

The Jerusalem Decrees and Paul's Attitude to Them

Here are a few comments on the problem that arose from the demand of Jewish Christians that the gentiles, too, should be circumcised and be compelled to keep the law of Moses, the solution proposed at Jerusalem and how Paul treated the decrees of the Jerusalem Church.

Acts 15:22-29: Τότε ἔδοξε τοῖς ἀποστόλοις καὶ τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐκλεξαμένους ἄνδρας ἐξ αὐτῶν πέμψαι εἰς Ἀντιόχειαν σὺν τῷ Παύλῳ καὶ Βαρναβᾶ ... γράψαντες διὰ χειρὸς αὐτῶν· Οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἀδελφοὶ τοῖς κατὰ Ἀντιόχειαν καὶ Συρίαν καὶ Κιλικίαν ἀδελφοῖς τοῖς ἐξ ἐθνῶν χαίρειν ... ἔδοξεν γὰρ τῷ Πνεύματι τῷ Ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν μηδὲν πλέον ἐπιτίθεσθαι ὑμῖν βᾶρος πλὴν τούτων τῶν ἐπανάγκης, ἀπέχεσθαι *εἰδωλοθύτων* καὶ *αἵματος* καὶ *πνικτῶν* καὶ *πορνείας*, ἐξ ὧν διατηροῦντες ἑαυτοὺς εὖ πράξετε.

The problem arose in Antioch at the return of Paul and Barnabas from the first missionary journey. Acts 15:1 says:

Καὶ τινες κατελθόντες ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἐδίδασκον τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ὅτι, ἐὰν μὴ περιτμηθῆτε τῶν ἔθει Μωϋσέως, οὐ δύνασθε σωθῆναι.

There is no doubt that the incident that Luke is relating here is the same incident that is related in Gal 2:1-10. The two texts need, therefore, to be brought together in order for us to penetrate more deeply into the issues that were at stake here as well as to understand the part each several actor played in particular.

The 'eirenic' Luke—as he has been dubbed—tries to present the problem as softly and amicably towards all partners as

he possibly can, whereas the vehement Paul is less diplomatic. The differences between the two accounts are to be explained also by the additional fact that Luke seeks to present the overall picture, avoiding controversies, whereas Paul puts forth the matter from his own viewpoint and does not feel inhibited in denouncing those he considers insincere and false.

In this conflict we see the two opposing viewpoints within early Christianity face each other and the problem is both real and serious.

The Course of Events according to Acts 15

The teaching of the persons who came down from Judaea, caused a great disturbance and debate in the Antiocheian Church, in which Paul and Barnabas formed the opposite pole.

Since no solution was in view, and Paul and Barnabas could not acquiesce to the Judaizers' demands, the Church of Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas with a few others to Jerusalem to take the matter up with the Apostles and elders.

Once in Jerusalem, they were received well by the Church, the Apostles and the elders. Paul and Barnabas had the opportunity to relate to them what they had accomplished during their journey to Cyprus, Pisidia and Lycaonia. At this point certain Pharisees, who had believed, put forth the demand that the gentile believers should be circumcised and keep the law of Moses.

This led to a gathering of the Apostles and elders to consider and decide the issue. After a lot of argumentation on either side, Peter related his own experience, when he was

called to evangelize Cornelius and his household, implying that the matter should have been settled long ago. Moreover, he had also an interesting argument. If God bore witness to the gentiles, making no distinction between them and us, “why do you test God to put a yoke on the gentile brethren’s neck, *which neither our father nor we were able to bear?*” Here the hypocrisy actuating these people become quite threadbare and transparent. As Paul explains in Gal 6:13 “Nor do those who are circumcised keep the law, but they want you to be circumcised, so that they may boast in your flesh”. Born Jews could not keep the law, but they demanded that the gentiles do it! How absurd!

At any rate, Peter’s testimony was in support of Paul and Barnabas’ viewpoint. This opened the way for Paul and Barnabas to address the assembly and they related the great things that God had done through them among the gentiles. When they stopped, James took the floor. An older Baptist Pastor once counselled a younger one, that in his deacons’ meetings, he should see to it that his own view was always the one to be adopted. “You must let them talk”, he said. “Let them wear out one another. When the time set has been spent and they are nowhere near a solution that is acceptable to all, and everybody wants to go home, then step in and say, that it just occurred to me, while listening to you ... There you present your own view, but present it in such a way, that they will think it was the solution that they themselves were arguing for. Tired as they are, they will acquiesce to your suggestion, and there, you will have won the day”.

