Piotr Briks

The History of the Birth of Traditions and Conflicts over the Nabi Samuel Shrine (Israel/Palestine)

Abstrakt

During the Crusades, the almost forgotten small Byzantine monastery of St. Samuel (4th-c.) became a key place on the map of Holy Land pilgrimages. Initially important only to Christians, the shrine quickly became a pilgrimage destination for Jews and later for Muslims. Each of these communities left an indelible mark on the traditions and customs of this holy place. During some periods, they managed to celebrate the memory of Samuel in unison, but largely the shrine was a source of conflicts or even bloody battles. In 1967, the area around Nabi Samuel was incorporated into the Israeli-Occupied Territories. Due to the rich tradition associated with the cult of the OT prophet, but even more the significance of Nabi Samuel (identified as the ancient Mizpah), the Israeli authorities have tried to make this site a memorial to Israel’s ancient history, and at the same time a tourist attraction. Since then, the actions of the authorities have provoked constant protests and unrest. As has recently been revealed, the motivations of the Israeli administration are not only religious, historical, and political, but also business-related, although this is shamefully hidden behind lofty slogans.

Key words: Nebi Samwil, Mons Gaudii, Mount Joy, Shrines in Israel, Tomb of the Prophet Samuel

Introduction

Present-day Israel is a holy land for Jews, Christians, and Muslims: a meeting place for followers of these three monotheistic religions. In practice, Israel’s history is a series of periods of relative peace, more or
less overt conflicts, and even open hatred and fighting. Its historical, 
civilizational and political conflicts are inextricably linked to religious 
differences. Recently the site of the most heated conflicts has been Nabi 
Samuel, about 7 km from Jerusalem.

The figure of the prophet Samuel and his burial place

*Nabi Samuel* means ‘Prophet Samuel,’ which in Arabic toponomastics describes a shrine of a given prophet (similarly: Nabi Musa, Nabi 
Junis, Nabi Saleh, Nabi Rubin and so on). The figure of the prophet 
Samuel is known from the eponymous book of the Bible (specifically: 1 
Samuel. Additional mentions can be found in 1 Chr; Ps 99:6 and Jer 
15:1; in the deuterocanonical Book of Sirach 46:13 and New Testament 
fragments: Acts 3:24; 13:20 and Heb 11:32.). According to these sources 
the prophet was active in Judea in the 11th century BC, performing the 
role of Israel’s spiritual leader at its crucial moment when the founda-
tions of a future monarchy were laid. It was he who was to anoint Isra-
el’s first ruler Saul and his successor David. Samuel is also associated 
with the victories over the enemies of the emerging kingdom of Israel, 
the Philistines, and with the destruction of the Amalekites. Among other 
things, these memories of the political role of the prophet play a signifi-
cant role in the current conflict. The figure of Samuel also appears in the 
Quran (2, 246–248), although he is not mentioned by name: the descrip-
tion of the activities of an anonymous prophet essentially coincides with 
the biblical version of the story of Samuel (Ali 2002: n. 278 to v. 246). 
He is therefore an important figure to the entire monotheistic religious 
community. For Israelis, he is also important from a national and politi-
cal point of view. Additionally, the history of his grave has provided 
Christians and Muslims with reasons to consider Nabi Samuel focal to 
their heritage and identity.

According to 1 Sam 25:1 (and 28:3), Samuel was buried ‘at his 
home in Ramah.’ The identification of Ramah still remains a mystery 
(Lagarde 1870: 225–226). In the 4th century, a modest monastery was 
built in the area of the present-day village of Nabi Samuel (Procopius 
1940: 359), and sometime later, this site was believed to be the location 
of the Tomb of Samuel the Prophet, which, historically, is a highly ques-
tionable assertion. Firstly, there are no archaeological traces of settle-
ment at this site from the period to which the activity of the prophet 
Samuel is dated (as well as numerous and long-lasting interruptions in 
the continuity of settlement there, and thus also the memory of a possible
tomb (Reports of the archaeological discoveries in 1980 see: Feldstein 1993: 232–233; in 1992–2003 see: Magen 2008: 36–45, 78–79). Secondly, for over 1,500 years there has been no mention of the prophet’s burial site or at least of his cult (Sacred Sites 2011: 86). Thirdly, there are testimonies that the prophet’s remains (wherever they were believed to have been before) were solemnly transported from Judea to Byzantium as early as 406 AD (Migne 1845: 343). Finally, numerous doubts regarding the identification of the biblical Ramah with today’s Nabi Samuel have been voiced. All these reservations (known and raised much earlier) have not prevented followers of various religions from making pilgrimages to this place, where they believed they would be closer to this Man of God.

