



# The Relationship between Religious Tourism and International Christians Visitor's Perceptions: A Case Study of a Mount Nebo Holy Site in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout the world, the tourism industry is developing at an astonishing rate and contributing to the economy. Since the past decade, it has been continuously evolving by diversifying itself. Within the tourism sector, religious tourism is considered a vital aspect where tourists are motivated due to religious aspects. Considering this aspect, Jordan must be analyzed for its business activities since religious tourism contributes significantly to the economy. Within the current research, the association amongst religious tourism and the perception of the Christian visitor towards the holy site of mount Nebo would be analyzed. The empirical research would be carried out using the likert scales which is part of the survey method. The data gathered would be helpful in extracting information regarding the association of religious tourism at the holy site of mount Nebo and the perception of Christian visitors. The dimensions used to measure the perception of the visitors are accessibility; security and safety; hospitality and local people; social life at the holy site area and; prices. According to the results, the perception of Christian visitors towards the five dimensions was significant. Within a statistical sense, these dimensions and religious tourism maintain a positive relationship.

**Keywords:** Jordan, Religious Tourism, Mount Nebo, Visitor's Perception, Holy Land, Christians Tourists

**JEL Classifications:** Z32, Z31, Z33, Z39, N95, Z12

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Religious tourism is significantly motivated by religious an aspect which is why it is considered a special tourism form and is one of the most ancient kinds (Fatima et al., 2016). As part of religious tourism, travelers visit holy places and perform their religious practices. The pilgrims are from all over the world which is why the holy sites are developed based on universal requirements (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are the most noticeable world religions which is why their tourism areas are of much importance. The pilgrims have their own level of significance for their specific religious sites (Fatima et al., 2016). Each year, nearly 200 million pilgrims are traveling where Christians are 150 million and approximately

40 million comprise Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus (Ibrahim et al., 2020).

Within the modern era, as compared to their predecessors, religious tourists are presented with better opportunities to visit their holy sites throughout the world. There is an increase in the visits made to places like the holy land and mecca. The visits are made by the people to gratify their religious obligations (Fatima et al., 2016). Within the sphere of Christianity, there is a strong tourism foundation for science, culture, and history. Hence, the Christian tradition believes in tourism and traveling quite strongly. There has been significant growth in religious tourism since the beginning of the new millennium (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Globally, and in the year of 2018 there are approximately

300 million travelers generating around \$18 billion in revenue (Ibrahim et al., 2020).

### 1.1. Jordan's Product

During the year 2017, approximately 4.2 million visitors were found in Jordan and the target is that by the year 2022, this number would increase to 7 million and nearly 10-12% of GDP is contributed by these tourists and the share is expected to double (Morris, 2018). The data presented by the International Monetary Fund suggests that during the year 2017, \$40.49 billion (\$5,680 per capita) was the GDP of Jordan (Morris, 2018). There were several destinations within the archaeological, cultural and religious context presented by Jordan (Bader, 2012; Harahsheh, 2009a). Religious tourism has been observed to be a significant niche market aspect according to the Jordan national tourism strategy (NTS). The biblical sites are over fifty and the primary pilgrimage sites, as stated by the Vatican, are nearly six destinations (Ibrahim et al., 2020). Mount Nebo is one of these sites. Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are three religions that meet in Jordan. Additionally, it is the place, specifically Petra and Mount Nebo, where Moses and Aaron passed away. The decapitation of John took place in Makawir (Arabic) or Macharius and baptizing of Jesus occurred (Al-louzi, 2013; Ibrahim et al., 2020). Furthermore, in Jordan, there are several Islamic shrines of the companions of the prophet Muhammad (Bader, 2012; Harahsheh, 2009a; Ibrahim et al., 2020; Mustafa, 2014).

In Jordan, the industry for religious tourism has developed in a significant manner since 1903 when the Hijaz Railway was built in Amman. During the 1950s and 1960s, it had been formed in a dynamic manner keeping in mind the main destination which is Jerusalem (Bader, 2012; Ibrahim et al., 2020). The papal pilgrimages grants much respect to Jordan as in 1964; Pope Paul VI paid a primary visit. Furthermore, in 2000, Pope John Paul II visits and in 2009, there was a visit by Pope Benedict XVI (Harahsheh et al., 2007; Ibrahim et al., 2020). The Jordanian financial and political economics developed in a significant manner due to the visits made by the Pope. "The Jordanian religious tourism is established as well as developed considering it as a holy Land feature. For the government, the Jordanian Christian and Biblical religious holy places maintain a unique level of excitement" (Ibrahim et al., 2020. p. 74).

