

The Founding, Development, and Social Interaction of the Ancient Church in Jordan

Introduction

In order to get a full understanding of the ancient Church's birth, growth and social interaction in Jordan, we must understand the earlier background of the peoples and area, which laid the foundation for the birth and development of the Church in Jordan and the surrounding regions. This also means, an examination of the contact and interaction of Christianity with Arab tribes and other peoples before the zenith of the Byzantine period when many of the church buildings were constructed in Jordan. I will discuss the ethnicity of these peoples and their linguistic and cultural heritage. I will also discuss how distinct their ethnic identity was and what intermixture and inter-mingling of their social lives and cultures occurred.

I: Background Leading to the Establishment of the Ancient Church

One Country

When we speak of Arabia, we understand it to mean the whole Arabian Peninsula. Philip Hitti (1956: 14) states "Arabia is the south-western peninsula of Asia, the largest peninsula on the map of the world... geologically, indeed, the whole Syro-Mesopotamian desert is a part of Arabia." (Hitti 1956: 14) Hitti's map (1956: 16) which defines Arabia includes everything south and west of the border of the Euphrates River; west of the border of the Arab-Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman; north of the Gulf of Adan; east of the Red Sea; and south and east of the Mediterranean Sea. And so, of course, Jordan is to be counted as part of the Arabian Peninsula and, as some have argued, especially part of Greater Syria.

One People

Who were all these people who, in ancient times, lived in the whole Arabian Peninsula, and how did they interrelate with one another? Hitti (1956: 9) maintains that all these people were Semites and thus closely related, including people who were "beginning with the middle of

the fourth millennium before our era, the Babylonians (first called Akkadians after their capital Akkadia, Agade), the Assyrians and later the Chaldeans who occupied the Tigris-Euphrates Valley. After 2500 BC the Amorites and Canaanites (including the Phoenicians) populated Syria; and about 1500 BC the Aramaeans settled in Syria and the Hebrews in Palestine." Hitti also notes that many of these people were bound by their cognate languages "Assyro-Babylonian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Ethiopic". Cooper (1992: 232-233) effectively argues, as I have alluded to above, that a number of tribal people in South Arabia migrated north and intermingled with other people there, that is, with the Sumerians (a non-Semitic people who had been in the Southern Babylonian region from the fifth and fourth millennia BC) whose language was distinct and hard to relate to any ancient or modern language.

Pre-Christian Background – Shared Heritage

Thus, as noted above, there was a diverse but common background, both ethnically, linguistically, and socially shared by many groups in the Arabian Peninsula, including those of Syria and Mesopotamia, peoples who were present in the centuries before the founding of the ancient Christian Church in the first century AD.

Linguistics

Linguistically, among the Near East Semitic peoples from time immemorial, tribes lived in all Arabia, including greater Syria, Palestine and Phoenicia, and in Mesopotamia. These peoples spoke a variety of Semitic languages including Arabic, Hebrew, Ugaritic, Aramaic, Akkadian, Eblite, and the like. The people who spoke these different languages were often from different ethnic and social backgrounds, like the Arabs, Aramaeans, Assyrians, Babylonians, Hebrews, etc. This is not to depreciate the importance of peoples and languages from Asia Minor (like the Hittites, etc.), Egypt and the migration of the Sea Peoples (Philistines) to Palestine.

These Semitic people, the Arabs in particular, from various regions, became farmers, peasants, townspeople, nomadic herdsmen of camels and goats, and linguistically spoke dialects of Arabic (as inscriptional evidence shows). Those who settled and lived as semi-nomads in Syria and Mesopotamia spoke Aramaic, the basic spoken Semitic language among the common people of those areas. Along the way, Arabs began to develop a distinctive ethnic consciousness and independence (Trimingham 1979: 1-2).

