

Churches in Urban Context in the Fifth-Eighth Centuries in Jordan and Palestine

The presence of Christian communities in Late Antiquity is one of the topics pertaining to the theme of "ancient identities". This topic can be addressed as a question: Why are there so many churches in cities dating from the fifth - eighth centuries, sometimes a dozen or more in one city? In order to find an answer, themes like the confrontation between the Early Church and the Pagan Religions, the increase of the number of church buildings and the development of a liturgical calendar are discussed.

The Gradual Replacement of Ancient Temples by Churches in Late Antiquity

The agreement made in 313 between the two emperors of the Roman Empire, Constantine and Licinius, set religious changes in motion. This agreement, the Edict of Milan, secured freedom of religion for the Christians. Consequently, Christianity played an increasing role in public life, and became the main religion in the Empire in the course of the fourth-fifth centuries.

In the ancient cities, temples often became a focus in the city plan (cf. Gerasa, Seigne 1992a: 333-341; 1992b: 185-195). In the daily life of an urban society, temples had played a prominent role as religious and public institutions. Besides religious ceremonies, temples were occasionally the scene of theatrical performances or festivals, or served as meeting places for political and civic bodies, while the area around temples may have functioned as a market (Stambaugh 1978: 576-588; Frézouls 1982: 357-362). Monumental inscriptions sometimes reveal the wide variety of deities worshipped (Kraeling 1938: 373-395).

Many historical sources of the fourth and fifth centuries contain data showing how the fight against pagan cults

progressed from the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great (Deichmann 1939: 105-136; Vriezen 1995: 70-73).

Early examples of the repression of paganism thus date back to the time of Constantine himself. In a decree issued in 321, Constantine prohibited domestic sacrifices and sometimes had churches built on sites where a temple had stood in Roman times. Two examples from the area of Palaestina illustrate the point. The first is Jerusalem, where both a memoria and a basilica were constructed on the site of the Holy Sepulcher (Corbo 1982: 27-137, 221-228). The second is a basilica built on the site of the Oak of Mamre (Rāmat al-Khalil) (Mader 1930: 89-104, 148-174). On both these sites, there had previously been a *temenos* and a temple dating from Hadrianic and Herodian/Hadrianic times, respectively (Eusebius, *Vita Constantini III*, 25-40, 51-53). Reports about similar constructions of churches in adjacent areas may be added to this data.¹

The Imperial decrees compiled in the *Codex Theodosianus* (henceforth: *CT*) indicate the progressive legislation on these matters from 321 until 435 AD.² They show an ever-growing repression of pagan cults and temples, starting with a prohibition of domestic sacrifices, followed by orders to close temples and finally by the command to destroy all temples and to purify them "by the erection of the sign of the venerable Christian religion", at the beginning of the sixth century. Spectacles and games, which had often been associated with pagan religion, were forbidden (Procopius of Caesarea, *Anecdota XXVI*. 7-8).

The influence of these decrees, although they were issued in the far away capitals of the Empire, was felt in the area of *Palaestina/Arabia*. This is to be concluded not only from historical information, but also from archaeological finds indicating that churches may have

¹ E.g. in Gaza: the Eudoxiana church on the site of the Marnas temple, Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyrii* 26-27, 63-69, 75-79, 84, 92-94; in Heliopolis in Phoenicia, Eusebius, *Vita Constantini III*, 58; in Damascus, Creswell 1969², 164 n. 1, 182-196; in Alexandria, Sozomenus, *Historiae ecclesiasticae* VII. 15. 2-10. Besides, many instances of purification of temples by destruction have been de-

scribed, e.g. Eusebius, *Vita Constantini III*. 54-56; Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiae* IV. 21, V. 21-23, 30.

² *Codex Theodosianus*, Chapter XVI, title 10 *De paganis, sacrificiis et templis*. Scattered decrees on "public works" (*CT XV*. 1. 36), "fiscal law" (*CT X*. 1. 8) and "faith" (*CT XVI*. 1. 1; XVI. 5. 42; XVI. 7. 2-3) add information on the subject. Translation in Pharr 1952.

been built on the ruins of older temples.

