Population, settlement and economy in Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine (70–641 AD)

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Introduction

The Byzantine period, between the fourth and seventh centuries, was an era of much settlement in Palestine.[1] During this period population and settlement density had reached a level to which this region returned only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many scholars believe this population growth can be attributed to the religious changes of the fourth century, when Palestine became a holy land. Avi-Yonah's words from the 1960s reflect this widely held view:

> The adoption of Christianity as the dominant religion of the Empire changed the status of Palestine radically. No longer just a tiny province, it became the Holy Land, on which emperors and believers lavished untold wealth ... the building activity [of churches and hospices] that ensued was one of the causes of the country's surprising prosperity at that time ... the influx of capital from public and private sources, and a huge increase in pilgrimage, multiplied the population and elevated the standard of living (Avi-Yonah, 1966: 101; idem, 1969: 171–2).

Avi-Yonah expressed his views on Byzantine Palestine widely; most prominent is his 1958 article (Avi-Yonah, 1958: 39–51), which has since become essential reference, and widely quoted (for example: Wilken, 1992: 178–83; Cameron, 1993: 178–9; Parker, 1999: 169). Avi-Yonah believed that the political and economic stability that characterized this period was only secondary to the main reason for this population expansion: Constantine's decision to legitimize Christianity. The many churches built during this period, together with vast donations made by the steady stream of pilgrims visiting the recently discovered holy sites, boosted the economy and contributed to the dramatic increase of population and settlement density (Wilken, 1988: 214–17, 233–7; idem, 1992: 178–81; Patrich, 1995: 470; Parker, 1999: 136; Stemberger, 2000: 82–5). Within just a few decades of Constantine's decision to build the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, dozens of holy sites connected to Jesus, his disciples and to the events of the Old Testament were identified within the boundaries of Palestine. Churches, largely financed from abroad by donations from Emperors or nobles, were built on the holy sites (Armstrong, 1967: 90–102), and followed by a steady stream of pilgrims (Hunt, 1982: 83–106; Limor, 1998: 6–8) who boosted the economy while buying expensive relics to be exported outside of Palestine (Avi Yonah, 1958: 45–6; Stemberger, 2000: 114). While, until the fourth century, it is claimed, Palestine suffered from a weak and undeveloped economy which resulted in depopulation and economic crises (Stemberger, 2000: 14–17), the building of churches, monasteries and other religious structures enhanced the economy and led to impressive population growth,

[1] This study covers the territory of the state of Israel, Judaea, Samaria and the Golan Heights. The territorial boundaries do not necessarily correspond to those of the province of Judaea during the Roman and Byzantine periods. For this geographic delineation see Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green (1994: viii).

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reaching an all-time peak of several million inhabitants living within the boundaries of Palestine by the mid-sixth century.[2]

The central question underlying this article is whether the prevailing scholarly view—that it was Christianity that brought in its wake the extraordinary change in the pattern of the settlement—is indeed correct, and whether a connection existed between the consecration of the land and the prosperity and economic boom that characterized Palestine during the Byzantine period. While until only a few years ago, the historic and archaeological research focused mainly on the urban sector of Roman and Byzantine Palestine, recent excavations and surveys in rural areas, where most of the population lived (Broshi, 1979: 1–10), have allowed a re-evaluation of the customary views of settlement patterns during this period and the ties between the process of Palestine's sanctification and the settlement dynamics which characterize this period. The construction of churches and monasteries, the phenomenon of pilgrimage, and the process of exporting relics from Palestine ought to be examined in a broader perspective, one which considers not only the holy sites and the residents of the cities, where the influence of Christianity was most intensely felt, but which also addresses the rural parts of the land, which likewise enjoyed a period of settlement and economic expansion at that time.

The following discussion is divided then into two parts. In the first section I consider the question of when economic and settlement prosperity characterizing this period began. Was it indeed during the Byzantine period, from the fourth century onwards, or should we trace it to earlier, i.e. to the Late Roman period. In the second part of the article I will re-examine the conventional link between Palestine's sanctification and population expansion. A careful assessment of the economic and settlement developments which indeed characterized this period, based on recent archaeological excavations and surveys, together with a comparison with other parts of the Roman and Byzantine East, may provide an answer to the question of why Palestine witnessed such exceptional population and settlement growth during the Roman and Byzantine periods.

