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The Conversion of Space VS The Conversion of the Population: Fourth Century Palestine

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Abstract

The following article reviews the conversion of space, that is the appearance of Christian holy sites, in fourth century Palestine. Later, it explores the conversion of the population of Palestine by examining the writings of different Christian authors. Juxtaposition of the archaeological and literary evidence alludes to a historical discrepancy, one which can be resolved by considering the political and religious aspirations of key figures, such as: emperors, bishops and monks.

Keywords: Conversion; Palestine; Fourth Century; Christians; Jews; Pagans; Holy Sites; Constantine.

Scholars have debated the conversion of space in fourth century Palestine[1], a process to which the actions of Constantine I and his mother, Helena, contributed greatly. This paper will consider the conversion of the population of Palestine in relation to and as a result of this conversion of space. The archaeological sites offering evidence for the conversion of space and the related historical context will occupy the first part of this paper. This will be followed by an examination of the conversion of the population, i.e. an examination of primary sources indicating the size and distribution of Christian communities in Palestine (both native and immigrants). Lastly, it will be argued that the historical impact of the fourth century emperors, starting with Constantine, on the conversion of the population is less decisive than their impact on the conversion of space.

Constantine's unprecedented interest in the land of Palestine[2] is evident in the creed of the First Council of Nicaea, held only one year after the reunion of the empire: 'Since **custom** and **ancient tradition** have brought it about that the Bishop of Ælia [*i.e.*, Jerusalem] is specially honored, he may retain the position of honor…'[3] The dignified status of Jerusalem was further reinforced by the establishment of four Basilica Churches in the territory of Palestine to commemorate Christ's life and death.[4]

[1] Tsafrir, 1979; Wilken, 1992; Walker, 1990.

[2] For the economic, religious and cultural realities which led to the insignificance of Aelia Capitolina during the second-third centuries see: Walker, 1990, Pp. 4-15; Stemberger, 2000, Pp. 51-55.

[3] Nicea Canon, No. 7, in: Mitchell, 1908.

[4] Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, III.25-45. The four churches are: 'The Holy Grave Church' in Jerusalem, 'Pater Noster Church' in Mount of Olives, 'Church of the Nativity' in Bethlehem and 'The Church of Mamre' in Hebron.

Regardless of Constantine's incentives,[5] the changes were apparent in both the literary and the spatial sphere. The literary perception of Palestine had gradually changed to fit further activities of construction conducted throughout the fourth century: from "the city of Christ killers"[6] to the land whose importance lies in the historical events, a land which every Christian men and women must visit.[7]

The literary shift evoked further interest and construction: according to the Tabula Imperii Romani Iudaea/Palastinae,[8] the remains of 400 churches dated from the fourth to seventh centuries in more than 335 sites have been found in the land of Palestine. These Byzantine churches are categorised into four groups based on different variables, *inter alia,* location, size and function.[9] Tsafrir states that the appearance of all four types of Churches in Palestine proves that the Christianisation of the land was present in all levels of the population and for a wide range of religious purposes[10]. The expansion of the Christianisation of the land can be further examined by documented journeys to Palestine during the

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[5] Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 25 - the religious feelings of Constantine and his mother; Walker, 1990, Pp. 16- a local act, illustrating the Jerusalemite's establishment of domain; Luz, 2002, Pp. 135 - the rehabilitation of land as a sign of triumph and a way for Constantine to establish himself as a "good" emperor.

[6] The idea of the city of Jerusalem being "the city of Christ killers" derives from the notion of the "New Jerusalem" evolving from early Christian theology. This idea correlates with the notion of the "Real Israel" and thus creates a negative view of the city of Jerusalem, see: Stroumsa, 1979, Pp. 119-124.

[7] Jerome, *Epistulae*, Letter 46; The well-organized ideal of the 'Holy Land' was constructed gradually and slowly. It had been a bone of contention among many theologians and church elders, among which: Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nyssa, Basillius of Caesarea, Jerome, Vigilliantius, etc.

[8] Y. Tsafrir, L. Di Segni and J. Green, 1994, Pp. 19; Also see: Baras, 1982, Pp. 221-264.

[9] The four types of churches are: 1) Memorialization churches, located in sites with direct connection to Jesus's life. These churches carry motives of imperial pride, and answer to the policy of the memory of an emperor. 2) Memorialization churches for the relics of saints or martyrs. 3) Community churches, in small towns and villages. 4) Pilgrim churches, used only during pilgrimage journeys, without having a native community. Baras, 1982, Pp. 221-264; Bar, 2008, Pp. 131.

