

John J. Ensminger

## The Sadducean Persecution of the Christians in Rome and Jerusalem, A.D. 58 to 65<sup>1</sup>

By the time of Paul's arrival in Jerusalem in A.D. 57 or 58,<sup>2</sup> James, the brother of Jesus, was at the head of a congregation of many thousands, all zealous for the Law (Acts 21:20). James was concerned that Paul's reputation — that he had taught Jews in the diaspora to ignore the Law, to give up circumcising their sons, and generally to adopt a Greek way of life — would cause difficulties. He asked him to undertake the support of certain men under Nazarite vows. Paul agreed, but James' fears were realized anyway when certain Jews from Asia (perhaps from Ephesus)<sup>3</sup> recognized Paul and accused him of teaching against the Jews, their law, and their temple, and finally of taking Greeks into the inner courts of the temple, beyond the warning signs forbidding this. A riot ensued and Paul was saved from the mob by the commander of the cohort, and brought the next day before the Sanhedrin. There he had his first confrontation with the high priest, whom Paul called a whitewashed wall. This was Ananias, son of Nedeadeus, high priest from c. 48 to c. 59.<sup>4</sup> The Sanhedrin was stymied by a debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees over the question of the resurrection of the dead, one of the central differences between the two sects.

Before the hearing could continue, the commander of the cohort removed Paul to Caesarea because of a report of an assassination plot. In Caesarea, Paul was brought to trial before Felix, the brother of Pallas, one of the most powerful freedmen in Rome in the reign of Claudius. Pallas was still alive, and perhaps still in-

fluent.<sup>5</sup> Felix was married to Drusilla, younger sister of Agrippa II and Bernice, and the only Herodian with any power in Judea, except for Agrippa's control of the Temple precinct. The Sanhedrin hired a rhetor named Tertullus to handle the prosecution. The high priest and certain elders made the trip to Caesarea to indicate the importance they attached to the matter. Despite this, Felix refused to be pushed into a decision.

Felix adjourned the hearing to obtain further evidence, perhaps anticipating a bribe to release Paul (Acts 24:25). There may have been other reasons. Were there enough Christians in Caesarea that a riot seemed likely if he acceded to the prosecutorial demands? We may also wonder if perhaps Felix was intrigued by the possibility of a Judaism without the separatism inherent in the Law.<sup>6</sup>

Paul's case remained in suspense for two years while he was kept in prison. A new procurator, Festus, was appointed, who likewise refused to conclude the matter. He sent Paul to Rome. Whether this was in the nature of a formal appeal or of a transfer of jurisdiction cannot be determined on the evidence available.<sup>7</sup>



John Ensminger, LL.M., is an attorney and writer living in New York City. He is the editor of the journal *Taxation for Lawyers*. His research interests include society and religion in the first century. He is currently working on a historical novel on the Christians in Rome during the reign of Nero.

It seems likely that despite Paul's appeal, Festus could have dealt with the matter had he wished. Whatever factors deterred Felix from making a decision still obtained for Festus.

In Rome, Paul remained under house arrest for two years and our principal source leaves us (Acts 28:30-31). The length of the imprisonment is not so extreme if Josephus is correct in describing his own visit to Rome when he was twenty-six, therefore in 63 or 64, to obtain the release of priests who were arrested by Felix, which would mean prior to the procurator's departure from office in 60.<sup>8</sup> An angel

<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to thank Professor E. Earle Ellis for his invaluable advice and frequent encouragement.

<sup>2</sup>A later date seems preferable to 55, that suggested by E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 71. A. J. M. Wedderburn, "Some Recent Pauline Chronologies," *Expository Times* 92:4 (1981), 103-8; M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 137. E. Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973), 1:466 n.42 dates Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea from 56 to 58, or more likely 57 to 59 with Felix's recall in 60.

<sup>3</sup>F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I: The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Macmillan, 1920-1933), I:150.

<sup>4</sup>E. M. Smallwood, "High Priests and Politics in Roman Palestine," *Journal of Theological Studies*, new series, 13:1 (1962), 32; and Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 637 n.6.

<sup>5</sup>E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 271 n.46.

<sup>6</sup>Such interest is only identifiable later, M. Simon, *Verus Israel*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 101, but Felix was in an ideal position to see the development.

<sup>7</sup>F. Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 511.

