

# Jakub Paleolog (1520-1585)

## Dominican Friar, Member of the Brethren in Christ, Martyr for Biblical Christianity

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### I. FRIAR FRA GIACOMO AND THE HOLY OFFICE

The sixteenth century, generally known as the Reformation period, saw very many persons who followed the three-stage life pattern indicated in our title. The number, of course, is unknown, but it is certainly in the hundreds. Leaving the “religious,” that is to say monastic and clerical, vocation for conscience sake, convinced that the Roman Catholic dogmas and practices were astray from the Bible, they wandered as fugitives around Europe, found a spiritual home with some group of Brethren in Christ (Swiss, Romanian, Czech, Polish, Ukrainian, or other<sup>1</sup>), and ultimately were “faithful unto death”<sup>2</sup> by fire or by the sword.

The life of Jakub Paleolog followed this not uncommon pattern, and thus in a sense is merely exemplary and typical. However, there are a number of features which make his faith and fate of interest to present-day Christians in the biblical non-Trinitarian tradition. Firstly, his life, for that period, is exceptionally well documented, with surviving material from both friends and enemies. His case has been used in the historical analysis of the workings of the Holy Office (Papal Inquisition).<sup>3</sup> Secondly, Paleolog is unusual among sixteenth-century biblical radical reformers in being Greek. Furthermore, during his wanderings

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<sup>1</sup> This article uses modern nationalities except where inappropriate (e.g. Transylvania).

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 2:10.

<sup>3</sup> Miroslav Hroch and Anna Skýbová, *Ecclesia Militans*, Leipzig, 1988.

as a fugitive throughout Europe, he contributed usefully and positively to the development of the distinctive doctrines of the Brethren in Christ, participating in several of the key debates where these doctrines were slowly hammered out. In the cut and thrust of controversy, he was acknowledged as a Christian of outstanding caliber, intellect and talent, even by those who disagreed with him.

He was born Giacomo Palaiologo in the Aegean island of Khíos.<sup>4</sup> His surname was the same as that of the last Imperial dynasty of Byzantium, which proved useful at several crucial points in his career, but there is no certainty that he was of royal descent. His father was, in fact, an artisan of quite modest means and his mother was a domestic servant in the home of the Giustiniani family, wealthy merchants from Genoa, hence the Italian form of his name in his early years.

Giacomo was a precocious youngster, and in his school days he immersed himself in both Greek and west European languages and culture. His teachers of the Dominican order assisted him to go to Genoa to study, and subsequently to higher institutions in Ferrara and Bologna. He was naturally under bond to give full commitment to that order upon graduation.

During the 1540s he was nominally a Dominican friar attached to a monastery in his home island, but subsequent events indicate that he was probably not a very loyal one. Khíos had a very mixed population of both Greek and Latin Christians, as well as a substantial, tolerated minority of Jews and Turkish Muslims. At the time of Giacomo's novitiate, Jews were very influential in the cities of Greece such as Thessaloniki, in the Ottoman Empire, and in some of the Aegean islands.

The religious tolerance (freedom would be too strong a word) which permitted mutual interaction between educated individuals of the four faiths in Khíos was intolerable to the Holy Office (Inquisition). When a delegation of inquisitors from Rome arrived in Khíos, Fra Giacomo the Dominican firmly withstood their interference. On one level, he considered that the activities of the Holy Office in Khíos would invite an invasion by Turkish armed forces to protect its nationals (which did in fact occur in 1566, when thirty thousand islanders were massacred

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<sup>4</sup> In the literature of the Radical Reformation, including that of leading Polish scholars, Fra Giacomo is known as Paleolog of Corfu. I have no idea how this mistake originated, as Paleolog had no connection whatsoever with Corfu.

by the Turks<sup>5</sup>). Much more importantly, his belief in the Trinity and possibly other dogmas had been unsettled by his association, certainly with the Jews, and possibly with the Muslims.<sup>6</sup>

In the circumstances of the time, and as a Dominican himself, his naivety in proposing to the delegates of the Holy Office that religious dialogue should be initiated with both Jews and Muslims must be seen as bold, or foolhardy, or both. We must remember that the Dominican order had been specifically chosen by Pope Innocent III to be the spearhead of the Inquisition, and such a proposal as this must have been a source of embarrassment. At that time, Fra Giacomo did not know that his name was already on the files of the Holy Office as a suspect heretic: some indiscreet comments made as a student in Ferrara had been noted by its spies.

