

ON BRANDON'S REJECTION OF THE PELLA TRADITION

by RAY PRITZ

Any attempt to treat the post-New Testament history of Jewish Christianity must first decide on the historicity of the reported flight of the Jerusalem church to Pella.¹ Until the middle of this century this legend was accepted almost without question. In 1951 the late S.G.F. Brandon published *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* in which he tried to show that the Jerusalem Christians suffered the same fate in 70 A.D. as their fellow-Jews: death, slavery and dispersion. The Pella tradition had to be discarded, and as justification for doing so, Brandon raised three serious difficulties: 1) Before 70 the church of Jerusalem held supreme authority; after that date it held no sway in ecclesiastical affairs. If the leaders were in Pella (and returned to Jerusalem as the legend may suggest) then where was their authority? One must conclude that they did not survive the disaster. 2) If Pella was razed by the rebels in 66, as Josephus reports,² then that city cannot be considered as a refuge for Jewish Christians, because either (a) they were there at the time of the raid and would have been treated as traitors by the rebels, or (b) they came after the raid, in which case the surviving and angered Pella Greeks would have been most hostile to the arrival of any Jews in any guise. 3) Brandon pointed out the extreme difficulty of leaving Jerusalem, which was guarded by Zealots, and passing through the lines of the Roman army. It would

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1. Eusebius, HE III 5, 3; Epiphanius, *panarion* 29, 7; 30, 2; *de mens. et pond.* 14-15.
2. *Jewish War* II 457-460.

have been impossible for a community of almost any size to accomplish such a feat. A number of scholars found Brandon's proofs convincing and abandoned the legend as ancient fiction.³ Others ignored him, but some have attempted to defend the tradition.⁴ In 1967 Brandon, in his somewhat radical *Jesus and the Zealots*, maintained his position, strengthened it with further argument along the same lines, and pointed out that none who had written against him to date had dealt with his three main objections to the flight.

Jerusalem's loss of authority

Even a cursory perusal of the available post-70 Christian sources makes it clear that Jerusalem carried no weight of authority in the general ecclesiastical structure after Titus' victory. According to Eusebius, however, there continued to exist a Jerusalem Church with an unbroken succession of bishops.⁵ Eusebius makes other references to events concerning the "Jerusalem Church" after 70, a fact which Brandon calls "contradictory".⁶ Is it contradictory that the Jerusalem community removed to Pella and yet Eusebius continues to write about the "bishops of Jerusalem"? Gibbon remarked, long before Brandon's time: "During this occasional absence, the bishop and church of Pella still retained the title of Jerusalem. In the same manner, the Roman pontiffs resided seventy years at Avignon; and the patriarchs of Alexandria have long since transferred their episcopal seat to Cairo."⁷ Rather than seeing an internal contradiction in Eusebius' inclusion of the list of Jewish Christian bishops (*HE IV 5, 1-3*), we should find in this another indication that some viable Jewish Christian remnant had survived out of Jerusalem' disaster.

But we return to the problem. If Jerusalem Jewish Christians did survive, and if the Jerusalem bishopric was important enough, as Eusebius tells us, that "those of the apostles and of the disciples of the Lord who were still alive" saw fit to return from far distances to elect James's successor,⁸ then why did the Jerusalem Church lose its former authority? Authority rests not so much in a place as in a position. James was not the final authority because he was the bishop of Jerusalem; rather, he was chosen bishop of Jerusalem because he was "the

3. Among these were Strecker, Gaston, Munck, Farmer.

4. L.E. Elliot-Binns, *Galilean Christianity*, 67f; W. Wink, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 25 (1969), 37-46; S. Sowers, *Theol. Zeits.* 26 (1970), 305-320; B. Reicke, *Supp. to Nov. Test.* 33 (1972), 121-134; J.J. Gunther, *Theol. Zeits.* 29 (1973), 81-94; B.C. Gray, *Jour. of Eccl. Hist.* 24 (1973), 1-7; B. Bagatti, *Revista de Cultura Biblica* 9 (1972), 170-179; M. Simon, *Rech. de Science Rel.* 60 (1972), 37-54.

