

# EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN TRANSJORDAN

Bastiaan Van Elderen

## Summary

*Considerable archaeological field work is currently being conducted in the area of the Decapolis, including the author's involvement in the excavations of Abila. This article reviews the few references to northern Transjordan in the New Testament and the references in early Christian literature which suggest that Jewish Christianity flourished in Transjordan in the early Christian centuries. Archaeological evidence indicates a rich floruit of Byzantine Christianity in Transjordan. A study of literary allusions relating to this area and the current archaeological work promise new light on this little-known phase of early Christianity.*

One of the blank pages in ancient church history is the beginning stages of the movement of Christianity to the east. The movement of Christianity as presented in the Acts of the Apostles was to the west. Nothing is reported about the movement of Christianity to the south apart from the report of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch; or of the movement to the east apart from the report of Christians in Damascus whom Saul sought to apprehend. On the other hand, there are some scattered references in the literature of the early church. In view of increasing archaeological work in the Transjordan area it may be useful to assemble some of these data from the literary sources to provide a framework in which to evaluate this current and future archaeological work.

Perhaps a word of caution is in order first of all. Archaeological data relating to pre-Constantinian Christianity are extremely limited. To a certain extent this is understandable, since prior to the Edict of Toleration in the early fourth century Christianity was a proscribed religion. Hence, many Christian activities had to be covert and there was little or no public evidence of Christian architecture. Thus, in

excavating a pre-Constantinian site it is virtually impossible to identify with certainty Christian remains. Perhaps the major exception is the house-church uncovered at Dura Europos dating from the middle of the third century.

On the other hand, after the Edict of Toleration there was a huge flurry of church building. Churches, shrines, and Christian cemeteries from this period are found throughout the Mediterranean world. Transjordan is no exception. Remains of numerous churches, often with colourful mosaic floors and massive architecture, from the fifth to the seventh centuries are found throughout this area. Practically every village had a church and in numerous places there were multiple churches; for example, at Madaba there were as many as 14 churches, at Jerash at least 14 churches, at Um el-Jemal 14 churches, and at Abila we have identified 5 churches already. Multiple churches are also found at Gadara, Rihab, Ma'in, Mt. Nebo, Mukhayyat, Abu Sarbut, Masouh, Amman, Um er-Rasas, etc. All this indicates how extensive Byzantine Christianity was in Transjordan.<sup>1</sup> This presence of multiple churches in many towns and cities (some in close proximity to each other) reflects the large size and wealth of the Christian communities. The inscriptions in mosaics in these multiple churches do not reveal any tensions or differences in theology or liturgy. They often do identify donors and individuals honoured or remembered. This suggests that a given church or chapel may be the religious centre of a certain clan or family. In other words, these multiple churches represent a sociological phenomenon more than theological diversity (as found in modern Western Christianity). As more attention is given to sociological studies of ancient communities (an important ancillary discipline in archaeological research), the social and religious stratification in these communities can be more clearly delineated.

In sharp contrast to these extensive Christian remains after Constantine, there are virtually no archaeological data for the church in Transjordan in the pre-Constantinian period. Given the very limited literary sources, we have about three

---

<sup>1</sup>B. Van Elderen, 'Byzantine Churches and Mosaics in Transjordan' in L. Geraty and L.G. Herr (eds.), *The Archaeology of Jordan and Other Studies* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1986) 237-46.

centuries of church history in Transjordan about which very little is known. However, in view of the extensive remains of Byzantine Christianity in this area, there surely must have been a significant earlier development.

It is proposed to review the data we have regarding the rise of Christianity and its literature in Transjordan by considering: (I) Transjordan in the New Testament, (II) other evidence of early Christianity in Transjordan, and (III) other Christian movements and writings relating to Transjordan.

## I. Transjordan in the New Testament

Transjordan, or the territory east of the Jordan River, is not frequently referred to in the New Testament. Apart from the Gospels there are only a few references to this territory. At Pentecost Arabs were present in Jerusalem (Acts 2:11) and Paul mentions that after his conversion he went to Arabia (Gal. 1:17). Christians in Damascus were the object of Saul's (*i.e.* Paul's) persecution activity, as reported in Acts 9 and parallels.

However, although not often referred to, the area we designate as Transjordan plays an interesting role in the Gospels. An examination of these data also reveals some striking redactional activity on the part of each evangelist.

All three synoptic gospels describe the initial response of Jesus' early Galilean ministry in terms of crowds coming from both Cis-Jordan and Transjordan. The territories mentioned by Matthew are: ὅλη ἡ Συρία, Γαλιλαία, Δεκάπολις, Ἱεροσόλυμα, Ἰουδαία, πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου (4:24f.). Mark describes these territories more comprehensively: Γαλιλαία, Ἰουδαία, Ἱεροσόλυμα, Ἰδουμαία, πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, περὶ Τύρον καὶ Σιδῶνα (3:7f.). On the other hand, in Luke the description is more limited: πάσα ἡ Ἰουδαία, Ἱερουσαλήμ, ἡ παράλιος Τύρου καὶ Σιδῶνος (6:17), although some manuscripts (*e.g.*  $\aleph^*$  W) add καὶ (τῆς) Περαιᾶς.

