

New Evidence for the History of Indigenous Aramaic Christianity in Southern Jordan

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Pre-Islamic Southern Jordan has for some time been a much neglected Aramaic-speaking domain in the history of the spread of the early Christian movement as it emerged from its Judaic origins. This is in spite of the large Byzantine site of Khirbet Humayma at the northern end of the Hisma and the sites in and around the Wadi Ramm, Petra and the copper-rich Wadi Araba. Now recent excavations of a large tripartite basilica which was discovered at Petra in 1990 and the discovery in its environs of ancient scrolls in December, 1993, have revived interest in the episcopal sees of *Palestina Tertia*, or Third Palestine, and the history of their origins and development.¹

Prior to this new evidence it was widely held that after the Roman annexation of Petra in 106 A.D. there was a gradual decline in the area generally and a move of socio-economic interests to Bosra which is situated to just south of the Hauran in southern Syria. A Greek inscription dated to 446 A.D. in the Urn Tomb at Petra indicated that this Nabataean structure had been converted into a church, and crosses engraved on the walls of the Deir which looks west across the Wadi Araba from just below Aaron's Tomb were thought to denote the consecration of the lofty Deir for Christian worship. Backtracking through the early Patristic sources it can be seen that Petra became the seat of a bishopric in the fourth century and was later elevated to that of a metropolitan see. Thus just twenty years ago Iain Browning reflected the view that the period of the Christian occupation of Petra was coincident with the demise of the Rose Red City half as old as time:

One gets the feeling that the authorities had at last given up the unequal struggle to pretend that their city mattered at all in the councils and history of the world. The vitality of the people was being sapped by squalor and the continual bickering between the Christian churches did not help matters. Without even vain hope, a sort of torpor settled across

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¹ *La Jordanie Byzantine*, Supplement to *Le Monde de la Bible*, [collected articles by] Michele Piccirillo, J.-B. Humbert, A. Desmeurax, Leonardo Ratti, Eugenio Alliate, Pierre Medebielle, Paris, 1984.

Petra; life became an existence valued for its own precarious self and not for any prospect of achievement. Control by the central authority became looser and looser, to such an extent that Petra virtually turned to being independent again.²

Browning further concluded that

It is worth considering the possibility that the whole of the true Nabataean population moved out long before the final desertion leaving behind only the polyglot, alien population which is an inevitable parasite of any wealthy trading nation with international ramifications and connections. The Nabataeans to a man were traders of one sort or another so it would be natural for them to move to where business could be found. Jerash and Palmyra have already been mentioned as possible destinations and there can be little doubt that expatriate Nabataean merchants were seen there.³

Twenty years later the accumulation of the results of surveys and excavations in southern Jordan, the study of new mosaics, numismatics, inscriptions, architecture and most importantly the refinement of the study of Nabataean ceramics have begun to draw a new picture of the developments in the indigenous semitic culture which took place in the Roman and Byzantine periods.⁴

Of particular interest with regard to native cultural traditions is the newly developed typology and chronology of the Byzantine churches of the Negev by Professor Avraham Negev. In my view this also applies to the new basilica at Petra and the church buildings at Humayma, and traces in a preliminary way an architectural history which links these sites east and west of the Wadi Araba and illustrates important links with the Nabataeans and a continuing indigenous semitic tradition.⁵ Basic to my study is the conviction that from the marginal and desert areas of the Hisma, through Petra and the Wadi Araba and across the Negev to the southern Mediterranean ports stretch the remains of an Aramaic and North Arabian

² Iain Browning, *Petra*, London, 1974, p. 58.

³ *Loc. cit.*

⁴ Robert Wilken, 'Byzantine Palestine: A Christian Holy Land', *Biblical Archaeologist*, 51 (4), 1988, pp. 214-217; Yoram Tsafirir, 'Ancient Churches in the Holy Land', *Biblical Archaeology Review*, 19(5), 1993, pp. 26-39; Yoram Tsafirir, *Ancient Churches Revealed*, Jerusalem, 1993, pp. 260-302.

