

The first Church

The Patriarchate of Jerusalem, one of the greatest custodians of the Orthodox Church in the East, maintains undiminished the international interest from the time of its foundation until today. Almost its entire history concerns the continuous struggles of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre for the protection of the sacred shrines. This happens because the sacred shrines, starting with the All Holy Tomb, were a field of unceasing struggle between the Orthodox Christians and at times the heterodox conquerors, but also between Christians of other confessions.

The first Christian Church was founded in 33AD in Jerusalem immediately following the Ascension of Christ. According to the text of the Acts of the Apostles, the Lord appeared bodily to His disciples, after His passion, being visible to them for forty days, strengthening their faith and preaching to them about the Kingdom of God, while at the same time He commanded them not to depart from Jerusalem but to wait for the descent of the Holy Spirit (Act 1:3-4). His disciples kept the command of Christ, remaining and continually waiting His Ascension in Jerusalem waited together (Acts 1:12-14), in the attic of the house of Sion, having already elected Matthias as the twelfth Apostle (Acts 1: 15-26). After the event of Pentecost, during which the descent of the Holy Spirit had occurred, and many among the audience of the Apostle Peter converted to Christianity, the faith in Christ was consolidated and the newly catechized together with the Apostles formed the First Church of Jerusalem.

This Church despite the persecutions of the apostles and the internal strife between the Hellenists and the Jewish Christians gradually grew larger and in a short time was recognized by all the Christians as the Mother of all the Churches. The founding principles of the newly established Church of Jerusalem were set by the disciples of the Lord,

sanctified by the blood of multitudes martyrs and were preserved by the Patriarchate as a sacred heritage to this day. It is the earliest and unique Apostolic Patriarchate which with its See in the holy City of Jerusalem, represents the uninterrupted history of the Church as a natural continuation of the first Church that Christ Himself had founded.

The first elected Bishop the Church of Jerusalem was James the Brother of Christ (+62) who shouldered the pastoral care of the whole Christian community. He himself struggled personally for the internal organization of the Church and proved a counseling leader of the whole ecclesiastic life from the first days of the dissemination and prevalence of Christianity.

Specifically he defined the ecclesiastic Order, he provided for the divine worship and composed according to tradition the text of the first divine Liturgy, which were adopted by the other sibling Churches from Jerusalem. Finally regarding the issue of the relationship of the Law of the Old Testament with the Holy Gospel, namely the disagreements between Jewish Christians and Ethnic (Hellenist) Christians, he provided the solution as president of the Apostolic Synod and emerged as the head exarch among the Apostles and leader of the hierarchs. For his major contribution for the dissemination and consolidation of the new religion, the Sadducees together with the Scribes and the Pharisees condemned him to a martyric death by stoning.

It was since that period that Christianity began to acquire a universal character, having the separation of Judaism from Christianity first occur as well as of the Mosaic Law from the Word of the Holy Gospel. Towards this development an important role played the destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD by the Roman general Titus, as well as the dramatic events that followed the destruction of the Jewish Temple.

It is self understood that during that period of the destructive upheavals and the roman atrocities, the Church of Jerusalem was going through a time of sorrow and agony. Moreover, before the destruction of the Holy City, the Christians, cognizant of the teacher Christ's commandment (Luke 21:20) departed from Jerusalem and fled under divine guidance, to Pella of Decapolis which was built on the eastern bank of the river Jordan. This city bore the name of the ancient capital of Macedonia and was populated by Greeks, close to whom the persecuted Christians sought and received refuge and protection. It seems that the Christians managed to escape before the start of the siege of Jerusalem, because the mob of enraged rebels who remained would murder anyone who wished to save himself by fleeing. In fact after the martyric death of James and within the climate of these upheavals, the Church of Jerusalem elected as her Bishop the famous in the Lord and later martyr, Symeon of Klopa or Simona (70-107). The Bishopric seat was located far from the Holy City. So, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the disappearance of its Temple, the pioneering steps for a long period did not belong to the Jewish Capital, but in different and newly founded Christian centres.

The Christian Church continued to be in exile and far from the deserted Capital, while it was persecuted as much by the Romans as by the intransigent Jews who were causing internal dissensions in the Church. This was happening because those Christians who came from them (Jews), after the Apostolic Synod and the events that followed, insisted in preserving the Mosaic Law. However, by a lucky coincidence the cleansing of the extremist Judaic elements resulted in the first Church to consist of Greeks or at least by Hellenist residents of Palestine, thus receiving a Greek identity.

As it shown from the rescued historical testimonies, immediately after the departure of the Roman armies, the Christians returned in the previously glorious city of David

and lived in its ruins. As a community in fact they sought and settled in that small quarter on the hill of Sion, which during the siege had escaped the general destruction and in which there was a small church, the Church of God. The Church became the religious centre of the Christians who immediately after their return from the Hellenistic Pella, re-organized the Christian community in Jerusalem. In the mean time, Symeon, who was the Bishop of Jerusalem during the rule of Trianon (98-117), was accused for his apostolic zeal by the heretic Jews to the Consul Atticus, who arrested him and after terrible torture, condemned him to a crucifixional death. Thus, this holy Bishop at the age of 120 years sealed with his martyric blood the history of the Church of Jerusalem and predetermined her martyric course henceforth.

