

The Nabataean Presence at Palmyra

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Nabataeans and Palmyrenes coexisted during the first three centuries of our era, sharing the trading routes of the near eastern lands in a way as yet not well clarified. Even though a Latin inscription from Bostra seems to refer to the Palmyrene destruction of a Nabataean temple at Bostra itself,¹ the episode, however, occurred during the years of Zenobia's military campaigns and, therefore, refers to a very late period. The relations between the two peoples must have been rather friendly during the centuries in which Palmyra held the monopoly of the Syrian caravans. This, at least, is what the historian may glean from two Palmyrene inscriptions. The information which each one provides is minimal and of a different nature, but, nonetheless, worth reporting.

An inscription found at Palmyra in 1900 commemorates the offering made by a Nabataean horseman in the following terms: "These two altars have been made by 'Ubaidu son of 'Animu ('*nmw*; Arabic *ġanim*) son of Sa'dallat, a Nabataean of the Rawāḥa (tribe), who was a horseman at Ḥirta and in the camp of 'Ana, to Shai' al-qum (šy' '*lqwm*), the good and bountiful god, who does not drink wine (*dy l' št' ḥmr*')." The inscription is dated "in the month of Elūl, the year 443," that is, September of A. D. 132.²

Although written in Palmyrene, the Nabataean character of the inscription is noticeable. The personal names are Arabic and so is the name of the god, whose cult is fully attested in the Safaitic inscriptions, where the spelling of the name is š'*ḥqm*. Shai' al-qum seems to have been venerated in the areas where Nabataean influence was conspicuous. A Nabataean inscription from the Hauran, dated in the twenty-sixth year of King Rabel II, that is, A. D. 96, records the offering of an '*rkt*' to him.³ The name of the deity appears again on the wall opposite the Diwan of Hegra, in North Arabia.⁴ The only representation we possess of the

1 H. Seyrig, "Inscriptions de Bostra," *Syria* 22 (1941), 46-47. See also G. W. Bowersock, "A Report on Arabia Provincia," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 234.

2 G. A. Cooke, *A Text-Book of North-Semitic Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1903) 304-5, no. 140b (CIS, 2:3973). For the personal names, see J. K. Stark, *Personal Names in Palmyrene Inscriptions* (Oxford, 1971).

3 R. Dussaud-F. Macler, *Voyage archéologique au Ṣafâ et dans le Djebel ed-Drûz* (Paris, 1901), 187-88; *RÉS*, 86. The meaning of '*rkt*' remains as yet doubtful: see J. Cantineau, *Le Nabatéen* (Paris, 1932), 2:67.

4 J. A. Jaussen-R. Savignac, *Mission archéologique en Arabie* (Paris, 1909), 1:221, n. 72; for the Diwan, "le grand sanctuaire de Ḥegrâ," see pp. 405-21.

god has been found in a Palmyrene tessera which shows Shai' al-qum wearing a helmet.⁵ This martial aspect of the god suits his personality as described by his name, which means the leader of the people. Shai' al-qum is a divine protector of the caravans, and in this respect the parallelism between him and the angel of Yahweh of *Exodus* 23:20, 23 drawn by G. A. Cooke is illuminating.⁶ Shai' al-qum, thus, was not a god of the Zeus type—as Bêl, Be'lsamên, Dushara—but his angel.⁷

The cult of the angels among the Semites enjoyed popular favor during the last centuries of the first millenium B. C. and the first centuries of our era. Inscriptions from Palmyra mention 'the angel of Bêl' (Malakbêl) and 'the Holy Brothers' of Be'lsamên; the angels of Holiness' of Emessa were venerated at Coptos by the troops stationed there; the people of Umm el-'Ammêd, near Tyre, worshipped the Angel of Milk'ashtart; the name of *Idarûma*, the angel of Dushara, has been read by J. T. Milik in a Greek inscription from the Hauran, and the same writer interprets the Greek *malachê* (1) *aleian* of a Ma'lula inscription of A. D. 107 as meaning *mal'ak 'el-'aliyân* 'the angel of god the Most High'.⁸ The cult of these angels, usually the messengers of a supreme god, represents a new trend in the ancient near eastern religiosity at the time when *assemblies of gods* vanish from the inscriptions. Divine assemblies survived in the pantheons of Karatepe, Sidon or Byblos until Persian times. From the fourth century onwards the inscriptions do not acknowledge the existence of these divine assemblies; instead, devotion to angels gains ground. The faithful must have worshipped them as the sponsors of their concrete needs and enterprises.