⁵ A. Negev, 'The Cathedral of Elusa and the New Typology and Chronology of the Byzantine Churches in the Negev', *Liber Annus*, 39, 1989, pp. 129-142, plates 15-20, and works by Tsafirir cited in the previous note.

culture which can also be linked with the Sinai. It is contended that neither Rome nor Constantinople eclipsed the native inhabitants of these regions. The new archaeological and papyrological data from Petra are beginning to shed new light on this culture and its accommodation of the intrusions from Rome and Constantinople.

During this century particularly academic controversies have raged over whether Jesus and his earliest disciples spoke Hebrew or Aramaic or both! Thus a major preoccupation of twentieth-century scholars has been the attempt to recreate an Aramaic or Hebrew *Vorlage* by following up the apparent semitisms preserved in the Greek New Testament.⁶ To this can also be added the record of Saint Paul's retreat in Arabia after his conversion and before his return to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:17-18).⁷ This was at a time when the Nabataean realm was at its zenith, towards the end of the long reign of Aretas IV (9 B.C.–39A.D.), and when these regions east of the Jordan from almost Damascus to the Red Sea were generally designated *Arabia Nabataea* and the Decapolis in current cartographic terminology.⁸ Less attention has been given to the Apostle's attestation that it was for about three years that his sojourn continued in these frontier regions of the Roman Empire which interfaced with the east semitic world and Parthia, regions which had their own regional socio-economic importance and cultural character. Recent important developments in Palmyrene- and Nabataean-Aramaic speaking cultures east of the Jordan in the Herodian and Late Roman periods provide a range of new archaeological and epigraphic evidence. This provides a picture of what I would term an apron of Aramaic culture which embraced the world of Syria, Palestine and the Decapolis in which it may now be perceived that Christianity originated, developed and spread. It must be stated immediately that this is not to overlook the depth of the intrusive

⁶ Mathew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts*, Oxford, 1967; Michael Sokoloff, *Aramaic and the Aramaic Literary Tradition*, Ramat-Gan, Israel, 1983; *The New Covenant Commonly Called The New Testament: Peshitta Aramaic Text With a Hebrew Translation*, ed. The Aramaic Scriptures Research Society in Israel, The Bible Society, Jerusalem, 1986; Robert Lindsey, *The Jesus Sources: Understanding the Gospels*, Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1990; cf. D. Bivin, 'Jerusalem Synoptic Commentary Preview', *Jerusalem Perspective*, 38 and 39, 1993, pp. 3-28; R. W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and The Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, New York, 1993, pp. 8-9; Alan D. Crown, 'The Parting of the Ways', *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 7(2), 1993, pp. 62-81.

⁷ Cf. Justin Taylor, 'The Ethnarch of King Aretas at Damascus. A Note on 2 Corinthians 11:32-33', *Revue Biblique*, 99.4, 1991.

⁸ Cf. G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, Harvard, 1983; A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 1971.

Hellenistic culture but rather to see it as in a finely and regionally differentiated symbiotic relationship with the indigenous Aramaic culture. The geography of the Aramaic cultural apron regardless of geopolitical boundaries provided a social medium through which Christianity spread. As this study will emphasise, preliminary analysis of some of the new archaeological and epigraphic material from southern Jordan illustrates an important aspect of this process and has important implications for the Byzantine period and the rise of Islam. After all it was from Nabataean-Aramaic script that later classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, was developed.

The discovery by the American anthropologist and archaeologist, the late Dr Ken Russell, of a Byzantine Church in Petra in 1990 has led to a significant breakthrough in our understanding of the Byzantine period in Petra, and in my view has added exciting new evidence with implications for the cultural continuity of the Nabataeans with this later period. (I should note that Professor John Bartlett of Trinity College, Dublin, has already argued cogently for a continuity between the Iron Age Edomites and the later Nabataeans.)

