

The Oratory of St. George in Rihab:
The Oldest Extant Christian Building or Just Another Byzantine Church?

In December 2000 the Public Archaeological Department of Jordan uncovered the remains of an ancient Christian building in Rihab Jordan, a small village located some 50 km N. of Amman.¹ Among the most prominent of the remains of this building was a large mosaic pavement. Atop the rectangular mosaic and encased within its eastern border could be found a brief Christian dedicatory inscription written in Greek that marked the completion of the building. In the second to last line of text the inscription appeared to date the completion of the edifice to the year “one hundred and twenty-four.”² Given that most Christian inscriptions from Jordan and other regions that were once a part of the former Roman province of Arabia employ a chronological reckoning that dates from 22 March 106 C.E., two Jordanian scholars, Samer Abu-Ghazalah and Abdel-kader Al-Hissan, recently argued that this inscription dated to the year 230 C.E. They even went on to insist that the mosaic and accompanying remains constituted the oldest extant Christian church.³ Even more recently, Al-Hissan has attracted the attention of a number of international news agencies by announcing the discovery of a subterranean Christian cave, or catacomb, located underneath the mosaic pavement that not only predates the church but may also be as early as the first century.⁴

1. For the preliminary report on the excavation of this site see Abdel-kader Al-Hissan, “The New Archaeological Discoveries of the al-Fudayn and Rahāb - al-Mafraq Excavation Projects, 1991–2001,” *ADAJ* 46 (2002): 71–94 (Arabic Section) esp. 85-90.

2. Al-Hissan, “The New Archaeological Discoveries of the al-Fudayn and Rahāb - al-Mafraq Excavation Projects, 1991–2001,” 88.

3. Samer Abu-Ghazalah and Abdel-kader Al-Hissan, “Discovery of the Oldest Church of the World,” *ASR* 45 (2002): 295–98.

4. Rula Samain, “Archaeologists unearth ‘first church in the world’ in Rihab,” *The Jordan Times*, June 9, 2008, <http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=8471>; Orly Halpern, “Ancient Find Fuels Modern-Day Hopes,” *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), June 11, 2008; Rita Delfiner (AP), “Lost Cave is Oldest Church in World,” *New York Post*, June 11, 2008, http://www.nypost.com/seven/06112008/news/worldnews/lost_cave_is_oldest_church_in_world_114977.htm; “The Oldest Church?” *Guardian*

Given the potential implications of such claims for the study of early Christianity, in that if they could be substantiated they would radically alter a number of conceptions currently held about early Christian epigraphic habits, building and burial practices, and the spread of Christianity into the region of the Decapolis, such claims merit some attention even if only to show that they are largely unfounded. This analysis will therefore consider whether the remains of the building found at Rihab should be considered the oldest extant Christian church and will take a two-pronged approach. First, the inscription from the mosaic pavement will be assessed to see whether it actually dates to the year 230 C.E., and second, a cursory survey of the archeological remains will be considered to see if they are consistent with a date of the first three centuries of the Common Era. As this examination will show neither the inscription, which is the only piece of objective evidence used to date the construction of the building, nor the archaeological remains point to such an early date. Rather, it will be shown that the building is clearly of the Byzantine era; not only are the archaeological remains consistent with Christian buildings of this period but the inscription has been transcribed incorrectly and actually contains the date 530 C.E.

I. The Inscription

The Mosaic inscription is embedded within the eastern border of the mosaic pavement and measures approximately 1.3 meters in length by 0.54 meters in height. It is written in *tabula ansata*, is marked by careless lettering that lacks uniformity, and contains a number of abbreviations.⁵ The letters *eta* (H), *mu* (M) and *nu* (N) are sometimes difficult to distinguish

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gallery/2008/jun/11/religion.archaeology?picture=334758825>.

5. Abbreviated words in the inscription are usually marked by either a sublinear stroke under the last letter or by the symbol 4 after the last letter. On the use of sublinear strokes to mark abbreviations see M. Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions (The Near East, 200 B.C. - A.D. 1100)* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 34–35.

from each other, especially in *ll.* 2-3, and at times the spacing between letters in the inscription lacks consistency as letters are occasionally placed so close to each other that they periodically overlap.⁶ Also, the inscription contains a few common orthographic errors as the transcriber had confusion distinguishing certain vowels and diphthongs and subsequently spelled certain words in an unusual albeit phonetic way.