Another interesting reference to πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου is in Matthew's citation of Isaiah 8:23-9:1 in 4:14. Reference is here made to the two tribes of Israel, Zebulon and Naphtali, where Nazareth and Capernaum are located respectively. The ὁδὸς θαλάσσης appears to be the main trade route between

Damascus and Caesarea Maritima which touches the Sea of Galilee at Capernaum. However, what then is *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου*? To identify this as the province of Perea would place one of these geographical designations in a totally different area—unless one were to combine Galilee and Perea as the territory of Herod Antipas. Perhaps, it would be more natural to locate this reference to *πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου* in the area of northern Transjordan. This identification would also comport with the summary reference to *ὅλη ἡ Συρία* in 4:24.<sup>2</sup>

The first journey by Jesus outside Galilee is a visit to a city of the Decapolis, which is reported by all three Synoptics (Mt. 8:28-34 = Mk. 5:1-20 = Lk. 8:26-39). However, the identification of the city is a very complex textual problem which can only be noted here. NA26 and GNT4 both read *εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γαδαρηνῶν* (*i.e.* Gadara, modern Um Qeis) in Matthew 8:28 and *εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γερασηνῶν* (*i.e.* Gerasa, modern Jerash) in Mark 5:1 and Luke 8:26. Other variants include *Γεργεσηνῶν* (*i.e.* Gergesa, modern Kursi) and *Γεργυστηνῶν* (*i.e.* Gergustes). The former may be a conjecture by Origen, as suggested by Tj. Baarda.<sup>3</sup> Although Gergesa is weakly attested in the manuscripts, topographically it fits the Synoptic data the best, being located on the high Golan bluffs overlooking the east coast of the Sea of Galilee. And so in many recent discussions it is the preferred reading (*e.g.*, Fitzmyer prefers this reading for Matthew, but not for Luke, and believes it antedates Origen).<sup>4</sup> Recent excavations near Tell el-Kursi on the east shore of the Sea of Galilee have revived interest in locating this extra-Galilean exorcism at Gergesa. The ruins of a monastery, basilica, and a chapel built in the late fifth or early sixth century indicate that this was an important site in Byzantine Christianity.<sup>5</sup> There is also a dedicatory inscription in

<sup>2</sup>See R. Riesner, 'Bethany beyond the Jordan (John 1:28). Topography, Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel', *TynB* 38 (1987) 29-63.

<sup>3</sup>Tj. Baarda, 'Gadarenes, Gerasenes, Gergesenes and the "Diatessaron" Tradition' in E.E. Ellis and M. Wilcox (eds.), *Neotestamentica et Semitica* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1969) 181-97 (esp. 185-88).

<sup>4</sup>J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX* (Anchor Bible 28; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 737.

<sup>5</sup>V. Tzafaris, 'A Pilgrimage to the Site of the Swine Miracle', *BAR* 15 (March/April 1989) 45-51.

the baptistry dated AD 685. However, there appears to be no evidence in the ruins to associate this site with the exorcism by Jesus. As noted above, topographically this site is preferred over Gerasa and Gadara which are located at some distance from a body of water in which the swine could drown. However, textually Gerasa is the preferred reading, given the evidence of P75 and B in Luke. Unfortunately, very little is known at present about the administration and extent of political control of the cities of the Decapolis.<sup>6</sup> More information on this political dimension could clarify the textual problem. In any case, this was an excursion by Jesus into the area of the Decapolis reported by all three Synoptics. However, from here on each evangelist reports Jesus' travels outside Galilee differently.

By omitting the material in Mark 6:45-8:26 (often referred to as the Great Omission) after 9:17 Luke keeps Jesus in Galilee, leaving out the northern trip to Tyre and Sidon, and including the episode about the Syro-Phoenician woman and the Feeding of the 4,000. Furthermore, although Luke reports the Confession of Peter (9:18-21), he omits the reference to its location as given in Matthew 16:13 and Mark 8:27—Caesarea Philippi at the foot of Mount Hermon outside Galilee. In addition, although Luke has an extended account of Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51-18:14 [19:44], known as the Travel Narrative, the Jerusalem Document, or the Great Insertion), he has Jesus travelling only in Samaria and not to Perea in Transjordan, as Matthew and Mark report. Clearly, this redactional feature is part of the geographical structure of Luke's two volumes. In sum, Luke reports only one visit of Jesus to the territory east of the Jordan River.

However, Matthew does report Jesus' northern trip to Tyre and Sidon (15:21-28), as Mark also does. Matthew simply reports Jesus' return to Galilee in 15:29: 'And Jesus went on from there and passed along the Sea of Galilee, and he went up on the mountain'. Matthew also locates the confession of Peter in Caesarea Philippi (16:13), again like Mark. In agreement with Mark but in contrast to Luke, Matthew reports that on the

---

<sup>6</sup>S.T. Parker, 'The Decapolis Reviewed', *JBL* 94 (1975) 437-41.

journey from Galilee to Jerusalem Jesus passed through the 'region of Judea beyond the Jordan' (εἰς τὰ ὄρια τῆς Ἰουδαίας πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου, 19:1). Mark's text (10:1) is very similar, although the better manuscripts insert καί before πέραν. Nearly all commentators identify this as Perea which is to be distinguished from the Decapolis and was administered by Herod Antipas along with Galilee. Perhaps the reference to Herod (Antipas) in Luke 13:31 lies behind Luke's decision to omit Jesus' visit to Perea.

