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Barnabas had carried it out as missionaries of the church there (14.4, 14) and that the story of their exploits had been told from an Antiochene perspective.

14.27 The Antioch church was still of a size able to be gathered in a single place (large house). The report emphasizes that it was all God's doing, and that it was God who had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles: the image is a favourite one of Paul's (I Cor. 16.9; II Cor. 2.12; Col. 4.3); and the emphasis is one we would expect from Paul (faith as the Gentiles' means of entry into Israel's heritage), but one (faith) which Luke has repeated throughout the preceding two chapters (13.8, 12, 39, 41, 48; 14.1, 9, 22, 23) in preparation for the climax of the Jerusalem council (15.7-11). The mention of Jewish converts (and of Jewish opposition) was less to the point: the principal significance was the fact that Gentiles had responded in significant numbers and that churches composed substantially, in some cases wholly of Gentiles had been established. A new phase in the development of the new movement and in the transformation of its identity had clearly opened up, with consequences which Luke proceeds to describe.

14.28 The final sentence (14.28) portrays Paul and Barnabas resuming their role as active members of the Antioch church.

The Council at Jerusalem 15.1-41

Chapter 15 is a watershed in Luke's whole narrative. It comes close to the beginning of the second half of Luke's account, and the coherence of the two halves depends in effect on the success of the Jerusalem council's deliberations. In historical terms what was at stake was nothing less than the very existence of the new movement itself, both its identity and its unity – in particular, whether what had begun in Jerusalem was going to remain in vital continuity with Jerusalem and all that Jerusalem represented, and whether the new outreach into the Gentile world now taken up as a life's work by Paul was going to become something else.

Luke had already prepared the ground to deal with this potential crisis: in cloaking the seriousness of the tensions within the Jerusalem church, initially between Hebrews and Hellenists, and consequent upon the death of Stephen and the resulting persecution; in ensuring that the acceptability by the Jerusalem leadership of the converted Saul and of the developments in Antioch was clearly documented; and in highlighting Peter's acceptance of Cornelius as the crucial precedent for Gentile mission. But even so, the counter-tendency to present the Jewish communities encountered by Paul's mission as almost uniformly hostile to his open invitation to Gentiles (chs 13-14, 17-19) was bound to stretch and strain that continuity through Jerusalem with the movement's Jewish heritage to breaking point. It was therefore imperative, before Paul's mission became more extensive and less under Antioch's (and Jerusalem's) oversight, to address the problems caused by the success of Paul's mission for what was still essentially a Jewish sect, and to show how harmony between Jew and Gentile within the new movement could be maintained without sacrificing the continuity with and through Jerusalem.

The goal is achieved in a skilful way. (1) The initiative of God is brought out repeatedly (15.4, 7-10, 12, 14, 16-18, 28). (2) Those

provoking the issue (whether Gentile believers should not be circumcised) are marginalized (15.1 – ‘certain from Judaea’, 15.5 – ‘some believers from the sect of the Pharisees’). (3) The full panoply of the leadership is engaged and agreed – ‘the apostles and the elders’, Peter, James, and Barnabas and Paul; the unity of the agreement is stressed (15.22, 28). But within that united front, (4) the precedent of Peter’s acceptance of Cornelius provides the decisive argument (15.7-11), (5) the contribution of Barnabas and Paul (in Antiochene order of precedence) is touched on only briefly (15.12), and (6) James is portrayed as giving a chairman’s summing-up and making the determinative recommendation (15.13-21) – all of which lean over to stress that the continuity of Christianity with the ministry of Jesus and its Jewish character is secure and determined by those most representative of that continuity. (7) James’ speech focusses on a scripture which combines a restoration (of Israel) theology with openness to the other nations (15.16-18). (8) And the ruling recommended by James and agreed by the conference assumes that the common ground for Jew and Gentile within the new movement are the traditional Jewish concerns over Gentile idolatry, sexual license and meat from animals improperly slaughtered (15.20, 29). (9) Finally, Barnabas and Paul are presented as explicitly endorsed by the apostles and elders and as the emissaries of the agreement to the churches of the Antiochene mission (15.23, 25, 30, 16.4).