Excavations of Dr Russell's site by the American Schools of Oriental Research and the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and the Department of Antiquities, who have been funded by the United States Agency for International Development, have revealed a large tripartite basilica, which measures ca 26 m. (east-west) by 15 m. (north-south), with three apses to the east and three entrances to the west.⁹ As has been so far reported,

the preserved decorations of the church attest to its original magnificence. Both of the side aisles have mosaic floors of patterns stylistically dated to the early sixth century A.D. In the northern aisle, three parallel rows of roundels depict native and exotic animals and a variety of vessels and containers. The eastern part of the southern aisle is similar, while the remaining area of that aisle presents a variety of different motifs. The central panels contain anthropomorphic personifications of the Seasons, Ocean, Earth and Wisdom. These are flanked by birds, animals and fish.¹⁰

Much of this mosaic art is typical of the decorations preserved at Mount Nebo and at Madaba and Umm er-Rasses where the semitic names of the mosaicists would suggest a well developed local school. In this regard it is

⁹ Zbigniew T. Fiema, 'The Petra Project', *ACOR Newsletter*, 5(1), 1993, p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

important to note the smaller but no less significant site of Deir 'Ain 'Abata which is situated close to the Lisan which juts out into the Dead Sea. This site has been identified as the Church of Saint Lot which is mentioned on the sixth-century Madaba map mosaic. The excavator of this site, Dr Konstantinos Politis, has reported an example of the Nabataean horned capital together with fifth-century A.D. Nabataean pottery.¹¹ He also notes that the extensive mosaic, which is dated by an inscription to May, 691 A.D., has branches with red leaves depicted and that these are reminiscent of the painted decorations found on the earlier Nabataean pottery in Petra.

Further to the south of Petra, providing something like the cathedral town and CBD of the 'top end' of the Hisma, the site of Khirbet Humayma furnishes similar evidence. Identified with Roman Avara, this site provides important evidence for the history of the occupation of this marginal desert area from the Nabataean through to the Byzantine and early Abbasid periods.¹² The large tri-apsidal church, the aqueduct and the hydrotechnology of this site in the Byzantine period attest a high demography and suggest a relationship (which is also confirmed by the surface pottery sherds of the subsequent ten years of the 'Aqaba-Ma'an survey) with a network of smaller sites throughout the area.¹³ G. W. Bowersock has noted that the modern toponym of Humayma situated about 60 km. north of Aqaba (Roman Aila) preserves a corrupted form of the Roman name Avara.¹⁴ David Graf has noted that recent investigation has only enhanced the importance of Humayma for the study of Nabataean and Roman settlements in the region and added the important summary comment that

It appears as *Aura* in the geography of Ptolemy (V.16.4) and as *Hauarra* on the Tabula Peutingeriana. Since the latter lists it as 20 Roman miles south of Zadagatta (modern Sadaqa) and 24 miles north of Praesidio (modern Khirbet al-Khalda), the precise distances to Humayma, its equation with *Auara* seems assured. According to the Notitia Dignitatum, the *equites sagittarii indigenae* served at Hauanae/Hauare under the Dux Palaestina (Or. XXXIV.25). Its importance in the sixth

¹¹ Konstantinos Politis, 'Deir 'Ain 'Abata Basilica', *Minerva*, 3(4), 1992, pp. 6-9; K. D. Politis, "Excavations at the Monastery of Agios Lot at Deir 'Ain 'Abata", in 'Ricerca Storico-Archeologica in Giordania', *Liber Annuus*, 40, 1990, pp. 475-476.

¹² D. Homes-Fredericq and J. B. Hennessy (eds), *Archaeology of Jordan*, III. Field Reports Surveys & Sites A-K, Leuven, 1989, pp. 270-274.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-24.