### 1.2. Visitor's Perceptions

It is vital to recognize the importance of perceptions since the behavior and patterns of the tourists is based on this perception towards reality and not the actual reality. Various factors which affect perceptions have been presented by researchers such as (Kartal et al., 2015; Kumar and Singh, 2015; Olsen, 2013; Rinschede, 1992). These factors are perceiver factors, situation factors, and target factors. Religious tourism and perception maintain a strong association along with expectations, experiences, requirements, interests, and attitudes (Collins-Kreiner, 2018; Govers et al., 2007; Kumar and Singh, 2015). Hence, there are

several methods available to measure the perceptions of visitors. Within the current research, the perceptions of the visitors would be measured using five dimensions which are accessibility, security and safety, hospitality and local people, social life at the holy site area and prices. The Holy Site of Mount Nebo visitors usually observe these aspects when developing their perceptions.

### 1.3. Mount Nebo

Mount Nebo located ten kilometres from the Roman-Byzantine town of (Madaba). The Jordan Valley is observed from Mount Nebo as it is 800m above sea level and the Dead Sea. It was Mount Nebo where Moses saw the Holy Land and took his last breath (Bader, 2012; Harahsheh, 2009b). It is referred to as Siyagha, an Aramaic word used for a monastery. The area was created as a religious site a year after it was purchased from the Holy Land by the Franciscans. During the day, the Dome of Rock can be seen by the visitor along with the church towers present in Jerusalem. Furthermore, it is believed that the burial of Moses took place in Mount Nebo (Figure 1). In Arabic, Mount Nebo is referred to as Jabal al-siyagha and can also be found in the Bible (In Deuteronomy 34:1-4).

"Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo from the plains of Moab to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land – from Gilead to Dan." (Testaments et al., n.d.)

Mount Nebo used to be visited since 1564. In 1963, it was purchased by Franciscan monastic. It was from this time that archaeology started or a long term project initiated that is seen till date (Bader, 2012). A church was also rebuilt after the purchase (Harahsheh, 2009a). Under the Franciscans, the mountain was to be changed into a refuge. Within the middle east, the most significant historical site for the Christians is Mount Nebo (Bader, 2012). From the year 2000, it was the most visited pilgrim destination. In Table 1, the Mount Nebo tourist arrival number can be observed along with the 2014-2019 relative changes.

Figure 1: Mount Nebo



Source: (MOTA, 2019)

Table 1: Number of international tourist arrivals to (mount Nebo) 2014-2019

Site	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*	% Change 18/19
Mount Nebo	167,904	106,316	110,590	191,036	480,565	445,037	45.6%

\*Until the month of June 2019. Source: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2019)

### 1.4. Research Objectives

- To examine whether accessibility, security and safety, hospitality and local people, social life at the site and prices at Mount Nebo holy site encourage visitors to visit the location more frequently
- To provide a base for researchers in the religious tourism field, and
- To explore the relationship between visitors' perceptions and religious tourism.

### 1.5. Research Significance

The main objective of this empirical research is to explore the relationship between religious tourism and the Visitor's perception at Mount Nebo holy site. The research undertook for various reasons:

- To tool up knowledge on the relationship between religious tourism and visitor's perceptions at Mount Nebo, and
- To provide some insights into the interactions between Christianity and religious tourism, which are of value to the site management, interested academics and local community around the location, and
- This research also provides a guide to the authorities of the tourism industry to take proper measures to promote religious tourism in Jordan
- To provides a guideline for researchers who, interest to explore the relationship between visitors' perceptions and other dimensions at different holy sites of different religions.

### 1.6. Research Hypothesis

"Visitors' perceptions measured in terms of (accessibility, security and safety, hospitality and local people, social life and prices) have a positive impact on religious tourism."

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no significant correlation between dimensions and religious tourism (P-value > 0.05).

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant correlation between dimensions and religious tourism (P-value ≤ 0.05).

## 2. METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

The research contained a questionnaire survey at Mount Nebo site in Jordan; primary data were collected from international Christian tourists and supplemented including the data from the site management. The questionnaire consisted of two sections:

- The first section comprised demographic questions related to visitors such as gender, age, nationality, education, etc
- The second section includes questions related to five dimensions namely: accessibility, security and safety, hospitality and local people, social life and prices) in the holy site based on a 5-point Likert rating scale.

To check the validity of the questionnaire, experts and academics suggested a few changes. Moreover, to check the reliability, a pilot study managed by distributing fifty-two questionnaires. The reliability related to the dimensions performance is 0.88 which is measured by Cronbach's Alpha

test. By employed SPSS software 20, the researcher measured the relationship between visitor's perception and religious tourism.