A transcription along with a translation of the inscription is given below:⁷

ἐν ὀ(νό)μ(ατι) τῆς ἁγ(ίας) τριάδος
 ἐκ προσφ(ορᾶς) Θωμᾶ Γαιανοῦ
 μονοκτίστ(ου ?)⁸ ἐτελιώθη {θη}τὸ
 εὐκτέρ(ιον) τοῦ ἁγ(ίου) Γεωργίου ἐν
 5 μ(η)νὶ ᾿Απελλείῳ χρ(όνων) ἡ ἰνδι(κτιῶνος) ὑκδ̄ ἔτ(ους)
 σπουδῆ Σεργίου παραμ(οναρίου)

1. *insc.* ὀμ 2. *insc.* Γαιανῶ. 3. *l.* ἐτελειώθη. 4. *l.* εὐκτήτιον. 5. *l.* ᾿Απελλάίῳ.

(1) In the name of the Holy Trinity, (2) from the offerings of Thomas son of Gaianus, (3) the sole founder. (4) The oratory of Saint George was completed in (5) the month of Apellaios at the time of the eighth indiction of the year four hundred and twenty-four (6) through the zeal of Sergius the watchman.

6. In *l.* 4 the letter gamma (G) overlaps with the following letter *iota* (I) so that at first glance this letter combination resembles a *pi* (P). At the beginning of line *l.* 5 the transcriber has placed the *eta* on top of *mu* in order to make it fit, nevertheless this is a common abbreviation for *mh&n* (month). See Avi-Yonah, *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions*, 12, 85.

7. The transcription is principally derived from a couple different pictures of the inscription that can be found in Abu-Ghazalah and Al-Hissan, “Discovery of the Oldest Church of the World,” 296; Al-Hissan, “The New Archaeological Discoveries of the al-Fudayn and Rahāb - al-Mafraq Excavation Projects, 1991–2001,” 84. We have also consulted the published inscription in *SEG* 51 (2001) 2045, although it contains a number of errors and our transcription is different. Likewise, we have looked at some suggestions for improved readings found in *REG* 118 (2005) 564-65 (= *BE* (2005) 544).

8. This reading has been suggested in *REG* 118 (2005) 564-65 (= *BE* (2005) 544). However, while it was noted in *REG* that this word is a *hapax legomenon*, it is actually attested on a few occasions as it occurs in Basil of Caesarea’s treatise *Contra Eunomium* where it has the meaning of “only-created” (1.256E; M.29.617A). Basil uses the term to describe the beliefs of Eunomius, who was an extreme Arian, and who asserted that only the Son was created by God, being the “only created,” whereas all other creatures were not created directly by God but rather mediately through the Son. While Eunomius and his followers were formally condemned at the first council at Constantinople in 381 C.E. (Can. 1), his sect appears to have remained for some time after his death c. 400 and appears to have been prominent in the East (Aug. *de Past. Cur.* 8; Jer. *Vir. ill.* 120; Theod. *Hist. eccl.* 2.25f; *Haer. Fab.* 4.3). In this inscription the term has no relation to the doctrines of Eunomius but simply refers to the fact that Thomas was not one of several benefactors of the church but the person who had financed the entire building.

That this dedicatory inscription is clearly Byzantine, which has obvious implications for the date of the church that it commemorates, can be established rather easily from *l.* 5 where it contains a date. The term “indiction” (ἰνδικτος, ἰνδικτιῶν = declaration) first referred to the announcement (*indictio*) of the mandatory delivery of foodstuffs for the *annona*; however, in the inscription it refers to the fifteen year cycle known as “indiction cycles” that were introduced as a means of reckoning in the year 312 C.E. to help aid with financial administration.⁹ While indiction cycles were not numbered consecutively, each year within a particular cycle was and would repeat at intervals of fifteen years with the earliest possible date for the “eighth indiction” falling in 320 CE (eight years after the system was first introduced in 312 C.E.).¹⁰

The latter half of *l.* 5, which contains the reference to “year four hundred and twenty-four,” is merely a reference to the Era of the Province of Arabia (E.P.A.). This system of reckoning was inaugurated shortly after the former kingdom of Nabatea was annexed by Trajan, being subdued by the Syrian legate Cornelius Palma at the beginning of the second century.¹¹ However, it does not appear that this reckoning was imposed by Rome, but that the inhabitants of the former Nabatean kingdom adopted it independently in place of their earlier chronological system, which was reckoned by regnal years.¹² To our best knowledge the starting point of the E.P.A. is reckoned from 22 March 106 C.E.¹³ Therefore, in order to convert the date contained on the inscription to modern reckoning according to the Julian Calendar, all one needs to do is

9. Yiannis E. Meimaris, *Chronological Systems in Roman-Byzantine Palestine and Arabia: The Evidence of the Dated Greek Inscriptions* (Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, Research Centre for Greek and Roman Antiquity, 1992), 32–34; Roger S. Bagnall and K.A. Worp, *The Chronological Systems of Byzantine Egypt (StudAmst 8)* (Zutphen: Terra, 1978), 1–8; Elias Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 78.