Social Living Habits

These Arab or other ethnic tribes and groups were naturally attracted to the desert areas in the whole Arabian Peninsula, which included the north parts of Syria and Mesopotamia. As Philip Hitti has noted "Etymologically Arab is a Semitic word meaning 'desert' or inhabitant thereof, with no reference to nationality" (Hitti 1956: 41). And so the tribes traveled in desert areas wherever they found them. Bedouin tribes lived in South Arabia, and in time some of those Arab tribes migrated north as far as the Mesopotamian river plains. These were such as the Ghassanids who claimed "descent from an ancient South Arabian tribe, headed formerly by 'Amr Muzayqiya' ibn Amir Ma-'al Sama', which [tribe] is supposed to have fled to Hawran and al-Balqa' from al-Yaman, toward the end of the third Christian century" (Hitti 1956: 78), and also the Lakhmids, the Banū Bakr and the Banū Taghlib went into North eastern Arabia. All of these had become Christianized (Hitti 1956: 89; 1957: 401-402). Hitti further states that this Banū Ghassān tribe, who became Christianized in the fourth century AD, when they came to the Ḥawrān, they encountered earlier peoples there, "the Daja'im of the Ṣaliḥ tribe, whom they replaced as masters of the territory under Roman suzerainty." Hitti further states that the "kings of Ghassān may have considered themselves successors of the kings of Nabataea". In the north, the Lakhmid tribe from South Arabia was the Persian's buffer on Persia's western border at the Euphrates River, while the Ghassanids, just to the west of the Lakhmids, were a buffer for the Byzantines (Hitti 1956: 69, "Map of the North Arabian Kingdoms Before Islam"; 1957: 402). Trimingham, in countering the argument that the Arabs lived mainly in the southern Arabian Peninsula until the seventh century AD, argues that the Arabs lived in all parts of the Arabian Peninsula and nearby areas including "Syria and Palestine, Mesopotamia and Babylonia, even parts of the Aramaic-speaking peoples of these regions" (Trimingham 1979: 1).

Religious Practices

Being Bedouin, in the main, these people were ethnically different in descent, maintaining their own customs and religious practices. Interestingly there are parallels to be

seen in the early history of the Israelites with their similar living habits and sometimes variant religious practices. The Patriarchs, Abraham and his family, including Isaac and Jacob (Jacob is called a wandering "Aramaean" in Deut. 26:5), lived like Bedouins with their sheep and goats. Also Israelite descendants traveled from Egypt with their sheep and goats and cattle and wandered for forty years in the desert. The Bible illustrates this people's penchant for idols and foreign gods. Compare the Aramaeans, Laban and Rachel, and their teraphim-household gods (Gen. 31:30-35), and note the tendency of the people to want to return to heathen idols (the golden calf, Ex. 32:1-4), despite the command "to put away your foreign gods" (Josh. 24:4). Further examples can be seen in Moses' command in Deut. 12:4, "Smash their sacred stones (Masseboth), and burn down their Asherah poles". These standing stones, Masseboth, were sometimes used in a good sense in bearing testimony to God's covenant, such as the stone which Jacob raised up at Bethel (Gen. 28:10-22). The agreement Jacob and Laban made in Gen. 31:43-53 further illustrates this. But often these Masseboth were erected in recognition of foreign gods, as suggested in the ninth-eighth century BC painted jars at Kuntillat 'Ajrūd in the eastern Sinai showing a stylized tree "...representing the pagan Asherah, a picture which Israelites apparently drew" (Avner 2001: 32). Another negative example is seen in the "pair of Masseboth found in the eighth to seventh century BC. Israelite temple excavated at Arad in the Northern Negev... at the rear of the Holy of Holies [which] displays the same relationship of 'male' to 'female' and probably represents a pair of deities" (Avner 2001: 36). These kinds of evidences point out that, although the Old Testament strictly forbids the worship of foreign gods and unequivocally demands absolute allegiance and obedience to the one God, the Lord (Yahweh) (Exod. 20:1-7), numbers of the Israelites strayed off and worshipped other gods (Josh. 24:14) or syncretistically mixed their worship of Yahweh with other gods as possibly exemplified in Joshua 24:15, where Joshua urges the Israelites not to serve "the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are now living".

In parallel, many of the Semitic Arab tribes in the days before Muḥammad and Islam, were also steeped in paganism, idol worship and also reverence for stone image worship. Alex Moberg (1974: 279) speaks of "pre-Islamic Mecca, where the 360 idols of the Kaaba, one for each day of the year, drew multitudes of Bedouin to primitive pagan worship long before Mecca became the holy place of Islam". And von Grunebaum, in speaking of the pre-Islamic times, notes that divinity was associated with the "red stone" of the south Arabian city Ghaiman, the "white stone" in the Ka'ba of al-Abalat (near Tabāla south of Makka), and in the "black stone" of Makka itself, showing an emphasis on stone fetishes for the

experience of divinity. Von Grunebaum also says that “the nomads themselves...carried...certain sacred objects or gods about with them” (von Grunebaum 1970: 24, 241).

