CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE BOSTRENE, DJEBEL Hauran, AND THE LEDJĀ

The large number of early Christian inscriptions found in northern Syria is paralleled by conditions in the Hauran, a district that included many of the areas formerly belonging to the Nabataean Arab kingdom which the emperor Trajan incorporated into the empire in 106 A.D.¹ The province of Arabia, which had its metropolis at Bostra, survived little modified as an entity in the Later Roman Empire, and consisted of several topographically distinct zones which lie generally east-northeast of the Jordan river valley on the far side of Djebel Ajlūn. Among these zones are the Hauran plain, on which Bostra lies, the Djebel Hauran (also called Djebel Druz), the Batanea to its north west, and the district called the Ledjā or Trachonitis.

The inscriptions collected by the Princeton Expeditions of 1904–5 and 1909, and those of Waddington’s collection, make up the principal evidence for any analysis of the decline of polytheism and Christianization of the countryside in the Hauran.² The rules of analysis vary considerably, however, from those encountered in northern Syria. For one thing, the “One God” inscriptions turn up in smaller numbers. Christian inscriptions are, in general, rarer in the rural Hauran, particularly those from the fourth century. Even with the cautionary dictum of avoiding too broad a generalization because of the random survival of inscriptions, it appears that the new religion hardly penetrated the countryside before the fifth century and that many villages remained unconverted in the sixth century.

Another consideration is the ethnic character of the Hauran. The

great majority of persons attested in the epigraphy, apart from
those with Greek and Latin names, came from Arabic-speaking
stock, this a direct result of the sedentarization of the Nabataean
Arabs and the subsequent arrival of new contingents which seem to
have practiced pastoralism and lived in symbiosis with the villages.
The ethnically Arabic character of the rustic population of the
Hauran is much more strongly pronounced than that of northern
Syria, where the Aramaic-Syriac dialects prevailed. Even so, the
majority of the Late Roman inscriptions of the Hauran are cut in
Greek. It can hardly be doubted that the villages had undergone
rudimentary Hellenization from Nabataean times onward, even if
the level of literacy was not high. Finally, and this is an important
factor in adjusting the chronology of Christianization, dedications
to the various Arabic deities turn up with much later dates than in
northern Syria, even in the late fourth century. The axiom that
cultural formations persist beyond the temporal limits of the evi-
dence finds application here as well, particularly as very many
fifth- and sixth-century inscriptions contain not the slightest trace
of the new religion, neither crosses nor the other symbols which
accompany the Christian epigraphy of other districts.

The metropolis of the district, Bostra, which lies west of Djebel
Hauran on the Hauran plain, had a Christian community from the
earliest times and its own bishop at the time of the Council of
Nicaea in 325. Emperor Julian the Apostate estimated that c.
362/3 the city had a population half-Christian and half-pagan, as
he might well know, for his agents were active in restoring the
temples and traditional sacrifices not only at Bostra, but in the
villages round about as well. Christianity had begun to radiate
outward to some of the larger communities well before the time of
Julian. The very large suburban kōmopolis or village-city of Umm
el-Jimal, whose ancient name is unknown, had a Christian nekropo-
lis at an early date, by 344, as a very grammatical inscription
records:  

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1 On the period up to c. 400, see: Maurice Sarre, Bostra, des origines à l'Isam
2 Julian the Apostate, "To the Bostrenes," Ep. 41 (Wright 3, 132f.).
3 Sarre, Bostra 106 and n. 64. Infra, Ch. X1, Sect. 1–3. We learn of the temple
of an unnamed divinity being constructed "from the foundations up" in 320 by the
duumoviri or urban executive board of Bostra. Waddington 1910. The temple
treasurers at Damascus engaged in some construction work not long after Julian
4 Littmann, PAES III A, 262. I have departed from Littmann's translation of
several key words.