We cannot know for sure whether James followed the Baptist Pastor’s advice, but he kept his peace to the end. No doubt they were tired. Using the authority that he enjoyed in the Je-

rusalen Church, James lays before them his plan. He could not argue against Peter or Paul and Barnabas. Obviously, their work had been crowned with divine approval. He saw that it was not possible for him, in the face of the facts, to go contrary to their stories. Therefore, he puts forth his suggestion. Leaning on Peter's testimony—Paul and Barnabas' testimony is not mentioned—he quotes prophetic scriptures to the effect that God was concerned about the gentiles as well. And now comes his suggestion. “Therefore, I judge that we do not bother those gentiles who have turned to God, but that we write to them to keep away from pollutions of idols, from *porneia*, from (eating) strangled (animals), and from blood” (Acts 15:19-20).

This suggestion by James passed. They all accepted it. They wrote the letter with their four decrees and send it to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas and a couple of others to guarantee the genuineness of the decision and to make sure that the letter with its decrees was delivered (implied).

But the matter did not end here.

2. *James' Solution*

There is no doubt that James' suggestion was accepted by all parties, even by Paul. James said: “I judge that we should not trouble those gentiles who have turned to God” (Acts 15:19). This gives the impression that Paul's side had won and the gentiles will be free. But alas, this is not so. In the same breath as James says “We should not trouble the gentiles” he also adds “except that we write to them to abstain from idol pollutions, *porneia*, strangled meat, and blood”. Thus, from the

front door he declares the freedom of the gentile Christians from the law of Moses, and then pushes in through the back door Mosaic commands! This was to satisfy the Judaizers. Thus the Judaizers have not quite lost face. They lost the circumcision, but they won their customs and their laws' commands.

Paul could do nothing more. From now on he had to come to terms with this new situation himself without conferences and consultations. When they come back to Antioch, they delivered the letter to the Church. The Church rejoiced to hear that circumcision, the badge of the Jews, was no longer required of them. When Paul and Silas came to Derbe and Lystra (journeying from the East), Paul circumcised Timotheos, because of the Jews in those parts, who were aware that his father was a gentile. What is happening here? Has Paul accepted defeat? Has he given up his principles for the freedom of gentile Christianity? The very next verse (Acts 16:4) says that as they visited one city after the other, they delivered the decrees that had been decided upon by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. It appears, then, that by this time Paul had decided to stick to the agreement reached in Jerusalem and keep to the decrees. He, in fact, went beyond that, when he circumcised Timotheos, something he had refused to do in Jerusalem to Titos. Or did he do that to Timotheos, because he was half Jew?—Titus seems to have been wholly gentile. Perhaps he was trying to keep the spirit of the agreement. It is a pity that we have this report only from Luke and not from himself as well.

Nonetheless, whatever made him circumcise Timotheos and recommend to the gentile churches to keep the decrees of the Jerusalem assembly, this was also the last time that Paul did it.

Henceforth there is never again any mention of the decrees. From this point on, Paul was breaking new ground. The churches in Lycaonia and Pisidia had been established by Paul and Barnabas. These churches had become aware of the conflict created by the Jewish Christians. It was, therefore, appropriate that they heard of the decisions of the Jerusalem Church. This fully explains Paul's conduct in citing the decrees and in circumcising Timotheos. After the Pisidian Antioch, the Churches established were alone Paul's churches, and they were not included in the commotion with the Judaizers. Thus, Paul felt now free to change his policy. The Jerusalem letter is discarded together with its decrees.

3. What Was at Stake

The question "What was at stake?" cannot be satisfactorily answered only from Luke's account. In Gal 2, with his usual vehemence, Paul gives an engaging picture. Acts 15:2 states that the Antioch Church commissioned (ἔταξαν) Paul and Barnabas (and a few other unnamed persons) to go to Jerusalem. In Gal 2:1-2, Paul claims that he went to Jerusalem with Barnabas (taking Titus along) as a result of a revelation! Is Paul here exaggerating his own role and his own importance, or was it a happy coincidence that both he and the Church had received the same guidance, i.e. for Paul to travel to Jerusalem? Perhaps we have here a repetition of Act 13:2. It could not be that the Church or some members of it had received a message from God respecting Paul's ministry (the First Missionary Journey), without him, too, having had the same confirmation.

The first person singular mentioned first is typically Greek, which, unlike modern European languages, does not say “Barnabas and I”, but “I and Barnabas”. That he here speaks in the first person singular with Barnabas hanging in the periphery has another reason as well. Inasmuch as Barnabas had separated from him and Paul had continued on his own, it would have been inappropriate to include Barnabas in matters relating to his personal ministry.

Paul says that he laid before the Jerusalem leaders the gospel he preached among the gentiles, so that they would take a position about it and confirm their agreement with its content, so that Paul did not labor or had labored in vain (he uses *τρέχω* and aorist *ἔδραμον* metaphorically of his labors).