It was not until he was thirty-seven, in 1557, when he was living in Istanbul as Jacob Palaiologos, that he discovered this. Again, with either misplaced trust in the sincerity of the Inquisition, or a naive conviction that as a fellow Dominican he could convince its officials of his innocence, he went to Italy where he was promptly arrested.

The heresy trial was, as always with the Inquisition, prepared in secret, with scrupulous care, and with ruthless efficiency. Five witnesses appeared and testified that Fra Giacomo was a heretic, but as the accused he was not told the basis on which the charges were made. Since, according to its own standards, the Holy Office was fair in that only rarely were charges deliberately trumped up or invented, it must be assumed that Giacomo had in fact erred from the “true faith” in several major particulars, although on this particular occasion no details have been preserved. According to normal procedure, a confession was demanded, but Giacomo refused to sign anything incriminating.

Fortunately, Fra Giacomo had influential friends, and in some way now unknown, he accomplished the exceedingly rare feat of escaping from one of the prisons of the Inquisition, an achievement by which he acquired considerable renown. But his freedom was short-lived: he was recognized in Venice, rearrested and sent to Rome to the headquarters of the Holy Office. In Rome, it was said, “they forgive atheists, sodomites, libertines, and all other kinds of offenders, but they will

<sup>5</sup> Franz Mehling, ed., *Griechenland*, Zürich: Droemersch, 1982, 163.

<sup>6</sup> R. Dostálová-Jeništová, “Jakob Palaeologus,” *Byzantinische Beiträge*, 1960, 153.

never forgive anyone who speaks badly of the Pope or of the Curia or who even creates an impression of having doubts about papal omnipotence.”<sup>7</sup>

On August 11, 1559 his Rome trial began. The hearing took place in the gloomy Dominican convent church, which is virtually unchanged today, and a visitor can readily recreate the scene in imagination. He was charged with twenty-three counts of heresy, including suspicions that he held belief in One God, had doubts about the eternal Deity of Jesus Christ, and was planning to forsake monastic vows. His guilt was evident, and being burned alive was his inevitable and imminent fate when — in his own words — “a miracle took place.”<sup>8</sup>

As soon as it became known that the unpopular Pope Paul IV had died, serious rioting broke out in Rome. The headquarters building of the Inquisition on Via Repetta was attacked and set on fire by a mob. Its director for life, Michele Ghislieri, barely escaped. The incriminating papers for Fra Giacomo’s hearing were destroyed. Then the rioters, tipsy from imbibing the contents of Ghislieri’s wine cellar, smashed open the underground cells and Fra Giacomo, to his astonishment, found himself a free man again.

## II. FRA GIACOMO THE FUGITIVE HERETIC

After the rioting, the Inquisition had to be content — for the time being — with burning him in effigy. He disappeared for two years. The next step on his pilgrimage that we know of was a debate in 1562 with a Calvinist in the town of Poissy near Paris. There followed the most audacious act in an adventurous life. He felt confident that if he went to the Council of Trent — which was, as was well known at the time, busy planning the counter-Reformation — he could persuade the Pope and the assembled clergy to compromise with, and tolerate, other faiths whose adherents rejected Romanist dogma. Hroch and Skýbová state that “he tried to convince them that his ideas were right and that he was correct in trying to get the different faiths to share a common language.”<sup>9</sup> The very thought of such an approach by one individual is almost unbelievable, were it not for undeniable evidence that this was his intention. The fact that delegates to the Council were prepared to listen to him at all, even in private, is a remarkable testimony to the

<sup>7</sup> Attributed to Gabriel Naude.

<sup>8</sup> “Summa cum miraculo.”