### 2.1. Data Collection

The total number of international tourists to Mount Nebo was 480565 in 2018; hence, a random sample was chosen using sample calculator techniques. Consequently, 411 questionnaires distributed of which 384 questionnaires returned and found fully completed for the analysis.

### 2.2. Research Design

Descriptive statistics tests were utilized in the demographic analysis, while the five dimensions rated using 5-point Likert Scales. Where: 5=Very high, 1=Very low. The data from these answers then used to measure the relationship between these

**Table 2: Respondents' socio-demographic profile**

Whole sample	n	%
Gender		
Male	220	57.3
Female	164	42.7
Age (years)		
18-30	10	2.6
31-40	144	37.5
41-50	130	33.9
51-60	70	18.2
61+	30	7.8
Marital status		
Single	66	17.2
Married/with partner	318	82.8
Education		
Secondary education	55	14.3
Diploma/advanced diploma	128	33.3
Masters/doctorate degree	50	13.0
Bachelor degree	147	38.3
Still studying	4	1.0
Occupation		
Higher management/professional	98	25.5
Student	4	1.0
Retired	26	6.8
Middle/junior management	110	28.6
Skilled manual worker	57	14.8
Unemployed	8	2.1
Self employed/own business	71	18.5
Semi-skilled/unskilled worker	10	2.6
Household income US \$		
Below 10000	24	6.3
10000-30000	101	26.3
30000-50000	190	49.5
50000-70000	55	14.3
70000-100000	9	2.3
100000 or more	5	1.3
Nationality		
Europe	137	35.7
North America	72	18.8
Southeast Asia	8	2.1
Arab countries	20	5.2
East Asia	12	3.1
South Africa	15	3.9
Canada	14	3.6
Australia	23	6.0
Russia	83	21.6
Total	348	100.0

Source: primary research

**Table 3: Descriptive statistics of all dimensions**

Dimensions	Very low		Low		Good		High		Very high	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Accessibility	11	2.9	45	11.7	157	40.9	152	39.6	19	4.9
Security and safety	1	0.3	8	2.1	12	3.1	96	25.0	267	69.5
Hospitality and local people	2	0.5	16	4.2	140	36.5	72	18.8	154	40.1
Social life at the holy site area	2	0.5	11	2.9	21	5.5	143	37.2	207	53.9
Prices	13	3.4	78	20.3	204	53.1	71	18.5	18	4.7

Source: Primary research

**Table 4: Dimensions performance**

Attributes	Mean*	Rank**
Security and safety	4.61	1
Social life at the holy site area	4.41	2
Hospitality and local people	3.94	3
Accessibility	3.32	4
Prices	3.01	5
Overall means (total)	3.85	5

Source: Primary research. \*Means more than 3.0 represent the positive rate of holy site, \*\*results presented in mean rank order rather than the order appeared in the questionnaire

dimensions and religious tourism, while the relationship of perception measured by using Pearson's Correlation.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The visitors of Mount Nebo in the survey were all international Christian's visitors as they have been inquired as to whether they are Christians so they can complete the questionnaire.

#### 3.1. Demographic Factors

The general distribution of gender in the sample was 57.3% males and (42%) females, while those who are 31-50 years old were the majority with a 71.4% of the whole survey, this contrast with past researches that indicated the old ages more concerned in religious tourism (Table 2).

A great number of visitors were married or with a partner consisted of (82%). Is confirming the results of previous researches about Jordan that concluded tourism in Jordan is a well-known destination for families. It's obvious that most of the visitors are Europeans (35.7%) and followed by Russians (21.6%), there are more than half of the sample are well-educated (51.3%) holding bachelor's degrees and above. On the other hand, a (54.1%) hold a position of higher management and middle management while the other occupations only (45.8%), nearly two-thirds of the respondents were considered to be upper middle class, with (63.8%) having an income of 30000-70000 US\$.

#### 3.2. Descriptive Studies

The analyses of dimensions of the visitor's perceptions that relate to religious tourism are discussed below. The frequency and percentages of each dimension are derived from a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 3 represents the descriptive analysis related to the five dimensions of visitor's perceptions by frequency and percentage. Regarding accessibility, 85.4% of respondents have rated it

positively (good, high and very high), the majority feel the security and safety in the site with 97.6%, while hospitality and local people 95.4%. On the other hand, social life at the holy site area and prices recorded 96.6% and 76.3% respectively.

