CHAPTER TEN

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE CULTIC TOPOGRAPHY OF LATE ANTIQUE PALESTINE

Doron Bar
Hebrew University

Many of those who research the history of Palestine during late antiquity\(^1\) assume that the process whereby the local pagan\(^2\) population underwent religious conversion had been completed by the middle of this period.\(^3\) It has been argued that “in no place in Palestine can we recognize the survival of pagan communities later than the first half of the fifth century.”\(^4\) The process of conversion was expedited, so it is claimed, by the vast sums of money invested in building churches, coupled with the density of holy sites and the thousands of pilgrims who made the journey to those places.\(^5\) All these factors jointly contributed to making Palestine unique compared to other provinces in the Roman empire.\(^6\)

During the past few decades, various areas of the State of Israel underwent extensive archaeological research. The many surveys and

\(^1\) The research on which this paper is based covers the territory of the State of Israel, Judea, Samaria, and the Golan Heights. The territorial boundaries do not necessarily parallel those of the province of Judaea during late antiquity. This geographic area was designated in order to include and exploit the fruits of research undertaken in the region over the past few years. For this geographic delineation, see Tsafir – Di Segni – Green 1994, viii. The chronological definition of the research is equally problematic. While, in accordance with the historical reality in Palestine-Eretz Israel, it is common to divide the period I treat here into the late Roman (70–324 C.E.) and Byzantine (324–640 C.E.) periods, I use the term “late antiquity” to cover the entire period; see Groh 1988, 83.

\(^2\) We will have to make do with the expressions “pagan” and “paganism” in this article. This term refers to the non-Jewish, non-Christian, or non-Samaritan population of Palestine. On the limits of this term, see Rousselle 1999; Bowersock 1997, 1–2.


\(^4\) Tsafir 1998, 199.


\(^6\) Tsafir 1993, xii; Patrich 1995, 470.
excavations conducted in the urban and rural settlements have enabled a renewed discussion of many geographic, sociological, and religious issues related to the local population. One of the more interesting questions has to do with the changes among the pagan inhabitants who were the major religious group in the region during the early stages of the late antique period, but later lost their supremacy and were assimilated into the other religious groups of the country.7

The focal point of this paper will be the temples and other pagan ritual sites that dotted Palestine’s urban and rural landscape. Many scholars have used these cultic sites as a useful tool for determining the fate of the local pagan community during late antiquity. Indeed, the following discussion will involve the effect of the Christianization process on the status and fate of these sites. By providing some historical and archaeological examples from different parts of Palestine, I will attempt to show that the process of transition from paganism to Christianity in both urban and rural settlements was far more complex and diverse than was previously believed. While it is true that the pagan cult centers in the central towns of Palestine did not survive beyond the fifth or perhaps the sixth century, it is important to remember that the majority of the country’s population was concentrated in the rural realm.8 There, it will be argued, the process of adopting Christianity was substantially longer and far more diverse than in the cities of Palestine.

The changes that the cultic topography in Palestine underwent during late antiquity are historically and symbolically important and may help us determine whether Palestine was unique in the process of embracing Christianity compared with other regions in the Roman empire. The answer to the question of whether the local temples were destroyed, abandoned, or continued to function during the later stages of late antiquity is significant for an understanding of the Christianization process. In the following pages I will try to answer some of the questions related to this process. Did changes in pagan cultic topography originate from outside, and were they institutional in nature? Or was it a gradual process, internal and non-institutional, coming from “below”? Was the temples’ fate determined by force and oppression, or did the cult sites undergo a gradual process of abandonment at a pace deter-

7 On the pagan population of Palestine prior to the fourth century, see Stemberger 2000, 18–19; Taylor 1993, 69–84.