<sup>9</sup> Hroch and Skýbová, 104.

tenacity of the man. The papal delegates “offered him the chance of repenting in secret,” but he refused. It is said that he astounded them even more by using his presence at the Council to plead for “an organized group of likeminded sympathizers,” but who these were can only be guessed.

Fra Giacomo was in mortal danger. His skill as an escape artist was once again called upon, and he shortly afterwards appeared in Prague, the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. He had somehow managed to travel under the protection of a party of Imperial legates to the Council — right under the nose of His Catholic Majesty! Spies informed the papal ambassador in Prague of the heretic’s arrival, who in turn reported the fact to the Holy Office in Rome. This took time, allowing an alert Fra Giacomo to run for his life once more, this time to Lutheran Saxony.

He applied for a university lectureship, but the Lutherans of Leipzig and Halle were no more ready to come to terms with Fra Giacomo’s heterodoxy than the Inquisition. After several further moves, in 1564 he was given official asylum and refugee status in Prague under the protection of the temporarily ascendant Hussites. In particular, he was befriended by Matthäus Collin of Chotejřina, who introduced him to a comely Prague maiden named Kuthen who brought him a relatively brief period of marital bliss. He was no longer Fra Giacomo the (officially) celibate Dominican friar, but Jakub Paleolog the intellectual and family man. His knowledge of and fluency in Greek and Turkish were his qualifications for a job as an intelligence officer in oriental affairs in the Imperial civil service. Was there just a possibility that he might be able to put his past behind him and live his new and happier life in peace?

Sadly not. The next crucial event was not a convenient miracle but a disaster. Michele Ghislieri, the director for life of the Inquisition, was elevated to the papal tiara! One of his first acts as Pope was to demand Paleolog’s extradition. On March 30, 1571 Paleolog was arrested; he spent four months in a Prague dungeon. However, before the Pope’s long hand could reach the Imperial capital, he somehow escaped once again, sold his house, drew his last salary, and fled, this time to Poland. He settled down in Kraków and joined the *Braci Polskich*, the Brethren in Christ in Poland, “the assemblies of those persons who, in the kingdom of Poland do affirm and confess that the father of the Lord Jesus Christ is the one and only God of Israel, and that the man Jesus

of Nazareth, who was born of a virgin, and no other besides him, is the only begotten Son of God.”<sup>10</sup> Taking advantage of the liberal Polish naturalization laws at the time, he soon became Jakub Paleolog the Greek Pole.

Works that Paleolog published later reveal that during his seven years in Prague he must have had extensive contacts with the Czech, Polish and Moravian Brethren, particularly those with a radical anti-Trinitarian theology.<sup>11</sup> Almost as soon as he reached Kraków he contacted Andrzej Dudycz, another prominent naturalized Pole who had once been the Catholic bishop of Pécs (Hungary), had come to Kraków as ambassador of the Holy Roman Empire to the Polish court, and, following a semi-secret conversion to the doctrines of the Brethren, had made Poland his home. Dudycz was a wealthy aristocrat and a career diplomat.<sup>12</sup> We have found no evidence that he was ever baptized or granted full communion among the Brethren, but he was at least patron of the congregation at Śmigiel near Poznań in western Poland, and was strongly attracted to their faith.

### III. JAKUB PALEOLOG AMONG THE ANTI-TRINITARIAN BRETHERN

During the happy year that the Greek exile and his Czech wife were in Kraków, Jakub Paleolog plunged readily and headily into the ongoing debates within the community of the *Braci Polskich*. That year the church’s position on the propriety of members engaging in military service and acting as magistrates was being vigorously discussed. One wing of the brethren favored a pacifist, separatist approach, a stance similar to that of “conscientious objectors” four hundred years later. Paleolog felt that this was too extreme, and like many other apologists for modifying Jesus’ teaching on non-resistance, he attempted to distinguish between just and unjust wars. He published a treatise entitled *Zdanie o wojnie* (My opinion on war). Grzegorz Pawel replied in very vigorous vein with *Adversus Jacobi Palaeologi de bello sententiam Gregorii Pauli Responsio*:

<sup>10</sup> *Katechizm zboru tych ludzi*, Raków, 1605, title page.