The inscription from Palmyra styles Shai' al-qum as a god who does not accept libations of wine. This clearly defines him as a god of nomads. The Nabataeans, in fact, preserved alongside their successful political history the nomadic character of their culture. Diodorus Siculus himself says that the Nabataeans ranged "over a country which is partly desert and partly waterless, though a small section of it is fruitful"; they had flocks and herds "in multitude beyond belief"; they lived in the open air "claiming as native land a wilderness that has neither rivers nor abundant springs from which it is possible for a hostile army to obtain water." Diodorus explicitly says that "it is their custom neither to plant grain, set out any fruit-bearing tree, use wine, nor construct any house; and if any one is found acting contrary to this, death is his penalty."⁹ To be sure, the Nabataeans did not remain for long the nomadic tribes described by Diodorus, for Strabo, some fifty years later, presents a different picture of the Nabataean daily life (XVI:4, 26). The Nabataeans, however, remained attached to primitive traditions and in spite of their opulence and their institutions, were

5 H. Ingholt et al., *Recueil des tessères de Palmyre* (Paris, 1955), 46, no. 332.

6 Cooke, *Text-Book*, 304.

7 T. H. Gaster has drawn a satisfactory parallel between Shai' al-qum and the Hittite god Yarvis, who was in charge of escorting the armies and "had the power of hiding warriors in moments of peril"; cf. *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York, 1969), 236-37, 386.

8 J. T. Milik has collected these inscriptions in *Recherches d'épigraphie proche-orientale*, vol. 1, *Dédicaces faites par des dieux*, BAH 92 (Institut fr. d'arch. de Beyrouth, 1972), 427-32;

9 II, 48, 1; III, 43, 4; XIX, 94, 2-5. The translations are from the *Loeb Classical Library*, vols. 2 (C. H. Oldfather) and 10 (R. M. Geer).

basically tribal.¹⁰

The Palmyrene inscription shows a Nabataean horseman who had had military assignments in the region which formed the eastern frontier of the Palmyrene.¹¹ 'Ubaidu had obviously been in contact with the metropolis where he had made some friends, for lines 7-8 of the inscription read: "and be remembered Zebida son of Shem'on son of Bêl'aqab, his patron and friend (*gyrb wrhmb*), before Shai' al-qum, the good god." Here, *gyr* does not mean 'guest', namely, the receiver of the hospitality, but rather the giver of hospitality, as Cooke, following Clermont-Ganneau,¹² has pointed out. It is natural that 'Ubaidu, a foreigner at Palmyra, could hardly have considered Zebida as his protégé. This meaning of the term is fully confirmed by a theophoric name from Memphis, such as *Kosgeros*, which is to be interpreted as '(the god) Kos is patron'.¹³

Finally, the closing lines of the inscription say: "and be remembered everyone who will visit (or 'will pass by') these altars (*kl m'yd 'lwt' 'ln*) and say 'remembered be all these for good!'"

The text is, of course, asking for a prayer from the would-be passerby, a practice that recalls the formula *dy qr' nšl'* ("whoever reads [this inscription], let him pray") found in many funerary inscriptions written in Syriac. The term *m'yd* is seldom attested in the northwest Semitic inscriptions. It can be found at Palmyra in another inscription published in the *Corpus*, and once in the Palmyrene region.¹⁴ The *peal* participle of the verb is now attested in the funerary stela from Daskyleion (ca. 400 B. C.): *dy 'rh' znh ybwb 'dh*, "who (ever) passes this way. . ."¹⁵

The Nabataean presence at Palmyra is confirmed by another inscription, only recently deciphered, which records the offering of Wahballat son of *'bmrt* to "the god of *š'bw*, who is called the Fortune of the Nabataeans."¹⁶ Of course we do not know the name of this

10 J. Starcky, "Pétra et la Nabatène," *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* (Paris, 1964), 7:938-40.

11 J. Starcky, "Une inscription palmyrénienne trouvée près de l'Euphrate," *Syria* 40 (1963), 53, n.15. Horsemen and camel riders are mentioned in Greek and Nabataean inscriptions from North Arabia; cf. Jausen-Savignac, *Mission* (Paris, 1914), 2:193, no. 227; 197, no. 246.

12 *Recueil d'archéologie orientale* 4 (1901), 386-87. *gr* appears often in Phoenician inscriptions forming theophoric names: the term is to be translated by 'guest', 'proselyte', etc.; see J. Teixidor, "Bull.épigr.sém.," *Syria* 47 (1970), 361, n. 20. A Palmyrene inscription dated May, A. D. 55, commemorates the offering made by a certain 'Atenatan to Shadrafa *dy yb' gyr bb bw wbnv byth klbn*; cf. *CIS*, 2:3972 ("ut sit hospes ejus ipse et domestici sui omnes"). In a funerary inscription of Medain Šaleḥ *gr*, in plural, is used to indicate the "clients" (men and women) of the female members of a Teima family; cf. Jausen-Savignac, *Mission*, 1:162-63, no. 12 (*CIS*, 2:205). The term *gr* in the Meshā inscription (line 16) is a restoration.