In the area under discussion, two building inscriptions have been identified, from which it may be inferred that the church was built on the site of a pagan temple that was purified and sanctified in this way. This is obvious from the inscription of St. George's Church in Izra' of AD 515 (Lassus 1947: 140f.), but the inscription on the outside of the lintel of St. Theodore's Church in Jarash dating to AD 496 is less clear (Kraeling 1938: 476f. inscr. 299).³

However, it remains to be seen whether the practice of sanctification of pagan temples by destroying them and subsequently building churches on their ruins was widespread in *Palaestina/Arabia*. In a survey of more than 350 churches from the fourth to eighth centuries (Van den Broek *et al.* 1988: 63, map 2) and of more than 60 temples from the Hellenistic or Roman Periods, only 13 churches proved to have been built on the site of a temple. In most instances, there was no direct relationship between the construction of a church and the destruction of the previous temple, or any such relationship was questionable.⁴

There may have been several objections to building churches on the site of a previous temple. This may be seen in the historical records about the building of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and of the Eudoxiana Church in Gaza, where the population retained a certain awe for demoniac presence in the remains of the previous temple (Corbo 1982: 41f.; Marcus Diaconus, *Vita Porphyrii*: 26-27, 63-69, 75-79, 84, 92-94). Another motive may have been to establish a new religious focus in the city plan, distinct from the previous pagan focus.⁵

Increase in Number of Churches

Remains of a large number of churches from the fifth to eighth centuries have been found in quite a few of the major cities in the area. Among the cities with a total of five or more churches excavated are: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Umm ar-Raṣāṣ, Mādabā, Jarash, Umm Qays, Khirbat as-Samrā', Umm al-Jimāl, Riḥāb, and al-Umta'īya. These monuments of Christian architecture testify to the growing Christian communities, which could make their presence completely visible to the public, after freedom of religion had been granted in the early fourth century.

The gradual increase in the number of churches can be illustrated for single cities, such as ancient Gerasa. If one

examines the archaeological finds there, one church dates from the fourth century. (Cathedral), two date from the fifth century. (St. Theodore's Church 494-496 and Church of the Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs 464-465), eleven date from the sixth century (St. John's Church 531; St. George's Church 529-530; Church of SS Cosmas and Damianus 533; Synagogue Church 530-531; Procopius's Church 526-527; Church of SS. Peter and Paul ca. 540; Church of Bishop Isaiah 558; Propylaea Church and Diakonia 565; Bishop Marianus's Chapel 570; Mortuary Chapel mid sixth century, and the church on the Intermediate Terrace). One church dates from the seventh century (Bishop Genesius's Church 611). Some churches in Jarash have not yet been dated: Churches on the Terrace of the Zeus temple; Octagonal Church; Chapel of Elias; Maria and Soreg.

A similar growth in religious architecture may be seen, if one examines changes in a single church, for instance at Umm Qays. There, our team excavated a double church on the Large Terrace. It first was built as a centralised church in the first half of the sixth century. The sanctuary was situated in the center of church, where there was a tomb, probably the grave of a martyr. From the ambulatory encircling the centre, visitors could watch the martyr cult celebrated in the sanctuary. In a later stage, this tomb was opened again and a double reliquary was placed there instead of the single burial. Other tombs and reliquaries were placed in smaller chapels arranged in large apses in the corners of the church-hall. Later, a second church was built against the south wall of the centralised church, a three-aisled basilica, which had a tomb and three reliquaries in the first building phase, to which a double reliquary was later added. So, this church complex shows the process of growth, starting with a single church with one tomb, and developing into a double church, where other three tombs and at least five to eight reliquaries were situated (Vriezen *et al.* 2001: 541-545).

This example illustrates also another element in the process, namely the function of the building. The Umm Qays church built over a venerated tomb at a conspicuous site in Byzantine Gadara must have been a prominent church. People from the Christian community of the city and any pilgrims from outside the city would have assembled there. By introducing more venerated relics into this church, its prominence as a place of worship grew.

³ According to one interpretation the inscription refers to an earlier pagan sanctuary on that site and according to another it refers to "a dead animal dump".

⁴ Certain relationship: Jerusalem-Holy Sepulchre; Rāmat al-Khalil, anc. Mamre; Jarash-the Cathedral. No immediate relationship: Dhibān, anc. Dībon; Dor, anc. Dora; Ḥisbān, anc. Esbus. Uncertain relationship: Jarash-the chapels on the Lower Terrace of the Zeus temple; 'Abdā. anc. Eboda-North church; Jerusalem-Probatika

church; Simj; Dayr al-Meshquq; Maiyamas; Dayr Smej. Cf. Vriezen 1995: 72-75.

⁵ It may be noted that in Roman Jarash the layout of the city was dictated by the religious centre of the Artemis temple, whereas in Byzantine times the religious centre seems to have shifted southwards, where the church compound of the Cathedral and St. Theodore's were built.