¹⁴ Bowersock, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

century is indicated by the Beersheba Edict's assessment of Auran with the second highest amount in annual taxes of any of the Transjordanian towns.¹⁵

This supports the view that 'the appearance of Avara in these late documents, along with the presence of Byzantine ceramics on the site, indicates that the town remained an important and prosperous military post into the Byzantine period, although its precise role in the overall defence of the region remains to be determined'.¹⁶ However like many other Roman and Byzantine sites in southern Jordan, Humayma has archaeological evidence of extensive Nabataean occupation. Nabataean shaft graves to the west and north-west of the site, pottery sherds, niches and inscriptions in both Nabataean and North Arabian-Thamudic attest a Nabataean occupation prior to (and in my view during) the Roman and Byzantine period. This may concur with the legend about the foundation of Avara which is preserved in the fourth-century A.D. fragment of Uranius' *Arabica*:

Auara, a city of Arabia, named after a prophecy given to Obodas, by his son Aretas. Aretas set out to seek the fulfilment of the prophecy, the prophecy being to look for a place named Auara, this meaning 'white' in the Arabian and Syrian languages. And to Aretas, as he was lying in wait in advance, there appeared the image of a man dressed in white proceeding on a white dromedary. When the image of the man disappeared, a round hill appeared, holding firm above the ground, and on this spot he built the city.¹⁷

According to the reconstructed Nabataean King List the Obodas and his son Aretas mentioned in the *Arabica* should be Obodas III (30-9 B.C.) and Aretas IV (9-40 A.D.).¹⁸ The former is thought to have been deified on his death and buried in Eboda in the Negev west of the Wadi Araba while the latter who was called 'Philopatris' (which was a rendering of his Nabataean numismatic superscription 'the King of the Nabatu, who loves his people') went on to bring the Nabataean kingdom to its zenith. From his survey in 1980 David Graf has now provided evidence of a Nabataean inscription

¹⁵ David F. Graf, 'The God of Humayma', in *Intertestamental Essays in Honour of Josef Tadeusz Milik*, ed. Zdzislaw Jan Kapera, Krakow, 1992, p. 67.

¹⁶ Homes-Fredericq and Hennessy (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 272.

¹⁷ No. 675 in F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker*, 3C1, Leiden, 1958, p. 340; cf. Graf, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

¹⁸ Nelson Glueck, *Deities and Dolphins*, London, 1966, pp. 541-542.

which he cogently argues supports the tradition in Uranius' *Arabica*.¹⁹ This newly published Nabataean inscription reads:

slm. br. tlm. 'bd. 'l.hwr

Peace, BR-TLM, servant of 'Al-HWR.

Graf suggests that the name 'Al-HWR like the Greek name *Auara* or *Hauarra* is derived from the Arabic term *hawar* 'white', 'to whiten, make white',²⁰ and that this is descriptive of the cretaceous white rock of the area. Thus he argues that 'the ancient toponym is probably preserved in the modern name Humayma, a corruption of the original name *Auara*'.²¹ I would suggest that this too brings into focus the strength of the semitic cultural stratum and in this particular case highlights the sociolinguistic mechanics of cultural continuity in the face of intrusive and socially superior Byzantine culture.

However to return to the newly excavated basilica at Petra, it is now reported that early in December, 1993, ancient scrolls have been found in the ruins of the basilica. Forty scrolls have been found and it is anticipated that the number may be increased to 50.²² Preliminary study of these scrolls has revealed that they are written in two scripts. The first of these scripts has been identified as a cursive Greek of the documentary style typical of the fifth-sixth century A.D., while the second script is thought to be some form of Aramaic.²³ It is so far reported that 'The arrangement of the texts on the scrolls indicates that they are more likely personal writings such as sermons, letters or contracts, rather than literary book rolls, e.g. a "standardised" or "published" text like a Bible or a Greek tragedy'.²⁴ Fragments of the Greek scrolls so far studied refer to the Patriarch of Antioch, Flavianus, who was banished by the Emperor Anastasius to Petra after the Synod of Sidon in 512 A.D. The Council, or Synod, of Sidon was concerned in 512 A.D. with the Theopaschite Controversy which was a christological problem about the theology of the suffering of Christ and, by definition, the theology of the suffering of God. Following the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 many of the eastern, or Levantine, bishops were declared Monophysites because they had adopted the formula 'God has been crucified', and incorporated this into the liturgy as an addition to the

¹⁹ Graf, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²² P. V. Vivekand, *Jordan Times*, 12 January, 1994, p. 10.

