

Paul And Conflict With The Jerusalem Church

Eric McAlister
RS 236
February 9, 2016

The apostle Paul has occasionally been called the second founder of Christianity, a title that serves to show his importance in Church history. The importance of the Jerusalem Church to Church history is also hard to understate as it was located in the center of Jewish life and was, in its early days, more or less seen as a mere offshoot of the main Jewish religion. These two forces in early Christian history were to come into conflict as Christianity expanded beyond the borders of Judaism as Paul, despite being a Jew himself, began to open up the gospel to Gentiles and, more specifically, began to preach that Torah obedience was not necessary for Christianity. This conflict was one that had strong opinions on both sides and can be examined at length through the lens of Paul's interactions with the Jerusalem Church.

Conflict – Context

In its earliest days, the community of believers, or Christians as they eventually became known, was based almost entirely in Jerusalem and was comprised entirely of Jews. One description of the early Jerusalem Church was given by Jaroslav Pelikan, who states:

The first seven or eight chapters of the Book of Acts describe a community based in Jerusalem, observant of Jewish dietary and other laws, seeing itself as one of several sects within the Jewish community – a special one, to be sure, because of its beliefs about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, but still functioning within that community.¹

This Jewish monopoly on membership in the Christian community was to be challenged though. One of the earliest challenges, and perhaps the definitive starting point for the larger conflict, comes in Acts

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Historical Perspective," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Science* 32 (Apr., 1979), 21.

10 when Peter, a Jewish apostle, visits the house of a Roman centurion, a Gentile, named Cornelius. The significance of the visit is seen in many ways, particularly because, as Peter states “You are well aware that it is against our [Jewish] law for a Jew to associate or visit with a Gentile.”² As stated earlier by Pelikan, the Jerusalem Church would have still been observant of Jewish law and Peter himself would have also continued to participate in temple activities and remained committed to traditional Judean customs.³

However, during this visit, Peter comes to a realization that salvation has become available even to the Gentiles,⁴ a realization that is further affirmed by the Holy Spirit being dispensed on the Gentiles present.⁵ Peter is challenged by his fellow Jewish Christians about his visit with Cornelius when he returns to Jerusalem, particularly on the matter of entering Cornelius' house and eating with him.⁶ Peter recounts the visit, the events leading to the visit, and places particular emphasis on the Holy Spirit being given to the Gentiles.⁷ Those who challenged Peter are noted to have “praised God, saying 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life,'”⁸ affirming what Peter himself had already seen and experienced. However, it is interesting to note the initial question of Peter eating and visiting with Gentiles and, more broadly, Torah obedience for Christians, does not appear to be resolved. As Baker notes:

The excitement surrounding the inclusion of non-Judeans and the response of the circumcision party may overshadow the fact that the issue of circumcision has not been resolved. The circumcision group is pleased that non-Judeans have expressed belief in Jesus as Messiah and been ritually accepted into the Christ group by being baptized and

2 Acts 10:28 NIV.

3 Coleman A. Baker, *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity: Peter, Paul, and Recategorization in the Book of Acts* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 122.

4 Acts 10:34-35.

5 Acts 10:45.

6 Acts 11:1-3.

7 Acts 11:4-17.

8 Acts 11:18.

filled with the Holy Spirit, but the question of the place of circumcision and Torah observance has yet to be addressed.⁹

Conflict – The Question

Thus, the question for facing the Jerusalem Church, and Christianity as a whole, had become whether or not one needed to be a Jew, in the sense of Torah obedience, to be a Christian. It was clearly seen that both Jew and Gentile could receive salvation from God but this recognition did nothing to resolve the matter of what rituals were required of individuals once joining the Christian community.

Paul, as the self identified apostle to the Gentiles,¹⁰ would have been fully invested in this question. Paul would come into even closer contact with this question when Barnabas brought him to Antioch in order to help instruct and grow the church there.¹¹ Prior to this, Antioch was noted as a city where the Christian message of Jesus was spread to Gentiles, in particular Greeks,¹² so there is almost no doubt the question of Torah obedience would have arisen in this setting, emphasizing Paul's particularly strong connection to the question, and likely giving him an outlook that would have been particularly different than that of those in the Jerusalem Church who were, more or less, totally surrounded by other Jews. We also know that Ananias, prior to his meeting Paul in Damascus, was told by the Lord that “[Paul] is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel,”¹³ further emphasizing Paul's stake in the matter.