5. *HE IV, 1-3*.

6. *Zealots*, 213 n. See *HE III 11; 22; 32, 1-7; 35*.

7. *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. II (1909), 9 n. 1. Cf. P. Carrington, *The Early Christian Church*, I, 250, who calls Simeon the "bishop of the Jerusalem church-in-exile at Pella".

8. *HE III 11*.

brother of the Lord". So it seems to have been also with the apostles. Their authority derived from the fact that they had been immediate disciples of Jesus.⁹ By the same token, Simeon was chosen to succeed James because he was Jesus' cousin, and others in the time of Domitian were considered leaders in the Church because of their relationship to Jesus.¹⁰ As the apostles died or moved away, so also the authority of Jerusalem began to diminish. John, traditionally, lived out his later years not in Jerusalem but in Ephesus, and with him died direct apostolic authority. By that time (c. 100), there was already considerable attention being given to apostolic *writings*. Brandon is looking for an anachronism when he expects to see a continued authority recognized for the "Church of Jerusalem".¹¹ That is to say, if we recognize that the concept of "apostolic succession" (and its concomitant authority) did not become a working reality until at least a century later, then it is an anachronism to speak of such cathedral authority between, say, 100 and the beginnings of "apostolic succession".

Pella as a safe refuge

In presenting his alternative explanation of how the Pella "foundation legend" got started, Brandon found it necessary to say that there were Christian refugees from the Galilee and Samaria who came to Pella.¹² It is clear that, if his objections to the safety of Jerusalem Christians are valid, then it would not have been any safer in Pella for Jewish Christians from anywhere else. (In Brandon's theory these refugees later claimed to be descended from the Jerusalem church, so they must have been *Jewish* Christians for such a claim to have had any credibility.¹³ Either the refugees arrived and were repulsed or killed by the local populace, or — wherever they came from — they managed to settle in Pella.)

The problem here centers around a single reference in Josephus' *Jewish Wars* (II:457–460). The inhabitants of Caesarea had just killed more than 20,000 Jews in their city. "The news of the disaster at Caesarea infuriated the whole nation; and parties of Jews sacked (*diameristhentes*) the Syrian villages and the neighboring cities, Philadelphia, Heshbon and its district, Gerasa, Pella, and Scythopolis." In the section immediately following, Josephus describes how various cities

9. Cf. Acts 1:21–26.

10. HE III 11; 20, 6; 32, 6.

11. Whatever authority may have inhered in the place Jerusalem itself would have died, of course, in 70. Such locational authority would have had meaning only to those of Jewish heritage; non-Jews would have had no special reason to revere "the Holy City." But in the eyes of *Jewish* Christians, we might not necessarily expect Jerusalem (without apostles or other recognized leaders) to hold on to special authority. In Judaism itself at this time, the authority shifted *with the leaders* to Yavneh, even though Jerusalem continued to be inhabited by Jews for another 65 years (See K.W. Clark in *NTS* 6 (1960–61), 269–280).

12. *Zealots*, 213.

13. See Gray. *art. cit.*, 5.

around the country were destroyed (*katastrepsamenoî*) or burned (*upoprêsantes*). Pella is not mentioned again in the lengthy following description of what happened to these and other cities, and from Josephus' words no general rule can be fixed whereby we could determine indirectly what happened to Pella's Jewish inhabitants. In Gerasa (480), for example, the Gentile inhabitants protected and aided their Jewish fellow-citizens, while in Scythopolis (466–468) the Jewish inhabitants helped to repel the raid and then were treacherously slain by the non-Jewish citizens. If nothing else, these two examples show us that the towns still continued to exist as viable entities, that *diameristhentes* should not be understood to mean that these towns were completely wiped out.¹⁴ In both cases, in fact, this curiously-placed word does *not* seem to indicate a very great destruction. In the one case (Scythopolis) the raiding party seems to have been repulsed, and in the other (Gerasa) whatever happened was not serious enough to damage the previous good relations between the Gentile and Jewish inhabitants.

