

"PAUL, PETER, JOHN, AND JAMES"
(from *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity*)
(by Paul Barnett)

After the Romans rescued Paul from the Jewish mob, he languished in prison in Caesarea Maritima for two years. On taking office in 60 the procurator Festus dispatched Paul to Rome for trial before the emperor since Paul was a Roman citizen. In c. 62 Festus died after only two years as governor of the province. In the interregnum, before the new procurator Albinus arrived, the high priest Annas acted against James. Josephus narrates what happened.

Annas . . . followed the school of the Sadducees who are more heartless than any other of the Jews . . . when they sit in judgment. Possessed of such a character, Annas thought that he had a favorable opportunity because Festus was dead and Albinus was still on his way. And so he convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them a man named James, the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the law and delivered them up to be stoned (Josephus, Antiquities 20:197-200).

Since only the governor had the authority (*imperium*) from the emperor to impose the death penalty, Annas's action must be regarded as illegal under the Roman settlement. That James, like Stephen, was stoned suggests an accusation of blasphemy against the laws of Moses. This was almost certainly a false charge. According to Josephus, "those who were strict in observance of the law," that is, Pharisees, protested first to Agrippa the Younger and then to the incoming governor. Agrippa deposed the high priest for illegally convening the Sanhedrin.

Annas must have had other motives to kill James, though we can only guess what they might have been. Was it due to jealousy? Since James presided over a large community, did the high priest somehow see him as a rival? Is it noteworthy that this Annas was son of the former high priest Annas, the real power behind his son-in-law Caiaphas under whom Jesus was delivered to the Romans for crucifixion? Was it because James, unlike Jesus, made no messianic claims that could be interpreted as treason that Annas felt he must strike before the Roman magistrate arrived? Did Annas the Younger somehow see James, brother of the so-called Christ, as a rival messianic dynast? Indeed, James was probably appointed as the leading "pillar" of the Jerusalem church after Peter's withdrawal from Jerusalem during the persecutions of Agrippa the elder, precisely because he was brother of the Christ. At James's death, another close relative of Jesus, his cousin Symeon, was appointed leader of the church in Jerusalem.

The evidence from Josephus suggests that James, the head of a substantial community in Jerusalem, was highly regarded within the city. Dramatic events followed the stoning of James at the instigation of the high priest Annas.

Those of the inhabitants of the city who were considered the most fair-minded and who were strict in their observance of the Law were offended at this. They therefore secretly sent to king Agrippa urging him, for Ananus [Annas] had not been correct in his first step, to order him to desist from any further such actions. Certain of them even went to meet Albinus who was on his way to Alexandria, to inform him that Ananus had no authority to convene the Sanhedrin without his consent (Josephus, Antiquities 20:201).

Most likely the high priest and the Sanhedrin had James stoned for the sin of blasphemy, as also occurred with



Stephen. This was a point of contention with the Roman authorities, who held that only the governor, the surrogate of the emperor, had the authority to execute people in a Roman province. The action of those of the inhabitants of the city who . . . were strict in their observance of the Law" must refer to leading Pharisees. Clearly they acted out of sympathy and respect for James. They would have approved of the Sanhedrin possessing the power to stone blasphemers, and they certainly would have resisted the Roman demand that this body only meet at the approval of the procurator. The incident portrays James as a well-respected and devout member of the community of Jerusalem. These religious leaders would not have acted in the way they did had this not been the case.

So ended the life and ministry of James of Nazareth, the brother of Jesus the Christ. At his death as a martyr in c. 62 he had been a member of the Jerusalem church for about thirty years and its leader for at least fifteen years. He saw the Jerusalem church as the rebuilt temple of David, with Gentiles welcome to its courts. He had imposed minimal conditions for the inclusion of Gentiles; he did not support the demands for their circumcision. Although preeminent at the Council in c. 49 he appears to have effectively lost his independence despite the remarkable growth of the Jerusalem church under his leadership. Indeed, his influence may have diminished precisely because of the expansion of the church. The membership became so "zealous for the law" and sensitive to the complaints against Paul because of outraged Jews scattered from Jerusalem in the diaspora.

The years after the missionary agreement between the delegates in Jerusalem in c. 47 saw remarkable developments within Christianity. Paul continued his travels, first in the Aegean region, then toward and in Rome, then again in the Aegean region before his execution under Nero in Rome in the mid sixties. Though Paul won Gentiles for faith in the Christ, his continuing motive was the redemption of Israel (see Rom 9—11).

Peter left Israel after c. 49, eventually traveling through Corinth to Rome. He was caught in Nero's massive assault against the Christians in the pogrom¹ of 64. Though called to witness to the Jews, Peter seems to have expressed his ministry increasingly to Gentiles, in all probability God-fearers.

His friend and fellow disciple John Zebedee was initially also an apostle to the Jews. He too may have migrated from Israel after the Jerusalem Council c. 49. It appears that John came to Roman Asia where he imposed a powerful influence on the churches and on key individuals during the half century before his death c. 98. John's ministry appears to have been to Gentiles; the Jews of Asia were both numerous and hostile.

James alone remained in Israel, where he presided over a large community of Jewish believers. This was a conservative enclave of Jews who were obedient to the covenant of Israel. James was stoned by an illegal process at the hands of the high priest. It is a measure of James's prominence in Jerusalem that his death is described at such length by the historian Josephus.

These four leaders—Paul, Peter, John, and James—are each associated with colleagues: Paul with his coworkers, Peter with his surrogate "son" Mark and his amanuensis Silvanus, John with his unidentified circle in Ephesus, James with other "brothers of the Lord" and "the elders" in Jerusalem. From these four men and their associates came the four main blocks of New Testament literature.

¹ A "pogrom" is an organized massacre of an ethnic group. In this case, the campaign was Nero's assault on the Christian community in Rome. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire while it likely had been set by Nero himself.