# PETER AT THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM

Professor Cullmann has recently [1] put forward the novel opinion that St Peter, though made head of the Church by Christ, gradually faded out, going off as a missionary after the death of James the Greater in A.D. 44 or 45, and leaving the headship to James, brother of the Lord. One test of this opinion is the position of Peter when some time later the Council of Jerusalem meets and James presides. Whatever else may be said about this new opinion, it is here desired to examine how far the evidence favours the idea that James, and not Peter, was the President of the Council. It must be admitted at once that some French Catholic writers have in recent times taken the same view, perhaps through sheer weariness with the old-fashioned papal controversies, but one is glad to see that the *Catholic Commentary* upholds, though briefly, the traditional Catholic view.

The first difficulty which one meets when trying to ascertain the true nature of the Council is the divergence of the two types of text in which *Acts* has been transmitted to us. While the *codex Bezae*, along with Irenaeus, Ephrem and others, makes the dispute of XV.1 at Antioch take place between partisans of Peter and of Paul, attributes the order that Paul should go up to Jerusalem to these partisans and seems to omit mention of the ex-Pharisees in *v.* 5, the text of *Vaticanus*, *Sinaiticus* and the other major codices gives no suggestion that Peter's followers are against Paul ; it leaves vague the responsibility for the decision that Paul should go up to Jerusalem, not regarding this trip as a bringing of Paul to judgment, and it clearly names his adversaries in *v.* 5 as converts from among the Pharisees. Between these two views one can hardly decide with security until the whole relationship of the "Western" text of *Acts* to the more usual one in *Sinaiticus*, etc. has been decided. However that question may be settled, it is clear that the view of the episode held by the *codex Bezae*, Ephrem and the rest must represent the tradition of a large part of the Church from at least the middle of the second century, and is therefore of much value in an historical question of this kind. When Ephrem writes : [2] "These men were of the Jews, men made disciples of by Peter and his. . . . They began to say, Unless according to the teaching of Peter and of his companions you believe, you cannot be saved", and then goes on to

[1] O. Cullmann, *Saint Pierre, disciple, apôtre, martyr*, 1952, pp. 36 and 42.

[2] These extracts from Ephrem come from his *Commentary* on *Acts*, an English version of which was published by F. C. Conybeare in VOL. III of *The Beginnings of Christianity*, London 1926, pp. 380–453, from the Armenian. The work had been known but little used before Conybeare's translation.

describe how at the Council Peter was moved by the Holy Ghost to speak in favour of Paul's position, he may be following an inferior text, but he is showing at the same time that he had no illusions about the importance of Peter at the Council. Even Chrysostom, with his remark on xv.5–7 that Peter had been a Judaiser up to the present time, seems to have shared the views of Ephrem and (along with many modern scholars) to have supposed that the episode of Paul's withstanding Peter to his face at Antioch was already over when the Council began.

The Council is represented as a full-dress assembly of the early Church. On good Hellenistic lines its decree begins with the consecrated words: "Whereas . . ., it hath seemed good to us being met together. . . ." The assembly describes itself as: "The Apostles and presbyter-brethren", though from the narrative it appears that the whole multitude of the faithful was present, as one might expect in view of the fact that in the first fully-recorded theological assembly of early times, that described in Origen's *Dialektos*, the people are found to be all present and listening quietly, as if it was their habit to be present at such times. Hellenistic assemblies usually consisted of magistrates, senate and people, and it does not seem that this first effort of the Church would be an exception. Even among the Jews the same three-tier structure was kept in the division of priests, Sanhedrin and people, as many Roman documents show. The importance of this assimilation to general practice will be seen presently.

James, brother of the Lord and Bishop of Jerusalem, who is described by Jewish and Christian historians alike as having suffered martyrdom in or near the year 62 at the hands of the Jewish mob, cannot with absolute certainty be identified with James the Less, one of the Twelve. If he is not one of the Twelve, it is perhaps somewhat easier to argue that Peter must have been superior to him when the Council met, but the question of his identity does not greatly affect the matter at issue. The Founder's kin seem to have kept the Jerusalem bishopric in their hands, much as the House of Annas kept the High-priesthood, though not by the same methods, until the year 107, if not longer, and this idea of family-bishoprics is also attested for Asia Minor in the second century by the famous boast of Polycrates of Ephesus [1] that he has had seven kinsmen bishops. When in the third or fourth century the Jewish-Christian forgeries called the *Clementine Homilies*, on which Cullmann bases part of his case, represent Clement of Rome writing to James and calling him Bishop of Bishops, they are indulging in a piece of Jewish fantasy, and are of no value to the sober historian.