Palestine's settlement and economy during the Late Roman period

Many scholars consider the period between the second and fourth centuries one of the lowest times in the history of Palestine: an era of decline, economic distress and political restrictions posed on the different ethnic groups (Avi Yonah, 1976: 89–136; Sperber, 1978; Schäfer, 1995: 170–75). Despite the practical and methodological problems of exploiting archaeological data in historical research, a comparison of archaeological survey maps and archaeological data from excavations permits us to observe and ascertain with a reasonable measure of confidence that the Late Roman period was one of the most marked periods of prosperity in the history of Palestine. Over twenty-five maps have thus far been published in the *Archeological Survey of Israel*, each outlining a stretch of land over 100 km^2 in size. Additional surveys have been conducted by universities and other research institutions. Surveyed information on more than 6,000 km^2—more than one-third of the estimated area of Late Roman and Byzantine Palestine—is at hand and can be used to examine the settlement process during this period (see Figure 1; Tsafrir, 1996; Cohen, 1997; Bar, 2004a, 2004b). Because the findings are so numerous, I am unable

[2] Tsafrir (1996: 269–71) summarizes the various opinions regarding the population size. Estimates vary between a minimum of one million (Broshi, 1979: 1–10) and a maximum of several million (Avi Yonah, 1964: 114–24).