Over time, Nabi Samuel began to be identified with other historically significant places that gave the prophet’s shrine a new, political or identity-related value. It was considered to be ‘the high place of Gibeon,’ known from 1 Kgs 3:3–4, where King Solomon was to offer sacrifices and burned incense, or the ancient city of Mizpah ‘in the tribe of Benjamin,’ where Samuel pursued his activities (Josh 18:26; Judg 25:1–8; 1Sam 7:5–6; 12:1–17. For an outline of various concepts concerning the identification of Nabi Samuel with Mizpah, see Lash 2019: 121–144). In my opinion, the second identification is the key to understanding the worship of the prophet on the hill near Jerusalem. Nabi Samuel is probably the actual location of Mizpah (Μασσηφα in Greek), but not the one ‘of Benjamin’ but the one mentioned in 1 Macc 3:46, where in 166 BC Judas Maccabeus gathered the rebels and launched a successful attack against the Seleucid forces at Emmaus (the so-called Battle of Emmaus against the Seleucid forces under the command of Gorgias and Nicanor). The victory of the Maccabean troops in this battle is considered one of the most important stages of the struggle for independence and the establishment of the Hasmonean state (further in: Brody 2009: 116–117). The final victory over the invaders attributed Nabi Samuel – associated with this victory in historical memory (regardless of scholarly discussions) – add an additional patriotic value to it, and on the other hand, this place began to be connected with the cult of the prophet Samuel because of the identical name (with Mizpah of Benjamin), and over centuries with his burial site.

The historicity of such identifications is obviously secondary. In the eyes of Jewish pilgrims coming to this shrine, and now in the eyes of Israeli visitors, it assumes the proportions of a symbol of Israel’s former glory and victories, a place commemorating Israel’s assemblies at many historically focal moments (1Sam 7:5–6), the beginning of the monarchy
The History of the Birth of Traditions and Conflicts over the Nabi Samuel Shrine...

(1Sam 10:17–25), places of judgments, prayers, and sacrifices, and somewhat surprisingly, only secondarily – the place of worship of the prophet Samuel himself.

The shrine of the prophet Samuel

The popularity of St. Samuel’s monastery in the Byzantine period has been confirmed by archaeological excavations (including numerous coins from various regions, pottery and the remains of a pilgrims’ hostel) as well as the 4th-6th century sources: Theodosius (Theodosius, ‘De Situ Terrae Sanctae’ v. 34, in: Dickson 1893: 10. See also Geyer 1898: 140. Cf. (Elitzur 1984: 88, n. 56)), Arkulf (Meehan 1983: 65), Eusebius and Jerome (Lagarde 1870: 146 and 225–226), Procopius of Caesarea (Procopius 1940: 359). The fate of the monastery after the Muslim invasion in 636–638 is unknown. It might have functioned for some time, but on the other hand, there are no traces of any cult in this place from the early Muslim period (Pringle 1993: 86; Magen and Dadon 1999: 68). What was left after the monastery and its patron is the memory preserved in the Arabic name of the place: dayr Samwīl or Šamwīl (monastery/church of [St.] Samuel).

The situation changed radically at the beginning of the Crusader period. It was from the hill of Nabi Samuel that the knights of the First Crusade, on 7 June 1099, after a strenuous three-year journey, viewed Jerusalem for the first time, and ‘they all burst into tears of joy’ (Alberti Aquensis Historia Hierosolymitana 1879: 463. For doubts concerning this tradition, see Ehrlich 2006: 264–272). Relatively quickly, the name ‘Mons Gaudii’ or ‘Montjoie,’ meaning ‘Mount of Joy,’ stuck to this strategic hill. This name appears in the documents of secular and church authorities from the very beginning of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, e.g. in the donation of King Baldwin I (1100–1118) given in 1115 (Delaborde 1880: 29, doc VI), until its end (Delaborde 1880: 34, doc. VIII. For discussions on the identification of Mount Joy in particular documents, see: Pringle 1993: 44; Kedar 2016: 3–19; Gibson and Har-Peled 2019: 113–140).