That there was such a conference and that the issue was whether Gentile believers should be circumcised is hardly to be questioned. In Gal. 2.1-10 Paul describes a consultation in Jerusalem on that very issue, involving Barnabas, with the protagonists of circumcision even more marginalized (Gal. 2.4), and achieving a formal agreement that circumcision was not required, endorsed by the Jerusalem leadership, James, Peter and John (Gal. 2.7-9). That there were two such consultations/conferences (the one a virtual repeat of the other) is unlikely, despite minority support by Bruce and others. The differences between the two accounts are readily explainable when the different perspectives of the two who provide the different accounts are taken into consideration. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Paul, in addressing the Galatians, focusses on his own part in the agreement; whereas Luke, with a wider audience in view, focusses on the role of Peter and James. That the latter’s opinions were absolutely vital can hardly be doubted, and Paul’s own language unwillingly acknowledges his dependence on them at this point (Gal. 2.6, 9).

The most serious divergence between the different versions is the presence of ‘the apostolic decree’ in Acts 15.28-29, taking up the recommendation of James in 15.20. Paul, for his part, makes it clear that ‘the pillar apostles’ ‘added nothing’ (Gal. 2.6), leaving little or no room for a formal agreement like ‘the apostolic decree’, and he never alludes to such a decree in I Cor. 8-10. The solution, however, may be straightforward. On his own side Paul naturally wanted to stress the one clear point of agreement (on circumcision, though including the codicil of Gal. 2.10). James and others in Jerusalem, however, probably took certain corollaries for granted, including traditional ground rules for association between Jews and Gentiles; such in part at least is the unavoidable implication of Gal. 2.12-13. Luke for his part probably felt free to indulge in a further case of concertina-ing, putting into close proximity what had actually developed over a longer period. That is to say, whatever had been assumed in the Jerusalem agreement and whatever had been formally agreed, the practice of association which steadily became more established within mixed churches of Jews and Gentiles thereafter had assumed the sort of religious, moral and social meeting ground which ‘the apostolic decree’ allowed for. Luke’s squeezing of history, as in his account of Saul’s involvement in the earliest persecution (8.1-3) and in his record of Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in the Galatian churches in 14.23 (see Introduction to 8.1-3), therefore, may simply have consisted in the retrojection to the Jerusalem conference of the formal agreement regarding a practice which from early days of the Gentile mission had in the event provided the informal terms of association between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Likewise, although there is nothing in the Pauline letters to support Luke’s portrayal of Paul as an ambassador for ‘the apostolic decree’, it is a fact that Paul in his exhortations to Gentile believers was equally as inflexible in his opposition to idolatry and sexual licence (e.g. I Cor. 6.9; 10.7, 14; see on 15.20(2)), and equally as ready to encourage Gentiles to respect the food scruples of Jewish believers (Rom. 14.1-15.6; I Cor. 8-10). If we should be sensitive to Luke’s readiness to concertina his historical record, we should be equally sensitive to the fact that Galatians was written when Paul was in incandescent mood and that his ethical counsel in other letters was (could be) a good deal more moderate.

Despite these divergences, the outcome in both versions indicates a genuine commitment on both sides to hold together, including some readiness to compromise on favoured positions for the sake of

unity by both James and Paul in particular. In both versions the agreement was of epochal significance for the future of Christianity and in crystallizing its character as a Jewish movement opening out to accept Gentiles as such as full members.

The issue of circumcision raised once again

15.1-5

We have already observed how central circumcision was to Jewish identity (10.45; 11.2-3). This is entirely understandable, given its absolutely fundamental character in Israel's self-understanding as laid down in Gen. 17.9-14: the covenant made with Abraham (on which Israel's identity was premised) was a 'covenant of circumcision' (Acts 7.8; Gen. 17.11), an everlasting covenant in their flesh (17.13); no circumcision, no covenant, no promise, no nation (17.10, 12-14).

Two centuries before Paul the importance of circumcision as Israel's essential identity marker had been massively reinforced by the Maccabean crisis: for the crisis had been occasioned by the attempt of Israel's Syrian overlords to destroy Israel's distinctiveness, precisely by forbidding circumcision (1 Macc. 1.48, 60-61); and the Maccabean defence of Judaism consequently had included among its first priorities the reassertion of circumcision as indispensable for all Jews (1 Macc. 2.46). Thus, for the great bulk of Jews, the link between 'Jew', 'Judaism' and circumcision was axiomatic; an uncircumcised Jew was virtually a contradiction in terms. And since circumcision was thus so inextricably bound up with the covenant promise to Abraham and his descendants, no one, no Gentile could surely think to have a share in that inheritance without first being circumcised.