Greco-Roman Influence – Cultural and Political

Greek Influence

From the late fourth century BC through the first few centuries AD, new linguistic, social and political elements were mixed in with the basically Semitic culture of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in the north. In the late fourth century BC, Alexander the Great’s conquests had a significant effect on the north part of the Arabian Peninsula, including Jordan. His conquests, VanderKam (2001: 11) notes “included almost all of Syria and areas to the south, including Judah, virtually without a fight. He was forced to do battle only at Tyre and Gaza”. This Macedonian introduced and spread the Greek language and Greek culture, which was further advanced through the settling down of the generals and soldiers of Alexander’s army among the local populations. Out of all this developed a number of kingdoms permeated with Greek culture and effecting the further spread of the Greek language which became the *lingua franca* of the whole eastern Mediterranean and Near and Middle East regions (Aramaic was the general local language): these kingdoms were the Seleucid kingdom in greater Syria and the western part of Mesopotamia, the Ptolemaic kingdom in Egypt, and Lysirmachus’ kingdom of Thrace and Asia Minor (Bevan 1985: 59-69). In the development of these new kingdoms, many “Greek cosmopolitan cities, each with its Greco-Macedonian upper-class, grew up in the successor kingdoms. Greek, in its modified Koine form, became the language of the educated classes throughout the Near East... The Greeks who migrated to these new cities took with them their culture as well as their language and thus brought about the spread of Hellenism. Nor was the process one sided: Asian [including Egyptian] art, literature, and, above all, religion exerted increasing influence on the Greek” (Milns 1992: 150).

Roman Influence

Then came the Romans and their conquest of the region of greater Syria (including Phoenicia and Transjordan) and Palestine, starting with the Roman general Pompey who conquered the area in 63 BC. As a result, Roman culture, economics, military presence, transportation, etc., also made their impact on the dominant Semitic culture, which had already been influenced by the Greek. The Romans had the knack of integrating and adapting their culture, religion, and governmental standards into the societal fabric of their conquered people. So in the conquered areas of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East they added

expertise in military organization, laws, and skill in transportation and road building to enhance its trade and commerce and to help keep control of the subject areas. But during the process of this Roman syncretism, it was “this Hellenistic Greek civilization that overcame the fierce (Roman) victors. Greek ideas, science and literature were absorbed by the Romans and modified by their own native traditions and ways. (Thus) the resulting Greco-Roman culture...” (Milns 1992: 150).

II: The Founding of the Early Christian Church

Period of Birth and Growth, The Early and Late Roman Periods, 63 BC - AD 325

Christianity was born in the first century AD. Initially centered on the West Bank of the Jordan River, both in Galilee, Judaea and also Samaria, the early Christian Church, through the command of Jesus (Acts 1:8), expanded its influence into Phoenicia, Syria and its prominent city of Antioch, and on to Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy. The Church’s expansion included influence on Arabia. According to Paul’s account in Galatians 1:17-18, he spent up to three years in Arabia, which no doubt included Nabataean Ḥawrān (at the time of the hegemony of Aretas IV (9 BC - AD 40) (cf. 2 Cor. 11:32-33), as Justin Martyr bears testimony in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (xxvii.4, xxviii.2, 5, 7, 10).

Then, at the time of the Jewish Revolt against the Romans, when the Roman army began to threaten the Jews of Jerusalem about AD 67-68, according to Eusebius (*H. E.*, 35.3-4), the Christian Jews of Jerusalem fled to Pella, one of the Hellenized cities of the Decapolis. Those who fled were, no doubt, Christian Hellenized Jews (of which there were a number in the Jerusalem area; cf. Acts 6:1), because Hellenized Jews would have been more apt to be accepted by the people of a Hellenized city such as Pella, known to be a non-Jewish city, which had been pillaged, along with a number of Hellenized cities and villages in Transjordan and Syria, by Jews in AD 66. Also, Pella was the closest to Jerusalem of the Hellenized Decapolis cities to which they could flee. As evidence of their presence, Hennessy and Smith note that “a sarcophagus excavated beneath the floor of the West Church at Pella may originally have contained the remains of a leader of that group who died during that sojourn” (Smith 1992: 220; Hennessy and Smith 1997: 259).