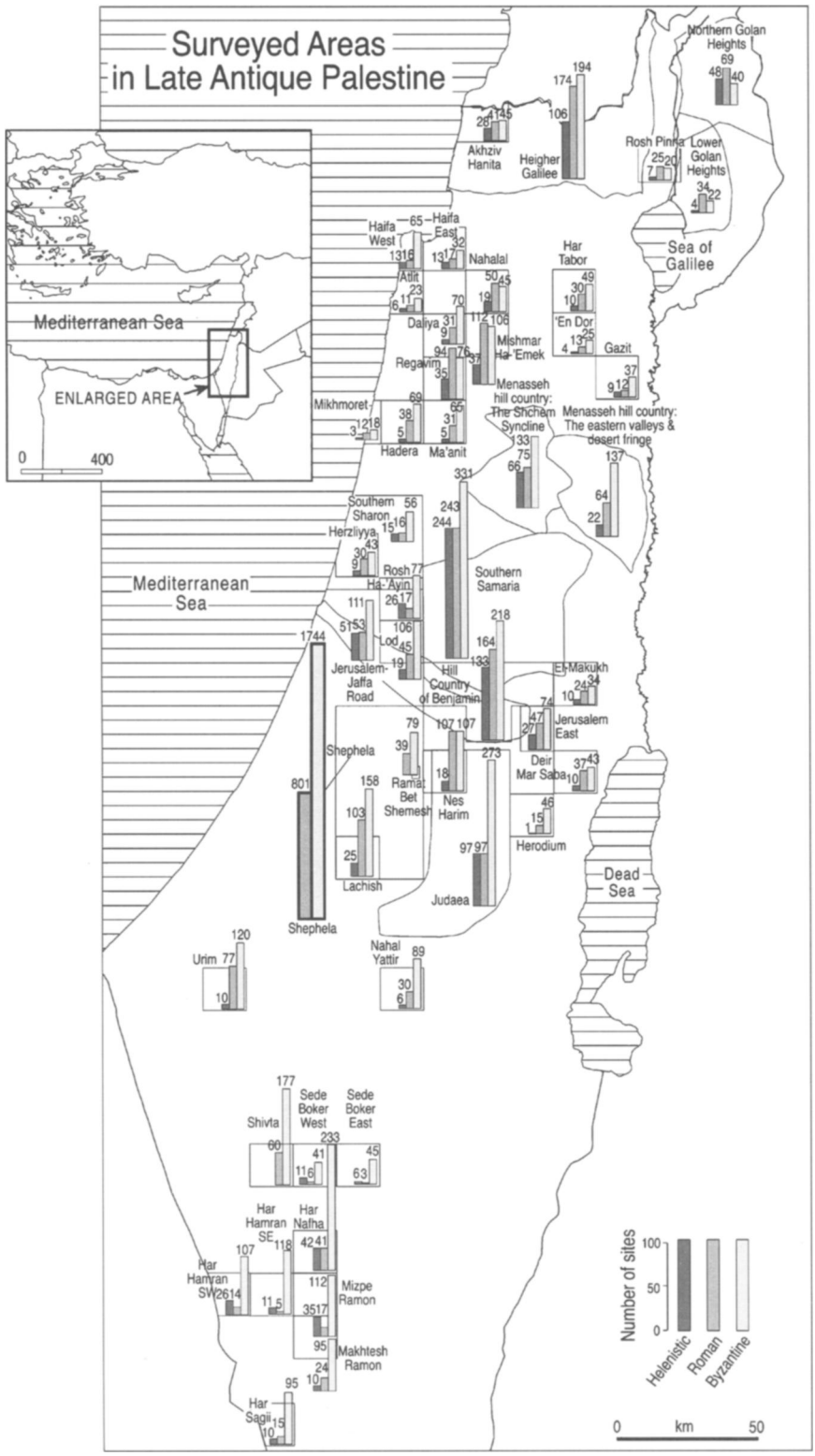

FIG. 1. Surveyed areas in Late Antique Palestine.

here to present the results of all the surveys, but will concentrate on some of the more striking examples from different parts of Palestine.

The north of the Golan Heights is characterized by the absence of permanent water sources and by its thick cover of Basalt soil. Some fifty-one sites from the Early Roman period (63 BC–70 AD) were surveyed in this region, as were sixty-nine from the Late Roman period (70–324 AD), and forty from the Byzantine period (324–641 AD) (Hartal, 1989: 130–1). The Hanita region in north-western Galilee is studded with narrow ridges, small peaks, gorges and basins. A total of twenty-eight Hellenistic (332–63 BC), forty-one Roman, and forty-five Byzantine sites were surveyed in the boundaries of the map (Frankel and Getzov, 1997: 34*–36*). In the Mt. Tabor map in southern Galilee, ten Hellenistic sites, thirty Roman and forty-nine Byzantine sites were surveyed (Gal, 1991: 13*) and in the Nahalal map in Lower Galilee, nineteen Hellenistic, fifty Late Roman, and forty-five Byzantine sites were surveyed (Raban, 1982: vi–viii). The Mishmar Ha-Emek map includes both the fertile soils of the Jezreel Valley and the steep and inhospitable slopes of the Menashe flats. In the boundaries of this map, thirty-seven Hellenistic, 112 Late Roman, and 106 Byzantine sites were surveyed (Raban, 1999: 21*–23*). The founding of the nearby city of Legio, together with the strong Roman military presence, contributed to the development of the region. In the Hadera map along the swampy Coastal Plain, five Hellenistic, thirty-eight Early Roman, seventy-five Late Roman and sixty-four Byzantine sites were surveyed (Neeman, Sender and Oren, 2000: 11*–12*). In the vicinity of Lod map, where characteristic limestone and dolomite rock surface has created a largely stony terrain, nineteen Hellenistic, forty-five Roman, and 106 Byzantine sites were surveyed (Gophna and Beit-Arieh, 1997: 12*). The Lachish survey map, part of the Judaean lowlands, centred on twenty-five sites from the Hellenistic period, as against 103 settlements from the Late Roman period and 158 Byzantine period (Dagan, 1992: 18*).