Liturgical Calendar

Information on the function of the buildings and on the changes in the status of Christians in the urban society may be gathered also from historical sources. An example is ancient Jerusalem. In the following discussion documents are limited to those relating to the development of liturgy in ancient Jerusalem.⁶

The first document describing the liturgy is the report by the pilgrim *Egeria*, who spent three years in Jerusalem (381-384). Her report contains a description of liturgical services there (Baldovin 1987: 55-64; Wilkinson 1971). On weekdays, the services were usually celebrated by the bishop in the Anastasis; on Sundays, in the Martyrium and in the Anastasis; on Wednesdays and Fridays, in the Sion Church. During the successive days of the Octave of Epiphany and of Holy Week, however, the services were held in other churches in the Jerusalem area:

During these weeks, the bishop celebrated not only in these main churches, but also in other churches during processions between the holy sites in the Jerusalem area. For instance, on Maundy Thursday evening, there was a procession that visited the Eleona Church, the Imbomon, the Place of Christ's Agony (all on the Mount of Olives and in Gethsemane) and from there they went into the city to the atrium "At the Cross".

Besides these Octaves, *Egeria's* report describes some other feast and fast days of the liturgical calendar of Jerusalem: the Fortieth day after Epiphany, Lent, the Fortieth day after Easter (stational service in Bethlehem), the Fiftieth day after Easter (services in Martyrium, Eleona, visit to Imbomon), and the Octave of the Encainia. And, as part of *Egeria's* report has been lost, it may be that originally it did mention some more days of the liturgical calendar (cf. *Eg.* 27.5 mentions unspecified martyr's days) (FIG. 1).

The liturgical calendar of Jerusalem as described by *Egeria* reflects stational liturgy. J.F. Baldovin provides the following definition of "stational liturgy": *Stational liturgy is a service of worship at a designated church, shrine or public place in or near a city or town, on a designated feast, fast or commemoration, which is presided over by the bishop or his representative and intended as the local church's main liturgical celebration of the day.* (Baldovin 1987: 36f.). *Egeria* mentioned very explicitly the presence of the bishop of Jerusalem as the main celebrant of the service.

The next source, the *Armenian Lectionary*, dates from the first half of the fifth century. This source illustrates the changes in the Jerusalem liturgy in the four or five decades after *Egeria*.⁷ Besides changes in the order of the main churches where the services were celebrated on the successive days of the Octave of Epiphany and of Holy week, the shortening of the Encainia Feast and the introduction of new churches into the liturgical calendar, 25 days of commemorations of martyrs and saints were added. Thus the number of registered stational services in the calendar became a total of 81.

