

## Jesus and the Zealots

### Analysis of Intent

The book *Jesus and The Zealots*, by S. G. F. Brandon, presents an apparently self-consistent picture of Jesus as being at least sympathetic to the Zealots, and the Jerusalem Church as being at one politically with the Zealot movement. The thesis may be summed up in three points. First, Jesus was, as the “Messiah,” not only a politically oriented man, but was inclined toward violent revolution. Second, the Jerusalem Church, espousing a “primitive” Christianity, was essentially Jewish in religion, and Zealot politically, differing from both only in that her Messiah had come. Third, as a result of the defeat of A. D. 70 by the Romans, and in order for Christianity to survive, the Evangelists forsook the Jewish aspect of Christianity, and turned Jesus into a pacifistic, universal savior, deliberately abstracted from the political concerns which must have pressed Him during His life.

Brandon seeks to portray Jesus in His historical and cultural situation by reconciling the records left us by Josephus and the New Testament authors. Further, he seeks to show how the New Testament authors used the historical Jesus as the basis for the theological Christ by directing their writings to the needs of the community.

As a result of this attempt, problems arise within the pages of the New Testament, both in what is recorded and in what is omitted.

### Brandon’s Reconstruction

The first chapter of Brandon’s work serves as a basic introduction to the theme of the book. Since a summary of the work is included in this paper, the reconstruction of the argument will commence with the second chapter, “The Zealots: Their Origin and Ideals.”

Here Brandon relates the fact that Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. and that in order for his nominee to succeed him in the kingship, Archelaus and other members of his family had to go to Rome and await the imperial decision. Josephus records that while the Herodian family was in Rome, the Jews were in open revolt, though he does not say why.

When Varus, the governor of Syria, put down these uprising, two thousand “rebels” were crucified. Brandon points out that if Jesus was a young boy, even if He was still in Egypt, He would have been aware of these events.

In A.D. 6 Archelaus, having proved himself incapable of efficient rule, was replaced. Augustus not only removed Archelaus from office, he removed the office itself and appointed Coponius as Judea’s first procurator, an office carrying the imperium. This inclusion of Judea under the direct control of Rome necessitated the census of A.D. 6 and made real to the Jews the fact that they were left without even a semblance of independence.

Brandon notes also Josephus’ mention of Judas the Galilean, who incited his countrymen to riot by upbraiding them as cowards for accepting Roman rule instead of fighting. This happened

under Coponius. This Judas made it clear to his people that paying tribute to Rome was spiritual and political treason.

Brandon carefully treats the records here to show that Josephus recognized Judas of Galilee to be the founder of the Zealot party, and points out that this took place immediately after the first Roman procurator took office in Judea. He also makes much of the fact that Josephus carefully distinguishes between the Zealots and the other “philosophies” of Judaism, i.e., the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.

The Zealots are shown to be zealous for the Torah, fanatic in belief, puritanical in discipline, and uncompromising under even the severest torture. The Zealot leaders, particularly in later years, aspired to royalty, were succeeded by close blood relatives, and saw themselves as fulfilling Messianic roles, and sought a following either by doing miracles, prediction God’s miraculous intervention as a result of faithful action, or by claiming the ability to work miracles.

The actual “sect” of Sicarii, those who involved themselves in political murder by concealing daggers in their clothing for use in the crowded marketplace, became a reality of daily life only after the time of Jesus, despite the fact that Josephus uses the term to describe Zealot activities during the lifetime of Jesus.

Brandon argues that Josephus presents the Zealots as a sect or “philosophy” which took as its beginning the Jewish reaction to Roman occupation, and as its example the heroic Maccabean freedom fighters. The tension built for years, with each new Zealot leader and each political death (whether Roman execution or Sicarii assassination) adding to the already explosive political equilibrium, until A.D. 66, when the full revolt was precipitated.

The last note was played at Massada, in A.D. 73, when the Romans broke through the fortress only to discover the corpses of 960 men, women, and children to whom suicide was preferable to servitude.