The uniqueness of the Late Roman period is manifested even more dramatically along the periphery of Palestine, which is plagued by problematic environmental–climatic conditions. Thus, for example, on the north-eastern slopes of the Menashe hills, bordering the desert area of the Jordan Valley, twenty-seven sites from the Hellenistic period were surveyed, whereas there are sixty-four from the Late Roman period and 137 from the Byzantine period (Zertal, 1996: 88–93). In the boundaries of the map of Herodium, to the west of the Judaean Desert, only one Hellenistic site was surveyed, compared with fifteen from Late Roman period and 46 Byzantine period sites (Hirschfeld, 1985: 10*). Similar results can be found in the boundaries of the Urim survey map, to the south of the coastal plain. The survey indicates that up until the second century settlement was rather scant, and connected to and dependent upon Roman military activity. During the Late Roman and Byzantine periods the number of sites rose to fifty-nine and 120, while well-developed water-collecting technologies were employed by the settlers (Gazit, 1996: 15*–19*).

It is true that in many parts of Palestine, as seen above, population density reached its peak during the Byzantine period. Nevertheless, in some parts of the land, the northern part of the Golan Heights and the western sections of the Jezreel Valley (Hartal, 1989: 130–31; Raban, 1982: vi–viii; idem, 1999: 21*–23*) for example, settlement level reached its peak during the Late Roman period, well before the fourth century. The archaeological findings from the surveys and digs indicate that the fourth-century conversion to Christianity cannot be regarded as a turning point in the settlement history of Palestine,

and that the commonly accepted imaginary dividing line drawn between the Late Roman and Byzantine periods in this century is in reality the fruit of chronological considerations referring mostly to political and religious events and has little relevance to the settlement history of rural Palestine. In fact, as early as the second century and even during the economic crisis that befell the Roman Empire during the third century, Palestine saw one of its finest periods of prosperity both in the urban centres and in the countryside (Bar, 2002: 43–54). This was manifested in a number of rural settlement activities: in many parts of the country, unaffected by the Jewish rebellions of the first and second centuries, settlement continued to grow uninterrupted; the excavated sites of Shiloa (Kampinski, 1993) and Bethel (Kelso, 1968) in the Samaria region offer good examples of this phenomenon (Magen, 2002). Other parts of the country which did suffer during the uprisings saw destruction and a halt in their development, with the resumption of intensive settlement activity only after a hiatus of a number of years. This phenomenon can be observed in Judaean sites such as Kiryat Sefer (Magen, Zionit and Sirkis, 1999: 25–32), Hurvat Zikhrin (Fisher, 1985: 112–20), or Horvat Itri (Zisu and Ganor, 2002: 18–27), villages that were inhabited by Jews until the second century and destroyed during the Bar-Kokhva revolt. A similar picture emerges from the settlements of Kh. Majdal, in the Sharon Plains and in Jalame, situated on the eastern slopes of the Carmel ridge (Weinberg and Weinberg, 1988: 1–4; Yannai, 1993: 1*–8*). Further, new settlements such as Kafr ar-Rameh and Tel Kedesh in the Galilee (Tzaferis and Shai, 1976) or Shiqmona and Horvat Qastra in the Carmel region (Elgavish, 1994: 105–08; Siegelmann, 1996: 77*–99*) were established during the Late Roman period; many were farms and small villages.[3] Not only did the number of settlements increase dramatically during that time, but many experienced expansion, with farms extending into villages, and villages into small towns (Yeivin, 1987: 59–71).

A decisive change was clearly visible in the 'stable settlement areas' of Late Roman Palestine where habitation and agriculture were common many years before this period (Bar, 2004c). Archaeological research conducted in recent years indicates that during this period settlement expanded enormously in those favoured regions, while huge stretches of fallow land were converted for arable use. The Samaria region, for example, was a 'stable settlement area' populated almost continuously before the Late Roman period. Nevertheless, the survey in this area shows a doubling in the number of settled sites during this period (Finkelstein, 1988–89: 156–61). While up until the Late Roman period many parts in these areas were used only as pasture and hunting grounds, they subsequently became an integral part of the tilled land (Aviam, 1994: 26–35; Ben David, 1998: 1–62). Those 'secondary' lands were put to use mainly by terracing the mountain slopes, a process that forced farmers to invest enormous resources in removing stones and piling earth (Gibson, Ibbs and Kloner, 1991: 37–41; Edelstein, Milevski and Aurant, 1998: 6–13), but was essential to the fast growing population in the stable settlement areas.