On the other hand, Mark has Jesus travelling outside Galilee on a number of occasions in addition to those mentioned above. Mark reports six boat trips by Jesus across the Sea of Galilee or parts of it. In contrast to Matthew, Mark indicates that Jesus 'returned from the region of Tyre, and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, through the region of the Decapolis' (7:31). It appears that for Mark the Sea of Galilee functions as the division and barrier between Galilee (Jewish territory) and the Gentile territory. Mark's itinerary clearly locates the Feeding of the 4,000 as occurring in Gentile territory (8:1-10). It is interesting to speculate to what extent the movement of Jesus in the Decapolis was facilitated by the witness and proclamation of the healed demoniac in Gadara/Gerasa. Again only Mark reports that the healed demoniac 'went away and began to proclaim in the Decapolis how much Jesus has done for him' (5:20). Likewise, it may be that Luke kept Jesus in Cis-Jordan with only one exception in order to centre his two-volume work on the movement of Christianity to the west.

In summary, although the references are not numerous, nevertheless the Synoptics, and especially Mark, report a significant ministry of Jesus in Transjordan.

However, the references to πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου in John's Gospel constitute a more complex problem. The term occurs three times in John (1:28; 3:26; and 10:40). All three references identify it as the location of the ministry of John the Baptist and this is further specified in 1:28 as Bethany. All three references indicate the presence of Jesus in the same area. However, the mention of 'Bethany beyond the Jordan' (Βηθανία πέραν τοῦ Ἰορδάνου) in 1:28 has made this one of the most

difficult topographical problems in the New Testament. Since the location of John the Baptist's activity was assumed to be in the southern part of the Jordan Valley, scholars have sought for Bethany on the east side of the Jordan in this area, but to date no trace of a Bethany in this area has been identified. Origen was already troubled by this problem because he could not find any town in Transjordan with this name, and so, in spite of the fact that almost all the manuscripts read Bethany, he preferred the reading Bethabara (*Comm.* 6:40) which is found in some later manuscripts and versions. It is of interest that in the Madaba Mosaic Map Bethabara is given as the place where John the Baptist baptised, but it is located on the west side of the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. Other sites in the Jordan Valley have been proposed, but none carries great conviction. Similarly, attempts to give the name a symbolic meaning have not been convincing. Raymond Brown wisely concludes his discussion in his commentary by urging caution because 'some Johannine place names, once accounted to be purely symbolic...have been shown to be factual'.<sup>7</sup>

However, a recent discussion of this problem regarding Bethany beyond the Jordan has suggested an intriguing solution which has significant bearing on our topic. In an article published in 1987 Rainer Riesner reviews this topographical problem and its proposed solutions and then through a careful analysis of the Johannine text argues that a northern location is necessary on the basis of time-indications in John 11 and John 1 and 2 and on the basis of the integration of given data in John and the Synoptics.<sup>8</sup> All this leads to his conclusion that Bethany beyond the Jordan must be identified with Batanaea, the territory east of the Sea of Galilee and north of the Yarmuk River. This identification, though not so closely argued, had earlier been proposed by Brownlee,<sup>9</sup> Conder, Eckhardt, and

---

<sup>7</sup>R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (Anchor Bible 29; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) 45.

<sup>8</sup>See fn. 2 for details.

<sup>9</sup>W. Brownlee, 'Whence the Gospel of John?' in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *John and Qumran* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1972) 167-74.

Pixner.<sup>10</sup> Strikingly in Mark 8:22 some manuscripts (e.g., D, it) read Βηθανία instead of Βηθσαϊδάν.

Riesner's solution is very attractive and, although one may question some specific points regarding this identification, he has, nevertheless, made an interesting case for the presence of both John the Baptist and Jesus in northern Transjordan. In his excellent Bible atlas, Barry Beitzel locates Bethany beyond the Jordan in this area.<sup>11</sup> This early presence of the John the Baptist and Jesus movements in Transjordan, with possibly some influence of those present at Pentecost, could adequately account for the early presence of Christianity in Damascus, as indicated in Acts 9.

Closely related to this is the persistently recurring thesis of some New Testament scholars that the provenance of John's Gospel was in Syria or northern Transjordan (Bultmann, Bauer, Burney, Kümmel, Haenchen, Schweitzer, Klijn). K. Wengst would locate the Johannine community in Gaulanitis and Batanaea.<sup>12</sup> W. Brownlee attempted to locate the provenance of John's Gospel in Pella in the Jordan Valley.<sup>13</sup>

Although the New Testament data regarding Transjordan are limited, the few allusions cannot be ignored and no doubt reflect the early emergence of Christianity in this area.