In the third chapter, “Israel’s Cause against Rome,” Brandon defines certain politically important relationships. He deals with the impact of the census, in which Rome numbered her subjects in order to calculate her economic returns. This was a remarkable departure from Israel’s status under the Herods. Although they were only client kings, still they provided Israel with a certain insulation from the brutal realities of Roman occupation.

After the Roman intervention, however, Israel was not even able to control her own high priest, the office instead being filled by the Roman Procurator’s appointee.

Indeed, Israel’s cause against Rome grew stronger with the passing of time. Each succeeding Procurator was worse than the last. Pilate, of whose rule we are relatively well informed, provided the Jews with a number of reasons for their hatred of Roman rule. Josephus records that Pilate introduced the image-bearing Roman standards into Jerusalem at night and was greeted with Jewish indignation the following day.

Philo records a similar incident which probably happened sometime later, in which shields, sans image or emblem and bearing only a brief inscription, were set up on the former palace of Herod. Again, the Jews were terribly unhappy, and made their feelings known.

In both of these cases, the pro-Roman historians record the Jews as handling matters peaceably. Josephus records the Jewish reaction as consisting of a mass migration to Caesarea, where they demonstrated at the Roman headquarters. Philo states that an orderly delegation of Jews petitioned Pilate to remove the shields, apparently in order to avoid a revolt, and charged him with using Tiberius as an excuse for insulting their nation. They challenged Pilate to produce the authority for this action and according to the record, threatened to appeal to the Emperor himself.

In both cases, the offending items were removed.

Pilate is also said to have built an aqueduct and paid for it with funds confiscated from the temple treasury, an action not calculated to bolster his ever-diminishing popularity. The Jewish reaction to this was violent, according to Josephus, and included personal abuse of Pilate himself. In response, Pilate disguised his troops and armed them with clubs. His troops, with their clubs hidden in their robes, mingled with the crowds and, at a prearranged signal, attacked the crowd, killing many of them. The protest was abandoned.

The incident involving the standards and that of the aqueduct, according to Brandon, without doubt occurred during the lifetime of Jesus. And, although they occurred in Judea, the importance of Jerusalem to the Jews in general, and to Jesus in particular, makes it impossible for Jesus to have been unaware of the matters, and highly improbable that He was unconcerned about them.

Brandon's thesis is partially unfolded in his rhetorical questions about Jesus. "Would it have been a matter of indifference to him, as a pious Jew, that the holy city was polluted by the images of a heathen lord? Would he not have shared in his fellow-countrymen's sense of outrage that the Temple treasury had been raided by a particularly vicious Roman official? Would he have viewed unmoved the killing and injuring of those who protested against this violation of their sacred Law?"<sup>1</sup> Brandon notes that the Gospels are silent about these events which caused such uproars during these years.

Josephus records the end of Pilate's procuratorial career as being due to his action against the Samaritans. Apparently a would-be prophet or messiah convinced some Samaritans that the sacred vessels of Moses, believed to be hidden on Mt. Gerizim, would be revealed to them. The Samaritans assembled themselves together for this revelation being armed, a fact which seems to indicate a Messianic movement directed against the Romans. Pilate's prompt action resulted in the killing of many Samaritans and the capture of many more, who were later executed. The Samaritans complained to Vitellius, the legate of Syria, that they had not intended to cause trouble. Josephus says that Vitellius ordered Pilate to Rome to explain his actions to Tiberius. Tiberius died while Pilate was en route to Rome, but Pilate is not heard from again.

Gaius succeeded Tiberius as Emperor of the Roman Empire. He seemed to have a genuine affection for Herod Agrippa, for he gave him the tetrarchy of the recently deceased Philip and a little later, after exiling Herod Antipas in Spain, he added his tetrarchy to Agrippa as well.