The biggest and most dramatic change to the settlement pattern of Palestine during the Late Roman period occurred in the 'unstable settlement areas' that were not heavily settled before (Bar, 2004). Prior to the Late Roman period, farmers preferred not to settle in those areas because they were either

[3] See Hirschfeld (1997: 67–70), about the fourth–seventh centuries. Yet this phenomenon was no less predominant during the Late Roman period, mostly in marginal regions such as the north-eastern parts of Samaria, where 81 out of 129 settled sites covered less than five dunams: see: Zertal (1996: 88–93). See also Finkelstein (1988–89: 159, table 14), where 84 per cent of the sites were defined as 'small' or 'very small'.

swampy or had poor soil. Other areas were covered with thick vegetation that had to be cut down. One of the biggest problems in most parts of Palestine was the lack of water sources. The archaeological material discovered in recent years clearly shows that population shifts towards these marginal areas had already begun during the Late Roman period. Demographic pressure from stable settlement areas forced farmers, mostly smallholders, to use those marginal lands after combating the swamps, the poor soil and the thick woods. A marked increase in the number and density of settlements is evident in various enclaves that were not settled before that period. These include the Hermon region, where despite the altitude and rough climatic conditions, the local agricultural population skilfully devised advanced intensive farming methods and built dozens of farmhouses and small villages on the mountain slopes (Dar, 1993: 25–7). The Odem area in the north of the Golan, characterized by its difficult terrain and lack of permanent water sources, was not settled until the beginning of the third century but, because of demographic pressure from neighbouring areas, was conquered during the period in question (Hartal, 1989: 130–31). The drying of the Jezreel Valley swamps during the Late Roman period resulted in the clearing of vast stretches of land near the city of Scythopolis and an increase in the density of settlements in that area (Isaac and Roll, 1982: 87–91). The Carmel region, likewise rocky, densely wooded, and lacking in permanent water sources, was intensively settled only during the Late Roman period (Kuhnen, 1989: 331–6). The Sharon area near Caesarea was marshy and covered with red soil unsuitable for easy cultivation, and therefore heavily populated only after the second and third centuries, following deforestation and swamp drying (Roll and Ayalon, 1981: 111–25; idem, 1989: 141–83). A parallel phenomenon could be observed in the inner coastal plain region, where tough geographic conditions—mainly the absence of land and water sources—left the area sparsely populated before the Late Roman period, yet there was an expansion of settlement during the third and fourth centuries (Dagan, 1992: 18*). This process, in various regions of Palestine, was not directed by the local authorities or by the rich landlords, who were more interested in the stable settlement areas, but by the small scale farmers who were forced to conquer those fallow lands, motivated by the growing demand for settlement areas and food.

Fixing the date of population recovery to the Late Roman period effectively invalidates the prevailing argument that the expansion should be connected to the Christianization of Palestine during the fourth century. The fact that the whole Palestinan population—Jews, Samaritans, pagans, settled nomads and later on also Christians—took part in the expanding economy, suggests that the linkage between it and the Christianization process was weak. This economic development should be attributed to the fact that Palestine, together with other provinces of the region, was governed by the Roman Empire, a political and economic organization which credited Palestine's population with political and economic advantages they seldom experienced before and after this period. The settlement changes of the Roman period were a result of the comfortable conditions brought about by the rulers, an absence of military tension over a long period, and the presence of a commercial network on a huge scale within the Roman Empire (Roll, 1983). Even though the Roman government considered only its own organizational needs and hardly engaged directly in developing the country, the Romans did ultimately establish an adequate physical infrastructure in which the economic boom could take place. It is true that Palestine's cities prospered during the Late Roman period (Walmsley, 1996; Schwartz, 1997), but this phenomenon was

even more predominant in the countryside, where settlement expansion had already begun during the Second Temple period (Broshi, 1985; Porath, 1989; Baruch, 1998), expanded during the second and third centuries, reinforced by the reforms led by Diocletian (Smallwood, 1976: 533–8; Williams, 1985: 126–39), and reached an all-time peak during the Byzantine period.