## II. Other Evidence of Early Christians in Transjordan

In the Acts of the Apostles the Jerusalem church functions in an interesting and at times ambiguous way. This is perhaps largely due to the fact that the Jewish Christian community was not as monolithic as a first reading of Acts would suggest. Questions such as the relationship between the Jewish Christian community and the Jewish religionists and political

<sup>10</sup>R. Riesner, *art. cit.*, 42f.

<sup>11</sup>B.J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985) 169.

<sup>12</sup>Cited with some approval by J.D.G. Dunn, 'Let John Be John: A Gospel for Its Time' in P. Stuhlmacher (ed.), *The Gospel and the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 293-322 (esp. 304, n. 33).

<sup>13</sup>W. Brownlee, 'Whence the Gospel of John?', 167-74.



radicals, and the community's function within the Jewish institutions (such as the temple and related feasts) are beyond the scope of this essay, but of relevance if one pursues a further delineation of Christianity in Cis-Jordan and Transjordan. In passing, it may be noted that some of these issues were points of dispute between Christian movements in Transjordan and mainstream Christian movements. In his study of the Jerusalem church Julius Scott distinguishes three groups: Jewish Christian Hellenists, Pharisaic Hebrew Christians, and Moderate Hebrew Christians.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known report about Christians in Transjordan is the tradition about the flight of Jerusalem Christians to Pella in the Jordan Valley. Eusebius (*HE* 3.5.3) reports that upon the command of an oracle before the First Jewish revolt (AD 66-70) the Jerusalem Christians migrated to Pella, a city of the Decapolis on the east side of the Jordan River. Epiphanius, perhaps dependent on Eusebius, three times reports the same tradition about the exodus to Pella (*Pan. haer.* 29.7.8; 30.2.7; *De Mesuris et Ponderibus* 14f.). Until the middle of the 20th century this tradition was generally accepted as reliable. In 1951 S.G.F. Brandon severely attacked the validity of this tradition in *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church*, and later also in his *Jesus and the Zealots*.<sup>15</sup> In 1970 S.S. Sowers presented a defence of the Pella tradition against the criticisms of Brandon.<sup>16</sup> A decade later Gerd Lüdemann again questioned the historicity of this flight.<sup>17</sup> In 1988 J. Verheyden published his dissertation prepared under the direction of F. Neirynck

---

<sup>14</sup>J. Scott, 'Parties in the Church of Jerusalem as seen in the Book of Acts', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 18 (1975) 29-63. 217f; (1983) 152f.

<sup>15</sup>S.G.F. Brandon *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (2nd ed; London: SPCK, 1957); *Jesus and the Zealots* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).

<sup>16</sup>S.S. Sowers 'The Circumstances and Recollection of the Pella Flight', *TZ* 26 (1970) 315-20.

<sup>17</sup>G. Lüdemann 'The successors of Pre-70 Jerusalem Christianity: A Critical Evaluation of the Pella-Tradition', in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition* Vol. I (ed. E.P. Sanders; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 161-73.

under the title, *De Vlucht van de Christenen naar Pella*.<sup>18</sup> This study deals with the data provided by Eusebius and Epiphanius and examines the testimony of Eusebius in *HE* 3.5.3. with special attention to its place in his account of the siege of Jerusalem. Verheyden judges that the flight to Pella was an Eusebian adaptation of a Christian motif about the deliverance of the faithful in order to explain the problem of the fate of the Jerusalem Christians in AD 70. In his study published in 1988 R.A. Pritz contends that the Nazarenes were law-keeping Christians of Jewish background who fled from Jerusalem to Pella at the time of the first Jewish revolt.<sup>19</sup> He also suggests that around the end of the first century controversy, perhaps about Christology, occasioned the withdrawal of a group who later became known as the Ebionites. In the next section we will discuss the presence of Nazarenes and Ebionites in Transjordan.

In 1989 Craig Koester published his discussion about the Pella flight in which he closely examines the texts of Eusebius, Epiphanius, and Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* and concludes that 'the origin of the tradition is that it recalls actual events of the 1st century'.<sup>20</sup> Robert H. Smith, co-director of the current excavations at Pella (modern Tabaqat Fahl), concludes:

None of the present evidence, whether literary or archaeological, contravenes the tradition that Christians of the Jerusalem church fled to Pella on the eve of the first Jewish revolt (AD 66-70); indeed, some circumstantial evidence tends to support that tradition, although by no means demonstrating it conclusively.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>*De Vlucht van de Christenen naar Pella: onderzoek van het getuigenis van Eusebius en Epiphanius* (Verhandelingen: Klasse der Letteren 127; Brussels: AWLSK, 1988).

<sup>19</sup>R.A. Pritz, *Nazarene Jewish Christianity* (Jerusalem Magnes Press/Leiden E.J. Brill, 1988) 10, 108f.

<sup>20</sup>C. Koester 'The Origin and the Significance of the Flight to Pella Tradition' *CBQ* 51 (1989) 106.