Gaius was obsessed with his "divinity," and when the Gentiles of Jamnia understood this, they erected an altar in his name. The Jamnian Jews destroyed the altar and the incident was reported to Rome, where Gaius took the Jewish action as a personal insult. He ordered Petronius, the successor to Vitellius as legate of Syria, to erect a giant statue of Zeus in the Temple at Jerusalem. The Jews let Petronius know that he could accomplish his goal only by means of a general slaughter. He risked his own life by trying to persuade Gaius to rescind his order, and was advised by Gaius to commit suicide. But Gaius died before he could himself introduce the idol, and before Petronius could be compelled to commit suicide. To the Jews this must have appeared to be divine intervention. Mark 13:14-20 likely reflects a Zealot teaching about this incident, which points to the likelihood that the Christians held similar beliefs on the matter. Brandon points out that the silence of Acts on this subject is surprising, considering the nature and extent of the threat.

For helping to secure the accession for Claudius, Agrippa received Judea in addition to the

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<sup>1</sup> Brandon, p. 77.

two tetrarchies he already ruled. This made his kingdom equal in extent to that ruled by Herod the Great, and gave all the Jews a rest. For Agrippa was devoted to the practice of Judaism. Strangely, however, Agrippa persecuted the Church, killing James the brother of John, and attempting to seize Peter. This found favor with the Jews.

Brandon presses his case that the actions of Agrippa were due to his belief that the Christians constituted a threat to Roman-Jewish relations. Zealot inactivity can be explained by the fact that, under Agrippa, there was no tribute payment to Rome. But Christians might yet constitute a threat because of their expectations of a returning Messiah to restore the Kingdom to Israel, and thus they remained to be dealt with.

With Agrippa's death in A.D. 44, Claudius put the entire realm under procuratorial government. Now, not only Judea, but Galilee as well, became the subjects of Rome. Brandon well notes that with the passing of Agrippa, Jewish history moved "inexorably to what appears to be the predetermined catastrophe of A.D. 70 in a manner not unlike a Greek tragedy."

The first procurator, Cuspius Fadus, found it necessary to rid the country of "brigands," and Josephus records his execution of Tholomaios the "Archbrigand." Theudas also was noteworthy. He promised those who would follow him that he would divide the Jordan River. Though the reasons for doing so are not provided, the procurator believed the movement to be politically dangerous. He sent troops who killed and captured a great number of Theudas' followers. Theudas himself was captured and killed. Again Brandon points out the curious silence of Acts regarding these events.

Claudius replaced Cuspius Fadus with Tiberius Alexander, a Jew. But he had the two sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob and Simon, crucified, apparently because these sons of Zealotism's founder had in some way distinguished themselves.

Alexander was succeeded by Cumanus. While he was procurator, a Roman soldier made an obscene gesture at the Jews who had assembled for worship during Passover. The Jews stoned the troops, and Cumanus sent in reinforcements. Josephus records that between 20 and 30 thousand Jews were killed.

Felix was the next procurator. He seduced Drusilla, the sister of Agrippa, causing her to leave her husband and marry him. He took vigorous action against "brigands" and "impostors," the terminology itself indicating a connection between the Zealots and the men who claimed to be wonder-workers. Felix even captured Eleazar, the elusive Zealot, and sent him to Rome. He crucified many of his Zealot followers.

During this time a new form of "brigand" came into being (or perhaps an old form took on new dimensions). Their method was that of clandestine assassination. This was aimed primarily at the wealthy or powerful pro-Roman Jews, and was accomplished frequently during religious festivals. These assassins were known as *Sicarii*.

It should be noted that in the years following the death of Agrippa, the Zealots became more numerous, bolder, came to include wonder-working messianic pretenders, and were associated with political assassinations with increasing frequency.

Nero sent Porcius Festus to replace Felix as Procurator in A.D. 60. Festus found Judea in a state of disorder. The *Sicarii* were even engaging now in open attacks. Festus died in office in A.D. 62, but not without having to suppress the followers of yet another "impostor".