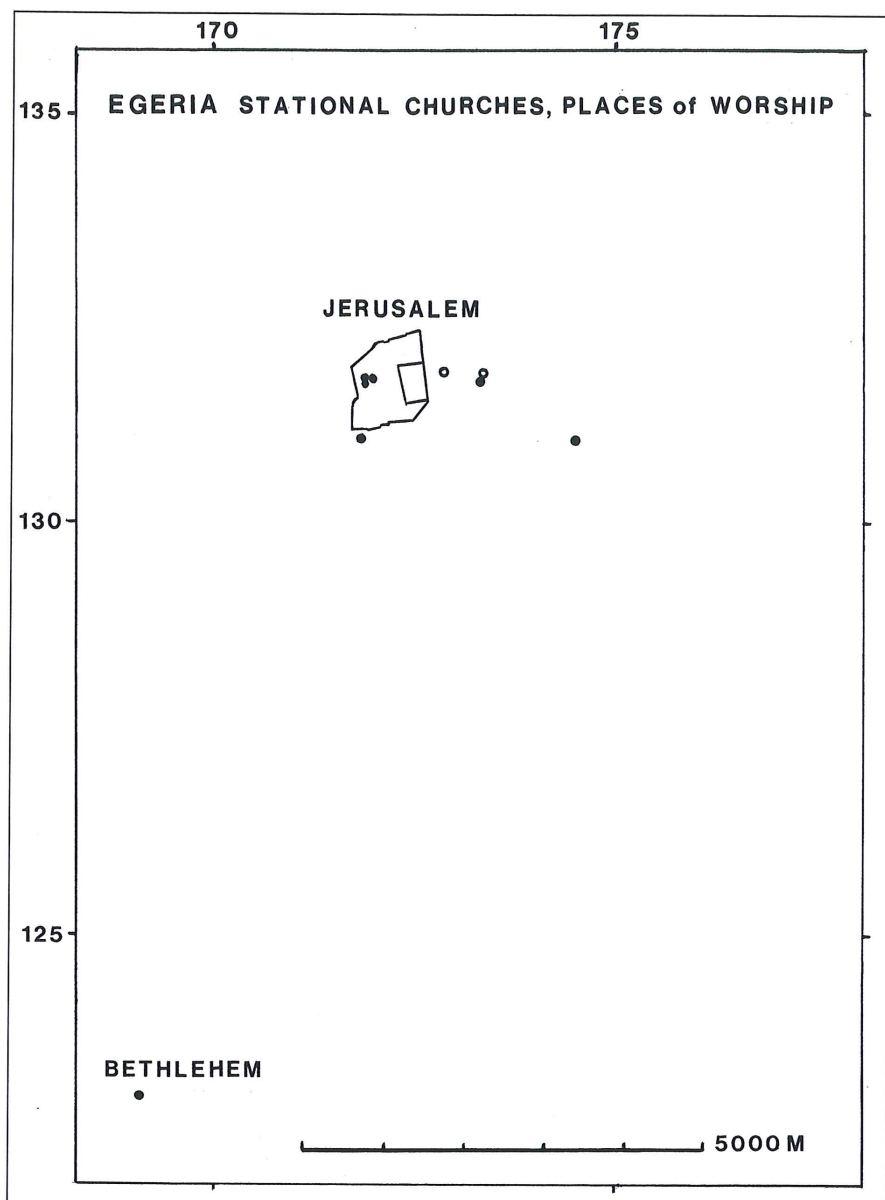
New stational churches, that had been added in Jerusalem, are: Martyrium of St. Stephen, which is the Diakonikon of Sion Church (services on the second day of Epiphany and on Easter Tuesday, on the 9th of March commemoration of the Forty Martyrs, on the 27th of December commemoration of the protomartyr St. Stephen); the Court of the High Priest; the Place of Peter's Repentance (according to ms *J*) or the Palace of the Judge (according to ms *E*).

New stational services outside Jerusalem were also added: at Anatot (on the 1st of May commemoration of the prophet Jeremiah); in Cariathiarim (on the 2nd of July commemoration of the Ark of the Covenant); at the "2nd

<u>Epiphany Octave</u>		<u>Octave of Holy Week</u>	
First day	Martyrium	(Saturday	Lazarium)
Second day	Martyrium	Palm Sunday	Martyrium
Third day	Martyrium	Monday	Martyrium
Fourth day	Eleona	Tuesday	Martyrium
Fifth day	Lazarium	Wednesday	Eleona
Sixth day	Sion Church	Maundy Thursday	Anastasis
Seventh day	Anastasis	Good Friday	Sion church
Eighth day	At the Cross (atrium)	Easter Eve	At the Cross (atrium)
		Easter Day	Martyrium
		<u>Easter Octave</u> same scheme as Holy Week	

⁶ The information on names and use of churches from these liturgical documents is corroborated by data from itineraries, e.g. the ones of Peter the Iberian, Theodosius, Sophronius of Jerusalem, Arculf, Epiphanius the Monk (Wilkinson 1977: 57f., 65f., 91f., 95-102, 117-

⁷ 121). The *Armenian Lectionary* is known from three manuscripts: *J*, *P* and *E*. For the Jerusalem origin and the date of the *Lectionary*, Renoux 1969: 21-22; idem 1971: 155-172; Baldovin 1987: 64-65.



1. Stational churches and places of worship in the Jerusalem Liturgy in the report of Egeria.

mile from Bethlehem" (ms *J*) or the "3rd mile" (mss *P* and *E*) (on the 15th of August commemoration of the Theotokos); in Bethphage (on the 23th of August commemoration of the apostle Thomas) (FIG. 2).