<sup>21</sup>R.H. Smith 'Pella' in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* Suppl. Vol. (New York Abingdon Press, 1976) 651f: cf. also 'Pella' in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* Vol. III Rev ed. (Grand Rapids Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986) 738. He argued his position more extensively in *Pella of the Decapolis*:

Julius Scott likewise cautiously affirms the historicity of this tradition.<sup>22</sup> Philip Sigal, accepting the historicity of a migration to Pella before the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, argues that the Jerusalem Christians withdrew to Pella because they refused to participate with their fellow Jews in resisting the Romans, resulting in their ultimate alienation from them.<sup>23</sup> In Pella, the Jewish Christians may not have fared very well shortly after their arrival there, since at the outbreak of the war groups of Jews devastated a number of the cities of the Decapolis, including Pella (Josephus, *War* 2.458f.).

Although the validity of the Pella tradition continues to be debated and at present cannot be conclusively proven, a migration in the first century of Jewish Christians from Cis-Jordan to Transjordan seems very plausible as accounting for the presence of Jewish Christian movements which flourished there in the second and third centuries.

Epiphanius reports that these Christians returned from their sojourn in Pella to Jerusalem after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (*De Mesuris et Ponderibus* 14f.). It can be safely assumed that some remained in Pella. Although Epiphanius suggests that the church in Jerusalem between 70 and 132 was small and struggling (*ibid.*), Eusebius describes it as a very important church composed of Jews with fifteen bishops in this period (*HE* 4.5), a rather large number. However, the end of the Jewish church in Jerusalem came in AD 135 when Hadrian crushed the second Jewish revolt (AD 132-135, led by Bar Kokhba) and forbade all Jews from entering the city. It seems that the expelled Jewish Christians went back to Pella, since (interestingly) Eusebius cites as his source for information about Hadrian's conquest and the expulsion edict a Christian from Pella named Ariston (Ἀρίστων ὁ Πελλαῖος).

---

Vol. I, *The 1967 Season of the College of Wooster Expedition to Pella* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 1973); Vol. II, *Final Report 1979-85* (Wooster: College of Wooster, 1989).

<sup>22</sup>J. Scott, 'The Effects of the Fall of Jerusalem on Christianity', *Proceedings: Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society* 3:149-60.

<sup>23</sup>P. Sigal, *The Emergence of Contemporary Judaism* Vol. I Pt 1 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980) 242-26.

Although the evidence may not be fully conclusive, nevertheless some migrations of Jerusalem Christians to Transjordan in the first and second centuries certainly seem suggested by the data and no doubt contributed to the rise of certain Jewish Christian movements in Transjordan.

There is an early tradition that members of the family of Jesus resided in Transjordan.<sup>24</sup> Eusebius quotes a sizeable portion of a letter written by Africanus to Aristides on the harmony of the genealogies in the Gospels (*HE* 17.1-17). In this letter he refers to the δεσπόσυννοι, relatives of the Lord who were located in the Jewish villages of Nazareth and Cochaba but travelled extensively to explain the genealogy of Jesus (*HE* 1.7.14). Cochaba, also mentioned in the Talmud, the *Onomasticon*, and by Epiphanius, is located in the south-west part of Batanaea, north of Abila and east of the Sea of Galilee.

In an appendix to the *Acta Pauli* in a Coptic papyrus (*NTA* II.388) there is an account of Paul speaking at Ephesus about his conversion in Damascus where he says: 'I entered into a great church with the blessed Judas, the brother of the Lord, who from the beginning gave me the exalted love of faith'. Eusebius quotes the account from Hegisippus about the grandsons of Judas, the brother of the Lord, appearing before Domitian (*HE* 3.20). The use of the name Nazaraeans for certain Jewish Christians in Transjordan may derive from the presence of people there who came from Nazareth (see below).

Among the books which the Ebionites had, Epiphanius includes a document entitled 'Αναβαθμοὶ Ἰακώβου (*The Ascents of James*) wherein sacrifices and burnt offerings are opposed and a strong antagonism to Paul is expressed (*Pan. haer.* 30.16.6f.). In his doctoral dissertation R. Van Voorst<sup>25</sup> locates the provenance of this document in Transjordan. Scholars continue to debate the date and provenance of the New Testament Epistle of James. In view of the above references to

---

<sup>24</sup>R. Bauckham's detailed study of the relatives of Jesus in early Christianity (*Jesus and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990]) demonstrates the very influential role that the family of Jesus had in Jewish Christianity.

<sup>25</sup>R.E. Van Voorst, *The Ascents of James: History and Theology of a Jewish-Christian Community* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 180.

the relatives of Jesus in Transjordan and a document associated with James located there, a Transjordanian provenance for this New Testament epistle is an intriguing possibility.

Strikingly, the information we have about the Christians in Transjordan is generally negative. In Transjordan heretical movements were spawned and questionable literature was composed. Eusebius reports that Origen contended with heretical bishops in Arabia, including Beryllus, bishop of Bostra (HE 6.20, 33, 37). We now turn to a consideration of some of these Christian movements and writings.