Interactions – A Relative Timeline

Regarding Paul's interactions with the Jerusalem Church, we know of Paul's encounter with Peter that he records in Galatians 2 where he opposes him on a matter relating to the conflict and we know of multiple visits to Jerusalem where he interacted with the Jerusalem Church. However, there is

⁹ Baker, 127.

¹⁰ Galatians 2:7.

¹¹ Acts 11:25-26.

¹² Acts 11:20-21.

¹³ Acts 9:15.

some debate over these visits, their order, and their events, thus it is useful to examine these visits and establish a relative timeline to work within. We can use Pierson Parker's statement that "[Paul's] whole argument ... depends on listing all of his contacts with the Jerusalem leaders,"¹⁴ when discussing Galatians 2, a particularly important chapter in lieu of the conflict, as a further justification for establishing a timeline of this nature.

Willis J. Beecher, in his 1893 piece *Paul's Visits to Jerusalem*, provides a reasonable starting point, helpfully identifying eight mentions of Paul and visits to Jerusalem, assigning a theme to each visit to further help identify the visit. These visits are named: *recognition*, *relief*, *council*, *salutation*, *imprisonment*, *trance*, *Cephas*, and *fellowship*.¹⁵

Beecher also identifies a reference made in Acts 26:20 but, in his words, this is "apparently general"¹⁶ and does not get assigned any importance. However, as alluded earlier, problems arise as some of these visits are overlapping and can be identified with each other. Particularly challenging is the matter of whether or not to identify the *council* and *fellowship* visits with each other. This is of particular importance because of the similar themes presented in both visits where challenges relating to the conflict from Jewish Christians are presented to Paul and later addressed.

Beecher himself makes clear his view that these two visits are not the same, himself identifying the *fellowship* and the *recognition* visits as the same.¹⁷ This seems to be a problematic view though, one reason being Beecher seems to weigh Acts and Paul's letters as being of equal importance as primary sources. This runs in contrast to modern scholarship that would favour a position where Paul is seen as the primary source and Acts as a secondary source, a position explicitly stated by David B. Bronson.¹⁸

Indeed, it seems more likely that both visits are one in the same. Parker, before addressing four

14 Pierson Parker, "Once More, Acts and Galatians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (Jun., 1967), 179.

15 Willis J. Beecher, "Paul's Visits to Jerusalem," *The Biblical World* 2 (Dec., 1893), 434-435.

16 Beecher, 434.

17 Beecher, 435.

18 David B. Bronson, "Paul, Galatians, and Jerusalem," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 35 (Jun., 1967), 119.

apparent contradictions from the two accounts, sums up this view when he states:

It certainly looks as though these accounts cover the same history, for it would be hard to imagine two such councils, on the same subject, involving the same people, with the same sequence of events, in the same places, and with the same denouements--right down to a quarrel between Paul and Barnabas.¹⁹

Parker's piece is notable as he actually dismisses the notion that the *recognition* visit from Acts 9 actually occurred.²⁰ Parker arrives at this thought when discussing a supposed contradiction in the timelines presented by Acts and Galatians. He addresses this, in the vein of the Paul as a primary source assumption, noting that "...where Acts and Paul disagree about Paul's own movements, Paul is surely right."²¹ He also presents three similarities within Acts 9 that line up well with other accounts of Paul's visits, leading him to conclude of the Acts 9 visit that "... one can almost see Luke's mind at work ... constructing it out of what he had heard about other sojourns in that city."²² By dismissing the *recognition* visit Parker is also able to present a coherent timeline that identifies the *Cephas* and *relief* visits as the same.²³

When discussing the *trance* visit, we can reasonably identify this with the *Cephas/relief* visit. Paul himself places this visit in his first visit to Jerusalem after his experience on the road to Damascus, the *Cephas/relief* visit in Parker's timeline, during his speech in Acts 22. The *salutation* visit is problematic as very few details are presented about the events that occurred during that visit, in fact Beecher makes little reference to it after assigning its theme and the visit is absent from Parker's timeline. Therefore, it should be safe to assume that either the visit was of little significance to Paul and the Jerusalem Church or that the visit was, similar to the *recognition* visit, an error in Luke's recording

¹⁹ Parker, 175.

