

7.2 The Jerusalem Council 15.1-35

It seems the issues at stake when gentiles join the Christ-Movement have been settled in the Cornelius narratives, since Peter stayed in Cornelius' house which means he accepted his hospitality and this included table-fellowship. Also in 11.1-18 the Jerusalem community consented to what had happened according to 10.1-48, and until the end of chapter 14 no voice is raised against those who proclaim the gospel among gentiles. Although some concern had been raised in 11.1-18 – these concerns appear to have been settled by Peter's explanations there. Thus it seems that this scene is the retelling of a problem which appeared solved, and as such could be repetition to emphasise that actually all the leading figures were in agreement about the parameters of the mission to Jews and non-Jews. In fact, whilst in chapter 11 only Peter and Christ-followers from Jerusalem were involved, now the Christ-followers of Antiochia appear as partners in this agreement.

What we find here cannot be the climax or turning point in the narrative of Acts as all that is 'decided' has already been decided and acted out from chapter 10 onwards. Thus it is rather a summary and conclusion of part I of Acts than a climax or turning point.

The dispute is depicted as being launched by 'some from Judea' who demand circumcision as a sign of full membership in the community of Christ-followers. This resonates to some extent with the account of Paul in Galatians 2 although he does not refer to a demand of circumcision on the part of Peter or the people from James but to issues concerning table-fellowship of Jews and gentiles. The fact that both Luke and Paul write about a conflict over the parameters of the inclusion of gentiles and issues of Torah observance indicates that there must have been some sort of dispute in the communities of Christ-followers of the early decades, but precise historical reconstruction of what was going on is difficult. Since the problem worsens in Antiochia Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem. The dispute continues there, and as a side element we learn that there were Pharisees among the Christ-followers in Jerusalem (15.5), and some of them were of the view that in order to be a full member of the Christ-movement gentiles had to become Jews, in getting circumcised and adhering fully to the Torah.

The problem is being settled, apparently smoothly, as those who express their views in the gathering of apostles and elders, Peter, Paul and Barnabas and James are in full agreement on the matter. Both, Peter and James are depicted as the ones who promoted gentile mission in the first instance and who sought to bring about a solution to the problem. The agreement is referred to as the so-called 'The Apostolic Decree' in contemporary scholarship. It occurs three times in Acts: 15.20 15.29 and 21.25.

The threefold repetition indicates that the narrator not merely records but actually promotes the decree:

- The things polluted by idols or sacrificed to idols most likely refer to meat and wine which was 'produced' or accompanied by cultic rituals (cf 1 Cor 8-10/Rom 14-15)
- Sexual immorality is a standard Jewish accusation against pagan behaviour and most likely includes what is perceived as immoral sexual but also as idolatrous behaviour (idolatry in the Hebrew Scriptures is often referred to in metaphorical language as 'porneia')
- The things strangled refer to the method of slaughtering, and blood consumption was associated with idolatry in that 'life' itself was in the blood.

It has been argued that the decree serves as a minimal requirement from Jews so that Jews and gentiles could eat together but the possibility of sharing meals is not an issue here since Jews and gentiles have been eating together since chapter 10.

According to Gaventa Cf. *Acts*, pp.210-227, the decree functions not to make it less offensive for Jews to eat with gentiles but rather to protect gentile Christ-followers from the ever present threat of idolatry. All elements of the decree are associated with idolatry. This is

particularly interesting when we note other passages in which Luke reflects on this problem: Stephen who mentions the golden calf 7.40-41, or Paul who touches the issue in his sermons in Lystra and Athens 14.15-17; 17.22-30. The issues involved in separating oneself from the symbolic universe of the deities were not merely inwardly and at the individual level but had major social and political implications. The need to clearly abstain from worshipping the deities of the Empire without compromise when joining the Christ-movement remained a problem for centuries as we know from Tertullian, Eusebius etc.

Tannehill (*Narrative Unity* Vol 2) on the other hand emphasizes that the decree serves to allow fellowship between gentiles and Jews who are deeply committed to a Jewish way of life. He argues that it is probably formulated out of concern for the effects a gentile church may have on practising Jews and corrects the view that the Christian mission is an attack on Judaism and its way of life (Tannehill sees Paul's defense in 21.20-28; 22.3; 28.17,19 as examples of this concern). Thus gentiles are asked to abstain from certain things which are particularly problematic from a Jewish perspective so that Jewish and gentile Christ-followers may adhere to their fellowship in Christ without Jews having to give up their identity.

The narrator then informs the audience that a letter and a delegation are sent to Antioch. In this context Paul and Barnabas are called 'beloved' and 'people who have given themselves over' for the Lord's name. The letter and the delegation sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to deliver the letter underscore the intention and concern of the decree – the unity of the community.

Essential Reading

- ** Gaventa Berverly R., *Acts*, pp. 210-227.
- ** 7.4 Callan, Terrance, 'The Background of the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20,29;21:25) in CBQ 55.2 April 1993, pp.284-297.
- ** 7.5 Strauss Mark L., 'The Fulfillment of the Promise Achieved: The Speeches of Acts' in *ibid. The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1995, pp. 130-193.

Further Reading

Fitzmyer Joseph, *The Acts of the Apostles*. New York: Doubleday, pp. 538-569.

Esler Philip, F. 'Table-Fellowship in Luke-Acts' in *ibid. Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lukan Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987, pp. 93-109.