The research shows that visitors are satisfied with the security issues, which consider strength to the tourism industry in Jordan, but it's clear that they are not satisfied with the prices of the accommodation and items sold over there which will cause in the future a decrease in the number of visitors to the holy site, and here the action should be taken regarding this serious matter, the other case is the accessibility, the need of increasing and facilitating the accessibility to the site is a must. It seems that Jordanians are friendly and welcoming hosts as the majority of respondents have linked between local people's attitude and the social life in the holy site.

#### 3.3. Dimensions Performance

The respondents were required to rate each of the five dimensions on a scale of one to five (where 1=Very low, 2=Low, 3=Good, 4=High and 5=Very high). Therefore, (Table 4) describes how international Christian tourists rated these dimensions.

Mean and ranks above shows that the holy site is in a very positive Image where security and safety and social life at the holy site area more than 4.0 <5.0, while hospitality and local people and accessibility in a positive image more than 3.0 <4.0. On the other hand, prices rated the lowest overall the dimensions. The overall image was 3.85 of the whole survey that rated the dimensions.

#### 3.4. Relationship between Visitors Perception and Religious Tourism

The relationship between visitor's perceptions and religious tourism is measured through correlation. The results are given in Table 5. The mean of each dimension of visitor's perception is measured and then analyzed by bivariate Pearson Correlation. Where each dimension is given a code:

- AC=Accessibility
- SS=Security and safety
- HL=Hospitality and local people
- SL=Social life at the holy site area
- PR=Prices.

The results show that accessibility, security, and safety, the hospitality of local people and social life in the site has significant relationships (Sig. is  $\leq 0.050$ ) with each other at a 1% level of confidence. This means that the ( $H_0$ ) is rejected and the ( $H_1$ ) is accepted. Prices, accessibility, security and safety and hospitality

**Table 5: Relationship between visitors' perception and religious tourism**

		Mean AC	Mean SS	Mean PR	Mean HL	Mean SL
Mean AC	Pearson correlation	1	0.297**	-0.014	0.256**	0.222**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.779	0.000	0.000
Mean SS	Pearson correlation	0.297**	1	-0.013	0.507**	0.383**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.779	0.000	0.000
Mean PR	Pearson correlation	-0.014	-0.013	1	-0.040	0.156**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.779	0.799		0.434	0.002
Mean HL	Pearson correlation	0.256**	0.507**	-0.040	1	0.241**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.434		0.000
Mean SL	Pearson correlation	0.222**	0.383**	0.156	0.241**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.002	0.000	

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: primary research

of local people have an insignificant relationship (Sig. is >0.05) with each other. Which means the (H<sub>1</sub>) is rejected and the (H<sub>0</sub>) is accepted. While social life at the holy site area has a significant relationship with all the dimensions at a 1% level of confidence.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The research employs descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The demographic profile shows that male visitors responded to the survey more than female, the majority of the visitors who visited the holy site are well-educated, middle-aged, married with upper-middle income level. Providing good reasonable prices should result in an increase in the number of visitors to the site. However, the study shows that visitors feel fully satisfied with the security issues of the holy site and with the hospitality of local people as well. Accessibility would facilitate visitors, but some of the respondents believe that this aspect is not properly provided for the Mount Nebo holy site. Social life in the site seems to be good and this may be because of friendly local people around the site.

The empirical analysis shows that security and safety, hospitality and local people and social life at the holy site area are all important elements for participants, and statistically, these features have a significant relationship with accessibility to the site. Prices have an insignificant relationship with accessibility and other dimensions except for social life in the site.

#### 5. RECOMMENDATION

After thoroughly assessing the research implications, there are several recommendations that have been brought forward:

- The literature review suggests that Christians consider Jordan as a culturally and religiously significant land. Hence, it is essential to invest within a holistic tourism strategy keeping in mind these extensive tourists
- There is limited monitoring of the items sold at the holy site and accommodation prices. Several respondents' part of the research complained about the price being charged. Hence, a price list should be formed regarding the accommodation and it should be available to the visitors for their ease. The small shops should also be limited so that the serious problems can be resolved
- More research and studies are needed in order to provide an understanding of the different forms and dimensions of

religious tourism as well as its management and effects on holy sites, locations, and territories. Talking about Jordan, urgent need related to religious tourism - this could be performed with supporting researchers, and academics in the field of religious tourism

- The role of government bodies regarding the maintenance of different holy sites is limited. Perhaps the government could consider reforming or even privatizing MOTA and its provincial arms like Jordan Tourism Board. This should enhance the management of the holy sites around Jordan and independently maintain the whole system of the holy land sites. If these institutions were privatized, in theory, they should perform better in the provision of a professional level of religious tourism.

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