10. While a reference to an indiction year cannot provide a precise date on its own, in its original context it would have been relatively clear since it have only repeated every fifteen years.

11. Dio Cass. 68.14.5; Amm.Marc. 14.8.13.

12. Leah Di Segni, *Dated Greek Inscriptions from Palestine from the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997), 19–21.

13. Meimaris, *Chronological Systems in Roman-Byzantine Palestine and Arabia*, 146.

simply add 106 (as 106 C.E. was the year in which the E.P.A. took effect) to the number of years contained in the date (424) with the result that the inscription dates to the year 530 C.E.

The confusion that has arisen over the date of this inscription is due to the fact that when Al-Hissan first published a transcription he made a mistake transcribing line 5.¹⁴ Instead of reading the year 424 he instead read 124 and consequently argued that the church dated to the year 230 C.E.¹⁵ This mistake was due to the way the number was written in the inscription. In ancient Greek numbers were written through a system of alphanumerics where each letter within the alphabet could also double as a number. In ancient Greek the number 424 was written $\Upsilon\overline{\text{K}}\overline{\Delta}$ with a supralinear stroke to signify that this letter combination should be read as a number and not as a word ($\Upsilon=400$, $\text{K}=20$, $\Delta=4$). Instead of reading an initial *upsilon* (Υ) Al-Hissan read an initial *rho* ($\text{P}=100$). Based on an examination of the photograph the reason for the error undoubtedly came about since the supralinear stroke that marks the *upsilon* as a number touches the two up diverging stems of the letter ($\overline{\Upsilon}$) so that at first glance it looks like a *rho* (P). However, Al-Hissan's reading has to be incorrect, since the date on the inscription contains the reference to an indiction cycle and as noted previously such cycles did not come into existence until 312 C.E. Therefore, a date of 230 C.E. for the inscription is an absolute impossibility. Additionally, the date of 530 C.E. is further reinforced since an eighth indiction would have fallen in that year.

Besides the date contained in *l.* 5 there are a number of other elements contained in the inscription that are characteristic of a date well beyond 230 C.E. The opening invocation to the "Holy Trinity" is characteristically Byzantine as such references simply do not occur in the

14. In fact an examination of his transcription of the inscription shows that he made a number of egregious errors. See Al-Hissan, "The New Archaeological Discoveries of the al-Fudayn and Rahāb - al-Mafraq Excavation Projects, 1991–2001," 88.

15. When the inscription was subsequently published in SEG the error was perpetuated, although it contained a brief note that there was something awry with the date.

epigraphic record until after the ecumenical councils of Nicea (325 C.E.) and Constantinople (381 C.E.) when the triune nature of God is first systematically worked out.¹⁶ Likewise, the reference to St. George in the inscription, which is almost certainly a reference to the famous martyr saint who bore this name, should suggest a date not any earlier than the fifth century when his cult first began to gain widespread popularity with a number of churches and shrines being dedicated in his honor.¹⁷ Lastly, the reference to a “watchmen” (Lat. *paramonarius*) in *l. 6* also suggests a much later date since this title is unattested before the fifth century in Christian literature.¹⁸

II. Archaeological Evidence

In addition to the inscriptional evidence, archaeological data also points to a much later date for the church complex at Rihab. While it would be extremely difficult to assign the archaeological evidence at the church complex a third century date, a date in the sixth century – one that corresponds with the date given in the inscription – is easily defensible.

16. The term “trinity” (τριάς) does not appear in either the LXX or the NT with reference to God. Theophilus of Antioch is the first Christian writer to employ *tría&j* when he argues that the first three days of creation are types of the τριάς “triad” of God, his word, and his wisdom (*Ad Autolyicum* 2.15). Yet it is clear Theophilus is not using τριάς as a technical term for understanding what much later comes to be understood as the triune nature of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Clement of Alexandria is the first to use the phrase “holy trinity/triad” (ἁγία τριάς) but has it refer to the attributes of “faith, hope and love” when discussing 1 Cor 13:13 (*Stromata* 4.7.54).