We must add to this another consideration of no small importance. It is possible that Pella was chosen as a place of refuge precisely because there was there some established community of Christians which could be expected to welcome and care for the refugees. If this be granted, then we must look at what effect this would have had on the safety of those refugees during the time of Pella's troubles and thereafter. A community of Christians in Pella at this time can be expected not only to have provided food and shelter but also to have raised its voice on behalf of harboring and protecting the refugees. It is to be remembered that Pella was primarily a *Gentile* town, and we should expect to find mostly Gentile Christians there. While it may be true that a band of refugee Jews (Christian or otherwise) might not expect to find a warm reception in a Gentile city during the time of rebellion, the picture is altered completely when we consider that their hosts there may have been Greek citizens of this Decapolis city.

Getting out of Jerusalem

Rabbinic tradition tells how Rabban Yoḥanan ben Zakkai was smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin so that he might have an audience with Vespasian.¹⁵ This story is repeatedly brought by Brandon and his school to demonstrate how difficult it was for even one man to leave Jerusalem near the end of the war. Brandon is also wont to cite Josephus on how difficult it was to leave the city because the Zealots were guarding all exits and killing any who were suspected of trying to desert.¹⁶ A close reading of Josephus with the view in mind that those Jews

14. It was naively suggested by Elliot-Binns, *loc cit.*, that the Gentile residents of Pella were perhaps all destroyed.

15. *Avot d'R. Nathan*, Version I, iv; *Avot d'R. Nathan*, Version II, iv; *Midrash Lamentations*, 1:31; BT *Gittin* 56a-b; *Midrash Proverbs* xv.

16. Brandon does not list the references, but they are *War* IV 410; 377ff; 556; 564–565; V 29f; 423; 448; 512; VI 421.

who had come for the Feast of Unleavened Bread were all inextricably trapped¹⁷ does indeed yield numerous places where the historian gives this picture. However, if one then re-reads the *Jewish War* looking for the time when it became impossible to escape, one finds that Josephus recounts stories of escapes throughout the siege and into the final days.

Space will not allow a full quotation of these notices, but the cumulative picture they provide is impressive in its portrayal of the continuous escape from the city of thousands. One may refer to *War* II 538 and 556 (November 66); IV 353 (2000 at one time), 377ff, 397, 410 (all in the winter of 67/68, before Passover); V 420ff, 446–450, 551–552 (June 70). Right up until the end, in August 70, we read (VI 113–115) that “there were others who, watching their opportunity for escaping in safety, made off to the Romans. Among these were the chief priests.... Many others also of the aristocracy went over with the chief priests.” As a result of this, Josephus records (116–117), the rebels had to spread a rumour of the death of these escapees, in order to deter further desertions. 118: The Romans countered by bringing them back so the people could see them alive, “whereupon great numbers fled to the Romans.”¹⁸ Not until after the Temple was burned did Titus declare that there could be no more desertions (VI 352), and yet even after this as many as 40,000 fled to the Romans and were allowed to go free (VI 383–386).

It may be objected here that Josephus is writing for a Roman audience, under the patronage of the Flavians, and that he simply wants to put the actions of the Romans in as good a light as possible. For that reason he frequently mentions desertions so that he can describe (perhaps falsely) how well the deserters were treated by the magnanimous conqueror. There is, no doubt, some truth in this. However, this possible exaggeration is more than balanced by Josephus’ hatred of the Zealots. It is as likely that he is overstating the completeness of the Zealot seal on escapes from the city. He wants to show the Zealots in as bad a light as possible, and, therefore, he repeatedly mentions their evil of forbidding their fellow-Jews the freedom of escape.

It would appear, then, that escape was possible at certain times for reasonably large numbers right up until the end of the siege.¹⁹

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17. *War* VI 421. But cf IV 88, where the large numbers are those who “had flocked from the seat of the war” to Jerusalem.

18. Translations of Josephus by Thackeray in Loeb series.

19. It is possible that escape might have been prohibitively difficult from the spring of 69 (when the Zealot factions not only controlled the exits of the city but also patrolled outside it) until the following spring (when they lost that outside control to Titus). Josephus, in following the movements of Vespasian and Titus, gives less information for this period in Jerusalem than for the time which followed.