Over time, the walled Abbey of the Premonstratensian was built there (Rey 1883: 391), becoming an important point on the map of the

---

holy places of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. It was supported by numerous donors, including the kings and queens of Jerusalem (In 1964 H.E. Mayer found a document issued in 1185 by King Baldwin V, in which he lists the donations of the rulers of Jerusalem for the Church of St. Samuel, commencing with the foundation of Baldwin II: Mayer 1964: 35–71 and Mayer and Richard 2010: 773–776 no. 453). This shrine again became a place of Christian worship, drawing pilgrims from the East and the West, including Jews. One of them, Benjamin of Tudela (1173), refers to the authenticity of the prophet’s burial site (Adler 1907: 26):

when the Christians captured Ramlah, the Ramah of old, from the Mohammedans, they found there the grave of Samuel the Ramathite close to a Jewish synagogue. The Christians took the remains, conveyed them unto Shiloh, and erected over them a large church, and called it St. Samuel of Shiloh unto this day.

The contemporaries of Benjamin of Tudela, Jewish pilgrims, Jacob ben Netanel HaCohen (between 1153 and 1187) and Petachiah of Regensburg (after 1175 and before 1187) did not mention the existence of Samuel’s tomb on Mount Joy, while others, following the opinion of Benjamin of Tudela (Elitzur 1984: 81), questioned its authenticity (Reiner 1988: 309–310). These discussions among Jewish pilgrims and travellers could have caused Nabi Samuel to be seen by many as a place of historical and national remembrance, and only secondarily, as the prophet’s shrine.

From 1187 onward, the monastery changed hands. The chronicles and records in martyrologies testify to victims among the monks of Nabi Samuel (Stevenson 1875: 229–230). Eventually, the monastery passed into Arab hands in 1244. It was probably then that its fortifications were demolished, and the church itself was seriously damaged. However, the memory of this place did not disappear. Matthaeus Parisiensis marked the monastery of St. Samuel on Mount Joy on his map dated 1240–1253. In turn, Burchard’s account (1283) allows us to conclude that even several decades after the destruction of the monastery, at least Christian pilgrims used the name ‘ad sanctum Samuelem’ on Mount Joy (Burchard of Mount Sion 1864: 76). Riccoldo da Monte di Croce (1289–1291) described his visit to ‘the house of Samuel’ (Ricoldus de Monte Crucis 1864: 107).³

³ For more information about the history of the shrine under the Christian rule see: Briks 2021: 519–546.
The second period of Muslim rule and Jewish pilgrimages

The removal of Christians from Nabi Samuel helped make the prophet’s tomb an extremely popular destination for Jewish pilgrims (Ben-Dov 2006: 62–63). Earlier Jews had rather avoided this place due to the fact that there was a Catholic church over their prophet’s tomb. After the monastery had been abandoned, Jewish pilgrims began visiting with increasing willingness and frequency, taking over the Christian tradition locating Samuel’s burial site in the village.

Over time, the Tomb of Prophet Samuel became a common religious destination, visited even more frequently than the Holy City itself (although it must be admitted that this was primarily due to restrictions on Jewish religious ceremonies held in Jerusalem. see: Ben-Dov 2006: 66). Many traditions cultivated to this day were born there, such as the custom of lighting candles and olive lamps in honor of ‘Master Samuel’, taking vows, celebrating the upsherin ceremony (first boy’s haircutting: Reiner 1988: 283–290), making offerings for healing or tying pieces of clothes, buttons, bandages, sheets or ribbons to the trees in the vicinity of the shrine (Reiner 1988: 246–248, 274, 280; Reiter 2009: 166–167). These customs were accompanied by special prayers. It sometimes happened that pilgrims consumed also large amounts of wine there. The local rabbis’ efforts to stop this practice are evidenced in such measures as the ordinance of the rabbis of Jerusalem, issued circa 1505, prohibiting the consumption of wine at the tomb (Ben-Zvi 1930: 83), and in the mentions of reprehensible behavior of drunken pilgrims (Cohen 1982: 81). The day on which thousands of Jewish pilgrims came to Nabi Samuel was and still remains the 28th day of the month of Iyar: the traditionally assumed day of the anniversary of Samuel’s death (yom hillula – this date, most often in May, as the day of the ceremony held before the prophet Samuel’s tomb was given for the first time by Yitzhak Ibn Al-Fara of Malka in 1441, but the celebration might have dated back to the 12th or the 13th century traditions after 1187, see Reiner 1988: 249–250).

