THE CULT OF ARTEMIS AND THE ESSENES
IN SYRO-PALESTINE*

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The hypothesis that the appellation Ἔσσηνοι (Essenes) is derived from a group of functionaries in the cult of Artemis at Ephesus with the same designation has been advanced by me and others.¹ The most common critique of this proposal is that it is “a rather remote model for the identification of the Jewish sect.”² In his survey of the options another analyst asks, “But why should anyone associate these two groups?”³ What both those who have advanced the hypothesis and its critics have overlooked is the evidence for the existence of the cult of Artemis and its influence in Palestine, Transjordan, and Coele-Syria during the Greco-Roman period. This article will survey that evidence and evaluate its relevance for the subject under discussion.

Jerash

The most remarkable surviving monument to Artemis in that portion of the world is the imposing temple in Jerash (Gerasa). When the new structure was completed, probably around 180 CE in the midst of Jerash’s “golden age,” it constituted one of the most impressive sanctuaries of the Syro-Palestinian world. Inscriptions of dedication are dated to 150/1 CE during the reign of Hadrian:

Beginning in the eastern half of the city, the processional way (11 m wide × 500 m long) bridges the river, approaches the cardo at an ornamental exedra, and ascends the retaining wall toward the eastern end of the colonnaded propylaeum. A staircase then leads to the outer court (161 × 121 m) of the temenos through a triple gate and finally to a colonnade (11 m wide × 100 m long) that leads to the temple court (124 × 88 m). The Temple of Artemis stands in this colonnaded court; two sets of stairs ascend the podium (40 × 22.6 × 4 m) to the temple. Of peripteral hexastylos design, the temple displays six Corinthian columns along its facade, with eleven along each of its sides.4

Claims are made that it provides evidence of such innovation for the organization of urban space that this temple and its environs are representative of a new eastern architectural school. R. Parapetti argues that the construction of the sanctuary was the central piece towards an entire reorganization of that area of the city.5 Similarly, in a recent study of urban space A.J. Wharton argues that “The object so elaborately packaged was the temple of the Tyche (Fortune) of the city, the goddess Artemis. . . . The Temple of Artemis is arguably the most impressive orchestration of space to have survived in the region from the Roman period.”6 She then goes on to demonstrate that this temple is situated and built in such a manner that in order to establish its prominence it appeared to be the highest sanctuary in the city, thereby confirming the dominance of its deity.7 The architecture and its surroundings suggest a situation of socioreligious conflict in which it was necessary to assert the dominance of the patron Roman deity of the city.8 Wharton also points out that the goddess, not the cult, is

7 Wharton, Refiguring, 68; note also the reference in J.C. Balty, “Apamea,” OEANE 1.146.
8 A.N. Barghouti, “Urbanization of Palestine and Jordan in Hellenistic and Roman