²³ *ACOR, Friends of Archaeology Newsletter*, February, 1994, p. 5.

²⁴ *Loc. cit.*

Trisagion with the words, 'Holy God! Holy Almighty! Holy Immortal! *who has been crucified for us!*'²⁵ The Emperor Anastasius favoured the Monophysite doctrine and directed the Patriarch Flavianus (II), who presided over the Council of Sidon and had made concessions to Monophysite doctrines, to anathematise the Chalcedonians. However, favouring a moderate Chalcedonian orthodoxy Flavianus was sent into exile at Petra in 512 A.D. Study of the Synod of Sidon and the Theopaschite controversy suggests that Flavianus was sent into exile amongst pro-Monophysites. It looks as though he may not have been amongst friends. It is to be hoped that swift publication of the Petra Scrolls will shed more light on these theologically troubled times.

However it is not to be overlooked that when Justin I became emperor in 518 A.D. many Monophysite bishops were deposed and fled to Alexandria where Monophysitism was too strong to be deposed.²⁶ Thus a variety of Monophysite sects developed, their divisions turning chiefly on the degree in which the humanity of Christ differed from ordinary human nature. Many of these sects which expressed their piety through ascetic practices were to be found along the trade routes which passed through southern Jordan into Arabia and the Sinai and of course penetrated the Eastern Frontier. In my view in all probability they did not replace the officially appointed ecclesiastical hierarchy which administered the main sites and cities of the Holy Land. Rather I would suggest that once again a symbiosis developed in which the heterodox found themselves able to operate in less populated areas. From the point of view of Constantinopolitan orthodoxy they were driven onto the boundaries of the *OIKUMENE* and were politically defused.

While we await further elucidation of the Aramaic scrolls from Petra it is pertinent to remember that Petra already has an important link with the Dead Sea Scroll corpus through 4Q235 and 4Q343.²⁷ Of these fragments from Cave Four which are written in the Nabataean-Aramaic script, Professor J. T. Milik has made a preliminary identification of the two fragments of 4Q235 as from the Biblical Book of Kings.²⁸ 4Q343 on the other hand is reported by Magen Broshi and Ada Yardeni to be a fragment

²⁵ Philip Smith, *The History of the Christian Church*, Part I, London, 1895, p. 362; cf. John Maiendorf, *Imperial Unity and the Christian Divisions*, 1989; Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*, Oxford, 1993, pp. 262-273.

²⁶ Smith, *op. cit.* p. 368.

²⁷ R. Eisenman and James M. Robinson, *Facsimile Edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Washington, 1991, vol. II, plate 1396: PM 43.402; plate 639: PM 42.078.

²⁸ E. Tov, 'The Unpublished Qumran Texts from Caves 4 and 11', *Biblical Archaeologist*, 55(2), 1992, p. 97; cf. 4Q235.

of a Nabataean letter. There are also other Nabataean texts from the nearby Nahal Se'elim which are soon to be published by Professor Jonas Greenfield. More substantial Nabataean-Aramaic documents from the Nahal Hever, and dated to the period of Jewish messianism and national insurgence against Rome under Bar Kokhba, attest substantial land holdings of the widow Babatha in areas on the old Moabite Plateau near the head of the Lisan. Written in Aramaic, Nabataean and Greek and witnessed in Reqem (which is the Nabataean and Mishnaic name for Petra), these legal documents attest the currency of Nabataean-Aramaic as a legal language, the penetration of the intrusive Greek language and the legal status of Petra as a place where such documents could be processed.²⁹ It is arguable that they attest the currency of the Aramaic culture in both the Dead Sea Basin and east of the Jordan in spite of the local political borders and intrusive administration of the Roman Empire. Recent analysis of the Babatha archive suggests that there was a close currency amongst the indigenous population in spite of the imposed Roman administrative patterns; as Martin Goodman now puts it,

far from feeling oppressed by an internal security force, people in the local group of which Babatha was a member enjoyed extracting all possible benefits from the density of the Roman presence in their country. In theory, in eastern as in northern provinces the wealth of soldiers paid regularly by the state could be a blessing for the natives as well as a curse, and provide a boost to the local economy.³⁰

