The Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 and Paul's Letter to the Galatians

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I. Introduction

In ch. 15 the book of Acts reports that Paul and Barnabas traveled from Antioch to Jerusalem to discuss with Peter and James whether it is true that *"unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"* (Acts 15:1). The meeting was successful. The participants formulated a written agreement, which was sent as a letter to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. The text of this agreement is quoted in full (Acts 15:23-29).

In ch. 2 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul refers to a visit to Jerusalem, where he and Barnabas met with James, Peter, and John. They came to an agreement and gave each other the right hand of fellowship.

At first glance both passages seem to refer to the same event. The main characters of the stories — Peter, James, Paul, Barnabas — and the location Jerusalem appear in both accounts.[1] However, several inconsistencies have caused confusion during the eighteen centuries of documented Christian exegesis and have led to apparent disagreement among biblical scholars to this very day.[2]

1. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.13.3. Cf. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) 111-13.

2. For bibliography and discussion see Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); Alfons Weiser, "Das 'Apostelkonzil' (Apg

II. The Problem

One of the more obvious difficulties is caused by the observation that the agreement in Acts does not touch either of the two issues Paul refers to in his letter to the Galatians: *"James, Cephas, and John gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that (a) we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; the only other issue being (b) that we should remember the poor, which of course I am eager to do"* (Gal. 2:9-10). Instead, the official document of Acts 15 asks Gentile Christians that they *"abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity"* (Acts 15:29).

Martin Hengel tries to alleviate the tension between these two accounts in the following way: *"For Luke . . . James is the decisive authority who ends the dispute with a compromise. . . . However, Paul knows nothing of legal concessions of this kind; indeed he asserts that no obligations were laid on Barnabas and himself* (Gal. 2.6). *Here we may trust him* [Paul], *rather than Luke's account."*[3]

But why should we trust Paul more than Luke, and why should we trust him in this specific case but not in other cases? Hengel suggests: *"In reality," "the resolute and unyielding approach of Paul and Barnabas to the 'pillars' had met with success."*[4] This is, of course, only one of several possibilities.

Nevertheless, critical scholarship through the centuries proved that the historical events behind Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians cannot be reconstructed in a manner that would convince the guild.

In his article in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary,* Charles Cousar lists several alternative attempts to link Paul's report in Galatians with passages from Acts.[5] Instead of connecting Paul's remarks to Acts 15:4-29, which according to Acts would have been Paul's third visit to Jerusalem, scholars have proposed to see his second visit (Acts 11:30; 12:25) or his fourth visit (Acts

15,1-35). Ereignis, Überlieferung, lukanische Deutung," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 28 (1984) 145-67, here 147-49; Gerd Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 1-9; A. J. M. Wedderburn, "The 'Apostolic Decree': Tradition and Redaction," *Novum Testamentum* 35 (1993) 362-89, here 362. For a comparison of the book of Acts to literature of the time see Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

3. Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 116.

4. Hengel, *Acts,* 116.

5. Charles B. Cousar, "Jerusalem, Council of," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1992) 3:766-68; cf. Stephen G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 178-91.

18:22) reflected in Galatians. Others have considered the possibility that Paul refers to a conference but, unfortunately, Acts does not mention Paul's presence. Such a conference is reported in Acts 11:1-18. And, in theory at least, Galatians could refer to a conference not reported at all.

Many interpreters seem comfortable with the answer that there is no answer. Consequently, they either do not address the problem[6] or they confront their readers with a whole set of alternatives.[7]

The objective of this short study is to demonstrate that the solution supported by the editors of the New Testament is that the letter to the Galatians was written shortly before Paul left for his visit with the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4-29).

III. Authorship and Sources

Much of the confusion is caused by two major difficulties. First, there are good reasons to think that Luke, the companion of Paul, did not author the book of Acts.[8] Second, it is not clear which sources the author used.[9] Whether the author knew Paul's letter to the Galatians or whether *"Acts refers to events told of also in Galatians but without knowledge of the letter"*[10] is of particular interest.

From a canonical perspective both questions may be answered with a high degree of certainty.

When looking at the book of Acts and the letter to the Galatians as parts of the same larger publication, the New Testament, it is important to keep one obvious reading instruction in mind: information referring to the same event but being recorded in two separate books is not presented to prove to the readers of the collection that one account is correct and the other false.

By arranging the writings and adding titles, the editors of the New Tes-

6. Hans Hübner, "Paulus, Apostel: I: Neues Testament" *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996) 26:133-53.