²⁰ Parker, 179.

²¹ Parker, 179.

²² Parker, 181.

²³ Parker, 181.

of Paul's travels.

We can thus conclude Paul visited the Jerusalem Church on three distinct, significant occasions: his initial visit comprising of the *relief*, *trance*, and *Cephas* visits, his second visit comprising the *council* and *fellowship* visits, and his final visit, the *imprisonment* visit. Using Paul's chronology of events in Galatians 2, we can place his opposition to Peter between the Jerusalem Council and his final visit.

The First Visit

In Galatians 1:18-19, while recounting his first visit, Paul makes no mention of any disagreement regarding the mission to the Gentiles between himself, Peter, and James the brother of Jesus. It is reasonable to wonder if the matter even came up, but given Peter's earlier experience with Cornelius and Paul's dramatic calling, it seems just as reasonable to believe it would have come up one way or another. This is especially curious in the case of Paul's interaction with James as James is noted, in terms of his Jewishness, to be "conservative."²⁴ One stated theory that addresses this curiosity is that "...the Jerusalem apostles, for these men, prior to the conference of Galatians ii, had no interest in the gentile mission. They were neither for it nor against it..."²⁵ This is not an unreasonable view for the Jerusalem Church to take given the uniquely Jewish context they were living in and thus they may not necessarily have been concerned with the specifics of Paul's mission.

The Council at Jerusalem

Nevertheless, the issue did arise in Acts 15:1, and is corroborated by Galatians 2:4, where "Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved.'"²⁶ At this point, some may look back to Cornelius experience and

²⁴ David Wenham and A. D. A. Moses, "'There Are Some Standing Here....': Did They Become the 'Reputed Pillars' of the Jerusalem Church? Some Reflections on Mark 9:1, Galatians 2:9 and the Transfiguration," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (Apr., 1994), 154.

²⁵ Joseph B. Tyson, "Paul's Opponents in Galatia," *Novum Testamentum* 10 (Oct., 1968), 251.

²⁶ Acts 15:1.

reach a conclusion that the matter was previously solved and this group from Judea were outliers among Christians. Rather, as Baker reminds us, the issue at hand with Cornelius was table fellowship and not entry rituals necessary in Christianity, in particular, circumcision.²⁷ It is also good to recall that in the genesis of this conflict, when Peter visited Cornelius, no clear answer to the issue was presented when Peter recounted the visit to his fellow Jews. At this point the Jerusalem Church is no longer able to avoid the unresolved issue of Torah obedience for Gentiles and Paul and Barnabas leave for Jerusalem to discuss the matter with the apostles and elders.²⁸

As the council progresses a group of Pharisaic believers argue that Gentiles must become Jews and thus obedient to Mosaic law to believe while Peter, Paul, and Barnabas all make speeches that favour Gentile inclusion in Christianity.²⁹ What comes next is a bit of a surprise as it is James who makes the definitive pronouncement on the issue, commonly seen as a sign of the growing influence James was beginning to see in the Jerusalem Church, influence beyond even that of Peter.³⁰ At this point, a ruling that is seemingly in favour of Paul is pronounced and his mission to the Gentiles is acknowledged while the Jerusalem Church agrees to reach Jews.³¹

The pronouncement from James, and Paul's reaction to it, are interesting for a few reasons though and seem to create a new issue for the early Christians. Firstly, Mathews notes that “even an extreme legalist like James could see the difference between a Jewish and a Gentile denomination of Christians,”³² and thus James is faced with creating a solution that both parties can agree to. This led James to, in effect, make a decision wherein “... Gentile Christians [were] allowed to maintain their non-ritualistic form of Christianity [and] Jews were left equally free to maintain the observance of the

²⁷ Baker, 151.

