

Chapter Twenty Three

Paganism in Palestine

At no time in history was Judaism the only religion of Palestine. In the time of the First Temple, though paganism and pagans were strictly proscribed by the Bible, there were not only pagans in the country, but their influence was so strong that many Israelites did not escape it. The pagans were still there in the Second Temple era, there was an influx of Greek and Roman colonists in the Hellenistic and then in the Roman period, and Greek cities were founded. The local paganism and its gods were Hellenized, and new additions made to the pantheon. In the first century, therefore, there were three elements to be reckoned with: the paganism of the Hellenized Canaanite population, that of the Macedonian and Greek settlers and an influence from Roman paganism.

There had been a two-way movement in ancient times. Greek paganism, as is well known, was influenced by the oriental religions, and the local gods were then identified with Greek gods, very often with the same gods as had influenced the Greek ones. To show how the process worked, we may instance the city of Beth Shean, which was then called Scythopolis in Greek. In the Hellenistic and the Roman periods, until the Jewish war broke out, relations between Jews and pagans in the city were very good. Judas Maccabeus marched against Scythopolis, 'but when the Jews who dwelt there bore witness to the good will which the people of Scythopolis had shown them and their kind treatment of them in times of misfortune, they thanked them and exhorted them to be well disposed to their race in the future also'.¹ Even during the pogroms which the Jewish war occasioned, relations were still so good, in contrast to what was going on elsewhere, that the Jewish citizens took the side of their pagan fellows, and sallied out along with them against the rebellious Jews who were attacking the city. In the end, however, they were surprised by the pagans and slaughtered.² Beth Shean could also be called *Skython*

¹ 2 Macc. 12:29-30.

² On this and the following, see Schürer II, pp. 170-3.

polis, the 'city of the Scythians', which suggests that Scythians had once occupied it. The Byzantine historian George Syncellus who had good sources at his disposal, says that the Scythians had invaded Palestine and conquered the city of Beth Shean, which was therefore called Scythopolis.¹ The 'Hegesippus', a 4th century Christian of Jewish origin² who produced a Latin recension of Josephus' Jewish War, says that the city was dedicated to the Scythian Artemis, because it was founded by the Scythians and named after them.³ This seems to be more than mere etymology and suggests that the city had had a temple of Artemis. Even so, erudite speculation had something to do with the statement, because the notion of a Scythian Artemis comes from the *Iphigenia in Tauris* of Euripides. 'Hegesippus' picked up the learned surmise somewhere. It is also in the *Chronicle (Chronography)* of John Malalas, c. 491-578, an author who had good sources but used them carelessly.⁴ His version is that when Thoas, king of Scythia, heard that Iphigenia had taken the golden statue of Artemis and fled with it, he sent out a large number of Scythians in pursuit, telling them not to come back if they could not produce the statue. They looked everywhere and so finally came to Palestine, to the town of Nysa, formerly called Tricomia. There they heard that Iphigenia and Orestes had reached the sea-coast and sailed off, so finding the place to their liking and being afraid to go back to the king, they settled down in the city, which they then called Scythopolis. Another thing they liked in it was its shrine to Artemis—which is the second reference to the worship of the goddess there.

Syncellus says the Scythians were invaders from Scythia, and Herodotus (I, 105) had spoken of such an invasion in the 7th century B.C.E. Possibly a group of such Scythians had settled in Beth Shean, but there are historians with grave doubts about the reliability of Herodotus here. The town could have got the name from Scythian colonists of a later date, maybe in the Persian or Hellenistic period. Scythians were renowned as archers and horsemen throughout the whole of antiquity. It is therefore possible that there was a core of veterans from Scythian units among the colonists settled in Beth Shean and the neighbourhood

¹ Syncellus I, 405.

² See *Hegesippi qui dicitur Historia libri quinque*, ed. V. Ussani, vol. II, praefationem Caroli Mras ... continens CSEL, (1960), p. xxxi-xxxvii.

³ Op.cit. vol. III (1932), p. 19.

⁴ Malalas, ed. W. Dindorf (1831), p. 140. See also Kedrenos, ed. A. Bekker vol. I, p. 237, and M. Avi-Yonah, 'Scythopolis,' in *IEJ* XII (1962), p. 126.