Contrary to the widely held view that this settlement growth was unique and should be attributed to the holiness of Palestine, my argument is that the same can be said for other parts of the Roman world during the Roman and Byzantine periods. Very similar historical–geographical phenomena can be observed in North Africa and Syria (Mattingly, 1993; idem, 1994; Tate, 1997), and especially in eastern Jordan (Banning and Fawcett, 1983; LaBianca, 1990: 178–81; Mabry and Palumbo, 1992: 70–71; De Vries, 1998; Ji and Lee, 1998; Parker, 1999: 143–4); these regions were also influenced by the Roman peace but had no holy status. Palestine, together with many other provinces of the Roman Empire, constituted part of a vast economic system that brought population and settlement to a peak. This is manifested in the high settlement density, large populations, and ratio of cultivated to arid areas.

Settlement, economy and the Christianization of the countryside

Focusing on the rural areas of Palestine and exploiting the extensive archaeological research conducted over the last few years in large parts of Israel permits a re-examination of the claim that Palestine's expanding economy during the Byzantine period should be attributed to pilgrimage and to the building of churches and monasteries (Dauphin, 1980; Hunt, 1982: 137–8; Groh, 1992: 299–303). A central means of evaluating this assumption is by using the updated map of churches from this period.

While it is true that Byzantine churches in Palestine have been classified into a number of types (Ovadiah, 1970: 188; Bagatti, 1971: 191–237; Tsafrir, 1984: 225–34), from my point of view the following classification is relevant: memorial churches on holy sites; urban churches; monastic churches and community churches throughout the rural sector (Tzaferis, 1976: 22–5). The map of the Byzantine churches with an archaeological record is extensive and includes over 450 such churches,[4] which may be divided according to the above categories. While community churches in Palestine's countryside make up more than half of the main body of churches, memorial churches—those that were built through outside donations—constitute only around 10 per cent of the total number of churches (Bar, 2003).

It was held earlier that the majority of churches in Palestine had been built before the end of the fifth century in bursts or 'pulses' of imperial activity conducted under the auspices of the different emperors (Avi-Yonah, 1958; Parker, 1999: 152). In fact the process whereby hundreds of rural churches were constructed was far more prolonged, extending over the entire Byzantine period, and was not necessarily linked to any larger political changes in the empire. During the fourth and fifth centuries most human as well as financial resources were directed towards the holy sites and the urban regions (Di Segni,

[4] A number of sources record the number and spread of churches in Palestine during the Byzantine period, for example Tsafrir, Di Segni and Green (1994): map of churches in Byzantine Palestine, and Tsafrir (1993): map of sites in the Holy Land where archaeological remains of churches have been recorded, though further churches have been discovered since. For fuller information on recently excavated or surveyed churches, one has to review various archaeological journals. Especially important in this context is *Excavations and Surveys in Israel*, printed by the Israeli Antiquity Authority.

1999) for two principal reasons. First, and most importantly, this stemmed from the empire's attempt to turn Palestine into the Christian 'Holy Land'. Further, a concentration of activity in the towns of Palestine was linked to the fact that they constituted the primary battleground against paganism. It was in the towns that the intelligentsia and the wealthy resided, and they tended to adopt the new religion rather easily—if only outwardly. The Christianization of the residents of the towns, therefore, was of paramount importance from the point of view of the Christian establishment, whereas the conversion of the inhabitants of the rural areas required an entirely different form of involvement (Bar, 2003). Thus while churches had been built in holy sites, Jerusalem and Bethlehem for example, during the early phases of the Byzantine period, financed largely from imperial sources (Armstrong, 1967; idem, 1969), the number of village churches was rather restricted at this stage. During the second half of the Byzantine period, from 450 AD onwards, as excavations and dedicatory inscriptions on the churches themselves attest (Ovadiah, 1970: 188, 193; idem 1976: 8; Di Segni, 1999), this trend was reversed and most of the churches were found in the villages of Palestine (Tzaferis, 1976: 23–5; Di Segni, 1995).[5] Western Galilee is one of the regions where this phenomenon was especially prominent as dozens of churches from the late fifth and sixth centuries were identified there (Aviam, 1999). Excavations in sites such as Horvat Eirav, Suhmata and Horvath Hesheq (Ilan, 1986; Avi-Yonah, 1934; Aviam, 1990) demonstrate how central was the second half of the Byzantine period in the Christianization process of this region. The churches in this region, together with dozens of additional churches in other parts of Palestine, reflect the economic prosperity characterizing the countryside during the Byzantine period.