Lucceius Albinus was next appointed Procurator by Nero. But before he arrived in Judea, a hastily convened Sanhedrin charged and condemned James, the brother of Jesus, for breaking the Law and stoned him. When Albinus took over the role of Procurator there was, according to

Josephus, no form of villainy at which he did not excel. Brandon makes a case for believing that Albinus was so corrupt that he was bribed to let the seditious activities of the Zealots continue unchallenged. By now the Zealots were openly polarizing the Jews by forcing them into commitment to one side or the other by threats directed at family members and personal property.

The last procurator was Gessius Florus. Brandon notes that “even execrable Albinus appeared a paragon of virtue” by comparison to Florus.

Under Albinus the situation deteriorated completely. The Herodians, the high priests and establishment elite, and the wealthy and powerful Jews now joined forces forming pro-Roman faction, and the seams split. It was precipitated by a serious clash between the Jewish and Gentile inhabitants of Caesarea.

In his next chapter, “Jewish Christians and the Zealot Ideal”, Brandon remarks on the obvious similarity of the two groups, and argues cogently from both the statements and the silences of the Bible.

The early Jerusalem Church was composed of Jews. The faith in Jesus was likely the interpretation of His life and teachings as it was hammered out in the tense situation of the years following His death. The problem of defining the beliefs of the Jewish Christians is made difficult because records concerning such belief are not extant, leaving the historian only the New Testament writings as evidence. This problem is compounded by the fact that the Gospels and Acts were written after A.D. 70 to churches (all but one of them of Gentile composition) outside Judea. Further complications arise because of the apologetic nature of these writings.

Aside from the meagerest outline of Jesus’ teaching provided in the Gospels, the only material from which we can reconstruct the beliefs of the Jewish Christians, according to Brandon, is the Pauline writings. But even Paul must be read carefully to find the traditions of the Jerusalem Church.

Briefly stated, the beliefs of the Jerusalem Church were apparently based on the hope that the Messiah would soon return and establish His Kingdom. Their beliefs could not have been far removed from Zealot beliefs. The social structure of the Church, (including its leadership) the social levels appealed to, and the prevailing Messianic hope provide striking evidence of the similarity between the Jerusalem Church and Zealotism. In addition, both had similar social and theological concerns, seeking to keep the temple culture pure, aid the poor, serve none but YHWH, and rid the land of the Roman oppressors. In both political camps, these beliefs stemmed from devotion to the Torah.

That the Jerusalem Church regarded Jesus as a political figure, and not as a savior or prophet, is indicated first by the fact that only the Gospels show any great concern with the early tradition of the human Jesus, and second by the fact that Paul’s Christ, abstracted from history and cast in the role of Universal Savior, produced a brand of Christianity offensive to the Jews. This is evident in the facts recorded in Galatians concerning the “Party of the Circumcision”, and the Jewish teaching about adherence to Jewish Customs.

The Jerusalem Church, being composed of Pharisees and priests, as well as poor but devout Jews, saw only two options in dealing with the unwanted Gentile Church; either she could discredit it, or she could control it. The control consisted of attempting to correct Paul’s Gospel, and bring the Gentiles to accept Jewish practice.

But the differences went far beyond Jewish practices, for apparently the Jerusalem Church was far more interested in the life and teaching of Jesus, especially as this related to political realities, than they were in His martyr’s death. Even the Resurrection meant only that He would one

day return to rule. This was, in fact, the only major difference between the Zealots and the Jewish Christians. When a Zealot leader, particularly if he were an “impostor,” met with death, it meant only that he was not the Messiah. For the Jerusalem Church, however, Jesus’ resurrection meant that He was indeed the Messiah, and that as such, He would return to rule the world. This, of course, means that there were two basic Gospels, Jewish and Gentile, and Paul informs his readers that those of the Jewish Gospel repudiated many of his teachings.