Many accounts of the second Muslim rule period in Nabi Samuel mention disputes, demands for fees, and even a ban on Jews entering the shrine at certain times. Other documents testify to the rights to the cave of Samuel’s tomb, purchased by Jews, and to the functioning of a synagogue with a large courtyard for pilgrims (Magen and Dadon 1999: 70 and 76). Although the records about the existence of a synagogue in this place did not appear until the mid-15th century, on the basis of the continuity of tradition, and above all the evidence of the so-called Florentine Scroll, it can be assumed that there was a synagogue at the tomb of the prophet Samuel
at least in the 14th-c, and some place for Jewish prayers at the end of the 12th-c. or the beginning of the 13th-c. (Reiner 1988: 306–320).

Yitzhak Ibn Al-Fara of Malka (1441) and Meshulam of Volta (1481) wrote about pilgrims coming to Samuel’s tomb from Egypt, Syria, and Babylonia (Reiter 2009: 167; Reiner 1988: 315). Over time, however, escalating restrictions and conflicts resulted in an almost complete disappearance of Jewish pilgrimages to this holy place. In 1726–30, the ruined former Crusader church was converted into a mosque (al-Ju’beh and Khalaf 2014: 154, cf. the inscription over the gate of the mosque). Later the Jews’ right to enter Samuel’s tomb was severely restricted, even possibly denied at certain times (Ben-Zevi 1942: 250; Ben-Dov 2006: 86). Heavy fines were imposed on those who tried to circumvent these restrictions (Shochet 1939: 81–86). Then the situation improved somewhat. The French traveler, researcher and amateur archaeologist V. Guérin (1863) stated that Muslims did not prohibit pilgrims, whether Jewish or Christian, from entering the shrine, but demanded a small fee. He also mentioned the great respect that Muslims had while showing the sarcophagus, believing that this was where the prophet lay. Guérin himself states that the prophet’s remains were not there after they had been transported to Thrace in 406 on the order of Emperor Arcadius, according to Jerome (Guérin 1868: 362–384).

Figure 1: Nabi Samuel in ca.
1880. Conder and Kitchener sketched the building in the same way in 1874. (Conder and Kitchener 1883: 152)
Zdjęcie 1: Nabi Samuel ok. 1880 r. Tak jak jest on widoczny na tej fotografii budynek meczetu opisują także Conder and Kitchener w 1874 (Conder, Kitchener 1883: 152)
Source: collections of École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem (photo by F. Bonfils).
Modern Arab-Jewish conflicts

In 1890, efforts were made to establish Ramah – a Jewish settlement named after the biblical events associated with this place. This name was later changed to Nachalat Yisrael, referring to the name of the organization initiating this foundation. The efforts bore fruit in 1895, when 13 families of Yemeni Jews joined the Ashkenazi settlers. A few years later, the colony was legalized, and other Jews settled there. Using various donations, they purchased land near Samuel’s tomb and also bought weapons for their self-defence.

In 1917, the inhabitants of the colony abandoned the place for a short time as it became an area of fierce fighting between the Ottoman Turks and the British army. It was during these battles that Nabi Samuel Hill was heavily bombed, resulting in severe damage not only to the Arab village, but also to the remains of the Crusader period. After the fights were over, the mosque was rebuilt, and a new minaret was constructed. Jewish residents returned to Nachalat Yisrael – Ramah.

---

4 The Nachalat Yisrael – Rama Foundation was created in 1886 with the aim of building a Jewish settlement near Samuel’s Tomb. It consisted of about 60 members, mostly Jerusalem residents from Jewish communities in the southern Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire, led by Rabbis Y. Mendelbaum, Y. Rubinstein and Y. Zvi Rivlin: The Nahalat Israel – Rama..., il.bidspirit.com/ui/lotPage/source/catalog/auction/450/lot/711-46/Nahalat-Israel-Rama-company-an?lang=en (access: 10.04.2024).