### III. Christian Movements and Writings Relating to Transjordan

#### 1. References by Christian Writers

According to a number of ancient sources, Ariston of Pella (referred to above) wrote a treatise entitled *Dialogue between Jason and Papiscus concerning Christ* (Ἰάσονος καὶ Παπίσκου ἀντιλογία περὶ Χριστοῦ). Unfortunately this document, although still known in the seventh century, is now lost. Finegan pertinently observes regarding this lost work: 'Thus from the background of the Jewish Christian community at Pella we have the first known written defence of Christianity against Judaism'.<sup>26</sup> In a misplaced Latin translation of this work of Ariston, the Jewish Christian Jason is called a Nazaraean (*Nazaraeus*). Although variant spellings of this term are found in the New Testament, all seem to reflect upon Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. Thus in Acts 24:5 Tertullus refers to ἡ τῶν Ναζωραίων αἵρεσις. Similar references are also found in rabbinic literature. On the other hand, it seems that this term Nazaraeans (or Nazoraeans) soon was used to designate certain Christians in Transjordan. However, another term, Ebionites, is also used and it is often difficult to distinguish sharply between these two terms.

Epiphanius extensively discusses both the Nazaraeans and the Ebionites, but not without a measure of confusion and

---

<sup>26</sup>J. Finegan, *Hidden Records of the Life of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969) 53.

overlapping (*Pan. haer.* 29-30). Although he distinguishes the two groups, he nevertheless locates both of them in various places in Syria and Transjordan. Jerome's references to the Nazaraeans and the Ebionites are also confusing, especially in his discussions about their collections of literature. Furthermore, it is not always clear to what extent Epiphanius was dependent on Eusebius for his information. Nevertheless, it is possible from the scattered topographical notices to locate the Nazaraeans and Ebionites in Syria and Transjordan.

In *Pan. haer.* 30.18.1 Epiphanius places the roots of the Ebionite heresy in Nabatea in southern Transjordan and in Paneas in northern Transjordan and southern Syria. In addition, he places them in Moab, Cochaba, Bashan, the area east of Adraa, and also in Cyprus. In the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius the Ebionites are located in Choba (Χωβά), presumably Cochaba. Epiphanius relates the origin of the Ebionites to the Christians who fled to Pella (*Pan. haer.* 30.3.7), as reported in the Gospel of the Ebionites. He also reports that Ebion, whom he dubiously identified as the founder, lived in Cochaba in Batanaea and Asteroth in Basanitis (Bashan). These various references indicate that the Ebionites were located primarily in the central part of the Decapolis from Pella to Adraa, including the area north of Gadara and Abila.

On the other hand, Epiphanius locates the Nazaraeans in the same general area of the Decapolis—in the region of Pella, in Basanitis, in Cochaba, and northward in Beroea in Coele Syria, near Aleppo (*Pan. haer.* 29.7.7). As in the case of the Ebionites, he also places the origin of the Nazaraeans in Pella.

In spite of this puzzling overlapping of locations, these reports do locate significant Jewish Christian movements in the area under discussion; particularly if we accept Riesner's proposed location of Bethany beyond the Jordan. And the same impression is given by the rather imprecise locations given in Jerome and Eusebius.

Of further interest regarding these groups in Transjordan is their literature. It is feasible to distinguish three Jewish apocryphal Gospels: the Gospel according to the Hebrews (GH), the Gospel of the Nazaraeans (GN), and the Gospel of the Ebionites (GEb), although some scholars combine

GH and GN. While the provenance of the GH is Egypt, that of the GN and the GEb is Transjordan. Unfortunately, no manuscripts or fragments of these three Gospels have been found thus far. The limited texts of these Gospels that we have derive from quotations in early Christian literature.

## 2. The Gospel of the Nazaraeans (GN)

The remains at present known to us of the GN are found in quotations by Eusebius and Jerome and in a few later writings, e.g., τὸ Ἰουδαϊκόν if it is to be included in the GN. Nearly all the readings preserved are similar to material in the Gospel of Matthew. On the basis of the preserved materials of the GN (including τὸ Ἰουδαϊκόν), its contents seem to range from the birth to the resurrection of Jesus. It appears to have been a sizeable document, perhaps about the size of canonical Matthew. Since the GN shows a fictional and legendary development of the tradition and expansion of discourse material (including the intrusion of Johannine motifs and Lucan details), Vielhauer judges that the GN 'presents no proto-Matthew but a development of the Greek Gospel of Matthew'.<sup>27</sup> Doctrinally the GN is not to be characterised as 'heretical', but is in the same Jewish Christian tradition as canonical Matthew.

Regarding the date of the GN, its *terminus a quo* must be the end of the first century. Given its close relation to Matthew and evident influence of Luke and John, the GN cannot be dated before the composition of the canonical Gospels. Furthermore, with its secondary character in the addition of possible fictional and legendary features, its non-eschatological features, and evident moral and social concern, it represents an early development of the Synoptic tradition. It seems probable to date the GN in the first half of the second century when there apparently was a flurry of oral and written traditions in the early church. It could have been one of the many documents in the second century which compelled the church to establish a

---

<sup>27</sup>P. Vielhauer 'Jewish Christian Gospels' in E. Hennecke & W. Schneemelcher (edd.), tr. R.M. Wilson, *New Testament Apocrypha I* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963) 146.

canon in terms of four Gospels in the latter part of the second century.