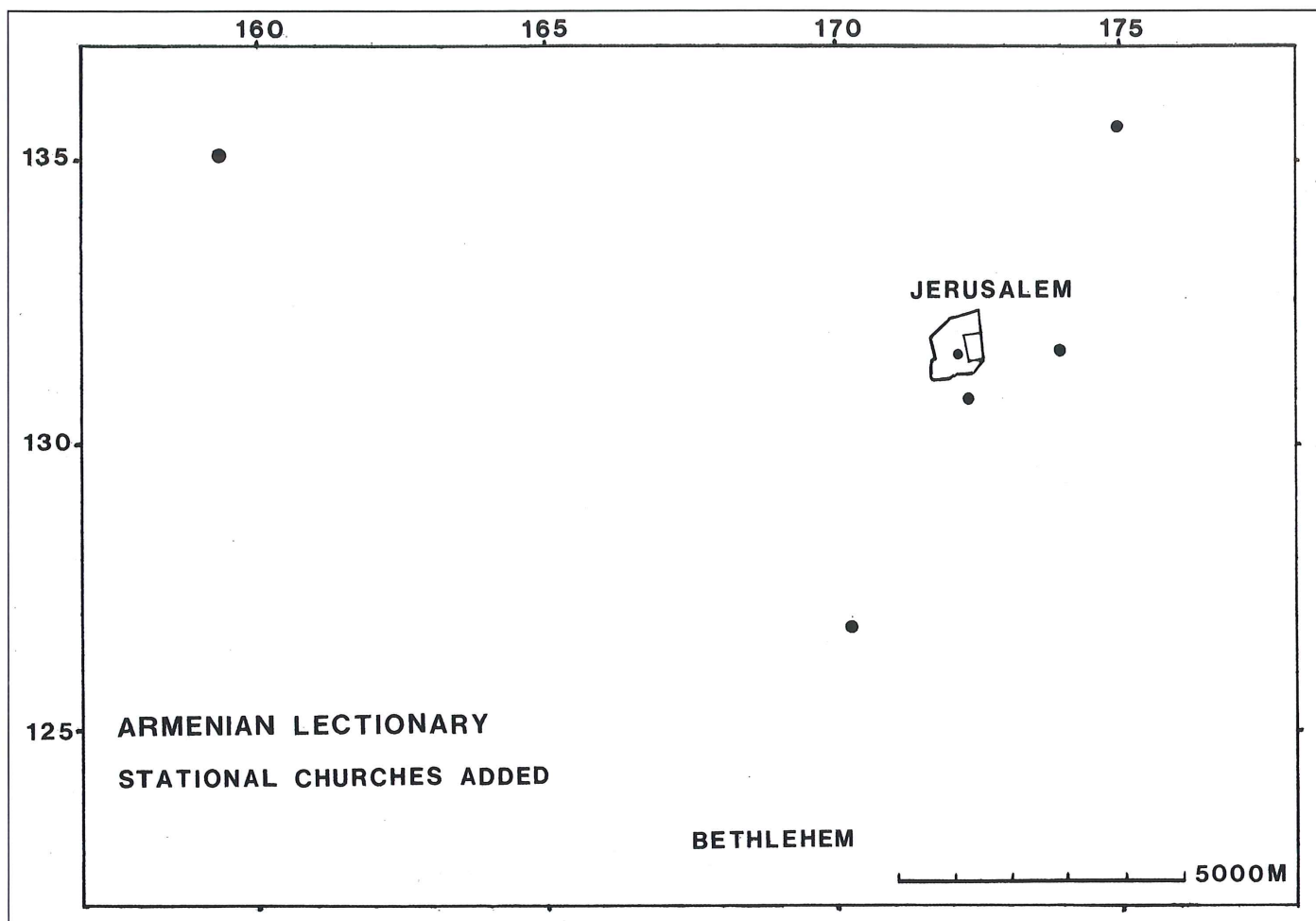
The third document, the *Georgian Lectionary*, contains a much more extensive calendar with commemorations on almost every day of the year. This Lectionary is a compilation of manuscripts apparently witnessing the liturgical calendar in Jerusalem between the late fifth and the eighth century.⁸ The massive evolution in the calendar shows the introduction of Christmas on 25th of December with a service in Bethlehem on the 24th of December.

Again there were changes in the order of successive stational churches in the two octaves.

In Jerusalem there are ten new stational churches: the Nea Church (services on the 9th of January, 16th of March, 26th of June, 3rd of August, 12th and 16th of Sept., and 20th of November); St. John the Baptist's (services on 10th of January; Monday of the second week of Easter); Probatika Church (services on Palm Sunday, Saturday of the second week after Easter, 30th of May, 1st, 2nd and 8th of September); St. Peter's Church (services on Maunday Thursday, 18th of August); the Sophia Church (services on Maunday Thursday, 7th of August);

⁸ For the Jerusalem origin and the date of the *Georgian Lectionary*, Baldovin 1987: 72-73. Text and translation, Tarnnischvili 1959-

1960.