7. Wedderburn, "Apostolic Decree," 370-74.

8. For an extensive bibliography and discussion see Claus-Jürgen Thornton, *Der Zeuge des Zeugen: Lukas als Historiker der Paulusreisen* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 56; Tübingen: Mohr, 1991).

9. For a brief history of the debate see Lüdemann, *Early Christianity,* 1-9.

10. Hans Dieter Betz, "Galatians, Epistle to," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 2:875. Cf. John Knox, *Chapters in a Life of Paul,* revised edition with introduction by Douglas Hare (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1987).

tament provided information which is not easily accessible from a close reading of the texts alone. Most of this information concerns authorship and literary genre of the writings, and it was obviously intended to guide the readers through the seemingly disparate material of the collection.[11]

Only a few sections of the book of Acts are written in first person plural. Therefore, not all events are presented as if they were experienced by the author himself.[12] On the other hand, the redactional title of Galatians describes the genre of this writing as being a "letter of Paul" to the Galatians.[13]

The editors are thus telling their readers that Galatians is not based on secondhand information, as opposed to much of the book of Acts. On the contrary, every word was written and experienced by the letter writer himself.

The consideration that both writings refer to the same events leads to the insight that Galatians was written before Luke finished the book of Acts.

There are three editorial suggestions: (a) the insight that Acts and Galatians are not included in the same collection to prove that one of the accounts is wrong, (b) the presentation of Galatians as the authentic voice of Paul, and (c) the earlier date of Galatians in relation to Acts. These suggestions instruct the reader to rely on the letters of Paul as the primary source and to read Luke's book of Acts as a trustworthy narrative, which might shed some light on the events preceding and following this letter. Or — in reference to Hengel's words — Acts describes the "reality" behind the text, which led Paul to formulate his letter to the Galatians.

The other question, whether Luke knew and used the canonical letters of Paul, is also clearly answered by reading the texts from a canonical perspective. For the editors of the New Testament and for their readers, Galatians and Acts formed two parts of the same publication. This observation alone dismisses any reading that will separate the testimony of Galatians from the testimony of Acts.

11. Concerning the theory of a final redaction of the New Testament, see David Trobisch, *Die Endredaktion des Neuen Testaments. Eine Untersuchung zur Entstehung der christlichen Bibel* (Novum testamentum et orbis antiquus 31; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1996).

12. For a thorough discussion of the evidence and its interpretation see Jürgen Wehnert, *Die Wir-Passagen der Apostelgeschichten. Ein lukanisches Stilmittel aus jüdischer Tradition* (GTA 40; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1989).

13. David Trobisch, *Paul's Letter Collection: Tracing the Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 24.

IV. Canonical Reading

Let me now demonstrate what the events behind Acts 15 and Paul's letter to the Galatians look like, when reading the texts from a canonical perspective.[14]

After introducing the main theme of his report, that is, that he received his gospel not from a human source but through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12), Paul writes about his trips to Jerusalem, demonstrating that he did not receive his gospel from any apostle in Jerusalem. Paul's comment that he was persecuting the church in his former days is related to the readers of the book of Acts at the first introduction of Paul (Acts 7:58–8:3).

Gal. 1:13-14 You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently persecuting the church of God① and was trying to destroy it. I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was far more zealous for the traditions of my ancestors.②

Acts 7:58–8:3 Then they dragged him [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. (. . .) And Saul approved their killing him.② (. . .) But Saul was ravaging the church① by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.

As Paul continues, he insists that it was God who revealed his son to him (Gal. 1:15-16). Luke explains the comment *"afterward I returned to Damascus"* by adding the information that Paul experienced this revelation close to Damascus (Acts 9:3).

Gal. 1:15-17 But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me,① so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me, but I went away at once into Arabia, and afterward I returned to Damascus.②

Acts 9:3-5 Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus,② suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."①

14. The English text of the following tables is quoted from the New Revised Standard Version (1989) to demonstrate that the crosslinks between Galatians and Acts are very apparent and do not require a close reading of the Greek text.

Next, Paul writes about his first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (Gal. 1:18-19). And in the continuation of his story of Paul, Luke gives an account of a visit in Jerusalem, corroborating that Paul met with the apostles at that occasion (Acts 9:27). Luke specifies Paul's vague remark that he *"went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia"* (Gal. 1:21) by mentioning the name of the Cilician city, Tarsus (Acts 9:30), and the name of the Syrian city, Antioch (Acts 11:26).