²⁸ Acts 15:2.

²⁹ Acts 15:5-12.

³⁰ Wenham and Moses, 155.

³¹ Galatians 2:9.

³² Shailer Mathews, “The Council at Jerusalem,” *The Biblical World* 33 (May, 1909), 340.

Mosaic law.”³³ This decree was, or at least seems, not totally satisfactory to Paul as it made an implicit ethnic distinction and “... nowhere grants ... that uncircumcised gentile Christians belong to the true Israel,”³⁴ where 'true Israel' would refer to God's chosen people. Further, we see that the letters of Paul “do not contain any clear references to the 'decree,’”³⁵ and in some instances, one being 1 Corinthians 10:25, outright rejects the commands given by James.³⁶

Paul Opposes Peter

Knowing that Paul may not have been totally satisfied with the decree from James can help us understand Paul's opposition to Peter starting at Galatians 2:11. Paul makes mention of certain men from James instructed Peter and others to stop eating with Gentiles³⁷ and, as we have already seen, James' influence in the Jerusalem Church was growing, thus this command would carry a specific weight. Knowing James conservative position on Jewish matters and his implicit ethnic distinction between Jews and Gentiles in his declaration, it's not unreasonable to conclude a policy of segregation during meals, and other measures meant to ensure Torah obedience for Jews, would have come into effect, despite the experience Peter had with Cornelius. This continued enforcement of Torah obedience would certainly have been vehemently opposed by Paul given the nature of what he had been preaching. Also interesting is the lack of a statement from Paul on whether or not Peter accepted his argument. In fact, it seems that “His silence on the matter strongly suggests he lost.”³⁸

The Final Visit

Paul's final visit to Jerusalem, although cut short by his arrest, does feature one last piece of insight into his interactions with the Jerusalem Church and his ongoing conflict over Torah Obedience.

33 Mathews, 341.

34 Parker, 176.

35 Martin Hengel, *Acts and the history of Earliest Christianity*, trans. John Bowden. (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1979), 117.

36 Parker, 176.

37 Galatians 2:12.

38 Arthur J. Dewey et al., *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*, (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2010), 47.

After arriving in Jerusalem, Paul is noted to have visited James and all the elders of the Jerusalem Church and recounts the details of his ministry.³⁹ Once again, the Jews praise God for what has been done, but soon the tone changes and they are confronting Paul over his teachings, particularly that he has been teaching Jews they do not need to maintain obedience to the Law of Moses, or Torah.⁴⁰ Paul is then instructed to undergo purification rites at the temple, which he does, and is reminded of the declaration from the Council at Jerusalem.⁴¹ The repetition of the declaration is noteworthy as it could potentially serve as a confirming sign that “ Paul himself had not recognized the 'apostolic decree' [as] James presents it as something new and apparently unknown to him.”⁴²

Analysis

From the first visit we can assume that Paul had, at minimum, made Peter and James aware of his mission to the Gentiles that was already at work in Antioch and would soon be at work in his missionary journeys. No opposition is raised here to the mission and, given the Jewish Christian response to salvation being afforded Cornelius and his family after Peter's visit, it is just as safe to assume they would have supported Paul in this endeavour. In fact, the question of sharing the Christian message with Gentiles never appears to be an issue, even up to Paul's final visit to Jerusalem. What we are unable to assume is that Paul would have discussed ritual obedience, Torah, and it's relation to Gentile converts with Peter or James. Judging by how often the issue would come up in the future it's almost reasonable to assume Peter and James were not initially concerned with this matter and that it would not have come up.

As the conflict evolved over Paul's next two visits and his encounter with Peter some themes emerge. The first theme to note is the emergence of James as a leader in the Jerusalem Church. Despite the fact he was not an apostle, James is listed by Paul as one of the three pillars of the Church in

³⁹ Acts 21:18-19.

⁴⁰ Acts 21:20-21.

⁴¹ Acts 21:24-26.

⁴² Hengel, 117.