This group of Christian Hellenized Jews was part of the foundation for the birth and growth of the Christian Church in Transjordan. But even before, that Jesus had already been engaged in ministry in the Syrian and Transjordan areas. Mark 7:31 describes his travels from Tyre and Sidon and down into the Transjordan area. He had already been working in the Decapolis area of northwest Jordan and Golan (Mark 5:1) (see the arguments of ar-

chaeologists Bastiaan van Elderen 1994: 98-117 and Robert W. Smith 1994).

From Acts 9, we are told of a sizable group of Christian Jews in Damascus, and according to Acts 11 a large Christian group of Gentiles and Jews had been developed in Antioch. Thus, the ancient Church began to spread into various parts of the Arabian Peninsula.

III: Period of Maturing – The Byzantine Period AD 325-661

In the Byzantine period, Christian churches flourished in Jordan, as well as in Syria and Palestine, as evidenced by the ruins of many church structures and monasteries. In this study, I have made a selection of church sites and their environs in Jordan to gather information from the type of structure, inscriptions and other embellishments of church buildings, so as to see what influence, effectiveness and social interaction the ancient Church had in the local and more extended communities.

I have selected the following sites for study: the Decapolis cities of Capitolias, Abila, Gadara, Hippos (Golan), Scythopolis (Palestine), Pella, Gerasa and Philadelphia; and Umm al-Jimāl; Darat al-Funūn ('Ammān); Mādabā; Ḥisbān; Mount Nebo; Umm ar-Raṣās; Petra; al-Ḥumayma; and Aila (al-'Aqaba).

Questions raised in the survey of buildings include: first, the time span and the quantity of church buildings; second, the rather wide variety of church architecture exhibited; third, the architectural sources suggested; fourth, the societal implications of community life; fifth, the literary and architectural evidence pointing to the Church's social relations with Greco-Roman societies, Islam under Muḥammad, and the Umayyad Caliphate society.

The selected ancient churches and chapel ruins in Jordan number between 90 and 100. Many of these churches and chapel ruins are largely clustered in and around urban centers and environs, such as the Hellenized Decapolis cities and other important urbanized areas such as Mādabā and Umm al-Jimāl, all of which are located in the north and middle of the country. Why were there so many churches built in the north, the regions where there are a number of Decapolis cities? No doubt, in part because the Bible's New Testament was written in Greek, the language which the people of these Hellenized cities read and understood. Other churches, however, are located toward the south in more rural regions and closer to vast desert areas: sites such as Mount Nebo, Ḥisbān, Umm ar-Raṣās; al-Ḥumayma; and Aila (The structure at Aila is somewhat questionable). Petra, the Nabataean Arab capital in the south, is a special case. In this region Aramaic and Arabic were the more dominant languages. The time span in which these churches and chapels were constructed is roughly between the fifth and sixth centuries AD. There are exceptions, however, such as the Memorial

of Moses basilica on Mount Nebo whose building period extended from the fourth to the eighth centuries AD; the basilica itself, however, was built in the mid-sixth century (Piccirillo and Alliata 1998: 151ff.). The Ḥisbān acropolis basilica's construction extended from the first part of the fifth century, through the mid-sixth century (AD 408-551; Geraty 1995: 628-629), while in Jerusalem the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, by comparison, had a long and checkered history of building and partial destruction: constructed and dedicated first in AD 335, then destroyed by the Persians (AD 614), restored (ca 628), spared by the Muslim Arabs (638), destroyed (1009), etc. (Finegan 1992: 279).

