CHAPTER FOUR

HISTORICAL-ARCHAEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND HEALING CULTS OF THE THERAPEUTIC SITES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

Following our survey of the locations, the names and the identification of the hot springs in the Levant, we shall now discuss the history and the archaeology of the most important and best-known of them. We shall use references in classical literature by Greek and Roman historians and other writers, and in Rabbinic and Christian literature, and attempt to integrate them to form a unified picture. In our discussion of the historical aspects of the subject, we shall consider whether the historical accounts accord with the archaeological findings and chronological conclusions to be drawn from the excavations in Hammat-Tiberias, Hammat-Gader, Hammat-Pella, Kallirrhoe, and Emmaus-Nicopolis. In addition, we shall adduce historical evidence to identify the Waters of Asia and their importance. Illustrating the archaeological material, epigraphic documents and the little finds from the curative thermo-mineral baths in the eastern Mediterranean basin, we shall present the social, religious and economic life in the spas during the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Early Muslim periods.

4.1 Hammei-Tiberias

Hammat was the most southerly of the fortified towns of the tribe of Naphtali on the coast of Lake Kinneret: ‘And the fortified cities are Ziddim, Zer, and Hammat, Rakkat and Kinnereth’ (Joshua 19, 35).
Even before the conquest of Palestine by Joshua the region round Hammath was known as an area of recreation and healing because of its hot springs and the landscape of the Kinnereth. The Anastasi Papyrus I, dating from the days of Ramses II in the thirteenth century BCE, which describes the major routes of Canaan, mentions Hammath after Hazor, as ‘a place for excursions’. Other traditions give an early date for the use of Hammei-Tiberias, and emphasize its origins in volcanic processes at the time of the Flood. Among them are: ‘All the fountains of the great deep broke up’ (Genesis 7, 11); ‘Rabbi Yohanan said: “Three remained of the fountains of the great deep that burst apart at the time of the Flood (ibid.): The eddy of Gader, Hammei-Tiberias, and the great spring of Biram. ‘For all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth’” (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 108a); the Midrash even connects Jacob with Hammei-Tiberias: Genesis Rabbah 76, 5 (Theodor-Albeck ed., p. 901) says that when Jacob fled from Esau, on his way to the Hauran he went into Hammei-Tiberias; and in Midrash Tanhuma, Vayehi 6, we find: ‘Rabbi Yohanan said: “Jacob’s arms were like two pillars in the demousin of Tiberias’”; it is said that Job’s house of study was in Tiberias, and it may be assumed that this legend was derived from the tradition that Job was cured there of ‘evil scabs’ (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Bathra 15b, and more).

One of the 24 Priestly Courses named Ma’a’aziya (Nehemiah 10, 8; I Chronicles 24, 18) lived in ‘Hammat, Ariah and Kafarnia’, at the south of the Sea of Galilee, and not in Tiberias itself. It appears that this

later Hammei-Tiberias, a site has been existed and already mentioned in Joshua (19, 35); See also ibid., 21, 31; It seems that the conditions to recognize and utilize the hot springs were known. Buchmann (1967: 196) is convinced that this was the very ancient therapeutic place in the world; Aharoni (1957: 80) assumes that the Israeli settlement is buried deep under the later layers, because by Hammei-Tiberias remains from the Chalcolithic and Bronze ages were discovered; See also Dvorjetski (1992a): 48, 93; Dothan (1993): 573.

A Aharoni (1957): 123, 128; idem, (1963): 160–162; Ishaki (1978): 199; Although Ahituv (1984: 113) is correct when he describes Hammat’s location, near the hot springs south of Tiberias, he has made a severe mistake in the punctuation of the word Hammat. By this fact it seems that Ahituv is not aware of the meaning of the term and contradicts himself by adding the word ‘Ammathus’; See the discussion on Terminology in chapter 1.4.

On the various names and traditions of Hammei-Tiberias, see Kasher (1934); Margalit (1976): 141; Weiss (1986): 175–179; Dvorjetski (1992a): 47–52; See also the discussion in chapter 5 on The Healing Properties of the Spas in the Eastern Mediterranean in Ancient Times.