5 For the British, the Battle of Nabi Samuel was the first stage in the capture of Jerusalem. For a detailed description of the activities: Bruce 2002: 151–163.
Nabi Samuel was stormed again in April 1948 by a Haganah unit, a paramilitary Jewish organization fighting for the establishment of the state of Israel, which fought a fierce battle there, unsuccessfully trying to capture the hill. At the time, there was an Arab artillery point from which, allegedly, shelling was carried out on the nearby Jewish settlements (Gilbert 1997: 207–208). As a result of the division of the Palestinian lands in 1948, Nabi Samuel remained under the protectorate of Jordan (1948–67). In the village, there was a base of the Jordanian Arab Legion, shelling Jerusalem (Kever: no date). Israelis were barred from entering the sanctuary. The situation changed radically with the 1967 Six-Day War, as a result of which Israel incorporated Nabi Samuel into its controlled territory (later designated as Area C). Most of its inhabitants were forced to flee (In 1961 Nebi Samuel was inhabited by 168 people, see: Welcome to al-Nabi Samwil: no date). Thus the Israelis regained not only a key strategic junction, but also free access to Samuel’s tomb. Under the auspices of the civil administration of the Israeli Army, a group called Breslov Hassidim began rebuilding the Jewish cult in this place, simultaneously removing its various Islamic elements, e.g. carpets from the floor of the cave or the green cloth covering the tomb (kiswa), replacing it with a cloth with Hebrew inscriptions (Reiter 2017: 273). However, the mosque, except its northern aisle and the tomb-crypt itself, which was initially closed and then turned into a synagogue, was controlled by the Muslim Waqf.

The background of the Intervention of the Israeli Army in 1971

Within one day, 22 March 1971, the Israeli army demolished all 46 houses near the mosque and moved their inhabitants (ca. 250 persons) to abandoned buildings a few hundred meters east of the site. These were

---

6 The attack on Nabi Samuel, part of an operation code-named Yevusi, lasted from 22 to 23 April 1948 and ended with the retreat of the Israeli troops, which lost 30–40 soldiers. The Arab losses are unknown.

7 It was completed by the 106th Battalion of the Harel Brigade under the command of Rabbi Yeshua Ben-Shoshan on the 28th day of the Hebrew month of Iyar (i.e. the commemoration of the death of the prophet Samuel and the day of the reunification of Jerusalem).

8 The door to the cave was broken down by the students of Bratslav Hassidim, and by the fait accompli method they took over the cave as a place of prayer.
homes and lands left by the Palestinians who had fled before the Israeli Army in 1967. This take-over does not constitute their possession *lege artis* (Hannaford 2014; Farah 2018: 6–9 sources: n. 10).

The answer to many questions was revealed in 2022 by “+972 Magazine”, with documents labeled "top secret" from the meetings of Golda Meir’s government in 1970–71. These documents clearly show that a settlement for wealthy Jewish Israelis was planned to be built in the place of the demolished Nabi Samuel village. The settlement was described as ‘another Savyon blooming and rising,’ which alludes to one of Israel’s wealthiest neighbourhoods near Tel Aviv. Officially, it was always assured that the only purpose of military intervention in the village was to protect historical sites, unique nature, and the residents... threatened by the collapse of old houses. Only three months after the liquidation of the village, 633 Israelis expressed interest in buying plots of land in the depopulated area. In June 1972, the Israel Land Administration prepared a plan for the new settlement of Nabi Samuel, which included 1,400 lots, public buildings, shopping centers, and roads. Due to various problems, the plans for building a luxury settlement were ultimately abandoned in the mid-1980s (Abraham 2022). However, this did not change the situation for the displaced Palestinians.

Meanwhile bottom-up initiatives were also shown. The Jewish settlers, impatiently waiting for administrative decisions, tried to seize a part of Nabi Samuel. For example, in 1972 a group of Jewish settlers tried to take control of this place by force. The Muslim Waqf administration and the Islamic Affairs Department lodged a complaint with the Israeli military authorities in the West Bank (Yazbak 2009: 238).