There are no examples of churches built before AD 300 (except the church, or house-church, in Dura Europos dated ca. AD 235 AD; Thompson 1992: 242-243). Examples from the Bible point to house churches which would fit the pattern of Bedouin simple living. These included an upstairs room in Jerusalem (Acts 1:13); the house of Mary in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12); the house of Titius Justus in Corinth (Acts 18:7); Paul's hired house in Rome (Acts 28:16-17); Priscilla and Aquila's house in Rome (Romans 16:3-5); Aquila and Priscilla's house in Ephesus (I Cor. 16:19); Nympha's house in Laodicea (Col. 4:15); and Philemon's house in Colossae (Phil. 1-2). This house church practice undoubtedly continued until Constantine's time, probably due, in part, to the sporadic periods of persecution of the Church by the Roman government and local authorities and other sources. Persecution was undertaken by the Roman Emperors, Nero (51-68); Domitian (81-96); Trajan (98-117); Marcus Aurelius (161-180); Decius (249-151); Galus (251-253); Valerian (253-260) in a time when "Christians were forbidden to hold church meetings or to visit Christian cemeteries on pain of death"; and Diocletian (284-305) (Dowley *et al.* 1977: 70-78). This was the persecution of the Church which came from the West and probably hindered Christianity from engaging in church building.

Further persecution came from the East as well, due also to pagan influence and the sporadic oppression of the Zoroastrian Persians. The early Christian Church was buffeted, which no doubt also contributed to the lack of opportunity, resources and incentives to build church edifices. The historian Sozomen in AD 390 bears testimony to the many pagans in the whole area when he says (describing the pagans and their defense of their temples) "There were still pagans in many cities, who contended in behalf of their temples; as, for instance, the inhabitants of Petraea and Areopolis in Arabia, of Raphia and Gaza in Palestine; of Heliopolis in Lebanon; of Apamaea on the river Axius (Orontes) in Syria" (Trimingham 1979: 80). There were also examples of persecutions by leaders of certain Arab tribes, such as in the case of the Arab Lakhmid king al-Nu'mān (ca 400-418) in the northeast Arabian

Peninsula, who despite the fact that there were many Christians in his kingdom, at times persecuted his Christians subjects, even though some of the members of his palace had become Christians. The Lakhmid kings were actually politically united with the non-Christian Zoroastrian Persia which was hostile to the Christian Church. For example, the Lakhmid Arab king al-Mundhir III (ca. 505-554) whose mother Mawiyyah, became a Christian, and his wife, Queen Hind, was also a Christian (a princess of a neighboring Arab kingdom), faced this dilemma (Rothstein 1899: 276). In South Arabia where the ancient Church had considerably expanded its influence, there was also persecution of the ancient Church in pre-Islamic times. As to the extent of the Christian presence in South Arabia then, A.R. Vine (1937: 59-60) comments that "in the South Arabian Peninsula there were many Christians by the fifth century and that there was a bishop at Hira (near Mecca) under the Metropolitan of Kaskar and there were bishops at Kufa, Beth Raman, Perath, Messenes, Baith Katraye and Najran. There were churches, and therefore, probably bishops also, at Sana, Aden, and Dhafar; and there were monasteries and schools at Mathota and Jemana. Many tribes are named as having become Christian including the Hamyar, Ghassan, Rabia, Taglib, Bahra, Tonuch, part of the tribes of Tay and Kodaa, some tribes in the Nejd, the Beni Harith of Najran, and some other tribes between Kufa and Medina". There was persecution, for example, in al-Yaman at Najrān, a city which had become Christian about AD 500 (through the efforts of a Syrian Jacobite ascetic, Phemion [Fay-miyun] — here there were about 40,000 Christians). In a struggle with the Arab Jewish kings of the Himyarites, particular King Inū Nawās, the church at Najrān in 522-524 suffered a bloody massacre (Moberg 1924; Ryckmans 1956: 277-278). Moffett (1992: 335) also notes that even later "the partly Christianized Arab buffer states of Yemen in the far south, of the Lakhmids on the Persian border, and of the Ghassanids east of the Jordan" suffered.