<sup>8</sup>But see Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 281 n.84, suggesting that Josephus meant Albinus, not Felix. Against the theory that unprosecuted prisoners would be automatically released after two years, see A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 112.

had announced to Paul on the journey to Rome that he would appear before the emperor, yet we have no record of a proceeding (Acts 27:24). Certainly the Jews would have pressed the matter had they been given the opportunity. Did they have the opportunity?

We must consider Ishmael, high priest from perhaps 59 to 61.<sup>9</sup> He arrived in Rome probably 61 or 62,<sup>10</sup> perhaps remaining there as late as 65 or even later, along with Helcias, a treasury guard or temple captain, and ten first men (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.194). This group received the favor of Poppaea, either after her marriage to Nero (A.D. 62), or close enough to it that she had the effective power of an imperial wife. The delegation had been sent by Festus because of a dispute with Agrippa concerning the heightening of the wall around the inner courts of the temple, which the priests had undertaken in order to block Agrippa's view of the inner court, where the sacrifices took place. Agrippa had built onto the Hasmonean Palace, which adjoined the temple to the west, so as to give himself this view, presumably for entertainment.

Could the delegation of twelve have pursued the prosecution of Paul in Rome? The first problem is chronological. It is doubtful Poppaea's power could have been great enough to outweigh that of Agrippina's before her assassination in 59. In fact, it has been suggested that Poppaea's favoring of the delegation may have resulted from resentment of Agrippina's friendship with the Herodian family. Therefore, those dating Paul's imprisonment in the mid- to late-50s must presumably reject any Roman connection between Paul and Ishmael.

The next problem is procedural. Could a delegation arriving from Jerusalem have raised a secondary issue, the unresolved status of Paul's case? Since the embassy was granted by Festus for the priests to present their argument against Agrippa's viewing of the sacrifices, it would seem that the extraneous issue of Paul's prosecution could only be raised by express permission of the emperor.<sup>11</sup> However, the success of the mission on its central issue would likely have been reflected in granting a request of much less political concern to Nero. Certainly, if the conviction of Paul still mattered to the priestly hierarchy, the presence of such distinguished witnesses was important in the effective prosecution of the case.

Therefore, it seems probable that the prosecution of Paul could have been resumed in Rome, with the support and testimony of the Jewish delegation, in 61 or 62. 1 Clem. 5.2 tells us only that Paul was pursued because of zeal and jealousy and that he gave his testimony before the rulers (*marturesas epi ton*

*egoumenon*).<sup>12</sup> We cannot, of course, go much further in our speculation. If Haenchen is correct in supposing that Paul was convicted and executed,<sup>13</sup> perhaps something is added to his argument if one supposes that such an effective delegation pressed for Paul's conviction. This model — of killing Paul as a matter of political appeasement of the Jews — cannot be used if the death of Paul is argued to occur much later. After the outbreak of the revolt in 66, any prosecution would have had to be for purely Roman considerations. The dispute remains as to what happened as a result of the trial. The apocryphal acts are largely fictional, but perhaps correct in suggesting that Paul was beheaded.<sup>14</sup>

The embassy to Nero of twelve leading members of the Jerusalem hierarchy, perhaps most if not all of them priests, has occasioned surprisingly little comment in modern scholarship. At a time when Paul and perhaps Peter were in contact with the Jewish communities there, it could have had a significant effect on the early debates at the synagogues concerning the Christian message. Paul's letter to Rome presupposes divisions in the receiving community as to the importance of continuing adherence to the Law. It may explain why early support and interest of the Roman Jews (Acts 28:17-22) evaporated by the time of trial.<sup>15</sup>

The delegation is not likely to have confined itself to political appearances before the emperor and attendance on the imperial consort. The priests must have also become a focus of attention for Roman Jews. A passage of Plutarch may be important in this connection:

When (the Jews) celebrate their so-called Fast, at the height of the vintage, they set out tables of all sorts of fruit under tents and huts plaited for the most part of vines and ivy. They call the first of the two days Tabernacles. A few days later they celebrate another festival . . . in which they enter the temple each carrying a thyrsus . . . (T)hey use little trumpets . . . Others of them advance playing harps: these players are called in their language Levites . . .

The Jews . . . keep the Sabbath by inviting each other to drink and to enjoy wine; when more important business interferes with this custom, they regularly take at least a sip of neat wine . . . (T)he High Priest . . . leads the pro-

<sup>12</sup> 2 Tim. 4:17 may indicate that Paul escaped from Nero, the lion's mouth, M. Dibelius and H. Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 124. J. N. D. Kelly, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (London: A. & C. Black, 1963), 219.