Moreover, the Jewish Christians, because of their zeal for the “orthodox” tenets of the Jewish faith, attracted many priests and Pharisees into their ranks. This could only have been the case if the sacrificial system had not been challenged by the Jerusalem Church.

Brandon sees this division between Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity in the teaching of Apollos, and in the factions in the Church at Corinth, as well as in the “unorthodoxy” of Stephen.

This distinction accounts for Paul’s designation of his Gospel as being the Gospel of the “Uncircumcision,” as opposed to the “Gospel of the Circumcision.” This explains Peter’s role of evangelizing the circumcised. It means that he carried the Gospel to the Jewish communities outside Judea, and was thus every bit the missionary Paul was.

Brandon believes that the Jewish Christians would have held essentially Zealot beliefs with regard to the Romans. For both stressed the sovereignty of YHWH and abhorred Caesar worship. Both deplored paying tribute. Both loved the Temple and wanted to avoid the possibility of the abomination of desolation. And both seem to have shared the same eschatology.

We have seen, then, how the Jerusalem Church, composed of the original disciples and the newer converts, did not see that their faith in Jesus set them apart from their fellow Jews in any major way, especially in the belief that Israel was the chosen people of God. Apparently, the only difference was that for the Jewish Christians, Jesus was the Messiah, His crucifixion notwithstanding, and their mission was to be converting others to this belief and encouraging them so to live in such a manner as would prepare them for the *Parousia*.

In the next two chapters Brandon deals with the possibility of contradiction within his sources. The whole issue is cleared up only when one realizes that the Gospels (particularly Mark, which was written first) are apologetic works rather than strict history, and that they were written to a diversity of audiences after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, in order to salvage what was left of Christianity. This was done largely by capitulating to Paul in his message of a pacific Jesus who, as the risen Christ, was viewed as a Universal Savior.

Brandon accomplishes this by reconciling the Gospels and Acts with what has been presented from Josephus, acknowledging the impact of the communities to which they were addressed, and carefully sorting out what represents accurately recorded facts and traditions from those statements whose value was strictly apologetic in nature.

Mark was apparently written in Rome in A.D. 71 and was an attempt to prevent the Christian Gentiles from 1) renouncing the faith, or 2) suffering the same consequences as the Jewish Church by showing that Jesus was a pro-Roman pacifist who was crucified because of pressure from the Jewish leaders for essentially religious reasons.

Matthew was written to the Alexandrian Jewish Christians, many of whom were refugees from the Mother Church after its destruction. It presents a pacific Jesus who was more of a Messianic fulfillment of prophecy than the Jews had realized.

Luke was written apparently in Achaea and his presentation of Jesus in his gospel, as well as his treatment of the spread of the Church in Acts, was calculated to win approval of Greco-Roman

peoples and to show an unoffensive pacific Jesus.

John, which was written last, gives the concept of the pacific Jesus its definitive form. Thus, according to Brandon, all four evangelists present a Jesus who was aloof, and who remained politically insulated all His life. This presentation was fabricated after the fall of Jerusalem in response to the needs of the various communities to which it was made.

Thus the Jews really viewed Jesus as their national Messiah and were surprised when His career was ended by crucifixion. This obstacle was overcome only by the personal magnetism of their Master and by the skillful biblical exegesis of His disciples. By such means were His followers induced to hold fast their faith and press on toward the restoration to Israel of sovereignty. When the revolt broke out in A.D. 66, the Jewish Christians must surely have made common cause with their brethren in order to free Israel from the yoke of bondage. The complete disappearance of the Jerusalem Church suggests just such a case.

This, of course, was possible only because Jesus, who had known of the Zealot cause from His youth, had viewed the movement with sympathy. The trial of Jesus presents the historian with data that can easily lead to the conclusion that He was tried by the pro-Roman Jewish elite for His "attack" upon the Temple and found to be a political rabble-rouser of such low character that He was immediately handed over to Pilate for execution on political grounds. Indeed, even the nature of Jesus' "blasphemy" ("I will destroy the Temple . . .") had a political ring to it. Thus, while Jesus may not have overtly attacked the Romans, He sealed His doom by attacking the pro-Roman Jewish establishment. For the pro-Roman Jews would certainly have availed themselves of the Roman protection afforded them, and delivered Jesus to Pilate as a political prisoner.