Such must have been the logic employed by the 'certain from Judaea'. And since nothing in the Jesus tradition encouraged the thought that the Gen. 17.9-14 requirement had been relaxed, it is hard to deny the strength of their case. It is true that a precedent had been established earlier in the case of Cornelius, but it is Luke's account which puts that precedent in the spotlight (10.1-11.18), and its strength had yet to be tested (15.7-11). Whether the acceptance of such a God-fearing Gentile as Cornelius counted as an anomaly or as the beginning of a new pattern had not yet been demonstrated. Even

after the still clearer precedent of Titus had been established in Gal. 2.1-10, the requirement for the circumcision of Gentile believers could still be put by the other missionaries in Galatia (Gal. 5.2-12). So there is no difficulty in envisaging Christian Jews who still regarded circumcision as axiomatic for Gentiles who wished to share in Israel's blessings.

What we have here, then, is a, possibly even the, classic confrontation between old revelation, confirmed by centuries of history, and a new insight, given not through Jesus himself but in the course of an expanding, developing mission. It would have to take clear indication of divine approval and tremendous confidence in the agreed judgment of the leadership for such an epochal step and breach with unbroken tradition to be taken. With the Christian mission continuing to develop today, the church cannot avoid being confronted with similar hard questions in the resolution of which not all will be satisfied.

15.1 The 'certain men' are not identified, except as coming from Judaea. They are presumably the same as or associated with the believing Pharisees mentioned in 15.5. Paul calls them or those like them 'false brothers' (2.4), though their acceptance as part of a Christian debate indicates that they were baptized believers (Paul could be very dismissive of Christians whose policies he resented – II Cor. 11.13; Gal. 1.7-8). Acts 21.20 ('zealots for the law') indicates that they were or became a very strong, indeed dominant faction within the Jerusalem church. 'The custom(s) of Moses' was a common Jewish way of referring to the Torah as it had been practised over the centuries (6.14; 21.21; 26.3; 28.17).

15.2-4 Paul and Barnabas went up to Jerusalem as delegates and with the full support (15.3) of the Antioch church. This representative role is implicit also in Gal. 2.1-10, but kept in the background in Paul's account. If the churches in Phoenicia and Samaria were founded by the scattered Hellenists (8.4-5; 11.19) it is understandable that they would be more open to a diaspora mission and persuadable by the evident success among Gentiles. Luke certainly makes a point of the positiveness of their reception en route as also by the Jerusalem 'church and the apostles and the elders'. The appeal to what had happened as the initiative of God echoes the justification of Peter's action in Caesarea (11.17-18) and underscores a familiar Lukan theme.

15.5 If mention of Pharisees as members of the new sect comes as a surprise, that probably is because of the generally negative impression of Pharisees in Christian tradition (strengthened, of course, by Matt. 23). Luke had recognized that Pharisees were more diverse (see Introduction to 5.33-42). At the same time, the fact that Pharisees were attracted to the new movement, while still characteristically Pharisaic in their emphasis on doing the law, presumably indicates how conservative as regards the law the Jerusalem church was, an attitude to which Luke himself was by no means hostile (cf. 7.38, 53; 18.18; 21.26; and not least 23.6). That circumcision was simply part of a whole package (the Jewish law, the Jewish way of life) is the assumption behind texts elsewhere such as Gal. 5.3 and James 2.10.

Peter cites the decisive precedent

15.6-11

This is the moment for which the lengthy account of Cornelius' conversion and its repetition (10.1-11.18) had been preparing. Crucial to the whole strategy (whether God's or Luke's) was the fact that Peter had been forced by clear directive and approval from God to accept a Gentile, as a full member of the new movement (indicated in baptism), without requiring him first to be circumcised. That was the crucial precedent and in his last appearance in Acts Peter makes full use of it. It was this event and Peter's intervention here (both the event itself and Luke's account of it), more than anything said to him by Jesus (cf. Matt. 16.17-19), which made Peter the bridge-man who spanned and held together the Gentile mission of Paul and the conservatism of the Jerusalem church under the leadership of James.