Galatians 2:9 and is even seen to have surpassed Peter in importance in the early church.⁴³ It has already been noted that James was a conservative Jew and as such, as well as seen in his sending men to Peter and requesting Paul undergo purification rites at the temple, he would have felt an obligation to maintain Jewish observance in Christianity.

Nevertheless, we do see him consent that Gentiles need not do this when entering the Christian community. While this was seemingly a victory for Paul it should be described as a 'half-victory' at best. Perhaps the best summation of Paul's opinion is given by N.T. Wright in lieu of justification by faith when he says:

The doctrine of justification by faith was born into the world as the key doctrine underlying the *unity* of God's renewed people ... God has one family, not two, and that family consists of all those who believe in the gospel. Faith, not the possession and/or practice of Torah, is the badge which marks out this family.⁴⁴

Paul's opinions on Torah obedience for Jews clearly ran counter to those of James and his opinions seem strongest when James' influence is at it's strongest, from his supposed ignorance of the decree from the Council and his opposition to Peter heeding to James' command not to eat with Gentiles.

It should be noted that nowhere does Paul explicitly question James' authority and in fact he even affirms that James is part of the mission to the circumcised.⁴⁵ However, Paul also makes it clear that he holds his message to be a direct revelation from Christ⁴⁶ and also makes it clear that, in his mind, he made his message clear at the Council of Jerusalem and believed he was found to be in the right.⁴⁷

Knowing these things, we can seemingly reduce the remaining conflict to one between James

⁴³ Hengel, 115.

⁴⁴ N.T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 113.

⁴⁵ Galatians 2:9.

⁴⁶ Galatians 1:12.

⁴⁷ Galatians 2:2-3.

and Paul over obedience to Torah for Jewish Christians. This also appears to be a conflict James had the upper hand in. Paul's lack of mention of a definitive result in his encounter with Peter and his undertaking of purification rights at the temple during his final visit to Jerusalem only seem to underscore the influence James had over the Jerusalem Church and Jewish believers as a whole.

Conclusion

The question of Torah obedience in Christianity, first for Gentiles then for Jews, brought Paul into a very lengthy conflict with the Jerusalem Church, in particular with conservative forces such as James. Through his efforts Paul was able to achieve a liberation from Torah for Gentiles at the Jerusalem Council, but he was unable to remove the perception that Jews were still bound to Torah, even partaking in temple ritual himself when pressured by James and the elders. This ethnic division in Christianity is a matter Paul would not see victory in during his lifetime, or at least while authoring his writings.

Bibliography

- Baker, Coleman A. *Identity, Memory, and Narrative in Early Christianity: Peter, Paul, and Recategorization in the Book of Acts*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011.
- Beecher, Willis J. "Paul's Visits to Jerusalem," *The Biblical World* 2 (Dec., 1893): 434-443.
- Bronson, David B. "Paul, Galatians, and Jerusalem," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 35 (Jun., 1967): 119-128.
- Dewey, Arthur J., Roy W. Hoover, Lane C. McGaughey, and Daryl D. Schmidt. *The Authentic Letters of Paul: A New Reading of Paul's Rhetoric and Meaning*. Salem: Polebridge Press, 2010.
- Hengel, Martin. *Acts and the history of Earliest Christianity*. Translated by John Bowden. London: SCM Press Ltd, 1979.
- Mathews, Shailer. "The Council at Jerusalem," *The Biblical World* 33 (May, 1909): 337-342.
- Parker, Pierson. "Once More, Acts and Galatians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (Jun., 1967): 175-182.
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. "The Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Historical Perspective," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Science* 32 (Apr., 1979): 18-30
- Tyson, Joseph B. "Paul's Opponents in Galatia," *Novum Testamentum* 10 (Oct., 1968): 241-254
- Wenham, David, and A. D. A. Moses. "'There Are Some Standing Here...': Did They Become the 'Reputed Pillars' of the Jerusalem Church? Some Reflections on Mark 9:1, Galatians 2:9 and the Transfiguration," *Novum Testamentum* 36 (Apr., 1994): 146-163.
- Wright, N.T. *Paul: In Fresh Perspective*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005.