It is possible also that the Church's advance in the Byzantine period was hindered by a widespread plague, probably bubonic, which, off and on, for over two hundred years (the sixth to eighth centuries AD) devastated the Golan, the Ḥawrān, and as far south as Jarash. Lawrence I. Conrad of the Wellcome Institute, London in his articles "The Plague in Bilad al-Sham in the Islamic Times" (1986) and "Epidemic Disease in Central Syria in the Late Sixth Century: Some New Insights from the Verse of Hassān ibn Thabit" (1992) closely examines this possibility. Conrad cites the writer Sayf ibn 'Umar on the extent and severity of the plagues thus: "from ancient times up until the end of the kingdom of the Marwānids, the land of Syria was incessantly affected by outbreaks of plague in every year, especially in the regions of Damascus, Jordan, and Palestine

and their environs, and in the cities of the coastal plain." (Conrad 1986: 151). The cities and areas affected included those east of Lake Tiberias, the Golan and the Ḥawrān including Al-Tabiya (principal residence of the Ghassanids), and the Decapolis cities such as Jarash, Abila and Capitolias (Conrad 1992: 13, 14, 15, 24, 25, 34, 35). Conrad also raises a controversial question, when he says, "These observations lead to a larger and ultimately more important consideration — the extent to which the plague epidemics in Byzantine Syria contributed to the course of events that culminated in the Arab conquest in the early seventh century. This is a complex and difficult question" (Conrad 1986: 154).

But despite these persecutions and setbacks in these Middle East regions, the early Christian church made many positive contacts with each country in the urban, rural and desert regions. Actually in the early centuries after Jesus, the Christian Church intermingled positively with the Semitic people in Jordan, Syria, and other parts of the Arabian Peninsula, with people who before had been exposed to the Greco-Roman culture, and earlier to Greek culture, and who were at least exposed to or spoke Greek even though they knew and spoke Aramaic (in the Decapolis city of Abila, all the inscriptions thus far found are in Greek). The Church also reached out to those Arabs who worked the land for the more wealthy landowners and lived in the country villages, spoke their native Aramaic language and were steeped in their old cultural ways, who sometimes followed their Arab tribal customs. Another group the ancient Church touched consisted of those truly Arabic-speaking Arabs, some of whom were semi-nomads, alternatively cultivating land and herding their flocks, while others lived as pure nomads, who wandered about with the camels as the seasons demanded (Trimingham 1978: 4). Jesus, in his parables, alludes to the activities of all three strands of society: the city dwellers doing business (Luke 19: 11-23; Luke 16: 1-8); owners of landed estates (the *pater familias*, "the father of the extended family") and their tenants who worked the land (Matt. 21:33-41); and shepherds in the open country taking care of their flocks (Luke 15: 3-7). The effect of the early Christian Church's interaction with these three segments of society can be seen particularly in Syria and Lebanon as Philip Hitti (1956: 231) has stated "Syria as a whole remained largely Christian until the third Moslem century. The small towns and villages and the mountainous regions... preserved their native features and ancient cultural patterns. In fact, Lebanon remained Christian in faith and Syriac in speech for centuries after the conquest".

As a matter of fact, as Trimingham argues, the spread of the Church's influence in the countryside at large was carried on mainly by ascetics and monks. Sozomen (1983: Vol. I.34), in the early fifth century, said "The (monks) were instrumental in leading the whole Syrian nation, and

most of the Persians and Saracens (nomad Arabs) to the proper religion, and caused them to cease from paganism". Sozomen's claim may be exaggerated, but Trimmingham himself speaks to the importance of the ascetic and anchorite influence in the early Church when he says "In the desert the anchorites met Bedouins. The ascetic ideal was first pursued in Mesopotamia, even before Egypt, and the first known bishop of nomad Arabs is found in that region and was present at the Council of Nicea in AD 325. The desert region south of Gaza on the Palestinian coast, stretching right down western Sinai to Jabal Serbal, was the centre from which the monastic and anchoritic ideal was first diffused in southern Palestine. St. Hilarion (c. 291-371), an account of whose life was written by St. Jerome immediately after his death, shows him to have been the pioneer in spreading Christian beliefs among the Arab nomads of southern Palestine. From the same desert, as will be shown, came the ascetic Musa who, about AD 365, became bishop of the nomads of the Syrian desert who were under the overall authority of an Arab queen called Mawiyya" (Trimingham 1978: 6-7). Prominent among those Arabs and Arab tribes, that is, the Taghlib, Lakhmid, Banū Šāliḥ, Baḥra, and Ghassanid, who were influenced by the Church, was the Tanūkh tribal leader, Arab Queen Mawiyya. Mawiyya's Tanūkh tribe, as well as the Banū Šāliḥ, two of the Yamanite Quḏā'a Arab clans, had moved to establish themselves in the Syrian desert. As MacAdam (1992: 27, 33) comments about Syria: "in the Hellenistic period, Ptolemaic Syria, included all Phoenicia and Palestine and the territory east of the River Jordan, from Damascus to the Red Sea", and we assume that in the Roman-Byzantine periods Syria could be thought of as including an equally wide territory. It is said through the account of Hishām ibn al-Kalbī (see Arab references reported through Trimmingham 1978: 7) that the dynastic line of the Banū Šāliḥ and the whole Banū Šāliḥ tribe had become Christian, possibly through the influence a certain monk had on an Arab leader named Zokomos (Sozomen 1983: Vol. I.38), at the time of the Roman Emperor Valens (364-378).