Goodman further concludes that

The Archives leave a strong impression that the same families had owned and traded in the lucrative estates around the Dead Sea for generations, and that they intended to go on doing so indefinitely, with the help rather than the hindrance of Rome; support for the property rights of rich provincials was of course not a novel aspect of Roman administration. The date-palm grove bought by Babatha's father in A.D. 99 under Nabataean jurisdiction was still owned by her in

²⁹ Y. Yadin, 'The Nabataean Kingdom, Provincia Arabia, Petra and En-Geddi in the Documents from Nahal Hever', *Ex Oriente Lux*, Leiden, 1963, pp. 227-241; N. Lewis, Y. Yadin and Jonas C. Greenfield, *Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of the Letters*, Jerusalem, 1989. Cf. Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Daniel J. Harrington, *A Manual of Palestinian Aramaic Texts*, Rome, 1979, pp. 162-168.

³⁰ Martin Goodman, 'Babatha's Story', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 81, 1991, p. 171.

A.D. 127. Most of the transactions recorded in the documents involved transfers of land around the extended family rather than to outsiders.³¹

The later Mishnaic references to Reqem would seem to support this view and indeed provide sound evidence for the maintenance of Jewish halachic provisions for this area.

In assessing the grounds on which the indigenous semitic population maintained and developed its cultural identity it is suggested that the regional economic potential of the vast copper resources of the Wadi Araba and the other agricultural and mineral resources of the Dead Sea Basin also need to be added to the strategic trade which passed through these areas from the Arabian Peninsula and the Red Sea. Both Humayma and Petra continued to benefit from them long after the Roman annexation of Petra. Thus in the Wadi Feinan, which is situated close to Petra and drains into the Wadi Araba, recent surveys and excavations by international teams of archaeologists and archaeometallurgists have traced extensive mining of the copper from the late Neolithic through to the Mameluke periods.³² Known as Phaino to the church historian Eusebius who was writing in the fourth century A.D., these copper mines were renowned as places where prisoners served hard labour sentences and where Christian priests from Gaza and Egypt were martyred by being beheaded or burnt alive during the earlier persecutions.³³ However by the fifth century a Bishop Saidas of Phaino was a signatory to the Synod of Ephesus in 431 A.D. This Synod was concerned with settling the Nestorian controversy. It rejected Nestorianism and gave formal approval to the doctrine of the Theotokos.³⁴ Later a Bishop Kaioumas of Phaino was a signatory to the Synod of Ephesus in 449. This Synod, known also as the *Latrocinium*, or Robber Council, supported the Monophysite doctrine. Its decisions were reversed by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The local significance of Phaino was also signalled by its bishops at the Jerusalem synods of 518 and 536 A.D. Two large Byzantine churches and a monastery and two Christian Byzantine cemeteries also attest the significance of the Wadi Feinan which was situated just to the west of Petra whence the patriarch Flavianus was banished. Thus for the moment it would seem possible to argue that his exile placed him amongst his theological opponents who by definition held the view that the Person of the Incarnate Christ was but a single, and that a

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³² Rami G. Khouri, *The Antiquities of the Jordan Rift Valley*, Amman, 1988, pp. 121-127.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³⁴ Ehrman, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-61.