The Bishops following Symeon either due to persecutions or for other reasons did not govern the Church for extended periods of time. According to the testimonies of the historian Eusebios and from other information, Saint Symeon was succeeded by Justus 1 st (107-111). From then until 134 on the Episcopal throne of the Church ascended twelve more Bishops, who were: Zaccheus, Tobias, Benjamin 1 st , John 1 st , Matthias 1 st , Philip, Seneca, Justus 2 nd , Lewis, Ephraim, Joseph 1 st , and Judas, who all served as bishops at Pella and of whom there is no special information. During this period the local Church was being disturbed externally by the Judaic Christians. Against them the "Justification of the True Faith" was written by Ariston from Pella (135-175) the first Greek author after the apostles and Saint James, who wrote on the history of the Church of Jerusalem and was the first justifier of Christianity against the Jews. As a result of these events the Church of Jerusalem was mainly composed of Greeks who flocked from Pella and other parts of Palestine. The Christians in fact in order to erase every Judaic element, which also riled the Roman authority, would elect henceforth Bishops from ethnics, mainly Greeks.

Despite the sad events that intervened following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, the Holy Places were not forgotten by the Christians. On the contrary they would surround them with respect until the time of emperor Adrian (117-138). Following the repression of the well known revolt of the Jews under their leader Bar Kohmba in 135 and the restoration of Jerusalem, Adrian by his edict and on pain of death, forbade the Jews to approach the Holy City. On her ruins he founded a new city, Aelia Capitolina. In fact to obstruct the settlement of Christians in the Holy Places, he ordered that they be covered with earth and built on the All Holy Tomb a statue of Zeus and on Golgotha a statue of Aphrodite. This way the holy shrines avoided destruction and were preserved in their original state. Jerusalem in her new state appeared inferior to the other Roman colonies. With time in fact she lost her former glory and fell into obscurity while gradually the rise in superiority of Caesaria had began.

Most probably it was during this time the last of Hellenic origin Christians who had fled to Pella prior to the destruction of the City, returned to Jerusalem. They settled in Aelia and together with the rest of the Christians they formed a cluster of Christian communities. This resulted in the Church of Jerusalem consisting of Greeks from Pella and elsewhere, and "this Church is retained in the same spot by the nations". In fact during the disturbed period of Adrian who was rather favourably predisposed towards the Christians, the Episcopal throne was occupied by Markos (134) the first Christian Greek of Aelia. The goodwill of the emperor towards the Greek Christians of Aelia coincided with the acceptance of the justifications for Christianity by the Bishop of Athens Kodratos and of the Athenian philosopher Aristedis.

After her destruction by the Roman armies, Jerusalem was demoted to a small and insignificant large village, built on the ruins of her glorious past and her Bishopric was thus lacking in primacy and her early magnificence. Despite all

this, Christianity during the period of settlement of the Jerusalemites, had spread throughout the whole of Palestine, while numerous Christian communities and important Bishoprics were created in different Greek urban centres such as : Caesaria of the Mediterranean, Ptolemaida, Joppe, Gaza, Bethlehem, Caesaria of Philipou, Scithiopolis, Neapolis, Neapolis, Pella, Gerasa, Vostra, Petra –and else where. Gradually, while Judaism was significantly confined, Christianity held and spread fast. This resulted in the development and strengthening of Hellenism throughout Palestine, so that the main element of the population of Palestine after the destruction of Jerusalem, the colonizing by Greeks from the time of Great Alexander had resumed. The soon reconstituted Church of Jerusalem was composed by the Greeks from the Church of Pella.

During this period begins a new era in the history of the Church of Jerusalem. The holy City as an insignificant large village was subject politically and administratively to Caesaria, seat of the ruler of Palestine. Also, the primacy and the ecclesiastic jurisdiction of all the Bishoprics of the Holy Lands were borne by the Metropolis of Caesaria. Due to this the Bishop of Jerusalem was under the Bishop of Caesaria, who was metropolitan of all the Bishoprics of Palestine. In the mean time Adrian had started to persecute not only the Jews but also the Christians. He in fact ordered that anything reminding of Judaism and of Christianity should disappear from Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

After Markos, Bishop of Jerusalem, Cassianos was elected, having been succeeded by twenty Bishops to the throne of the Lord's brother, until the time of Great Constantine. Progressively the Bishop of Aelia enjoyed special honour by the rest of the Bishops. He sometimes even presided in honour, in the regional synods of the Bishops of Palestine. To this end contributed the fact that to the Episcopal throne ascended distinguished men with strong personalities, such as Narcissus

the Wonderworker (185-211), the most important Bishops of Jerusalem since Symeon till even the First Ecumenical Synod of 325. This pious Patriarch, having been accused falsely, fled to the desert where he remained ignored for a long time. In his place Dios was elected (211) who was succeeded almost immediately by Herman and Gordian (211-212). In the mean time in 211 appeared in Jerusalem Saint Narcissus, whom following the death of Gordian, the people persistently implored him to accept again the pastoral care of the Church. He however refused not being able to serve due to old age.

His successor was Alexander from Cappadocia (213-251) who having arrived in Jerusalem on pilgrimage, he was obliged by the Christians to become assistant to the Bishop Narcissos. As a Bishop, Alexander pastored the Church successfully, created an important library in Jerusalem, built a school in which the famous Origen taught and helped significantly in the development of theological manuscripts. After Saint James, the brother of the Lord, the first Bishop of Jerusalem, Alexander held the position of primacy for the first time in the history among the learned Bishops of the Church and was the first one to build a library and a school. The continuous progress of the Church of Jerusalem was interrupted by the persecutions by Decius (250), Diocletian (303) and Maximilian (308-319), during which time many Christians were led to martyrdom. In fact during the persecution of Decius, among others, Bishop Alexander was also arrested who after a bright justification of the Christian faith, he died in prison in 251, due to old age and was laid to rest in a modest tomb in the city. During these difficult times of persecutions the Bishopric of Jerusalem was pastored successfully by Mazabanis (251-260), Hymeneos (260-298), Zambdas (298-300) and Hermon (300-314).