As to the Tanūkh tribe, the other branch of Quḏā'a, which settled in much of Syria including Roman Lebanon, it had also become Christian, and in time had built houses there (so Balādhiri, Futūḥ, pp. 144-145, writes). So Mawiyya, whom is mentioned above, upon the death of her ruling husband, assumed the reign of the Western Tanūkh federation at the time of Emperor Valens (following the tradition of Arab queens going back to Akkadian times; Trimmingham 1978: 8). Christian Queen Mawiyya (Sozomen 1983: Vol. II.374) then broke the treaty of peace with the Romans, and marched her army into Phoenicia and Palestine and on to the border of Egypt, and finally achieved peace with the Romans on her condition that a certain Christian ascetic, Moses, who served in a desert

district, be consecrated as bishop over Queen Mawiyya's subjects. (Cf. Sozomen 1983: Vol. II.374; Socrates, *Eccles. History*, Vol. IV: 36; Trimmingham 1978: 8-9).

Another instance of the early church's contact with, and influence on, Arab tribes is evidenced by the record that Barochius "Bishop of the Arabs" was present at the Council of Seleucia in 359 (Trimingham 1979: 120). And in 325, when Constantine convened the Council of Nicea, delegates came from all the districts, including Palestine, Phoenicia, Coele-Syria, Arabia, Mesopotamia and Cilicia, whose representatives totaled 66 bishops, and 10 "rural bishops" (Gk. *Chorepiskopoi*), with 5 bishops coming from Arabia (Trimingham 1979: 65).

In regard to architecture, what about the variety of building plans in the 90-100 church buildings mentioned earlier in our survey? Many of the buildings are single apse basilicas: Gerasa has 8, Umm ar-Rašāš 9; at Umm al-Jimāl all 15 are single apse churches (De Vries 1997: 278; 1998: Fig. 6); Mount Nebo and Mādabā have several one apse churches each, Ḥisbān has two single apse basilicas (Storffjell 1994: 117; Lawlor 1994: 123). Several sites have three apse churches: Abila has 3; Hippos 1 (Epstein 1993: 634-636); Pella 3; Mādabā 1; Mount Nebo 1 (the Basilica of Moses, has a three in one apse); Umm ar-Rašāš 1; al-Ḥumayma at least 1; and Petra, where a three apse church with early sixth century mosaics in the two side aisles and important papyrus scrolls was found (Joukowsky 1997: 307-308). About Christian activity in Petra, David F. Graf in his article on the "Nabateans" (1992: 972), mentions that "hellenized bishops were serving at Petra in the latter part of the fourth century." Three sites have cruciform churches: Abila 1 (the central cathedral church), Gerasa 1, and Darat al-Funūn 1. The proposed church structure at Aila (al-'Aqaba) with the suggested date of AD 280 does not seem to have an apse. Questions arise. Why are there so many one apse churches? What is the significance of the three apse basilicas, and especially the cruciform basilicas? Might the architects, or a guild of architects, in different areas have developed a preference for a particular type? Or was there a central architectural authority which had a preference for single apse churches, which seem to be prevalent throughout Jordan? Did they plan cruciform churches with regional bishops in mind? It is to be noted that Abila had a bishop in 568 (van Elderen 1989: 2-5). Records also show that the Abila Bishop Alexander was in office in 553; Cyril of Scythopolis (1991: 208) notes that because Bishop Alexander refused to sign the acts of the fifth holy ecumenical council held at Constantinople that year, acts that included an anathema against Origen and Theodore of Mopsuestia, he was expelled from the episcopacy.