15.6 The description ('the apostles and the elders . . .') presupposes that the Jerusalem church leadership had become thus formalized. Following this episode 'the apostles' disappear from view. With this crucial agreement achieved, their role in securing the new movement's link to the past was more or less complete.

15.7-9 This is the third (much briefer) rehearsal of the Cornelius episode. That it was God's initiative (in the early days of the movement) is the starting point. That Cornelius and his friends had

indeed believed the word of the gospel was not in dispute; but their response of faith is stressed (15.7, 9). The decisive factor, however, was that God had given the Holy Spirit to them 'just as he did to us' (15.8; as in 10.47 and 11.15-17). The gift of the Spirit was God's testimony to them of their acceptability to him as Gentiles; God 'knows the heart' (cf. 1.24) and deals with his human creatures on that basis, not on the basis of ethnic descent or ritual markers (cf. 1 Sam. 16.7). His priority, therefore, was to cleanse the heart, not to secure observance of laws of clean and unclean (cf. 10.10-15), and this was effectively achieved through the individual responsive openness and commitment of trustful faith.

As in 10.34-35, 43-47 there is something of a tension between Cornelius' acceptability to God and his actual acceptance by God. The question of the acceptability of Gentiles as Gentiles is resolved by the fact of Cornelius' manifest acceptance by God. That was manifest by the gift of the Spirit. The cleansing of the heart is not assumed to have been an intermediate or distinct stage, which would simply confuse the basic point being made: it is the abolition or denial of any distinction/discrimination between Jew and Gentile which is the point of emphasis (15.8-9; cf. 11.12). Any difference in function between 15.8 and 15.9 would have the gift of the Spirit attesting Cornelius' acceptability, and only then the cleansing of the heart effecting his actual acceptance. But Luke could hardly intend such a meaning. His point is rather that he who knows the heart (counted the Gentile *per se* as acceptable) cleansed his heart (accepted him) by giving him the Spirit. As elsewhere in Acts, the Spirit is the central feature in the process of conversion-initiation (see Introduction §5(3)).

15.10-11 15.10 introduces an unexpected note: that the law requiring circumcision (and a whole way of life) was a yoke which their fathers and they themselves had been unable to bear (cf. Luke 11.46). This hardly accords with the generally positive attitude to the law in the Judaism of the day or with what we have read of a Jerusalem community attractive to Pharisees (15.5). Is this Luke's nod to a Pauline tradition (cf. 13.39) which had found various features of the law as a slavery from which their Christian faith had brought deliverance (Gal. 4.1-7; 5.1-6)? At all events, 15.11 puts the emphasis back on the central point: that the grace of the Lord Jesus is both the necessary and the sufficient means of salvation for Jew and Gentile ('we in just the same way as they'). The denial of any significance for

ethnic or ritual factors enables unconditional recognition of everyone's dependence equally on divine grace. Failure to acknowledge this is to 'test' / resist God (5.9).

The determinative ruling of James

15.12-21

James now emerges as the leading figure on the Jerusalem stage (cf. Gal. 2.9; see on 12.17). His speech falls into two parts. It begins from the precedent provided by Peter and uses scripture to build it into a basic principle (15.13-18). Far from being an anomaly, the Cornelius episode, confirmed by the reports of Barnabas and Paul, indicated a new stage in God's dealings, in which the restoration of Israel would incorporate Gentiles as such as also his people. The corollary (15.19-21) was that for Gentiles to be his people did not require them to become or to live like Jews. All that was required was that Gentile believers should adopt sufficient basic laws as to enable Gentile and Jewish believers to associate together in worship and in table fellowship.

In terms of Luke's overall strategy in portraying a coherent and unified Christian movement, this is probably the key statement. It gives absolutely no backing to the view that Luke saw Christianity as a completely new entity, thoroughly Gentile in composition and completely superceding and divorced from Judaism and Jews in general. On the contrary, its basic assumption, in what is clearly intended as the most eirenic statement on which Jewish and Gentile believer can unite, is that Jewish restoration and Gentile visitation/calling go hand in hand (cf. 1.6-8; 2.39; 3.25-26). At the same time, it is somewhat surprising that the centrality of Christ is not indicated (unless implicit in the reference to 'seeking the Lord' in 15.17, though 'the Lord' of 15.18 is clearly God), nor of faith in him. Rather it is God's initiative which is central (15.14, 16-18) and the importance of Gentiles turning to God which matters most of all (15.19).