<sup>11</sup> Most of the publications of Jakub Paleolog are in the Czartoryski Library in Kraków and the University Library of Cluj-Napoca in Romania.

<sup>12</sup> George Huntston Williams, “The Polish Brethren,” *Harvard Theological Studies*, 30, 1980, 62.

Palaeologus has not presented to us the real Christ, but a fictitious one. Why? Christ was gentle, patient, humble. He did not teach war, but prayed for his enemies. He promised the Kingdom of God to the humble and merciful. He made the harsh laws of Moses mild. He forbade swearing, going to law in courts, seeking vengeance. He commanded a man instead to run the risk of new injuries, of loss of goods, of slavery and toil, and to give a robber his cloak also. If it is not permissible to demand the return of things taken away, then evidently it is not permissible to resort to a court for them. Why did Christ command men to offer the other cheek to an attacker if he would have allowed punishment to be meted out by a magistrate? Punishment and vengeance must be left to God, not to men. Enemies must be loved not only with the heart, but also in outward act, the greatest evil repaid with the greatest good. That is Christian perfection.

Championed by the converted Austrian baron Johann Wolzogen, the more pacifist elements in the debate generally won the day, although it is clear that not all members were prepared to adopt such a sacrificial stand in the face of the pressure from the state.<sup>13</sup> Poland's vulnerable position made the issue a very real one throughout the history of that country.

Dudycz had already introduced Paleolog to the Brethren in Transylvania.<sup>14</sup> In consequence, he and his family only stayed in Kraków for a year before moving to Cluj (Romania). He may have felt that he could more effectively use his considerable talents among the Brethren there than in Poland. The Transylvanian Brethren, while generally avoiding embroilment in secular affairs and armed conflict, were rather more open-minded on the issue than the Poles. Whether this was the reason or not, Paleolog seemed to find a very congenial spiritual home among the anti-Trinitarian Brethren in Cluj. The seven-year period from 1568, when Ferenc David made his eloquent and successful plea before the Diet (Parliament) in Turda for liberty for all believers in the one God and "the hope of Israel," until 1575 when Prince Stefan Báthory rescinded the edict of toleration, was the "golden age" of the Transylvanian Brethren.<sup>15</sup> Jakub Paleolog enjoyed and

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<sup>13</sup> L. Alan Eyre, *Brethren in Christ*, Adelaide, 1982, 295.

<sup>14</sup> Zbigniew Ogonowski, *Socynianizm polski*, Warszawa, 1960, 15-20.

<sup>15</sup> John Fretwell, *Three Centuries of Unitarianism in Transylvania*, New York, 1976.

utilized this short-lived freedom to the full. Most of his surviving writings were published at this time. It must be assumed that the wing of the Brethren associated with David, which the Poles stigmatized then (and still do in their histories of the period) as “judaistic,”<sup>16</sup> attracted Paleolog, no doubt because of his early experiences in Khíos and his familiarity with oriental languages and modes of thought. Indeed, he visited his native island for the last time in the aftermath of the Khíos massacre, perhaps to investigate the fate of his family. He also stayed — and probably did some serious study — in Muslim Istanbul, where Jews but not Christians were tolerated.

When Prince Stefan Báthory succeeded Jan Sigismund as ruler of Transylvania, and the precious liberty of the Brethren was lost, the Paleologs returned to more tolerant Kraków.<sup>17</sup> But political events overtook Jakub yet once more. Prince Stefan Báthory became King of Poland! So again Jakub and his family took to the road, this time back to his wife’s native Czech lands. He asked for protection from an old Czech friend, Jetřich of Kunovice. The family stayed with him for five years.

However, the brief years of relative safety among the Polish Brethren and their co-religionists in Cluj had perhaps been too carefree, and moreover during this period Jakub Paleolog had become a deeply committed man. “The isolated and persecuted seeker after truth had become a member and even a worker of an organized religious movement where he found friends, helpers and admirers. Ironically, it was precisely this new feeling of fellowship which in the end proved his downfall.”<sup>18</sup> His friend and deeply beloved co-worker Ferenc David was tried for heresy and only escaped the stake by dying in his prison cell in the grim castle of Deva (Romania).<sup>19</sup> Paleolog published what has been described as a passionate defense of his friend, accusing the judges of failing to recognize true Christianity in the person and faith of this saintly old man.