2. Stational churches added in the Jerusalem Liturgy according to the Armenian Lectionary.

St. Mary's Dormition Church in Gethsemane (service on 15th of August); Church of the archangel Michael (service on 22nd of June); Church of Procopius (service on 2nd of October); Church of St. Laurentius (service on 18th of October); Church of St. Stephen (service on 19th of October). Four other places of memorial services are: the Stoa of the Church of St. Stephen (on 27th of June); the Spoudaion at the Anastasis (on 11th of August); the monastery of the presbyter Peter (on 13th of October); the Hospitium (on 21st of November). Moreover there are mentioned 18 religious buildings named after their founders, in which altogether 36 memorial services were held.⁹

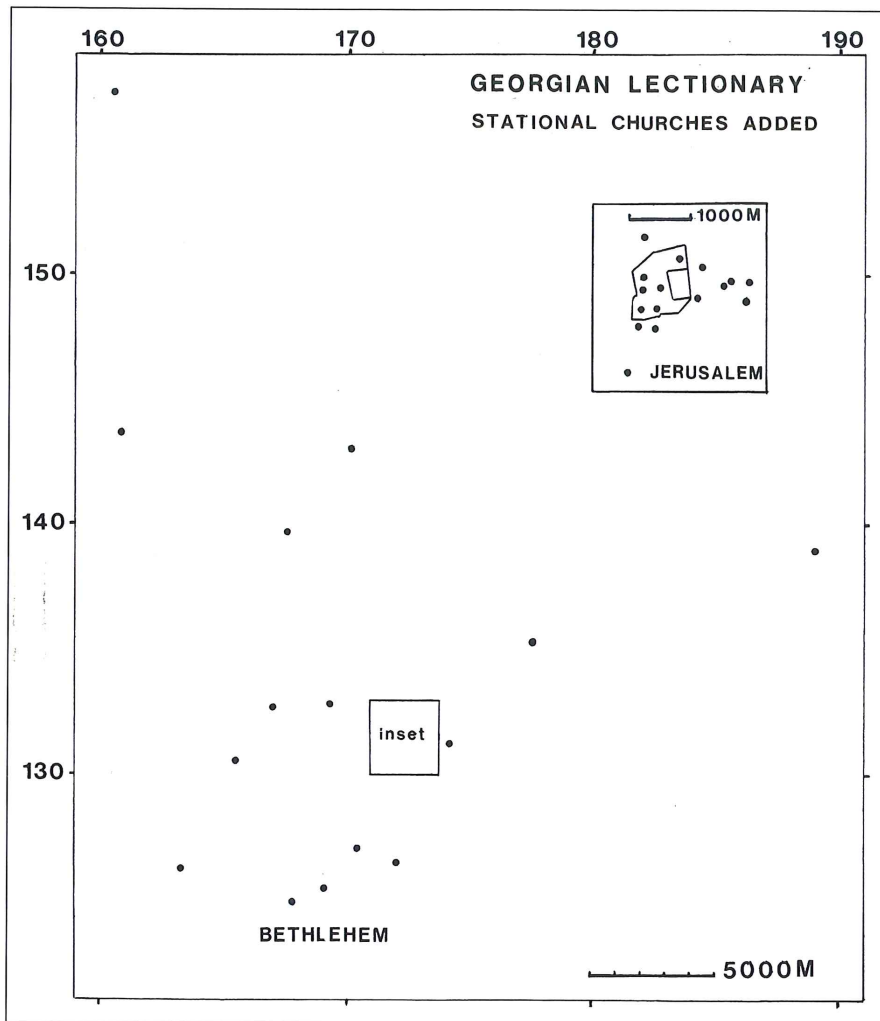
New stational churches outside Jerusalem were: in

Choziba monastery (service on 18th of January); at Rache's Tomb (service on 20th of February, 18th of July); Kathisma Church (service on 13th of August). Moreover there are listed 20 villages and localities in the wider area of Jerusalem, in which altogether 21 memorial services were held.¹⁰ (FIG. 3).

