CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WORLD OF NABATAEAN RELIGION

The task of summarizing and characterizing the Nabataean religious world in Paden’s sense of the phrase (Chapter I) is well beyond the potential of the evidence. In some areas of Nabataean religious life there seems to be plenty of evidence. There is much more direct evidence than there is, for example, for the more or less contemporary religious world of Edessa in Mesopotamia, perhaps more than there is for Palmyra.

But on close inspection the quantity of epigraphic material is deceptive. Much of the very direct evidence provided by inscriptions is enigmatic and insubstantial. From it we gain a fair impression of religious structures, that there was, for example, a tradition of certain types of dedication, but the epigraphy tells us next to nothing about the characteristics of particular gods and, therefore, what the faithful had in mind when they worshipped them. Only the broadest themes of Nabataean religion emerge, and even then some aspects of our interpretations have to be based on analogy with related and similar religious worlds rather than on indisputable direct evidence. However, we can tentatively say something in conclusion!

As noted by Wenning and Merklein (1997, 107), the world of the Nabataean gods was the result of a complex bringing together of north Arabian, Edomite, Syrian and Egyptian traditions, within the new context of the Hellenized East. Only Dushara, Obodas and the divinized Bosra would be counted as genuinely Nabataean and Dushara is to be seen as a local version of the near universal god of heaven, elsewhere represented as Baalshamin. Dushara to some extent turned the tables on Baalshamin through the Nabataeans’ political expansion, so that Baalshamin was imported into Nabataea as a minor deity.

The Nabataeans appear to have worshipped few deities and it is possible to interpret the evidence as indicating really only two, what we have called the Nabataean God and the Nabataean Goddess. There can be no doubt that the Nabataean God is to be identified as Dushara, though this is probably in origin a title of the deity rather than a proper name. Attempts have been made to pin down the true name of
Dushara. Starcky and many followers of his view claim that Dushara is really a title of Ruḏā, but this is in our analysis far from sure. There are doubts about the gender of Ruḏā, but even if these are convincingly set aside, there remains the fact that Ruḏā never appears in a Nabataean inscription and is never associated with the Nabataeans by any outside source. What we do know of Dushara is that he was probably a local god of southern Jordan and that certainly in the post-Nabataean period and in contact with the world of Greco-Roman religion he was comfortably assimilated to Zeus and Dionysos. We have argued that there indications of a solar aspect to Dushara, but we cannot pretend that this is at all certain for the Nabataean period.

So far as the Nabataean Goddess is concerned, the probability is that Allāt and al-ʿUzzā, both clearly documented as major deities in Nabataea, were treated as two manifestations of a single divine reality, the Supreme Goddess. Their cults appear to be distributed geographically in such a way as to suggest that the Supreme Goddess was worshipped as al-ʿUzzā at Petra but as Allāt at Iram, and both acquired characteristics of other supreme goddesses of the Roman world, especially Isis and Atargatis.

All other deities pale into insignificance beside these, but there was undoubtedly worship of other, quite separate deities in particular regions or in particular segments of society. Manōtu and to a considerably lesser extent Hubal seem to have had a certain role in northern Arabia, while Baalshamin may have been brought into the Nabataean sphere through the political, military and commercial involvement of the Nabataeans in the Ḥawrān, a region not easy to integrate into the world of Nabataean religion. Of the various gods, only Dushara, al-ʿUzzā, Allāt and al-Kutbā are truly multiregional (Wenning and Merklein 1997, 107) and inscriptions often locate deities in particular temples (at Gaia, Bosra, Ṣalkhad, etc.).

As might be expected, protective deities (as we have called them) of various kinds were cultivated. The evidence for the family god is clear; that for the tribal god is slight but highly suggestive of similar religious structures of protective deities operating also at a higher level. On the level of city Ṭyches the evidence is again somewhat clearer (though heavily dependent on iconographic interpretation). And because of the nature of many of our inscriptions we are also well informed on the notion of the main gods of the state being associated artificially, as part of a political claim, with the royal family: the gods of our lord the king.