The claim that as early as the fourth and fifth centuries, the majority of the population of Palestine was already Christian, enjoying the fruits of the economic prosperity which was based on Christian donations, should also be re-examined. The conversion process in the towns appears to have been quick, and most inhabitants had already adopted Christianity during the fourth century (Ashkenazi, 1991; idem, 1995; Tsafrir, 1998; Berlin, 1999). Yet positive evidence can be found to indicate that pagan practices continued to prevail in some cities and areas in Palestine—the Pan temple near the city of Caesarea Philippi (Berlin, 1999), or the small shrines of the Hermon mountain ridge (Dar, 1993: 27–92), for example—as late as the fifth century and even the sixth century (Bowersock, 1997; Ashkenazi, 1995: 55–6; Geiger, 1998; Rubin, 1998). The prolongation of the Christianization process is especially prominent in relation to the gap between the relatively large number of memorial churches erected during the first half of the Byzantine period (Taylor, 1993: 295–332) and the modest number of community churches built at this stage (Ovadiah, 1970; Ovadiah and de Silva, 1981; idem, 1982). Large areas of rural Palestine, such as the Galilee, the Golan, and Samaria, had an absolute Jewish or Samaritan majority which resisted all attempts at Christianization. Christianity's influence in the Jewish, Samaritan or pagan rural areas, where the population assimilated sociological, technological and religious innovations at a far slower pace, was therefore minor and came at a much later stage. In contrast with the quick sanctification of Palestine, a process unmatched

[5] Di Segni (1999) focuses on fifty-seven churches from the province of Palestine dated mostly through inscriptions (out of the 450 archaeologically known churches). Her research indicates that of these only some ten churches were established by the early sixth century, while thirty-four churches were established in the sixth century, and another eleven were added during the seventh century

in either scope or speed in any other part of the Roman Empire, the rate at which the rural population converted to Christianity resembles more the relatively slow process that characterized other regions of the Roman Empire (MacMullen, 1984: 83–5; Chuvin, 1990: 101–18; Trombley, 1993–94: 134–204; MacMullen, 1997). At any rate, it appears that the Christianization process lasted throughout the Byzantine period and was 'accomplished' only years after the formation of the map of holy sites. The main period of achievement for the Christian church in Palestine's countryside was the sixth century, when the majority of the community churches in areas like Judaea, western Galilee, the Negev and others were built. The period when Christianity reached its peak in terms of geographical spread and number of believers was also the period when an economic and settlement regression started to be felt in Palestine. The Samaritan revolts of the fifth and sixth centuries, combined with the outcomes of the sixth-century plague and the political hardships of this period all had a measurable impact on the local economy and settlement patterns in areas such as the Hermon, Galilee, the Carmel and the Jezreel Valley (Kuhnen, 1989: 331–6; Dar, 1993: 52; Frankel and Getzov, 1997: 34*–36*; Raban, 1999: 21*–23*).

Pilgrimage, memorial churches and monasteries, and their influence on Palestine's economy

The commonly held view that the building of memorial churches had an obvious influence on the local economy should also be contested. Despite the vast sums of money donated by the emperors and wealthy Christians, which led to the erection of hospices, churches and monasteries (Hunt, 1982: 221–48) in places such as Bethlehem, the place of Baptism near the River Jordan and the area around the Sea of Galilee, the influence of these lavish projects was very limited and had only a minor influence on the economy of Palestine. The building of these Christian establishments led, no doubt, to the employment of masons, stonecutters and carpenters, but these were only a small fraction the general manpower in Palestine. The construction of these religious structures was funded by philanthropic sources, originating outside of the local market and not part of 'natural' economic progress which could lead to the expansion of the local economy. The building of churches in the holy sites had a short-term positive economic influence but was of less importance to long-term economic processes which characterize this period.