[10] Memorialization churches, dedicated both to Christ and to the martyrs, are the first type of churches to be built in Palestine. Community churches, mostly found in rural areas, mainly appear in the 6th century CE. Di-Signi dated only 10 rural community churches prior to the sixth century, see: Di-Signi, 1999, Pp. 149-178. By the time of the Muslim conquest at the 7th century, there are approximately 250 rural churches in the land of Palestine. Bar, 2008, Pp. 131.

fourth century[11]. A comparison between the sites mentioned in Jerome's description of Paula's journey at the end of fourth century CE[12] and Theodosius' "De Situ Terrae Sanctae"[13] dated to the sixth century, shows great similarity, despite the expansion of pilgrimage and the deepening of the Christianisation of the population. This proves that the Christianisation of the land of Palestine is already evident in the fourth Century and is especially recognisable in the territory of Jerusalem, which exemplified the geographical centre of the conversion of space.[14]

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While the visual evidence of the expansion of Christianity in the fourth century Palestine is obvious, researchers disagree about the demography of Palestine in the Byzantine era.[15] The literary sources are more focused in scope and discuss different religious groups separately. Resources indicating the expansion and size of the Christian communities in Palestine derive mostly from the writings of pilgrims, saints, and monks.[16] These testimonies reveal, on close inspection, that the Christian community was a minority in Palestine during the fourth century and was often molested by the majority groups. Eusebius,[17] our earliest testimony

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[11] See: Wilkinson, 2011, for illustrations of pilgrim maps based on these journeys to Palestine.

[12] Jerome, *Epistulae*, Letter 108.

[13] Theodosius, *De Sito Terrae Sanctae,* Sections 7-11, 17, 21, 31.

[14] For an examination of different archaeological and material sources exemplifying the conversion of space see: Irshai, 2009, Pp. 465-486; Coüasnon, 1974; Tsafrir, 1999.

[15] Evaluations of the total population of Palestine range between one million and almost three million inhabitants based on different geographical-archaeological models. For an overview of different estimation models, see: Broshi, 1979, Pp. 6-7.

[16] Bitton-Ashkelony, 1996, Pp. 183; Maraval, 1985, Pp. 116-125; The Jewish-Rabbinic sources answering to theological issues evolving from interactions with Christian individuals are few but none of them reveal the expansion and scope of the Christian communities. This paper is exclusively based on Christian primary sources.

[17] Eusebius, *De Martyribus Palaestinae*, 8.

(early fourth century) of the distribution of Christian communities in Palestine, discusses communities in Caesarea, Gaza, Ashkelon, Diospolis, Eleutheropolis, Anaea, Scythopolis and Iamnia. A few years later, as indicated in the canon of the First Council of Nicaea, there were between fourteen and nineteen bishops of Palestine[18]. This number grew to a few dozen by mid-fifth century[19]. Despite the evident growth the presence of a bishop does not reflect the size of the local Christian community and, in certain cases, even the existence of one, as can be demonstrated by the following testimonies.

The testimony of Epiphanius of Salamis illustrates the condition of the northern Christian community through the story of Joseph the Commes. Joseph, after having experienced frequent harassments, succumbed to the Jewish community and left: '…{he} received the authority to build a church to Christ in Tiberius, in Diocaesarea, in Capernaum and in the other cities and who had much to suffer from the Jews… The Jews continued to treat Joseph badly, but he finally built a portion of the temple in Tiberius, completed a small church and then left and went to Scythopolis, where he stayed.' [20]

Joseph's testimony of harassment and of having to flee one place and move to another in his quest to build churches for Christ emphasises the Jewish character of the Galilee during the fourth century. This testimony thus corresponds to the archaeological evidence taken from burial motifs, indicating the beginning of

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[18] The number of the Bishops of Palestine varies according to the writer. See: Sozomenos, *HE*, I.XVII; Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, III.III.

[19] Oriens Christianus, III.

[20] Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 30.4.1, 30.12.9.

Christian presence in the Galilee only in the late fourth - beginning of fifth Centuries.[21]

The condition of the southern Christian community is illustrated by Marc the Deacon's *Vitae Porphyrii*. In the description of Porphyry's public confrontation with the pagan community in Gaza (which resulted in demolishing their temple) the size of the Christian community is revealed. The community in Gaza, one of the most ancient Christian communities, only counted few hundred members at the time of Porphyry's arrival, 394 CE.[22]

Christian presence in the rural areas of Palestine during the fourth century was even smaller in scope than the Christian presence in the urban areas. The barriers of the Aramaic language, the difficulties and dangers in transferring oneself to distant and secluded areas and the lack of imperial financing are only few of the reasons harnessed to explain this development.[23] Thus, Bar claims that rural churches should be counted as the true evidence for the Christianisation of the population in Palestine.