In 1980, the first archaeological survey works were carried out under the supervision of Amir Feldstein (Feldstein 1993: 232–233). Their results helped Israel decide to open an archaeological visitor center there and conduct a series of archaeological excavations, supervised by Dr. Yitzhak Magen from the Archaeology Department of the Civil Administration, in 1992–2003 (Magen 2008: 36–45, 78–79). The 1971 operation of the Israeli army was later justified by the need to prepare this specific research. However, that one-day demolition of the village with the use of heavy equipment was definitely not an act of the implementation of well-thought-out plans for future archaeological research, but a simple seizure and ‘cleansing’ of the area of the shrine (at the same

---


10 Archaeological records on Nabi Samuel are taken from this publication unless otherwise indicated. See also: Magen and Dadon 1999.
time, a strategic military point - from the top of the hill, one can control the routes from the coast and from Samaria to Jerusalem). This place turned out to be valuable building plots, but after abandoning this idea, it was meant to become a valuable historical and tourist attraction. So it was possible to kill two birds with one stone. It is the irony of fate that some earlier Palestinian residents of Nabi Samuel, employed at the excavations, were removing manually the last traces of their own village. In their case, finding another job was almost a miracle.

Conclusion

Over time (especially after 1990) increasingly numbers of, mostly Orthodox, Jews began arriving at the prophet’s tomb. On the other hand, Muslims flocked there every Friday to pray in Samuel’s Mosque. It was almost symbolic that both communities entered the sanctuary through the same door (except on holidays, when Muslim and Jewish pilgrims were separated), proceeding afterwards to the two ‘graves’ of the same prophet. A wooden cenotaph was placed in the mosque to remind visitors about the prophet’s tomb located in the basement chapel (now a synagogue). Right next to it, there was an opening in the floor (it has just been bricked up), through which one could see Jews praying at the prophet’s tomb (Description and photographs: Mikhalson et al. 1996: 62–65).

Nevertheless, peace in Nabi Samuel still requires the vigilance of the military and police. Protests and unrest occur regularly. The public administration is increasingly ruthlessly pushing the tiny community of former residents of Nabi Samuel beyond the margins of this place. The Analysis of the current situation in the Nabi Samuel sanctuary and the nearby Palestinian slums and proposals for solutions to current problems, will be presented in the next article titled 'Tourist Center in Nabi Samuel. Conflict Analysis'.

Literature

The History of the Birth of Traditions and Conflicts over the Nabi Samuel Shrine...


Historia narodzin tradycji i konfliktów wokół sanktuarium Nabi Samuel (Izrael/Palestyna)

Streszczenie

Niemal zapomniany, maleńki bizantyjski klasztor (z IV w.) pw. proroka Samuela stał się w okresie wypraw krzyżowych jednym z najważniejszych miejsc na pielgrzymkowej mapie Ziemi Świętej. Sanktuarium, ważne początkowo wyłącznie dla chrześcijan, z czasem stało się celem pielgrzymek żydów, a później także muzułmanów. Każda z tych wspólnot religijnych pozostawiła niezatarte piętno na tradycjach i zwyczajach tego sanktuarium. W niektórych okresach udawało się czcić pamięć proroka Samuela w miarę zgodnie, ale przeważnie sanktuarium było źródłem konfliktów, a nawet krwawych bitew.

W 1967 r. obszar wokół Nabi Samuel został włączony do Terytoriów Okupowanych przez Izrael. Ze względu na bogatą tradycję związaną z kultem proroka Starego Testamentu, ale także historyczno-polityczne znaczenie Nabi Samuel (utożsamianego ze starożytnym Mizpah) izraelskie władze próbowaly uczynić to miejsce pomnikiem historii Izraela, a jednocześnie atrakcją turystyczną. Od tego czasu działania władz wywoływały ciągłe protesty i niepokoje. Jak ostatnio ujawniono, motywacje administracji izraelskiej miały charakter nie tylko religijny, historyczny i polityczny, ale także biznesowy, choć fakt ten jest ze wstydem ukrywany za wzniosłymi hasłami.

Słowa kluczowe: Nebi Samwil, Mons Gaudii, Mount Joy, sanktuaria w Izraelu, Grób proroka Samuela