Vv. 3-4 are problematic and seem on the surface to be contradictory in their statements. In verse 3 Titus appears not to have been circumcised, while the concessive *διὰ δέ* in verse 4 seems to contradict it. Verse 5 gives the impression that the demands of the Judaizers were not granted, and thus Titus was not circumcised. It is obvious here that the memories of those sordid events in Jerusalem, with the many viewpoints, the arguments, the contradictions, when the situation changed constantly, make it difficult for Paul to give in a few words an adequately clear picture of a very volatile situation, the order of the events, the causes behind them and the final net result. The conclusion I draw from these verses is that Titus was not circumcised. Indeed, this was demanded by the Judaizers, but we (I and Barnabas!) stood our ground, refusing to give in to their demand.

Why all this insistence? Why this fight? Why could not Paul try to show some understanding to the feelings of the Je-

wish Christians and compromise on a few points? What harm would be done, if he had been more cooperative?

Anyone who argues in this way shows that he has not understood what was at stake here. Had Paul (and Barnabas) given in and allowed Titus to be circumcised, this would have passed as a precedent. Paul would have sacrificed the heart of his gospel, which was that God justified the ungodly without the mediation of the law. The grace of God in Christ was sufficient without the sinner undertaking any acts of self-improvement. The submission to circumcision was totally without any value before God, in whose presence a cultic interference on the flesh could not cleanse the soul and spirit. Had Paul given in to the Judaizers' demand, Christianity would have turned to a Jewish sect, like many others in those days. Here, too, we see Paul's greatness. Even though there were those who sympathized with him and were willing to support him—fine Christian leaders like Peter—no one had seen quite as clearly the principal side of the whole thing. Paul became 'obstinate', because he knew that Christianity's very existence was at stake. Cost what may, he fought the Judaizers' point of view strenuously and to the bitter end. And he won. It is thanks to the Apostle Paul that the truth of the gospel has remained in the Christian Church. Within a few generations the Judaizers were swept away; they degenerated into a number of Jewish sects until they died out (see in the present folder the comments on "Jewish Bigotry").

In Gal 2, therefore, we get a perspective that is totally missing in Acts 15.

In the rest of the paragraph—which is not central to this note—Paul speaks a little disparagingly about the "pillars" of the Jerusalem Church, i.e. James, Kephias, and John. That

must be, because he was disappointed with the support they gave him, or rather with the fact that the principle of the matter had not been grasped by them. In such matters they were spiritual dwarfs. Only later, much later, do we find John, for example, becoming a giant, giving us that deeply theological work, the Fourth Gospel.

4. Paul's Views about the Jerusalem Decrees

Paul nowhere speaks explicitly about the Jerusalem decrees. But the way he treated a problem reflected in the decrees, reveals what he must have thought of them.

The problem arose in the Corinthian Church. Perhaps they had written to him asking his advice. At any rate, he takes it up in 1 Cor 8. In verse 4 he says:

Περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὖν τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων, οἶδαμεν ὅτι οὐδὲν εἶδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ (With regard to eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, we know that there are no idols in the world)

This means that the Christian is free to partake of any kind of meat. But Paul does not stop here. This is only the introductory statement, the basic given, if you like, which taking various other factors into consideration, sometimes will need modification. Paul implies that knowledge is a good thing, but not everybody has the right kind of knowledge. Thus, some people, Christians, who had come out of heathendom, who as heathen used to buy animal meat that had been sacrificed to idols, or used to go to the εἰδωλεῖα—places where one could eat food of animals that had been offered to various deities—

continued to eat such meat in the consciousness that they were eating meat of animals offered to idols. In this way, their weak conscience was polluted. Or Christians who felt that they as Christians should abstain from such meat, watching other Christians either buying or eating such meat in the εἰδωλεῖα, would themselves be encouraged to eat meat offered to idols for what it was taken to be. And thus their conscience would be wounded. Accordingly, he promulgates the principle that, if meat offends a Christian brother, it should be abstained from.

Paul is not saying that eating meat offered to idols is sin, but if such behavior unsettles a Christian Brother, it becomes sin.

For the subject under discussion, then, what is important is that Paul takes a diametrically opposed stance in the matter of the “idol pollutions” of the decrees. The expression used in Acts as such might include other idolatrous practices as well, but its collocation with other Jewish dietary regulations in the decrees, might imply that in the first place food is in view here.

Here, then, we have a total break with the Jerusalem decrees. Paul’s reasoning is quite clear that the Jewish inhibitions in matters of food are without value and irrelevant for Christians.

If the Earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, then a Christian may partake of any kind of food. Moreover, for a Christian the deities of the pagans are non-entities. They do not exist. They have never existed. The Christian is not bound to such superstitions. There is absolute freedom. Only, the Christian may not offend anyone.

If the Jews are intended by those who are offended here, then they are the weak Brother, just like in Rome, where Paul tried to support them against the strong Christians, i.e. the

gentile Christians, by seeking to put the gentiles in their place (Cf. Caragounis, “From Obscurity to Prominence: The Development of the Roman Church between Romans and *1 Clement*” in K. P. Donfried – P. Richardson (Eds.), *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 245-279).