The beginning of the fifth century shows no apparent change in the size of the

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[21] During the fourth century, given the non-political, often hunted character of Christianity until 324 CE and unlike in Rome, monuments are the main form of material culture used to testify on religious affiliations of a group. Other forms of material culture may be found in iconographic evidence, derives mostly from funerary art (Sarcophagi, murals, etc.), see: Stokstad, 2004, Pp. 14-21. Other forms of Late Antique portable art, such as ampullae and reliquaries, are dated to the 6th-7th centuries, see: Kuhnel, 2006, Pp. 463-504; the complexities of examining religious iconography are discussed in: Kraemer, 1991; also see: Mayan-Fanar, 2010 and Rubin, Pp. 116, for examples of Christian burial motifs.

[22] Marc the Deacon, *Vita Porphyrii*, 20.

[23] See: Bar, 2008, Pp. 133-149; Di-Signi, 1999, Pp. 149-178.

Christian community, according to the description of Barsauma's journey to Palestine. Furthermore, this evidence bears witness to the religious interactions between the different religious communities: "Les païens à cette époque étaient nombreux dans le pays de Palestine et dans le pays de Phénicie et des Arabes; les chrétiens étaient encore peu nombreux dans ces pays; les Juifs et les Samaritains dominaient et persécutaient les chrétiens de cette région. Parce qu'ils voyaient que le jeune Barsauma était encore enfant et qu'il n'y avait personne autre avec lui, à cause de cela surtout ils le chassaient et le frappaient".[24]

As demonstrated previously, as well as in Sozomen's *Historia Ecclesticae*,[25] hostility and violence accounted for forms of interaction between the different religious groups in Palestine, at least until the beginning of the fifth century CE. Sozomen documented ongoing anti-Christian riots in southern Palestine: Scythopolis, Gaza and their surroundings. This hostility is central to our understanding of the failure of the Christian missionary activity and the pro-Christian legislation. Saul Liebermann[26] states that during the fourth century there had been an intentional policy by the emperor to increase religious discrimination against the Jewish population; this resulted in the Gallus rebellion, which expressed a feeling of betrayal and took the form of anti-Christian religious activity within the Jewish community. Christian preachers had more success with the pagan and Bedouin communities than with the Jews: 'My mind has been often exercised in inquiring how it is that other men are very ready to believe in God the

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[24] Nau, 1914, Pp. 274: 'At that time the pagans were many in Palestine and in Phoenicia. The Christians were still few in these countries. The Jews and Samaritans were ruling and were hunting the Christian in that region. And since they saw the young Barsauma, who was still a boy, who hadn't anyone with him, they often chased and hit him'; Stemberger points to some historical discrepancies in this description. These mostly deal with the later journeys of Barsauma to Jerusalem, and not with the one described here, see: Stemberger, 2000, Pp. 309-313. The story of Barsauma, as many others written by Christian writers, can be used to shed light on the perspective of its subject's or author's lifetime, even if the historical details are inaccurate.
[25] Sozomen, *Historia Ecclesticae*, 2.5, 3.7, 5.15.
[26] Liebermann, 1972, Pp. 330; also see Avi-Yonah, 1980, Pp. 136-150, for the anti-Jewish legislation and the Jewish literary responses.

Word, while the Jews are so incredulous.'[27]

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The testimonies of the outnumbered and harassed Christian community, which was unlikely to gain new followers among the Jewish community and which was still unsuccessful in converting the Pagan communities, do not correspond to the number of Christian sites found in Palestine. This discrepancy can only be explained by examining foreign interventions and the interests of key figures, such as: emperors, bishops and monks.

Unlike the Christianisation of the local residents of Palestine, the Christianisation of the land does correspond with the political aspirations and the exercise of power by Constantine I and his successors. As put by Jacobs: 'Abstract notions of dominion and Empire were manifested through discursive configurations of material control'.[28] As a Christian emperor, Constantine I and his mother, Helena, acted in order to establish Christianity in Palestine, and thus to shape Christian identity anew.[29] This meant that the land of Palestine had to be identifiable within the constraints of Christian history. As part of this process, the New Testament was used as an indicator of geographical locations marking Christ's life and death. These sites were then enclosed within a new Christian space, namely: churches, monasteries and pilgrimage sites, from which arose liturgical expressions.[30]

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[27] Sozomenos, *Ecclesiastical History,* 1.1; also see: Rubin, Pp. 241; Jerome, *Vita Hilarii*; Since pagans were centered in coastal cities, the Christian communities were also mostly centered in coastal cities, see: Stemberger, 2006, Pp. 301.