17. In some traditions St. George was a soldier martyr who was put to death under Diocletian on account of his Christian faith in Nicomedia at the beginning of the fourth century. Later, his relics were then transferred to Diopolis in Palestine where a large church was built in his honor. However, given that there are a number of conflicting regional accounts concerning his martyrdom and place of burial it is virtually impossible to determine what traditions are more authoritative. Nevertheless, his cult seems to have been especially popular in not only in parts of Palestine and Arabia, where a number of churches were dedicated to his memory (Yiannis E. Meimaris, *Sacred Names, Saints, Martyrs and Church Officials in the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Pertaining to the Christian Church of Palestine* [Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation, Centre for Greek and Roman Antiquity, 1996], 123–28), but also in parts of Egypt where he came to be one of the most popular saints in the sixth century (Arietta Papaconstantinou, *Le culte des saints en Égypte: des byzantines aux abbassides* [Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2001], 69–72).

18. Meimaris, *Sacred Names, Saints, Martyrs and Church Officials in the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri Pertaining to the Christian Church of Palestine*, 259–60. For early attestations of the title see *Cod. Just.* 1.3.45.3; Chrysostom, *De paenitentia* 1 (PG 60.688); Can. II Chalcedon.

The overall plan of the so-called St. George church is a basilica plan, with a nave separated from the aisles by square columns, and an apse and altar area.¹⁹ This basilica plan is of a type not found before Constantine, but which becomes the norm in the centuries after Constantine's Lateran in Rome.²⁰ The initial reports concerning the church note the similarity between the plan of the St. George church and the church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, in nearby Gerasa, whose dedicatory inscription dates it to the year 553 C.E.²¹ This report also noted that the excavations at Rihab uncovered churches dating from the sixth and seventh centuries C.E., and a neighboring basilica on the same site is dated by these excavators to the year 580 C.E.²²

Indeed the plan of the church has far more in common with the neighboring sixth and seventh century structures than those of the third century. Third century Christian worship buildings, such as the so-called Christian prayer hall at Megiddo, or the Christian building at Dura Europos, are adapted domestic spaces, rather than churches constructed in their own right.²³ They retain their domestic appearance from the outside, and have inner renovations to accommodate worship practices. These accommodations are not, in the case of both Megiddo and Dura, basilical in their plan. The claim that Rihab's basilica form predates Constantine's Lateran by some 85 years needs far more to substantiate it than a dubiously translated inscription, especially when considering the contemporary evidence.

¹⁹ See Abdel-Qader al-Husan, "The New Archaeological Discoveries of the al-Fudayn and Rahab," *ADAJ* 46 (2002): 86-7. The authors are grateful for the assistance of Professor Walid Saleh in the translation of the Arabic here.

²⁰ It should be noted here that the potential church at Aqaba has a basilica plan and a relatively early – fourth century – date. See S. Thomas Parker, "An Early Church, Perhaps the Oldest in the World, Found at Aqaba," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 61 (1998): 254; S. Thomas Parker, "Brief Notice on a possible Fourth Century Church at Aqaba, Jordan," *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, 1999.

²¹ Abu-Ghazalah and Al-Hissan, "Discovery of the Oldest Church in the World," *ASR* 45 (2002): 296.

²² Abu-Ghazalah and Al-Hissan, 296.

²³ For Megiddo, see Yotam Tepper and Leah Di Segni, *The Christian Prayer Hall of the Third Century CE at Kefar 'Othnay (Legio): Excavations at the Megiddo Prison 2005*, Israel Antiquities Authority, 2006; for Dura Europos, see L. Michael White, *Social Origins of Christian Architecture Volume II: Texts and Monuments for the Christian Domus Ecclesiae in its Environment*, Trinity Press International, 1997: 123-131.

The mosaics in the nave also indicate a much later date than the third century date assigned by Al-Hissan. In fact, Al-Hissan and Abu-Ghazalah, in their initial excavation site, also rightly note the similarity of the mosaic pavement in the St. George Church to that of the church of SS. Cosmas and Damian.²⁴ The overall geometric pattern of the St. George pavement, the vegetal ornamentation, and the positioning of the inscription in front of the altar, bear a striking resemblance to that of the church of SS. Cosmas and Damian, dated to the sixth century C.E. The pavement also corresponds stylistically to many of the sixth and seventh century pavements in Jordan, including nearby Madaba.²⁵

In addition to the mosaics, the photos released of the St. George church also show chancel screens in the reconstruction of the altar. Chancel screens are quite common in the Constantinian period and after, but not before. The *cancelli* shown in the St. George photos are stone, with bas-reliefs of a cross in circle, with radiating bars. The use of the cross in early Christian art does not appear until the late fourth century, and does not become common usage until long after that, in the fifth and sixth centuries C.E.²⁶ These *cancelli* may well have been later additions to the St. George church, but without complete archaeological information, it is impossible to say for certain, and Al-Hissan does not address this point himself.²⁷

²⁴ Abu-Ghazalah and Al-Hissan, 296.