13 M. Lidzbarski, *Ephemeris für semitische Epigraphik* (1908), 2:340.

14 *CIS* 2:4207; see J. T. Milik's remarks in *Dédicaces*, 183.

15 F. M. Cross, *BAOR* 184 (1966), 8-9 and J. C. Greenfield, *IEJ* 19 (1969), 206.

16 J. T. Milik, in F. V. Winnett-W. L. Reed, *Ancient Records from North Arabia* (University of Toronto Press, 1970), 158.

god whose cult is also attested in North Arabia, but to mention the divinity after the name of the place where he, or she, was worshipped was customary among the Nabataeans, as well as among other Semitic peoples. The Nabataeans invoked their national god as *Du-Shara*, that is, 'the one of the Shara', or as *Ilaalgê*, that is, 'the god of al-Gê' (modern el-Gî, in Wadi Musa). El-Gî was the first Nabataean capital and the god of the site became so popular among the Nabataeans that the names 'bd'lg' and 'mt'lg' are frequent in their onomastica.¹⁷

The theological conception of making the god inseparable from his sanctuary becomes conspicuous in a bilingual inscription from Si', the main center for the cult of Be'Isamên in the Hauran. The inscription, in Greek and in Nabataean, is written on a tablet, found in 1909, which supported the statue of the deity. The Greek text says: "Seeia standing in the Hauranite land," while the Nabataean inscription reads as follows: "This is the statue (d'šlmt') of š'y'w." The term *šlmt'* clearly indicates that the statue was that of a female divinity, probably a Tyche. The word *š'y'w*, which seems to mean here 'levelled square' or 'even space', was given to the goddess who personified the holiness of the area in which the famous sanctuary of Be'Isamên had been constructed. Theophoric names formed with the name of the goddess are known in the area.¹⁸

The Nabataeans wandered in the Hauran at least since the second century B. C.; by 163 they were at Bostra and other sites of the Hauran,¹⁹ where they grew in importance to the point of defeating Antiochus's army during the reign of Obodas I. After Antiochus's death, King Aretas, Obodas's successor, was called to the throne of Damascus by the enemies of Ptolemy, the son of Mennaeus, the tetrach of Chalcis.²⁰ Aretas issued coins in Damascus from 84 to 72 B. C.²¹ But the Nabataean presence here was rather ephemeral and Pompey's arrival in Syria marked the decline of their political influence, especially when the Hauran was given by Rome to Herod the Great.

It is difficult to ascertain how deeply Nabataean culture permeated Syria. At Palmyra, the Nabataean influence seems to have affected the daily life of the city. The first inscription discloses the presence of a Nabataean horseman in one of the Palmyrene frontiers. His case could not have been an isolated one, for the second inscription, by acknowledging the existence of a Nabataean cult at Palmyra, implies that the Nabataeans there were numerous. Furthermore, the recent archaeological excavations carried out in the temple of Be'Isamên at Palmyra have shown that this temple may be a copy of the one that the god had at Si', in the Hauran.²² On the other hand, the Palmyrene inscriptions indicate that

17 The inscription mentioning *Ilaalgê* comes from Šammet el-Baradan, in the Hauran; see Milik, *Dédicaces*, 428-29.

18 I follow E. Littman's interpretation and remarks in *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria*, vol. 4, section A: *Nabataean Inscriptions* (Leiden, 1914), 81-83, no. 103.

19 1 Mac. 5:25-26; 2 Mac. 12:11-12.

20 Josephus, *Jewish Ant.*, 13:392, 418. See A. H. M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1971), 254.

21 Starcky, *Supplément*, 907.

22 P. Collart-J. Vicari, *Le sanctuaire de Baalsamin à Palmyre*, vol. 1, *Topographie et architecture* (Institut suisse de Rome, 1969), 190-98.

the cult of Be'lshamên was foreign to the city and had started not before the first half of the first Christian century.²³ This is in contrast with the antiquity of the cults of Bêl, Yarhibôl, 'Aglibôl and Malakbêl, all of whom were styled "ancestral gods" in the inscriptions.²⁴ Shamash, too, was invoked as "the god of the fathers".²⁵ Archaeological and epigraphical remains would suggest that the Nabataeans were responsible for the installation of the cult of Be'lshamên at Palmyra at a time when Bêl (initially Bôl) had been long accepted as a supreme god by the Aramaeans and Arabs alike. The Nabataean presence at Palmyra can be correlated with their presence at Edessa, in North Syria, where they founded a new dynasty in 132 B. C..²⁶ The advance of the Nabataean tribes northwards seems to have been a steady one.

23 Collart-Vicari, *Le sanctuaire*, 202.

24 CIS, 2:3904, 3927 (see the Greek text).

25 Literally 'lh byt 'bwbn; cf. CIS, 2:3978.

26 J. B. Segal, *Edessa: The Blessed City* (Oxford, 1970), 16.