

Where to Go



# Al-Jib – Where the Sun Stood Still

By Bassam Almohor



**I**n 1956, the American archaeologist James Pritchard started to uncover the remains of the 5,000-year-old Canaanite site Gibeon. During his first visit to the “modern” village Al-Jib, he described its life at that time:

*... El-Jib is no suburb of Jerusalem; it is a self-contained island of the past where Arabs live today very much as they did in the Middle Ages.*

*The place is unmarked; one could easily pass by this modest village without being aware of its name. The only road sign reading “el-Jib” is posted two and a half miles away, where a narrow, black-top road branches off from the Jerusalem-Ramallah highway near the Jerusalem Airport. Following the direction indicated by this sign at the junction, after a ten-minute drive one comes to a rocky track on the left, over which a driver has often refused to take his taxi. This path of sharp stones winds for a quarter of a mile around the edge of the hill, past a threshing floor and two turreted guns, rusting away since the “troubles” of 1948 but still pointing menacingly toward the Israeli border only a few miles to the west, and comes to a dead end in the central square of el-Jib.*

*Two modest stores of one room each, a coffee house, and a mosque with a new minaret constitute the civic center of the village. The remainder of el-Jib consists of stone houses, which provide shelter for approximately one thousand Muslim Arabs and their cows, donkeys, goats, and chickens. Narrow streets, wide enough for men and loaded donkeys to pass, fan out from the village square to serve as passageways to houses and as playgrounds for children. There are no modern conveniences, such as telephones, electricity, plumbing, or sewers. A number of unused privies stand in front of houses like sentry boxes—the well-intentioned gifts of U.S. aid. Here and there one may hear the sound of a battery-operated radio blaring away at full volume.*

*... Twice a day a dilapidated bus, No. 45, owned by Abed Rabbo, mukhtar of el-Jib, passes along the main road taking passengers to and from Jerusalem, where anything beyond the basic necessities, such as sugar, salt, tobacco, kerosene, and a few tinned goods, must be purchased. Except for this motor transportation, the occasional radio, and the ubiquitous gasoline stove, called a “primos,” life at el-Jib goes on about as it did during the Crusades.\**

Al-Jib lies 10 kilometers northwest of Jerusalem and 13 kilometers south of Ramallah (Location: 31.847582, 35.186352). The archaeological site

locally known as Tel al-Ras was a Canaanite city, continuously inhabited since the Bronze Age. The mission uncovered a sophisticated water system, a spiral-staired well, tunnels that lead to underground springs, an engraved wine press, and wine storage pits on top of the tell (hill). To the southeast, a magnificent olive or wine press is carved into the rock along with cellars to store the jars – sadly marred by garbage and political graffiti today.

In 2017, Riwq Centre for Architectural Conservation embarked on a three-year project to rehabilitate and preserve Al-Jib’s historic center, identifying 120 buildings that date back to the Byzantine era. This remarkable old town lies between the ancient city to the south and the modern urban town to the north, with distinguished historic buildings such as Sheikh Hamed Shrine and a Byzantine hall known as *Al-Kanisa* (The Church).

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\* James Pritchard, *Gibeon, Where the Sun Stood Still: The Discovery of the Biblical City*, Princeton University Press, 1962, p. 3.