So far as its historical value is concerned, the speech has certainly been written up by Luke (as use of the Greek version in 15.17 and proposal of 'the apostolic decree' in 15.20 most obviously indicate). Yet Paul's account also implies clearly a considerable degree of accommodation and a higher degree of good will on the part of

James on the key issue (Gal. 2.7-9) than either subsequent account would have led us to expect (Gal. 2.12; Acts 21.17-22). There is more behind the text here than simply Luke's grand plan.

15.12 Barnabas is accorded first place before Paul, again (as in 15.25), reflecting a more Antioch/Jerusalem perspective. Their report is given the briefest of mentions. There are suggestions of a sceptical audience (why does Luke say 'they kept silence?'), that Paul may have taken more of a back seat (already a more controversial figure on this topic?), and that Luke has made a point of putting their report in terms of the 'signs and wonders' which in his account had marked the earliest community itself (2.43; 4.30; 5.12; see on 2.22). By way of contrast, in Paul's account (Gal. 2.7-9) it was the report of the grace clearly and effectively manifested through Barnabas and himself in their preaching of the gospel to the uncircumcised which proved decisive in the consultation.

15.13-14 James begins by citing only Peter (referred to here by the old form 'Simeon', as in II Peter 1.1), and, interestingly, not Barnabas or Paul. The point of emphasis is recognized: that God had taken an initiative which they could not gainsay. The language is deliberately scriptural in tone: God visited to fulfil his promise and saving purpose (Gen. 21.1; 50.24-25; Ex. 3.16; 4.31; Judith 8.33; Luke 1.68; 7.16); to take from the nations a people for his name, that is, for himself (cf. Deut. 14.2; 26.18-19; 32.9; Ps. 135.4). By using the emotive idea of 'God's people' the speech implies that the calling of Gentiles is of a piece with Israel's own calling and an extension of it (cf. Paul's use of Hos. 2.23 and 1.10 in Rom. 9.24-26).

15.15-18 The scriptural proof or confirmation is essentially Amos 9.11-12, with the opening phrase possibly drawn from Jer. 12.15 and the closing phrase from Isa. 45.21. The incorporation of these secondary allusions would be understandable, since the Jeremiah passage envisages a restoration of Israel's hostile neighbours and integration with God's people (Jer. 12.14-16), and the Isaiah passage is part of the famous denunciation of false gods. Amos 9.11 is also cited by the Qumran community in reference to itself (CD 7.11; 4QFlorilegium 1.12). So the text featured in Jewish speculation of that period about the restoration of Israel, of the Davidic kingdom (rebuilding the ruins of David), and it would not be surprising that a new sect concerned about its own identity in relation to Israel should draw upon it.

The difference here is that the quotation follows the Greek version of Amos and that the crucial line (verse 17a) is quite different in the Hebrew (did James address the conference in Greek?). According to this version Amos envisages a restoration of Israel with a view to the rest of humankind seeking out the Lord, that is, the Gentiles over whom God's name had been called (REB – 'all the Gentiles whom I have claimed for my own'). What is clearly intended is an understanding of a people of God in which Jew and Gentile are one, a restored Israel into which Gentiles called by God in their own right, and not as petitioning proselytes, are integrated (not assimilated). The implied exegesis is bold but gives Luke (and James) a sound scriptural basis for his vision of the new movement and its integrated Jewish-Gentile identity.

15.19 The critical factor in the acceptability of Gentiles to the believing Jews should be the fact of their conversion to God and thus acceptance by God. The key term is again 'turn to God' (as in 14.15; 26.20; cf. 3.19; 9.35; 11.21; 26.18; 28.27). James seems to imply that even for a non-Christian Jew, a genuine turning to God by a Gentile should be sufficient ground for the former to drop most of the ritual barriers to association with the latter (to stop bothering/harassing Gentile converts on the point). In this case, presumably, the genuineness of such a conversion would be sufficiently attested by belief in Christ, the gift of the Spirit, and baptism in Jesus' name (the precedent is Cornelius), whereas the traditional marker of such conversion had been circumcision.