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<sup>16</sup> Stanislaw Tync, *Zarys Dziejów Wyższej Szkoły Braci Polskich w Rakowie 1602-1638*, Warszawa, 1960.

<sup>17</sup> Janusz Tazbir, *A State Without Stakes: Polish Religious Toleration in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Warszawa, 1973.

<sup>18</sup> Hroch and Skýbová, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Many sources, some very authoritative, state that Ferenc David was burned alive. In fact, there is incontestable evidence that he died in prison in advance of his execution. The Romanian sources are definite on this.



#### IV. JAKUB PALEOLOG THE MARTYR

The ubiquitous spies of the Holy Office pounced upon this publication as the clearest proof of heresy. “What further need have we of witnesses?”<sup>20</sup> In short order Jakub’s protector Jetřich was ordered to hand over Paleolog to the bishop of Olomouc’s police. He had no choice. At this Czech nobleman’s home at Loučka near the city of Zlín, a nobler man than he was arrested as a prisoner of the Pope. It was as a prisoner that he was taken to Vienna, which by this time had become the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, and thence to Rome. Paleolog was sixty years old, but his reputation as an escape artist was such that he was chained, with his hands bound behind his neck, and locked into a cramped iron cage for the long journey from Vienna to Rome. The cage was put on a riverboat, which then made its slow way up the Danube and the Inn to Innsbruck. There the cage with its inmate was hauled over the Alps to Italy. The journey took three months. On arrival the hapless prisoner was exhibited like a caged animal through the streets of Rome.

The trial was held in the same Santa Maria sopra Minerva, the Dominican convent church familiar to him from twenty-four years before. It was relatively brief and the outcome a foregone conclusion. The records of the Holy Office indicate that he defended his faith “con eloquenza incredibile” (with unbelievable eloquence). It really must have been so for such an admission to be made by his most fanatical enemies. It was agreed that he was a “stubborn and recidivist heretic” and he was condemned to be burned alive.

In February, 1582 he was led out to the stake, holding a candle and in the usual tunic with its picture of the damned in hellfire. But even at this late hour Jakub Paleolog incredibly eluded the flames. While actually on the way to Rome’s central square, where the crowds were already gathered and the faggots prepared for the victim, he asked for his execution to be postponed, on the grounds that he would like some time to search his heart. This was such an unprecedented request that the Dominican friars in charge decided that the Pope in person would have to give his ruling. So Paleolog was taken back to prison. For some reason which can only be guessed, the Pope decided that this renegade heretic monk could be permitted an honorable, private execution.

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 26:65.

Hroch and Skýbová state that there is no evidence that during the two years he was in prison he renounced his heretical views.<sup>21</sup>

On May 25, 1585 Jakub Paleolog was beheaded in the courtyard of the Torre di Nona prison. Officers of the “secular arm” (state police) carried his body through the alleyways of Rome to the Campo de fiori, then the central square of the city, and burned it to ashes. If custom was followed on this occasion, these were taken down the Via d’Farnesi and thrown into the waters of the Tiber.

References to Jakub Paleolog in contemporary documents suggest that he was held in some awe by both his brethren and his enemies. He must have had considerable charisma. Many of the Polish and Transylvanian Brethren were men of learning and were obviously rather proud that a Greek theologian of his repute and ability should ally himself with their views, so unorthodox for that period. That he was aware of his talents is evident, and he was certainly over-confident at times. He must have taken pleasure in eluding his captors, but when it came to the final test, he was not ashamed to depart in the same manner and within a short walk of where the apostle Paul, whose teachings were his model and guide, and whose life of faith he followed so zealously, gave his life for the “hope of Israel”<sup>22</sup> in confident assurance of receiving a crown of life from the Lord when he returns in glory.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hroch and Skýbová, 106.

<sup>22</sup> Acts 28:20.

<sup>23</sup> 2 Timothy 4:8, 18.