These documents thus illustrate the urban services, which presided over by the bishop or his representative and the extension of the calendar of memorial days through the centuries that resulted in an increase of stational mobility. The exceptional character of the Holy City of Jerusalem may have contributed to this liturgical mobility, as so many sacred places of Christianity are situ-

⁹ The edifices of the presbyter Zanibus, of Romianus, of Bassa, of the presbyter Passarion, of Paulus, of Gelbanus, of Flavia, of patriarch Johannis, of Melania, of Johannis, of Romlus, of Juvenalis, of Ephraemias, of Innocentium, of the Emperor Mauricius, of Aphronus, of the presbyter Euphlius, and the new edifice of the presbyter Zanibus. Not all of these are identified, Milik 1960: 354-367, 550-591; Bieberstein & Bloedhorn II/III 1994.

¹⁰ The villages of Gethenus, of Metoba, of Sebentus, of Entidabara, of Enbicumacube, of Jason, of Petanus, of Probus, of Betronus, of Masephtha, of Encharim, of Thamnachar, of Enbigonus, of Agarthana, of Betarius, of Enbiteba, of Ida-Qutha, of Petre-Bagonus, of Gelbanus and Golgotha near Bethlehem. Not all of these localities are identified yet, cf. Garitte 1958: 121-423; Milik 1960: 354-367, 550-591; Bieberstein & Bloedhorn II/III 1994.



3. Stational churches added in the Jerusalem Liturgy according to the Georgian Lectionary.

ated in and around the city.¹¹

However, the gradual increase of churches noticed in cities like Jarash/Gerasa could be analogous to the increase of stational churches in the Jerusalem liturgy. In most of the churches from the fifth to the sixth century. In Jarash, there are inscriptions, that mention saints also listed in the calendars of the Armenian and of the *Georgian Lectionary*. It is of course not sure in how far the liturgical calendar of Jerusalem strictly was followed in the cities of Transjordan, but it is clear that the Jerusalem liturgy in those centuries had a large influence.

Memorial services commemorating saints, martyrs or events would have been held at churches, which were related to them by dedication or deposition of their reliques,

and such a church could have been the stational church of the day in ancient Gerasa. Possibly also on the other days on which such a person or event was remembered, the bishop may have celebrated service in that church. In the Jerusalem liturgy as reflected by the *Georgian Lectionary*, for instance St. John the Baptist was commemorated on 11 different days and in different churches/chapels¹² and in each of these other saints were also commemorated.

Information from historical sources indicate that a bishop was seated on a bishop's chair, a *kathedra*, in the presbyterium. However, it may be questioned whether only churches in which a *kathedra* is found are to be identified as stational churches. The number of *kathedrae* excavated in our area is relatively limited.¹³ Cities, in which

¹¹ Unfortunately, the interesting dissertation of S. Verhelst, *La liturgie de Jérusalem à l'époque byzantine. Genèse et structures de l'année liturgique* (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, Jerusalem 1999) came to my attention only after this article was finished.

¹² On the 9th of May and the 25th of July in the Matheteion; on the 3rd of June and the 15th of October in the edifice of Flavia; on 24th of June, the 29th of August, the 26th of Octobre and the 15th of De-

ember in the edifice of Patriarch Johannis; on 18th of July at Rachel's Tomb; on 29th of September in the edifice of Innocentium; on the 14th of November in the edifice of Aphronus.

¹³ In the bishops' cities: Umm Qays/Gadara (1); Jarash/Gerasa (6); Tabaqat Fahil/Pella (2); 'Amwās/Nikopolis (1); Ḥisbān/Esbus (1). In non-bishops' cities: Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (1); Halusa (1); Rehovoth (1); Kurnub (1); 'Abdā (1). In Jerusalem: in the Siloam Church.

more than one excavated church has a *kathedra*, like Gerasa and Pella, are exceptional.¹⁴ Unless future excavations yield more *kathedrae* in churches, it ought to be supposed that *kathedrae* were movable and made of perishable material. Cf. Egeria's report, which on various occasions states *They place the bishop's chair* and then *the bishop takes his seat*.¹⁵

This means that on a commemoration the Christian community would have met in the church dedicated to the saint or martyr in question or where relics were deposited and that many churches in a city would have functioned as stational church at least once a year. On special days, processions would have been held like the ones described by Egeria in Holy Week and on the feast of the Fiftieth Day after Easter in Jerusalem.¹⁶ During Christian festivals, large crowds would have assembled.¹⁷ The liturgical calendar allowed the Christian community to manifest itself in the public area. Some of the solemn Christian festivals thus may have functioned as successors to ancient pagan festivals, while games and plays were falling into disuse with the official suppression of Roman religions.¹⁸