[28] Jacobs, 2004, Pp. 104.

[29] In giving homage to a deity as an act of gratitude for a battle field victory, Constantine I is no different than his predecessors, See: Taylor, 1993, Pp. 308-309.

[30] Smith, 2007, Pp. 1-31.

The emperor (sometimes acting through the imperial administration) was the bearer of power, who approved the erection of churches and monasteries in his letters and edicts and was also initially the financing agent. This allowed key figures in the monastic movement and ecclesiastical authority to claim the land in the name of Christ and in the name of the emperor as appointed by Christ. Therefore the emperor's actions encouraged further constructions, by private donors and later by ecclesiastical institutions; for example: Icelia, "the virtuous lady" Flavia, the patriarch Juvenal, Melania the Elder, Posidonius, Melania the Younger, etc.[31]

Other Christian figures, holding political rather than financial positions, impacted on the process of claiming the land of Palestine. These figures, by keeping regular correspondence with the emperors, acted to strengthen the prestige of Palestine and especially Jerusalem: Cyril of Jerusalem, as an example, used Christian sites (the Golgotha, Church of Nativity, The Church of the Holy Sepulchre) as a proof of the centrality of Jerusalem in Christian doctrine. His doctrine was influenced by the edicts signed by the emperors and reciprocally encouraged further legislative acts of emperors. Cyril's political use of religious sites in the land of Palestine reflects the religious and political aspirations of key figures involved in the process of claiming the land of Palestine.[32]

The emperors and bishops were the political and theological axes of the conversion of land. However, the "field agent", the most central and active group

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[31] Smith, 2007, Pp. 21-23.
[32] On the political aspirations of Cyril of Jerusalem and the debate over jurisdiction between Acacius, the Arian bishop of Caesarea and Cyril, see: Walker, 1990, Pp. 311-346; Drijers & Watt, 1999.

in the claiming process of Palestine, was the monastic movement. The establishment of Christian saint geography enabled a person to conduct rituals in a certain sacred space.[33] It supplemented the classic Pauline conception of spirituality,[34] and while it was allowed and sometimes favoured, it was not mandatory. The monastic movement, starting in the second quarter of the fourth century, had a growing interest in the concept of the 'Holy Land' as an ideal and as a place of worship. Athanasius of Alexandria in his 'Letter to the Virgins' reflects on the idea that being close to the Holy Land and Jerusalem brings one closer to God. It is however, by no means a crucial element of monastic life.[35]

Members of the monastic order constituted the majority of pilgrims who travelled to the Holy Land to visit distant sites.[36] Their presence had multiple purposes: to study the Old Testament, to pray in martyrs' burial sites, to pray at holy sites, to visit living holy men and to reconstruct Christ's life and death. This suited the monks' ideal and social status as "Wandering Charismatics",[37] symbolically following the command to Abraham: 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you'.[38] The educational journeys of pilgrims, wandering around the land, placed them at the front of the conversion of space; more so with further expansion of Christian religious sites. Despite their presence as a distinctive group with social, religious and intellectual characters, the pilgrims themselves (at least many of them) kept wondering the land, some moved to other

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[33] Bitton-Ashkeloni, 1996, Pp. 18, 201.

[34] By Pauline conception of spirituality, I mean: the emphasis on the inner life, on the development of the theological and cardinal virtues, on the progress in grace through the illuminative and unitive ways and not on specific places of worship, of the sacred and godly presence.

[35] Athanasius of Alexandria, *To The Virgins*, 5.174.

[36] Bitton-Ashkeloni, 1996, Pp. 18.

[37] Theissen, 1989.

[38] Genesis, 12.1; for the symbolic ideals of the early Christian pilgrimage see: Leclercq, 1964.

towns or eventually left. Many of those who chose to settle lived in the Egyptian desert in their search for solitude and inner salvation.[39] Their effect on the population and the local Christian communities in fourth century Palestine was minor, but their presence was major.

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This article examined aspects of the changes the land of Palestine went through in a short but crucial period of time. It has been shown that the spatial changes were conducted with no regard to the native population of Palestine, as part of a top-down process. The emperor Constantine I, followed by his successors, started a phenomenon of imperial-religious involvement in Palestine which suited the religious and political aspirations of monks and Bishops. Therefore, the conversion of space did not correspond to the conversion of the population during the fourth century, but rather to political and theological aspirations.

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[39] See Bitton-Ashkeloni, 1996, Pp. 183-195, for the ideas of peregrinatio, contemplation and the intellectual importance of the Egyptian dessert. See Bar, 2008, Pp.124, for the unimportance of monks in the demography of Palestine.

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