CHAPTER FOUR

THE NABATAEAN GOD AND GODDESS

Considerable use has been made in what follows of the excellent survey of Nabataean deities by Starcky (1966, cols 985-1005), though we also acknowledge the contributions of other scholars (Teixidor 1977, 82-94; Zayadine 1989; Niehr 1998, 219-34; Höfner 1965a). The treatment here brings the inscriptions to the fore.

The Nabataean Conception of the Gods

The Nabataean gods are rendered more mysterious than those of other contemporary peoples by a number of specific factors. While they appear to represent the usual forces of nature, causing springs to flow, producing lightning and storm, etc., and are associated with mountains, fertile gorges and stars, they do not have names like the names of the Greek, Roman and Mesopotamian gods. Their so-called names are mostly titles describing particular attributes or aspects of the deity (Wenning and Merklein 1997, 105) and the main local god and goddess came to be regarded, especially by non-locals, as manifestations of the supreme god or the god associated with the politically dominant élite. Thus the titles or names of gods vary from place to place, while at another level there is a trend towards a simplification of the complex world of the gods, with a few major deities absorbing the roles of local ones.

This complicates the question of whether the Nabataeans had any concept of a pantheon or assembly of the gods. Both concepts can be detected, for example, in Ugaritic religion, where the assembly of the gods appears a number of times in mythological texts as a specific object of worship and pantheon lists give a theologically constructed overview of how the Ugaritic theologians saw the whole world of the gods (Healey 1985; 1988). Even in pre-Islamic Arabia, where each tribal (or other) group had its own deity and nobody worshipped the whole set of deities, it is clear that the Meccan Ka‘bah had what might be called an incipient pantheon: several different gods were worshipped there, with Allāh having a family associated with him. So
far as Nabataean religion is concerned it is not clear that there was a hierarchical pantheon despite the plethora of divine titles (Macdonald 1991, 112; Wenning and Merklein 1997, 105-06).

Dushara, the main Nabataean god, was a new god who, as we shall see, gained prominence through association with the Nabataean state. He was a minor local god (or local version of some major deity: see discussion of Ruḍā below) and does not, therefore, come to prominence with a pantheon in tow. There is, as might be expected, very little evidence in Nabataean on which we can base an answer to the question of a pantheon, but there are some slight pointers in favour of the assumption that a process of gathering the gods together in a pantheon was in train.

Firstly, there is the fact that in the lists of gods which appear in the curses and fines on Hegran tombs there is some element of order, perhaps not yet a fixed order, but nevertheless some sort of order. Setting aside cases where only Dushara is mentioned, we have the following:

Dushara, Manōtu and (her) Qaysha (H 8)
Dushara, his mætb, Allāt of ‘Amnad, Manōtu and (her) Qaysha (H 16)
Dushara, Hubal(u), Manōtu (also H 16)
Dushara and Manōtu (H 19, H 31, H 34).

This rather limited database suggests that Dushara, Manōtu and Qaysha formed a group, at least in the Hegran context. It must be noted, however, that Manōtu is very much a local deity of the Hijāz (as is also Hubal), so that one cannot on this basis arrive at conclusions about Nabataean religion in general.

It is not so easy to find evidence from elsewhere in the Nabataean realm, but there are other pairings of deities (see below) and indications of a familial relation among some of the gods. Notable is the possible reference in an inscription from Şalkhad to Allāt as ‘m ḥl̄y du m‘rn̄ ṭb, “mother of the gods of our lord Rabel” (CIS II, 185: readings uncertain — see on Allāt below), which seems to imply a pantheon associated with the king or approved by the king, just as Dushara is called “god of our lord the king” (below). Note may also be made of the later evidence of Epiphanius on Dushara’s virgin mother (see below on Dushara). A familial relationship among the gods may also be reflected in the design of the numerous Nabataean niches containing two or three betyls (possibly a divine couple plus a junior partner or offspring of the couple: see Chapter VI).