<sup>13</sup> Conzelmann, *Acts*, 732.

<sup>14</sup> M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924), 295.

<sup>15</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1954), xxix, concerning 2 Tim. 4:16. The zeal and strife of which Clement speaks should not be restricted to the Christian community alone, nor seen as being strictly between Jews and Christians. The boundaries were not nearly so precise yet. D. W. O'Connor, *Peter in Rome* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 81 n.157.

<sup>9</sup> Haenchen, 665 n.2, to the effect that Ishmael was nominated by Agrippa in the procuratorship of Felix, which Haenchen terminates in 55. Smallwood, "High Priests and Politics," 32.

<sup>10</sup> Smallwood, *Jews Under the Roman Rule*, 279 n.80.

<sup>11</sup> F. Millar, *Emperor in Roman World*, 169.

cession at their festival wearing a mitre and clad in gold-embroidered fawnskin, a robe reaching to the ankles, and buskins, with many bells attached to his clothes and ringing below him as he walks.<sup>16</sup>

In his brilliant discussion of Judaism in the Greco-Roman world, Lightstone discusses this passage.<sup>17</sup> The description may be a flawed account of temple practices in Jerusalem, or of the temple of Onias at Leontopolis in Egypt. Noting the absence of reference to sacrifice, Lightstone also raises the intriguing possibility that it could also be an account of synagogue practice. He notes Paul's encounter with the Jewish exorcists at Ephesus, sons of the archiereus Sceva. This may suggest a kind of synagogue priesthood in Asia,<sup>18</sup> or may only indicate that the exorcists travelled from Judea. An additional possibility may be that the account is that of a delegation of priests, perhaps even the one we are discussing.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the priests celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles in Rome, taking those aspects of the liturgy which did not require the temple. The size of the delegation may also be significant. Is it possible the Sadducean code may have specified certain procedures which required the presence of ten priests, just as the Mishnah requires the presence of ten for prayer (M. Meg. 4.3)?<sup>20</sup>

Poppaea retained the high priest and the treasury guard as hostages after the mission accomplished its purpose, perhaps to deter any misuse of the privilege of privacy.<sup>21</sup> Though we may doubt the depth and character of Poppaea's theosebia (*Antiquities* 20.195), we may also suspect she found their practices appealing enough to retain them for their continued decoration. Some difficulty with the length of their retention must be seen in Josephus' failure to mention them in connection with his own visit to Rome in 64, where he had gone to obtain the release of certain priests.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Q. Conv. 4:671c. Loeb translation (pp. 363-65), deleting the discussion whereby the Jewish liturgy is "proven" to be related to Dionysus. The description is given by Moergenes, who, according to a footnote to the text, is otherwise unknown unless to be identified with that individual who is attributed with a life of Apollonius of Tyana by Philostratus, *Vit. Ap.* 1:3, III:41.

<sup>17</sup>J. N. Lightstone, *The Commerce of the Sacred*, Brown Judaic Studies No. 59 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 99.

<sup>18</sup>D. Georgi also argues for a non-Palestinian priesthood. *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 91 n.77.

<sup>19</sup>Plutarch could have heard the account in Rome, which he might have visited in the reign of Vespasian. D. A. Russell, *Plutarch* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 7.

<sup>20</sup>G. Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, II:36 on "deka," (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1978). T. Rajak sees the number as a reflection of a standard political unit for an embassy, *Josephus: The Historian and His Society* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 40. Schiffman suggests that the number may indicate the size of a governing body of Jerusalem and the temple. L. H. Schiffman, *Sectarian Law in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Brown Judaic Studies (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), 24. He also notes the number's significance in terms of formal meals, 196.

<sup>21</sup>Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 278.

<sup>22</sup>T. Rajak, *Josephus* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 39. See the marginal notes of the Loeb translation of Josephus, *Vita* 86, p. 7. Schurer, I:466 n.42 gives the date as 63/64. See Lake, *The Beginnings*, V:321.

Rajak is likely correct in rejecting the suggestion that Josephus was trying to obtain the release of Ishmael and Helcias. Josephus indicates that he was introduced to Poppaea through a Jewish actor of whom Nero was fond, named Aliturus.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps Josephus makes no mention of the priests because they could not, in this instance, be influential. It is even possible that the arrested priests were among their opponents. It may not be accidental that at *Antiquities* 20.180, immediately after mentioning the appointment of Ishmael as high priest, Josephus describes the increase in enmity between the high priests and the leaders of the populace.

