezekiel 47:6) which comes from the English Standard version.

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The views expressed are those of EcoPeace / FoEME and do not necessarily represent the views of our expert team, contributors, project advisors or reviewers.

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EcoPeace/ Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is a unique organization at the forefront of the environmental peacemaking movement. As a tri-lateral organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli environmentalists, our primary objective is the promotion of cooperative efforts to protect our shared environmental heritage. In so doing, we seek to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region. FoEME has offices in Amman, Bethlehem, and Tel-Aviv.

For more information on FoEME or to download any of our publications please visit: www.foeme.org

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