Dedicatory mosaic inscriptions found in a number of the churches and environs suggest that those mentioned in the inscriptions were pious and generous persons — the

information is limited since many of the church mosaics were damaged or destroyed (as at Abila). The large size of some church buildings may indicate sizable community involvement, and reliquaries found in several churches (as the reliquary found in the Abila single apse church in 2000) may suggest an attitude of reverence for the church and special reverence for the clergy.

There are a few cases where inscriptions in churches and environs indicate outreach into the countryside. One inscription dated AD 522 from a tomb in Pella (Tomb 7) reads that a certain John "dedicated soldiers coming, by origin from the regions of the Arab nation" (Smith 1973: 64, 188, Pl. 25; Bagatti 2001: 262). And in the Kaianos Church in the Mount Nebo area, a figure in a mosaic "which is seen several times is Safaitic and Thamudic graffiti in the desert depicts an Arab Christian soldier, one of the Ghassanids unified by the Byzantine government under al-Harith" (Piccirillo 1993b: 115-116).

Sometimes items found in or near church buildings or in buildings used for church worship may suggest religious syncretism of the church with other religious faiths. At Hammath Gader (al-Ḥimmah as-Sūriyya) near Gadara, Christian objects were found in the Late Byzantine synagogue remains there, suggesting syncretism of Jewish and Christian worship. One object found was a ring with an inscription, "Christ help Andrew," and also found was a clay lamp with a cross between the orifice and the spout. Sukenik interpreted these two objects as relics of the Jew's successors to this site. Bagatti (2001: 58) suggests, however, that this may have been a form of syncretism in a synagogue still in use in the Byzantine fifth and sixth centuries; and he comments that the finding of a Constantinian monogram found in the Jewish catacombs at Beit Shearin may fortify the plausibility of this suggestion. The life-size white marble statue of Artemis, goddess of the hunt, found in the debris in the 1994 excavations just outside the Tall Abila sixth century basilica may also suggest syncretism. Could the Artemis statue at Abila have been used to represent the Virgin Mary?

IV: The Ancient Church and Early Islam

In the Time of Muḥammad

In the time of Muḥammad and his founding of Islam, the Prophet accepted Christianity as one of the three monotheistic religions. Muḥammad of the Quraysh tribe and the Hāshim family was born about AD 571 and died in 632 [according to the Muslim biographer Ibn Ishāq (707-773) see Ibn Hishaam and Guillaume 1955: 79-81]. On a caravan trip to Syria when he was 12 years old we are told he met a Christian monk (cf. Hitti 1956: 112, 388) "named Bahira at Bostra, which was the seat of the Monophysite bishop of the desert Arabs". Ibn Ishāq also mentions another Christian named Jabr, who had great in-

fluence on the Prophet. Ibn Ishāq says "According to my information the apostle used to sit at al-Marwa [a hill overlooking Mecca] at the booth of a young Christian called Jabr, a slave of the B. Al-Hadrami [tribe], and they used to say, 'The one who teaches Muhammad most of what he brings is Jabr the Christian.'" (Ibn Hishaam and Guillaume 1955: 180; through Moffett 1992: 326). Another story has it that the cousin of Muḥammad's first wife was a Christian and probably had provided the Prophet information about Christianity (Bell 1926: 57ff.; Moffett 1992: 326, 362). It was the beautiful Mariya, a Coptic Christian, who bore Muḥammad a son, Ibrāhīm, but the boy died before his second birthday; it is to be noted that two others of the Prophet's wives were Jewish (Moffett 1992: 333). However, in the long run, despite these exposures to aspects of Christianity, the ancient Church did not make a lasting impression on Muḥammad (Moffett 1992: 327-332).

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that the ancient Church in Jordan with its surrounding regions: 1) was preceded by an important set of ethnic, cultural and political forces; 2) was solidly founded in the first century AD in the midst of a unified Semitic background and inter-mingled with a diverse set of cultures, and then it expanded its influence north and south in the Arabian Peninsula; and 3) flourished in the Byzantine period, as exhibited by the many Byzantine church ruins in Jordan.

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