In critiquing Brandon, it will be helpful to note the following assumptions, many of which were made explicit in Jesus and the Zealots.

1) Zealots were a body more unified by their beliefs than they were diversified by other factors, such as Messianic claimants and wonder-workers. As such, they performed in a manner capable of reflecting political solidarity.

2) The Zealots were a formidable force during the lifetime of Jesus.

3) The Zealots were a political action Party.

4) The word "Zealot" has only one basic meaning in Josephus.

With regard to the facts recorded in the New Testament, Brandon supposes that silence on certain issues reflects the embarrassment of the author of the community to which he wrote, and that it is the source of this embarrassment to which the authors direct their various apologetic tasks.

Further, Brandon assumes a late date for the writing of the Gospels and Acts, two mutually exclusive Gospels (Jewish and Gentile), and a corresponding division between the Mother Church and Paul, which can be seen by careful analysis of the text.

Concerning the Messiah, Brandon assumes that Jesus could have had no other view than that which was current in His day among the common people. Therefore, Jesus viewed Himself as a political Messiah.

## Critique

Because Brandon is dealing with primary source material in an attempt to reconstruct a situation from the past, his method is historical in intent. Conservative Christians would find Brandon's conclusions unsatisfactory from a theological perspective, and Biblical scholars would

find many points of exegesis to argue. But here we will concern ourselves with a critique of his hopeless historiography.

The first area of attention must be Brandon's assumptions. These are far from being recognized as fixed principles, and are so numerous that by their sheer number, Brandon's position is seriously weakened.

There simply was no monolithic Zealot movement. There were different ways of striving toward the same goal, as is manifest by the presence of the Essenes, the Sicarii, and the "messianic pretenders." But holding common beliefs does not equate to making common cause, nor does common cause, where it does exist, always necessitate a common method. In neither attitude nor action does sympathy equal unity.

Nor should we believe that the Zealots were themselves primarily a political body. Even Brandon records the fact that under Agrippa the Zealots were quiet. This is because they were no longer directly answerable to Rome, and they had no fear of the presence of the hated Romans or of the possibility of the "Abomination of Desolation."

Further, it should be noted that in Jesus' lifetime Zealot activity was minimal, with only a few disturbances. When carefully read, Josephus expands at length the general observation of Tacitus that "under Tiberius all was quiet."

Concerning the Messiah, Brandon assumes that only the popular expectation of the time can provide a definition of "Messiah," and that the consensus was that the Messiah would be a political activist. This is but one more way of imputing to "community" a creative function, or at least the role of arbiter of normalcy. Such *a priori* fail to be compelling, and Brandon is unable to demonstrate the value of his thesis sufficiently to compel their acceptance.

His method includes what this author refers to as "cut-and-paste" methodology, or redaction/form criticism. Both redaction criticism and form criticism tend to late-date the books of the New Testament. But this late-dating militates against the very points Brandon seeks to accomplish by it. Brandon sees the Gospels and Acts as being essentially apologetic in nature, seeking to save Christianity from persecution and/or extinction after the Jewish Revolt of A.D. 66-70. But surely they chose a poor method, and in the case of Acts the strongest argument is gained only from implication. No apologist allows his strongest argument to slip into his writing only by way of implication. Yet if the authors of the Gospels and Acts were attempting to present a pacific Jesus to those who had once, or might yet, understand Jesus to be a political activist, they had only to show what had happened to the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem to demonstrate what a travesty such belief made of the teaching of Jesus.

And if indeed the writings of the evangelists (particularly the synoptics) constituted a theological surrender to Paul, and were fabricated to this end, why would they not also have been at pains to present the universal Christ rather than the Jewish Jesus? Why didn't they in addition to claiming that Jesus was mistakenly crucified, show that He died for the sins of the world as Paul insisted? This would have been, by that time, a well established motif, and one would have to refute it or accept it.