Ishmael, the high priest, probably died in Cyrene about 73 (BJ 6.114). Had Ishmael returned to Judea before the outbreak of the revolt, after Poppaea's death in 65, he might have been expected to have been settled in one of the pacified areas of Galilee. A late tradition holds that Titus settled 30,000 Jews in Punic territory after the revolt.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps Ishmael did not leave Rome until 66 or 67, after the revolt had broken out.

If Ishmael and Helcias remained in Rome through 65, they would have been at court when Poppaea bore a daughter and then lost her. Moreover, they would have been at court when the fire broke out, for which the Christians were blamed. Poppaea has been implicated in this persecution.<sup>25</sup> If this connection is made, it is but a small step to suggest that the members of the Jewish delegation, who may be supposed to have discussed divergent forms of Judaism with the empress, could have been responsible for the idea.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulty of explaining the reason the Christians were blamed for the fire has long been recognized.<sup>27</sup> We must account for the fact that during the reign of Nero there seems to have been sufficient information about the Christians to distinguish them from Jews, whereas thirty years later, under Domitian, no such distinction was made.<sup>28</sup> The number of Christians must have been considerably greater by the time of Domitian. The influence of the Jerusalem priests on Poppaea is the most credible explanation.

Let us return to the death of James, the brother of

<sup>23</sup>"Without a doubt an apostate, even if he retained enough national consciousness to befriend Josephus." Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 281 n.84.

<sup>24</sup>M. Simon, *Verus Israel*, 303 n.160.

<sup>25</sup>J. Beaujeu, *L'Incendie de Rome et les chretiens* (Brussels: Collection Latomus xlix, 1960), 40.

<sup>26</sup>The suggestion has unfortunately been seen as reflecting modern anti-Semitism. J. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960), 28 n.2. What should be observed is (1) the Sadducees were in the midst of strife which was rapidly eroding their power and they could be expected to react in such a way as to attempt to preserve that power, and (2) they may have only planted the idea of blaming the Christians by describing their fiery apocalyptic descriptions.

<sup>27</sup>V. M. Scramuzza, "The Policy of the Early Roman Emperors towards Judaism," K. Lake, *The Beginnings* V:296-97, suggests that the blame was deflected from the Jews onto the Christians with the help of Poppaea and Aliturus.

<sup>28</sup>Simon, 117.

Jesus, and other leaders (perhaps including John the son of Zebedee<sup>29</sup>) of the Christians.<sup>30</sup> They may have been charged with blasphemy. The persecution happened in the administrative hiatus between the death of Festus and the arrival of Albinus. The perpetrator is Ananus, a priest Josephus praises for his conduct in the war.<sup>31</sup> Yet here, Josephus seems to feel that the action was extraordinary and that the replacement of Ananus was incumbent upon Agrippa.<sup>32</sup> Evidently, there was sufficient opposition to Ananus that his continued authority could be a threat to the peace. That the Pharisees were involved in this must mean that the majority of the nation had turned against Ananus.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, Josephus may have also seen the removal of Ananus from the high priesthood as one of the factors that hastened the descent into revolution.<sup>34</sup>

The event took place in 62 and was connected even in antiquity to Paul<sup>35</sup> (Eusebius 2.23.1-11, citing Hegesippus). That is, it may have happened because James had not denounced Paul, or perhaps because he had accepted an offering from the Pauline congregations, with this being seen as a derogation of the temple tax.<sup>36</sup> In the pseudo-Clementine Recognitions, c. 70, Paul is depicted as Simon Magus, whose mission is given by the opponents of James as proof of the flawed nature of the Christian message.<sup>37</sup>

S. G. F. Brandon<sup>38</sup> speculated that James may have become a champion of the lesser priests in their disputes with the chief priests, and that this is reflected in the later depictions of James as a priest or high priest. One of the principal exponents of the suppression of the lesser priests was Ishmael, though he was to have been in Rome at the time of the persecution

of James.<sup>39</sup> Brandon argued that James had been looked to as one who might help quiet the people, but who instead heightened messianic expectations.<sup>40</sup>

That the Sadducees were likely to have opposed the Christians is not surprising; they were an embattled group in the decade prior to the revolution. A mere list of conflicts which concerned them is impressive.