[1] In Eusebius, *Eccles. Hist.* v. 24.6.

Ephrem's description of what Peter does at the Council is of great interest. He comments : "But Shmavon (i.e. Peter), who in Antioch kept silence, when Paul stepping forth spoke against the law in Jerusalem, there dwelt in him the Holy Spirit, and he began to speak against the upholders of the Law thus". Reading in his text that Peter spoke "in the Holy Ghost" he interpreted this to mean that Peter underwent a conversion from his state of weak indecision at Antioch and now recovered his clearness of vision which he had enjoyed in the Cornelius episode. It may have been so ; at all events there is no chance of mistaking the attitude of Peter now. He proposes and carries the abrogation of the rule of circumcision for convert Gentiles. The silence which follows Peter's argument is thus interpreted by Ephrem : "On a sudden they reached conviction and ceased the inquiry. For the elders acquiesced in the words of Shmavon, and without dissension was annulled the dissension through the counsel of the Spirit". That Paul and Barnabas follow this up by an argument that God has shown His approval of their past conduct, in admitting uncircumcised Gentiles, because He has worked miracles in their favour, must have confirmed the Council in its acceptance of Peter's view.

When James rises to speak, it would seem that little more is left to be said. But he wishes to propose an amendment or rider to the general resolution of Peter. This is quite a normal practice in the legislative assemblies of Hellenistic times. Many surviving decrees give the actual words of the speakers, the text coming from the original proposer, and the rider being introduced by another speaker who is reported in this fashion : "The rest as Hipparchus said ; but as to a matter of detail, let this or that be done". James is doing just this. The fact that he begins with the words : "I judge" has misled many to think that he is summing up a debate, and giving the verdict of a presiding judge. In fact, the formula *ego decerno* (I judge) was used in the Roman Senate by each Senator when giving his opinion about a measure proposed, as anyone can see from such a speech as Cicero's *De provinciis consularibus*, which was spoken before the Senate. That we are entitled to interpret James's words thus is clear from the evidence of Irenaeus and Ephrem who read in their texts : "I for my part judge". One is not entitled to say that this is simply an attempt on the part of these Fathers to exalt Peter without prejudging the question at issue especially when there is good ancient evidence (such as Thucydides 1.87) for the use of *κρίνω* in the meaning of "to judge by giving one's vote". Père Dupont, O.S.B., is quite correct in saying (as he does in his edition of *Acts* for the *Bible de Jérusalem*) that the word is here used in its most solemn meaning, as also in Acts XVI.4 and XXI.25, but it is a complete *non sequitur* for him to conclude from this that therefore

James is presiding. The other examples are plural, this is singular; and as a singular it must be interpreted.

It is interesting to see the fate of James's rider in the ultimate formulation of the decree. He proposes it without limitation of place, yet in the decree it is only the communities of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, to whom the regulations apply, which James has put forward as a *modus vivendi* for mixed communities of Jewish and Gentile converts. The communities in Iconium and Lystra are not covered by the decree, although they must certainly have been in existence when it was passed, and it seems reasonable to conclude that St Paul's silence about it when later on he is discussing food-laws with the Corinthians (in 1 Cor. VIII.1–13) is a sign that he did not understand it to apply to such communities. James's scriptural phrase about "the pollutions of idols" has also been edited in the final decree, and has become the more intelligible word "things offered to idols in sacrifice". Luke does not describe in detail the work of drafting the decree, but he shows by his text that such work has been carried out, and he leaves us to guess at what he has not reported.

In recent times some controversial use has been made by Anglicans of a passage in Chrysostom's commentary on *Acts*,[1] which is thought to give James the presidency at the Council. Chrysostom is under the impression that the Simeon to whom James refers is not Peter but some other speaker whose discourse has not been reported. He then proceeds to comment: "There was no pride in the Church but much freedom from punctilio. See how Paul speaks after Peter, and no-one shouts him down. James is patient and does not leap to his feet, for he it was who had been elected into the position of rule. John says nothing here, nor the other apostles, but they are silent and do not repine". He has made it clear what position of rule James holds by saying at the outset that he was bishop of the Church in Jerusalem. Hence it is quite clear also that Chrysostom regards Peter as superior to James. He does not represent James as likely to jump to his feet and start speaking before Peter, but, when Peter has finished, he thinks it would have been natural for James to follow, and not Paul. Earlier in his treatment of the episode Chrysostom had pointed out that Peter allowed the debate to go on in the Church first of all, and then spoke himself, thus suggesting that he was in command, and indeed, as Abbot Chapman [2] showed long ago, one cannot read far into this commentary on *Acts* without discovering how exalted a position Chrysostom allows to Peter. His concluding words on this episode, which have been badly misquoted in a recent controversy, can then be understood in their proper light.