Although because of its secondary nature it is unlikely to contain much authentic data regarding the life of Jesus (except where it follows the canonical Gospels), the GN does provide a picture of the early church in the first half of the second century in Transjordan in its main (and orthodox) tradition in Jewish-Christian circles. Furthermore, the GN contributes to the exegesis and interpretation of the canonical Gospels in providing information about the understanding of certain passages in the second century. For the analysis of the data of the canonical Gospels and their inter-relationship and development in literary studies, redaction criticism, source analysis, and textual criticism, the GN illustrates and demonstrates the process of the development of literary traditions in the second century.

### 3. The Gospel of the Ebionites (GEb)

The church fathers describe the Gospel used by the Ebionites in various ways. Irenaeus indicates that they used only the Gospel of Matthew (*Adv. haer.* 1.26.2). Eusebius, on the other hand, reports that the Ebionites used only the so-called Gospel according to the Hebrews (*HE* 3.27.4). However, Jerome (*Comm. in Mat.* 12:13) mentions that the Nazaraeans and the Ebionites were using a Gospel *quod vocatur a plerique Mathael authenticum* and which he recently translated from Hebrew to Greek. Furthermore, Epiphanius (*Pan. haer.* 31.13.2) reports that the Ebionites had an εὐαγγέλιον κατὰ Ματθαῖον ὀνομαζόμενον which they call the Hebrew (Ἑβραϊκόν) Gospel, but which was not at all complete (οὐχ ὅλον δὲ πληρέστατον), but corrupt (or spurious) and mutilated (ἀλλὰ νενοθευμένον καὶ ἡκρωτηριασμένον).

For various reasons it is not possible to identify this above document with the canonical Gospel of Matthew, the GH, or the GN. The Ebionites denied the supernatural birth of Jesus, as set forth in Matthew. And since GN is so closely related to canonical Matthew, this could hardly be the document from which the Ebionites derived their views, as described by Irenaeus and Eusebius. Similarly, the Ebionite



view of Jesus can hardly be derived from the GH. Hence, in spite of the nomenclature used by the church fathers, it appears that the Ebionites had a distinct document (Gospel) which the church fathers loosely and confusedly named. This document is the *Gospel of the Ebionites* (GEb).

Although this document of the Ebionites is referred to by certain church fathers, quotations of it are only found in Epiphanius' Πανάριον κατὰ πασῶν τῶν αἱρέσεων, 'medicine chest for the cure of heresies'. These quotations indicate that the GEb used the Gospel of Matthew predominantly, although there is clear evidence of knowledge of and use of the other Gospels. This would suggest a date of composition of the GEb after the composition of the canonical Gospels. Hence, a *terminus a quo* would be about the beginning of the second century. Irenaeus' knowledge of the movement and presumably of its Gospel suggests an origin in the second century (a possible *terminus ad quem* would be c. AD 175). Vielhauer dates the origin of the GEb in the first half of the second century.<sup>28</sup>

Descriptions of the Ebionite movement can be found in various sources.<sup>29</sup> Eusebius reports that the Ebionites, except for one group, denied the virgin birth (HE 3.27.2f.) but strongly maintained that the law must be kept in a very strict Jewish fashion (HE 6.17). The quotations of the GEb in Epiphanius indicate that the Ebionites rejected the Old Testament ritual and sacrifices.

The literary remains of the GN and the GEb, limited as they are, certainly imply a great deal of activity in these Jewish-Christian communities in Transjordan, the Decapolis, and Syria. This literary activity is also indicated by the lost works of Ariston of Pella (see above, section II) and the passing allusions in Epiphanius to other Ebionite literature: Ἀναβαθμοὶ Ἰακώβου (see above, section II), Πείσοδοι Πέτρου and other books.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup>P. Vielhauer 'Jewish Christian Gospels', 117-65 (esp. 156).

<sup>29</sup>Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.26.2; 3.21.1; 5.1.3; Tertullian, *De praescr. haeret.* 39.5, 11; Origen, *De principiis* 5.3.8; Epiphanius, *Pan. haer.* 29ff.; Eusebius, HE 3.27, 6.17; Jerome, *Epistula* 112.13.

<sup>30</sup>A.F.J. Klijn, & G.J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish Christian Sects* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973) 43.

Regarding Syrian Christianity and its literary development we have rather extensive information. However, what happened in the second and third centuries to the south of Syria (granted these boundaries are very fluid) in the Decapolis and Transjordan, although thus far only known in a very limited way, certainly deserves further literary and archaeological investigation and much more consideration in our discussions about early Christianity.

#### IV. Conclusions

This review of the present limited data of early Christianity in Transjordan indicates the potential of more extensive literary and archaeological research in the area. Furthermore, there are two aspects of the indigenous population that must be investigated in order to recover and understand more fully this eastward movement of Christianity as it interacted with its environment.