Divine, Nature. This doctrine is usually traced through the heresiarch Eutyches to Cyril of Alexandria. It is pertinent that both in trade and architecture Alexandria cast a long socio-economic and cultural shadow over the Nabataean Realm.³⁵ For a long time it had been one of the main Mediterranean ports to which the Nabataean trade routes made their way.³⁶

In a variety of ways Constantinople produced a control of religion and culture. As Claudine Dauphin has shown with regard to the Mediterranean Basin and the Levant the spread of basilicas and mosaics are coefficients of wealth and social status concomitant with the zenith of the Christian occupation of the areas east and west of the Jordan.³⁷ East of the Wadi Araba the basilicas at Humayma and Petra as well as the mosaics of other sites such as Umm er-Rasses now provide additional new data for the statistics compiled by Dauphin.³⁸ Together with the other mosaic sites and basilicas located south of Philadelphia (which is roughly modern Amman) the basilica and scrolls of Petra make a welcome addition to the study of the religious change and conversion of this strategic area at the 'top end' of the Arabian Peninsula.

The new archaeological, epigraphic and papyrological evidence from east of the Wadi Araba has important implications for the reassessment of the religious change and conversion associated with the spread of Christianity through the early generations of missionary outreach and then through the imposed political structures which follow the conversion of Constantine. It is suggested that there was always a basic semitic cultural substratum into which entered the intrusive Hellenistic culture of the Mediterranean Basin. As other scholars have shown, this intrusive culture has a long history of penetration and symbiosis with the indigenous semitic cultures and reaches back to the period before Alexander the Great.³⁹ With the conversion of the Emperor a new phase of this imperial cultural intrusion began. However as the material surveyed in this study suggests the indigenous semitic element remained a strong element in the cultural mix. In my view important dimensions of this can be identified in the Nabataean architecture, art motifs and Aramaic dialects which have been identified in the local Byzantine remains of southern Jordan and the Negev.

³⁵ Judith Mckenzie, *The Architecture of Petra*, Oxford, 1990, pp. 62-63, *et passim*.

³⁶ P. M. Frazer, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 176-181, 296-303.

³⁷ Claudine Dauphin, 'Mosaic Pavements as an Index of Prosperity and Fashion', *Levant*, 12, 1980, pp. 112-134, fig. 7.

³⁸ Boghas Darakjian, *Mosaics of Jordan*, Amman, n. d.; Wilken, *op. cit.*, pp. 236-7.

³⁹ D. S. Barrett, 'Ancient Hellenism and The Jews: A Study in Attitudes and Acculturation', and W. J. Jobling, 'Hellenism in North Arabia: A New Epigraphic Focus', in *Greek Colonists and Native Populations*, ed. J.-P. Descoeudres, Oxford, 1990, pp. 543-550 and 551-557, respectively.

With regard to the types of Christianity which developed east of the Jordan it is tempting to argue that a pattern is emerging which suggests that not only were the deserts to the east of the ancient King's highway the domains of pastoralists and caravaneers of geopolitical significance, they were also theological frontiers where Monophysite (and Nestorian) Christians were to be found. In this latter respect it may be possible to argue that these regions became the eastern edge of imperial penetration of Constantinopolitan and Chalcedonian unity. Indigenous Monophysitism in its struggles with intrusive Chalcedonian orthodoxy probably reflects a theological loyalty to the deep theistic motifs of semitic religious culture.⁴⁰ In all probability these were the circles in which the local legends of Syrian or Arabian Christians were generated and sustained, some of which are preserved in the so-called Apocryphal Gospels.⁴¹ They were never extinguished and are in all probability the sources of the Christian religion with which the prophet Muhammed came into contact.⁴² In my view the recovery of the Byzantine sites of southern Jordan provides a stimulus for a new look at the theological geography of these regions east and west of the Wadi Araba.

⁴⁰ William Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*, London, 1927, pp. 74-75, 526-531.

⁴¹ M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924 (corrected edition, 1953); cf. Erhman, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-96, 274-283.

⁴² W. J. Jobling and R. G. Tanner, 'New Evidence for Early Christianity in the North-West Hejaz', *Studia Patristica*, 25, 1991, pp. 313-317; Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, *Lectures on the History of the Eastern Church*, London, 1869, pp. 262-264.