[1] Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts*, Migne, P. G., VOL. LX, pp. 239–40.
[2] *Studies in the Early Papacy*, London 1928, p. 89.

After the remarks about lack of pride and punctilio, he goes on : "Peter had spoken somewhat more vehemently at the beginning, but James more mildly. Thus should one in great power always act, leaving to others the unpleasant things while basing his own argument on milder considerations. Rightly does he say : Simeon has explained, seeing that this Simeon gave the opinions of others". Here the comparison is between James, who is in a position of great power, and the unknown Simeon, who simply repeated, according to Chrysostom, the arguments of Peter ; and it was obviously tactful, on this view, for James to refer not directly to Peter, but to Simeon who had said very much the same thing. By ascribing the forthright view to Simeon rather than to Peter, says Chrysostom, James has made an opening for his milder amendment.

If this is the true account of Chrysostom's treatment of the Council-episode, it is astonishing that Anglicans could have made so much out of it. Recently there has appeared again the old objection about James's great power which in the earlier editions of his work *The Roman Catholic Claims* Gore had used, but which is missing from the eleventh edition ; now it is given by K. N. Ross [1] as if it was all that Chrysostom had to say on the position of Peter in the Council. What is worse, it has been publicly quoted by another Anglican as if the words were : Thus should one in *greater* power always act. If one had to give Chrysostom's real summary of the Council, one would find it at the beginning of this *Homily* where he points out how providential it was that the proposal to annul the rule of circumcision came from Peter and Paul who did not remain at Jerusalem, while James, who was bishop and teacher of the people there, could not be held liable for the decision, though he did not disagree with it. It was the decision of the whole Council, but if his flock afterwards murmured, James could always put the blame on Peter. This is hardly the conduct of a President in regard to his Council.

Anglicans sometimes plead in support of their view the text of Gal. II.9 where James, *Cephas* and John are enumerated by Paul in that order as if that would show how they stood in order of dignity and power at the time. The text is by no means certain ; a rival version which gives *Peter*, James and John as the order goes back at least to the time of Marcion, and this version is followed by Origen, Jerome, Ephrem, Ambrosiaster, Victorinus and others. But even if one supposes that the right reading is James, Cephas, John, the order can be explained reasonably enough. In a recent article Fr Gaechter, S.J.,

[1] *Why I am not a Roman Catholic*, London 1953, p. 48. "It was James, not Peter, who summed up the deliberations of the Apostles at the Council . . . etc.".

of Innsbruck [1] has put his finger on the reason. He argues that James is put first because Paul is arguing with a particular Jewish opposition in view. If he can show that James above all, the leader of the party of the Law, had approved of him, that is even more important than the approval of Cephas for the present argument. That he does not think lightly however of Peter's approval appears from the use of his more solemn name Cephas, which is not often found in the pages of Paul's letters. Abbot Chapman in a now famous article in *Revue Bénedictine*, 1912, based a long argument upon this change in Paul's usage from Peter to Cephas, and the least that one can say about this argument is that it showed that where such a change occurred Paul was giving his language a more solemn tone.

The ambiguity of the opening words of St Peter's first Epistle means that it may be addressed to the strangers *of* the Dispersion or to the sojourners *in* the Dispersion, to Jews or to Gentiles, and hence one cannot argue that Peter's subsequent work was entirely done for the Jews. It would thus appear that Paul is somewhat over-emphasising his case in Gal. II.9–10 when he says that Peter was committed to work for the circumcised alone in the future. That may have been the major part of Peter's work, just as the major part of Paul's was with the Gentiles. But just as it is clear that Paul converted quite a number of Jews after this time, so it must be allowed that Peter was not without his conquests among the Gentiles. Paul is using a Jewish manner of speech in view of a Jewish opposition and his words should not be stressed to the point where it is surmised that Peter goes out from Jerusalem as the deputy of James, a missionary to the Jews of the Dispersion.

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[1] "Jakobus von Jerusalem" in *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, II (1954), p. 144.