Pilgrimage was no doubt an important factor in the local economy and it surely influenced such pilgrim cities as Jerusalem and Bethlehem, but not all parts of the region and especially not the countryside. Pilgrims tended to move in well-defined routes, from one holy site to another (Wilkinson, 1977: 16–28). The pilgrims' way between Jerusalem and Jericho and the Jordan is a good example for this phenomenon (Wilkinson, 1975; Hirschfeld, 1992: 55–8). The pilgrims' influence on settlements near the holy sites was no doubt significant, but still secondary to the wider economic development.

Monasteries were also regarded as a major factor in the expanding economy of Byzantine Palestine, but recent archaeological evidence shows how, besides the Judaean Desert, monasteries were located in many parts of Palestine, including western Galilee, the coastal plain and the Negev (Cohen, 1993: 1067–70; Figueras, 1995: 401–50; Aviam, 1999). Monasteries were not built exclusively in places of solitude but mainly in Palestine's countryside, mostly from the mid-fifth century onwards (Hirschfeld, 1990: table in 81–8; idem, 1992: 10–17 for the chronology of Judaean monasteries), and were

independent agricultural and economic units (Eisenberg and Ovadia, 1998; Damati, 2002). It is true that in monasteries located along pilgrims' routes and near holy sites, especially in the Judaean Desert (Magen, 1993), donations were one of the main sources of subsistence (Sivan, 1990). Nevertheless the wider distribution of monasteries in Palestine indicates that they should be regarded as a consequence of economic expansion and surely not its cause.

Summary

Until recently, based on literary sources and in the absence of updated archaeological data, it was held that the changes in the settlement pattern and the economy of Byzantine Palestine should be associated with the Christianization of the region during this period. I have examined this proposition and found that research had placed too great as emphasis on the religious aspects of this process and that the demographic changes characterizing the period should be connected to the fact that Palestine was part of the Roman and Byzantine empires, a factor which gave the local population various economic benefits.

After the dust of the two Jewish rebellions had settled and the Jewish population accepted Roman rule (de Lange, 1978: 276–7), a period of prosperity followed. The main reason for this unique phenomenon is the fact that from the second century to the sixth century Palestine witnessed a period of calm in which wars, plagues and earthquakes were scarce (Amiran 1950–51; idem, 1996). It is true that life expectancy was still low throughout antiquity (Arensberg, 1999), nevertheless, for a period of nearly five hundred years the number of people living in this area rose steadily and with it also the number of villages and the proportion of cultivated versus uncultivated land. The expanding population needed a constant and increasing supply of food, and it is for this reason we find villages in areas that were uninhabitant and uncultivated before the Late Roman period. While it is true that in other regions of the Roman Empire, especially its western parts, settlement peaked during the first and second centuries, in the Roman East in general and in Palestine in particular, this process started only later and was manifested in both urban and rural areas.

In this context, it seems that the degree to which the sanctification process influenced settlement dynamics was only minor. The building of churches and monasteries was not the reason for economic expansion, as it was claimed, but the reverse. The hundreds of churches built in Palestine during the Byzantine period are in fact the outcome of this process and are the best evidence of the inhabitants' financial cap capabilities.

During the late Roman and Byzantine periods three distinct processes, connected with economic progress, took place. First was the sequential rise in the proportion of the population and settlement, a process which began during the Early Roman period (63 BC–70 AD) and lasted until the middle of the sixth century, when Palestine reached its pinnacle in the number of population and in the distribution of settlements. Second, during the sixth century the process of Christianization had also reached its apex as most of the local pagans embraced Christianity. Third is the wide spread of holy sites in various parts of this region. During the first half of the Byzantine period, Christianity's impact on settlement could hardly be felt and its influence on the local economy was very limited. Only considering Palestine as part of the eastern Roman and Byzantine provinces will give us a thorough explanation of the economic prosperity characterizing this period and of the unprecedented expansion in population.

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