However, having provided himself with an *a priori*, Brandon twists and stretches to cover his case. Even when he admits that no sources exist which deal with his topic, he plunges on. Because we have no extra-Biblical sources to show what the Jerusalem Church was like, Brandon believes not only that we can only speculate as to its nature, but that we must so speculate. Since the Gospels and the Epistles differ in the picture they present of the early Church, they must represent a deliberate departure, and be so interpreted. But such a process could be useful for any number of conflicting

positions. To posit a Zealot Church, of which no trace is to be found, and then show how the records which do exist are deliberate fabrications and departures from the posited norm is a colossal exercise in question-begging.

This is of the essence of much of redaction criticism and form criticism. These critics seek to “go behind” the records to find the motives, methods, and materials of composition, in order to gain interpretive insights. They are thus forced to assign late dates to the records, in order to allow for whatever favored process is supposed to have taken place. But this is to attempt to find a reason for the writing of the type of material used in composition without first understanding the composition itself. It is in this way that Brandon begins from the belief that the records must be an apology on the mistaken crucifixion of Jesus and is then able so to interpret the records. For Brandon, the only possible interpretation of the Gospels which is unthinkable is the one that takes them at face value. This is clearly a case of the tail wagging the dog. It is illustrative interpretation, which assumes that the obvious interpretation is faulty.

This results in determining historical fact not on the basis of what is recorded, but on the basis of why one believes it was recorded. This “why” is an item often not given by the author, and is therefore left to the imagination of the historian.

By Brandon’s method, we do not need to conclude that Jesus was an apolitical pacifist just because the records say he was. We may instead conclude that He was a Zealot, a Zealot sympathizer, a political activist, or anything else we desire, on the basis of why we believe He is shown as He is. It would not be difficult to show that Jesus was a lunatic, using this method; or a homosexual; or a suicide; or anything else. The possibilities are nearly limitless.

This is given status today by copping a plea of “the needs of the community.” Never mind that trying to reconstruct history from the needs of the community is like trying to reconstruct a tornado ravaged restaurant on the basis of an extant menu and subsequent stomach rumblings.

The proper way to deal with history is to regard primary source documents as the records of witnesses, and not as the necessary result of communal “stroking.” Furthermore, if we, with Brandon, rewrite our sources, surely we can see that nothing will remain of Jesus but His name and His crucifixion. But this is all that Brandon started with.

This point cannot be over-stressed. Brandon says that the representation we have of Jesus, which shows Him as insulated from political realities, the “Evangelists fabricated for their own apologetic needs.”<sup>2</sup>

Never mind that the Evangelists paid with their lives for the failure of their apologetic endeavors. But what kind of history can one construct from sources one is convinced are fabrications? The assumption is that one is somehow able to rise above the sources, to judge them, and to rearrange the chaotic brush strokes into a masterpiece. It is to assume that one can sort out the truths from the non-truths and explain why each was used. But such a process is possible only on two foundations, that of omniscience, and that of a priori rationalism. Omniscience is unavailable, and rationalism is discredited as historiography.

Another shortcoming of this method is Brandon’s selection of evidence. In his attempt to select that date which supports his *a priori*, Brandon plays “heads, I win.” In interpreting away as apologetic that data which contradicts his *a priori*, he plays “tails, you lose.”

That is, if the account records sword swinging at Gethsemane, so much the better for Brandon. But if the account records Jesus halting the fight, so much the worse for us, for it is

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<sup>2</sup> Brandon, p. 320.

obviously apologetic in nature. If it is recorded that Jesus died as the “King of the Jews,” so much the better for Brandon. But if it is recorded that the Jews could not get consistent testimony against Jesus, so much the worse for us. It was recorded to show what a crooked bunch of men the Jewish elite were. If Jesus is recorded as having said “I came not to bring peace but a sword,” so much the better for Brandon. But if He is reported to have said, “Blessed are the meek,” so much the worse for us. For the evangelist was forging for us a pacific Jesus.