First of all, the Jewish element in this environment must be investigated more fully, also as a part of the history of Judaism in this area. Epiphanius in a discussion about Jewish sects or heresies (αἱρέσεις) before Christ (*Pan. haer.* 14-20) locates some of these in Transjordan. One of these, the Nasaraeans (ἡ αἵρεσις τῶν Νασσαραίων), he places in Gilead and Bashan and another Jewish sect, the Ossaeans or the Sampsaeans, he locates primarily in southern Transjordan—Perea, Moab, and Nabatea (*Pan. haer.* 53.1.1f.). Some intriguing suggestions have been put forward regarding the presence of Essenes, Karaites (Wieder), Mandaeans (Rudolph), and Gnostics in this area.

The extensive presence of Jews in Transjordan is also indicated by the numerous synagogues identified in the Golan Heights. Surprisingly, in present-day Jordan, only one synagogue has been identified, the synagogue at Jerash which later was changed to a church (admittedly this is a politically sensitive issue). Knowledge of Transjordanian Judaism can contribute to a better understanding of the rise and development of Transjordanian Christianity.

The other feature of this indigenous population relates more specifically to the Decapolis, located in northern Transjordan and southern Syria. These Graeco-Roman cities were settlements of Hellenistic culture in a Semitic environment. The Graeco-Roman character of these cities is evident in their layout: colonnaded north-south *cardo maximus* and east-west *cardo decumanus* with a monumental tetrapylon at their intersection. In these cities there were Roman installations—nymphaeum, public baths, forum, hippodrome, gymnasium. Each of these cities had at least one sizeable theatre built according to the plan of the Roman architect Vitruvius. There were temples dedicated to the deities of the Graeco-Roman pantheon. The language was predominantly Greek as evidenced in the preserved documents, especially in inscriptions with Graeco-Roman names. These cities were centres of Hellenistic culture and education, as Gadara with its famed university.

An intriguing question is the nature and extent of the influence of this Hellenistic culture on the surrounding population. To what extent was the Judaism of the neighbouring territories affected and influenced by the presence of these cities? And, furthermore, what influence did the culture and society of these cities have on the rise and development of Christianity in the area? Current archaeological research should provide more information about the political structure and administrative control and influence of these cities of the Decapolis.

From the above survey of pre-Constantinian Christianity in Transjordan, certain implications and conclusions can be drawn.

First of all, the roots of Transjordan Christianity clearly lie in Jewish Christianity. In the early years of the movement there were Christians (*i.e.* those belonging to the Way) in the synagogues of Damascus whom Saul had authorisation to apprehend. A few decades later refugees from Jerusalem fled to Transjordan. Again after the second Jewish revolt Jewish Christians in Jerusalem appear to have fled to Transjordan. Furthermore, the Christian literature that arose in Transjordan had distinct Jewish characteristics, as noted above. Hence,

Christianity in Transjordan originated in a Jewish context and matrix. This does raise the question about the extent of Jewish settlements in Transjordan in these early centuries. At present it is not possible to give a definitive answer. Hopefully, new literary and archaeological research will yield some fresh data on this issue.

Secondly, all indications are that this Jewish Christianity flourished in Transjordan during the second century. With Jerusalem and environs off-limits for Jews, there must have been an influx of refugees into Transjordan in the first half of the second century. This was also the period of literary activity in which the apocryphal Gospels and undoubtedly other literature were composed. The synagogue and house-church at Dura Europos, which were destroyed about AD 256, suggest a period of development and co-existence well into the third century.

Thirdly, in spite of this floruit in the second century, Jewish Christianity in Transjordan seems to have declined in the third century and to have virtually died out in the fourth century. During this period it was opposed by both Jews and Christians. Rabbinic literature designated Jewish Christians as 'heretics' (*Minim*). Even Jerome in a letter to Augustine refers to the Ebionites and Nazaraeans (seemingly as the same group) as 'heretics' (*Minim*) and concludes with this judgment: 'But while they desire to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither the one nor the other' (*Epistula* 112.13). Hence, Theodoret, living in Syria in the middle of the fifth century, writes that the Ebionites are among the sects of which not even a small remnant remains (*Hist. haer.* 2.11).

On the other hand, the abundance of churches built during the Byzantine Period after the Edict of Toleration, as noted above, indicates a widespread Christian population, obviously indigenous and non-Jewish. It was at this time that a synagogue at Gerasa was changed into a church. Names in inscriptions in church mosaics are predominantly non-Jewish.

From these observations some intriguing questions remain. What were the predominant factors that led to the demise of Jewish Christianity in Transjordan? What were the dynamics functioning in the transition to, or conflict with,

Gentile Christianity in Transjordan? What role, if any, did doctrinal issues play in the demise of one and the rise of the other form of Christianity in Transjordan? And then there is the larger question: What bearing, if any, has Transjordanian Christianity, both its earlier Jewish and later Gentile forms, had upon Western Christianity?

It is of major significance that presently there is a growing interest in Transjordan and the Decapolis, as seen in the number of current excavations. These excavations are providing new data about the Roman and Byzantine periods. Hopefully, this better picture of Transjordan in these periods which is emerging will also elucidate the setting and background of Byzantine Christianity and provide data regarding the earlier religious movements in this area. Hence, as field work and research continue, some lacunae in our knowledge of the history and theology of the early Christian church may be filled.