Gal. 1:18-24 Then after three years① I did go up to Jerusalem② to visit Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days; but I did not see any other apostle③ except James the Lord's brother. In what I am writing to you before God, I do not lie! Then I went into the regions of Syria→⓪ and Cilicia,④ and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, "The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy."⑤ And they glorified God because of me.

Acts 9:23-30 After some time had passed,① the Jews plotted to kill him, but their plot became known to Saul. (. . .) When he had come to Jerusalem,② he attempted to join the disciples; and they were all afraid of him⑤ for they did not believe that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, brought him to the apostles③ (. . .) He [Paul] spoke and argued with the Hellenists; but they were attempting to kill him. When the believers learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.③

Acts 11:25-26 Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch.⓪←

The next trip to Jerusalem described in Galatians is difficult to relate to the book of Acts for many interpreters. However, a plausible reading does not seem very difficult from a canonical perspective. Paul's comment that he left for Jerusalem *"in response to a revelation"* (Gal. 2:2) is explained by Luke as a reference to the prophet Agabus (Acts 11:28), who had predicted a famine. The Christians of Antioch had organized a collection and they sent it with Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, thus representing Paul's visit as a response to Agabus's revelation. Paul's dating of the trip, *"after fourteen years"* (Gal. 2:1), is specified by Luke to have ocurred *"during the reign of Claudius"* (Acts 11:28). The request of the apostles to *"remember the poor"* and the comment of Paul that this *"was actually what I was eager to do"* (Gal. 2:10), are interpreted by Luke as referring to the collection he and Barnabas had just delivered to Jerusalem (Acts 11:30).

Gal. 2:1-10 Then after fourteen years① I went up again to Jerusalem② with Barnabas,③ taking Titus along with me. I went up in response to a revelation.④ (. . .) They gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor,⑤ which was actually what I was eager to do.⑥

Acts 11:27-30 At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit④ that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius.① The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief⑤ to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders② by Barnabas③ and Saul.⑥

Paul then addresses the event for which he probably prepared his readers from the very beginning of the letter: his clash with Peter in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14). Luke translates Paul's reference to *"certain people from James," "the circumcision faction"* (Gal. 2:12) into *"certain individuals from Judea teaching that 'you cannot be saved unless you are circumcised'"* (Acts 15:1), Luke not mentioning the apostle Peter. Among other details, both accounts agree in the events taking place in Antioch while Paul and Barnabas were present and in the fact that there was *"no small dissension"* (Acts 15:2).

Gal. 2:11-14 But when Cephas came to Antioch,① I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people② came from James he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision③ faction.④ And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas⑤ was led astray by their hypocrisy.

Acts 15:1-2 Then certain individuals② came down [to Antioch]① from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised③ according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension④ and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas⑤ and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

Considering Acts to be Luke's perspective on the events, there is little doubt that — according to the canonical reading instruction — Galatians reflects the situation after the dissension in Antioch and before the council in Jerusalem reported in Acts 15:4-29.[15]

Luke explains to his readers that Paul's letter to the Galatians is a literary product of Paul's and Barnabas's campaign to publicize their position on

15. This chain of events was proposed as the most plausible historical solution by William M. Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982, reprint of 1925 fifteenth edition) 54-60, 152-77.

the issue of circumcision. The distribution of this letter to several churches in Galatia, however, was not their only public activity in this matter. On their way from Antioch to Jerusalem, *"as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers"* (Acts 15:3).

V. Conclusion

From a canonical perspective, Acts tries to achieve the same goal that any critical historian would try to achieve: to describe the events that lie behind the text of Paul's letter to the Galatians. The reliability of Luke's information on events of the first century, however, is the object of a long-lasting debate. It is unlikely that this question will be answered convincingly in the near future, and it was not the intention of this study to propose a solution.

However, the canonical perspective — which considers the final form of the New Testament as it was edited and published — is a perspective of the second century, and its historical value should not be overlooked. It describes the view of a readership that strongly believed that Peter and Paul were not opponents and that they both were active missionaries in Rome, where both of them died as martyrs; this belief is expressed by the layout and structure of the canonical edition of the New Testament, and especially by the supporting views of the book of Acts.

The objective of this study was to show that the reading suggested by the canonical edition of the New Testament is still recoverable. In correspondence to the editorial reading instructions of the edition, Luke maintains that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians after the dissension in Antioch (as reported in Acts 15:1-2 and Gal. 2:11-14) and before he left for the council in Jerusalem (as reported in Acts 15:4-29).