To survey the course of church building in a region, one may take a diocese, for instance the Diocese of Mādabā. In the city of Mādabā, the bishop's see, a dozen churches have been excavated. The building inscriptions in some of them mention the names of the bishops who were in office at the time of the construction, and the saints and martyrs to whom the church or parts of the church compound were dedicated. Complementary data about these bishops and about the dedications to saints and martyrs are found in churches excavated at other sites in the diocese, which extended from some kilometers north of Mādabā to Wādī al-Mūjib. In total, there is information about ten bishops from the sixth-eighth cent and dedications in churches mention nine saints and martyrs.¹⁹ If a bishop is mentioned in the dedicatory in-

scriptions of several churches, a clearer picture emerges of the building activities supervised by this bishop and about regional relationships. For instance Bishop Sergios I is mentioned in one inscription in the atrium in the Cathedral in Mādabā (575-576), in one in the Church of the Holy Apostles in Mādabā (578-579), in one in the Elianos Chapel in Mādabā (595-596), in two in the later baptistery on Mount Nebo (597-598) and in one in the Bishop Sergius Church in Umm ar-Raṣāṣ (586). Similar observations may be made for the bishops Leontios, John, Cyrus and Elijah. Each of the saints and martyrs mentioned in the dedicatory inscriptions, except for one, is mentioned only once in a dedication. In view of the situation in the Diocese of Jerusalem, some of these churches in the Diocese of Mādabā may have been stational churches visited on the memorial days of the saints and martyrs in question.

In the first half of the eighth century, many of the churches in our area collapsed, because of earthquakes, not to be rebuilt. The Christian presence became less manifest. Finds indicate that squatters came to live in the ruins of many of the collapsed churches or that less monumental architecture was constructed on the sites of the churches.

Finally, a provisional answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper could be that the large number of churches in cities of the fifth-eighth centuries resulted from the gradual decrease in ancient pagan religions and from the increase in the number of saints and relics, which caused the liturgical calendar of memorial days to expand.

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¹⁴ The high number of six churches with a *kathedra* in Jarash/Gerasa, cannot be explained by the fact that they occur in the churches dedicated to a saint or a martyr, because in only two of them there are inscriptions mentioning a saint or martyr. The explanation may be found in the fact that in these six churches an *episkopos* is mentioned in the building inscription. For the Church of SS Peter and Paul it is inferred that the mentioned "Anastasios" is a bishop. The fact that a *kathedra* is not found in the Church of the Prophets, Apostles and Martyrs, where Bishop Klaudios is mentioned, may be explained by the excavator's report, that only traces of the tiers of seats of the *synthronos* were found (Kraeling 1938, 258). For Pella, cf. McNicoll *et al.* 1992: 152, 158.

¹⁵ Egeria: 31.1; 37.1; 37.5; 45.2; 46.1; 46.5 (cf. Wilkinson 1971: 132-145). *Testamentum Domini nostri, Liber I, xix*: Let there be a Throne towards the east; to the right and to the left places of the presbyters..... And let the place of the Throne be raised three steps up, for the altar also ought to be there (cf. Rahmani 1899: 25).

¹⁶ E.g. the crowd of people go singing from Bethphage to the Lazarium/Bethany on Saturday before Palmsunday; Palmsunday from Eleona to Imbomon; Thursdaynight from Eleona to Golgotha. Cf. Eg. 43.2: on the festival of the Fiftieth day after Easter: "straight after

the dismissal in the Martyrium all the people, every single one, take the bishop with singing to Sion, where they arrive in time for nine o'clock" (Wilkinson 1971: 141).

¹⁷ Cf. the description of the festival of dedication of the buildings on Golgotha by Adomnan (writing bishop Arculph's description of Jerusalem in 685): "Each year on the twelfth of September a huge crowd always comes to Jerusalem. They come from almost every country and many nationalities to hold a fair, and buy, sell, and exchange. Thus these crowds from various countries have to spend some days in the inns of the city, and they have a great many draught animals, camels and horses, asses and oxen, who throng the city streets and everywhere cover them with their revolting dung. Not only does the smell of this glogging filth cause a considerable nuisance to the citizens, but it also makes it difficult to walk about" (Wilkinson 1977: 95).

¹⁸ E.g. in this way Christmas was celebrated on the 25th of December, which was the *Natalis Solis Invicti*. Baldovin 1987: 234-239; Geffcken 1929: 233.

¹⁹ St.Theodore, the Martyr; Mary, the Theotokos; St.Elijah; St.Elianos; the Holy Apostels; St. Georgios; SS. Lot and Procopios; St.Stephanos.

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