²⁵ See Michele Piccirillo, *Madaba: le chiese e i mosaici*, Edizione Paoline, 1989; M. Piccirillo, *The Mosaics of Jordan* (Amman: ACOR, 1993).

²⁶ Graydon F. Snyder, *Ante Pacem: Archaeological Evidence of Church Life before Constantine* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 58-64.

²⁷ The chancel screens at Rihab also bear a resemblance to those found at the West Church in neighbouring Pella, which have cross and lily and cross in circle reliefs, and are dated to the sixth century C.E. See Robert Houston Smith, "Chancel Screens from the West Church at Pella of the Decapolis," in Lawrence E. Stager, Joseph A. Greene, Michael D. Coogan, eds. *The Archaeology of Jordan and Beyond: Essays in Honour of James A. Sauer* (Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant 1). Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000. The type of chancel screen exhibited both at Rihab and in Pella is clearly of a later date than the early third century C.E.

Thus it is clear that the date of 230 C.E. for the upper church, or the St. George church, is doubtful, and the church ought to be assigned a date closer to the mid-sixth century, corresponding both with the inscription on its mosaic pavement and with the neighboring structures.

Given the fact that an early date for the upper church is unlikely, it must also be noted that the claim for first-century worship in the cave or catacomb beneath the church is also highly unlikely. There is no evidence that the cave was used for worship in the first century, and indeed, Abu-Ghazalah and Al-Hissan dated it not before 150 C.E. in their initial report.²⁸ Much has been made of the eastern orientation of the cave, as well as the semi-circular area they call an apse.²⁹ The reports suggest that the so-called apse is an altar or worship area of an early meeting place, complete with stone benches for the clergy. There is little precedent for such a claim; certainly such architectural differentiation of worship space is not present in Christian architecture until long after the first century. To invoke again the third century examples of Megiddo and Dura Europos, both of these have minimal articulation for clergy, with the former having only a central table or altar, and the latter, a *bema*. The church of St. Basil in Rihab, does have an apse with a row of seating, presumably for clergy, but is dated from a dedicatory inscription to 594 C.E., and parallels between a cave and a church ought to be drawn only with extreme caution.³⁰ Even if the cave could be proven to have housed Christian worship at some

²⁸ Abu-Ghazaleh and Al-Hissan, 297.

²⁹ Al-Hissan, "New Archaeological Discoveries," 86-7.

³⁰ David L. Chatford Clark, "Viewing the Liturgy: a space syntax study of changing visibility and accessibility in the development of the Byzantine church in Jordan," *World Archaeology* 39 (2007): 84-104; 91.

point, there is no demonstrable proof that it did so in the first century, especially with architectural differentiation for clergy.³¹

In conclusion, the Christian complex at Rihab, both the upper oratory and the cave church or catacomb, is well in keeping with a date in the mid-sixth century, as the inscription on the mosaic pavement clearly states. The basilica plan, the mosaic decoration, and the differentiation of worship space all support a later dating. Given the presence of many other churches in the area (a number of 25 in a 4 km² area is given by Al-Hissan and Abu-Ghazalah in their initial reports), all of which date to the sixth or seventh century C.E., it is clear that the so-called St. George church was part of the building program of churches in Rihab in the Byzantine period.³²

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³¹ It is also worth noting here that the so-called apse construction, with its stone benches, resembles in no little fashion the layout of a *stibadium*, the preferred dining arrangement in late Antique houses of the Empire. Since Al-Hissan's reports in the *Globe and Mail*, among others, mention a cemetery or catacomb, one wonders whether there is a connection between funerary ritual practice and the semi-circular arrangement, but of course such a claim could not be borne out without examining the site itself. Orly Halpern, "Ancient find fuels modern-day hopes," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), June 11, 2008, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20080611.wchurch11/BNSStory/International/home>.

³² Abu-Ghazaleh and Al-Hassan, 297.