It should by now be plain that Brandon is playing fast and loose with the primary sources. But the end is not yet. For in addition to beginning with a carefully thought out *a priori* and forcing every text to support his conclusion, Brandon exhibits one more mammoth shortcoming. For the whole structure is a function of both cut and paste. The cutting has been described already. Let us look at the pasting.

The kind of glue Brandon uses to hold his castle together is speculation. It is a poor choice. Having carefully selected those passages that support his *a priori*, and having demolished as “apologetic” those passages which do not, Brandon finds himself left with a fistful of isolated particulars which had at one time been joined together by precisely those passages which he has excised. The problem is how to join the meaningful pieces together again in a coherent pattern. This is done by means of creative speculation. Speculation, in short, comes to be used as a substitute for that excised primary source material which was unsupportive or contradictory to the thesis. But one may do this and only be guilty of bad historiography. Brandon goes the additional step, and actually treats his speculation as though it were itself primary source material. One example of this is Brandon’s treatment of the cleansing of the Temple. He states that cleansing the Temple on the scale recorded in the New Testament could not have been done by one man acting alone, and therefore required the help of several followers. This kind of disturbance could not go unnoticed by the troops in the adjoining Antonia fortress. Though many pages intervene before the argument is concluded, when it continues it proceeds in like manner. Because no interference by the troops of the Antonia garrison is recorded, they must have been elsewhere during the cleansing of the Temple. Now because Jesus and Barabbas both were in custody at the same time, they might have been arrested at the same time. The conclusion is that Barabbas was perhaps occupied in the insurrection in another part of the city at the time when Jesus was cleansing the Temple. This would explain the absence of the troops, and suggest that Jesus and Barabbas were, if not partners, probably at least aware of each other’s activities. This is not impossible. But neither is it history. One wonders why Brandon uses the sources at all, so little bearing do they have on his case.

This brings us painfully to the last point. For Brandon, proof is constituted solely by the internal consistency and lack of evidence which specifically and explicitly denies his conclusions. And this is speculation, not history.

## Summary

If we accept what modern “historians” such as Brandon tell us about the documents of the Christian faith, we have two basic options, both of which make Christian faith, as traditionally it has been understood, practically impossible, and Christian unity unthinkable.

Intellectually, we can stretch the Jesus narratives to cover any contingency, tailor them to fit any wish. One day Jesus may be an Essene and the next a Pharisee. For one man, Jesus may be a savior, for another He may be just “a good ol’ boy.” The same texts may, for another, show Jesus

to be the proprietor of a traveling medicine show. As John W. Montgomery pointed out in his debate with Thomas J. J. Altizer, “the worse your logic, the more interesting the conclusions to which it gives rise. May we not expect . . . Jesus to be a billboard, or a toasted cheese sandwich? We may, provided only that our logic is bad enough.”

Or, on the basis of our own experience, we can affirm that the God of the Bible has made us aware of Himself by His intervening control in our lives, thus confirming the New Testament teaching about Jesus the Christ. But still the question presents itself, “what is the teaching of the New Testament?” Though our experiences may be consistent with New Testament teachings, they give neither unity nor a basis for the intellectual establishment of unity on New Testament teaching.

In a day when more and more books of greater and greater technicality are spilling forth from more presses, it seems a shame that there is less and less being said, and the conclusions are so diverse as to confuse even those who have the time and inclination to read them. This kind of “progress” is possible only because “scholars” invent methodologies more quickly than they can perfect and discredit them.

We can be pardoned if we are not immediately swept off our theological feet by Brandon’s work. We cannot be pardoned for acquiescing to his views after critical examination of the evidence.

Brandon’s is but one more voice hawking wares in the theological marketplace. *Caveat Emptor.*

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