- (1) Pharisaic opposition to the Sadducean penal code.<sup>41</sup>
- (2) Friction between factions of high priests. *Antiquities* 20.214.
- (3) Conflicts with ordinary priests. Tosefta Menahot xiii, 21; B. T. Pesahim 57a.
- (4) Conflict between priests and Levites. *Antiquities* 20.214.
- (5) General conflict between rich and poor. *Antiquities* 20.219.<sup>42</sup>

Inevitably, there was continuing friction with Greeks, Romans, and Samaritans.

The argument presented here does not enhance the theory that the Christians took part in the revolt of 66 to 70. There is at least one tradition that suggests that after the death of James, the Jerusalem community divided into factions in any case (Eusebius 4.22.5). Nor can the Pella tradition establish a unitary Christian response to the revolt,<sup>43</sup> even if the tradition is accepted. The fervor of revolt undoubtedly swept many along in spite of their better judgment.

### Conclusions

The Sadducean position was one of resistance to social and religious change, to popular movements, and generally to the forces eroding their authority. They could not stop the trend, but they could single out certain strands within their opposition. The Christians were attacked in this way.<sup>44</sup>

While the information is lacking to do more than hypothesize concerning the continued prosecution of Paul in Rome, it seems likely that the high priests would have carried their polemical stance toward Christians to Rome. There they would have influenced the Jewish community, as well as Poppaea. The Christians had remained close to the synagogue in Rome and were vulnerable to the attack. The strife which Clement says killed Peter and Paul began.

Ishmael and Helcias remained at court. Though

<sup>29</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Peter, Stephen, James and John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979), 137; M. Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark* (London: SCM Press, 1985), 13 n.80.

<sup>30</sup>W. A. Beardslee rejects the account in Hegesippus as legendary, *Interpreter's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 2:794. B. Reicke, "Judaean-Christianity and the Jewish establishment, A.D. 33-66," in E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule, ed., *Jesus and the Politics of his Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 146.

<sup>31</sup>Rajak, 106.

<sup>32</sup>Brandon, "The Death of James the Just: a New Interpretation," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 57-69. On page 63, Brandon says that Josephus is "curiously neutral about the whole affair," suggesting that this neutrality is occasioned by a combination of the belief that James was innocent with the later admiration for Ananus' conduct in the war.

<sup>33</sup>That the Pharisees were more political than is generally acknowledged and that they represented the majority of Palestinian Jews is well argued by G. Alon, *Jews, Judaism and the Classical World* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977).

<sup>34</sup>Brandon, id., suggests that an alteration of the text of Josephus may explain why Origen believed that the death of James the Just was the cause of the revolt and the consequent destruction.

<sup>35</sup>J. L. Martyn, *The Gospel of John in Christian History: Essays for Interpreters* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 144.

<sup>36</sup>This is not to say that the Christian community in Jerusalem had not suffered. 1 Thess. 2:14-15, H. Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity* (New York: Abingdon, 1973), 111.

<sup>37</sup>See discussion of J. L. Martyn, *The Gospel of John*, 61-62.

<sup>38</sup>*Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967), 125.

<sup>39</sup>Pesahim 57a, cited in Smallwood, *Jews Under Roman Rule*, 28.

<sup>40</sup>S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (London: SPCK, 1978), 95-99.

<sup>41</sup>J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 264 n.60.

<sup>42</sup>Perhaps banditry is to be listed here. Rajak, *Josephus*, p. 123 on the causes of banditry.

<sup>43</sup>G. Ludemann, "The Successors of pre-70 Jerusalem Christianity: A Critical Evaluation of the Pella Tradition," in E. P. Sanders, ed., *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

<sup>44</sup>Perhaps this explains the significant number of references in the New Testament to archiereis, as opposed to mention of a single high priest. TWNT, III:271.

Josephus refers to them as hostages, they were probably honored spiritual advisers to Poppaea. When Nero needed someone to blame for the fire, Poppaea could have mentioned what the priests had said about the apocalyptic expectations of the Christians. Perhaps even the priests saw the opportunity to cleanse the Jewish community of an element perceived as

dangerous. A number of hypotheses in the chain of cause and effect can be developed here, but that the Sadducean high priests were an important link in that chain is becoming harder to deny. The persecution of the Christians from A.D. 58 to A.D. 65 was part of the Sadducees' last effort to retain control of their world.

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