15.20 The minimum terms for mutual recognition and association between Jews and Gentiles in the churches are spelled out. The problem was not a new one. Jews in the land of Israel had always been confronted with the problem of 'the resident alien' and had included them in the basic legislation envisaged here (Lev. 17.8-9, 10-14; 18.26). Subsequently the Noahide laws (including the prohibition of idolatry, adultery and incest, bloodshed, and eating the flesh of a limb cut from a living animal) became the basis for association, and such rules of association were probably already operative (Gen. 9.4-6 had already warned against both eating flesh in which the blood still adheres, and murder). We have also already noted the prominence of Gentile God-fearers within the ambit of the diaspora synagogues (see on 10.2), which presumably involved some social intercourse. So this represents an attempt to formulate for the

Christian communities, on the basis of much longer experience, what could probably be regarded as best practice at that time. It is of course assumed that circumcision should not be regarded as a precondition for association between Jewish and (uncircumcised) Gentile believers; but next to circumcision maintenance of table purity was close to the heart of Jewish identity (cf. I Macc. 1.60-63; IV Macc. 4.26).

What the actual terms of 'the apostolic decree' were is a matter of some confusion in the textual tradition, though that very confusion is a reminder that the terms of association continued to be debated and revised during the period when 'the apostolic decree' played a vital role as the basis of mixed churches. The earliest form probably included four elements, covering three areas of concern on the Jewish side.

(1) Gentiles should avoid 'things polluted by (contact with) idols'. The noun ('things polluted') occurs only here in the Bible but presumably is equivalent to 'what has been sacrificed to idols' in the corresponding letter (15.29; 21.25). The reference, then, is to the fact that in most cities the meat available for purchase in the meat market would be supplied primarily from the local temples and from the sacrifices offered there (as in the Jerusalem temple only part of the animal's carcass would be used in the ceremonies). In most pagan households also, before wine was drunk a libation to some god or goddess would be poured out. In both cases the problem for devout Jews was that the meat/wine had been consecrated to an idol, and to partake of it would be to tarnish (render unclean) their own dedication to the one God (Ex. 34.15-16). The fear of having anything to do with idolatry was a major determinant of social behaviour for most Jews, because of the supreme importance of the first two commandments (Ex. 20.3-6); a whole tractate of the Mishnah was subsequently devoted to the issue (*Aboda Zara*). Strictly applied the rule would prohibit most social intercourse with Gentiles and prevent Jews from holding many posts and from participating in civic ceremonies. The care with which Paul deals with the issue in I Cor. 8-10 indicates its sensitivity in the early churches.

(2) Also to be avoided was *porneia* (also 15.29 and 21.25), best taken to indicate not just adultery or fornication but every kind of sexual licence, though in this context with special reference to sexual union within the prohibited degrees (Lev. 18.6-18). As Paul's own indictment of humanity (seen from a Jewish perspective) indicates (Rom. 1.22-27), a link between idolatry and sexual licence was taken for

granted (e.g. Jer. 3.6-8; Ezek. 16.15-46; Wisd. 14.12; *Testament of Reuben* 4.6-8; Rev. 2.14, 20). Israel's own failure over the golden calf at Sinai was remembered as a dreadful warning (Ex. 32.6; 1 Cor. 10.7-8). Paul warns his own converts against *porneia* regularly (1 Cor. 6.13, 18; II Cor. 12.21; Gal. 5.19; 1 Thess. 4.3). As these references indicate, the rationale behind the prohibition was not some narrow-minded prudery, but the realistic recognition that such lack of self control usually came to expression also in other self-indulgences and vices.

(3) The third term probably means 'strangled, choked to death', though it occurs only here (and 15.29 and 21.25) in biblical Greek, and only in these passages in this sense in secular Greek. It no doubt refers to the prohibitions in Jewish law against eating the flesh of animals from which the blood had not been properly drained (Gen. 9.4; Lev. 7.26-27, 17.10-14); strangulation killed without allowing the blood to drain from the beast. The importance of adequate provision for kosher meat was one of Israel's traditional identity markers (as still today), part of a complex of food laws which also covered clean and unclean and the dangers of idol meat (cf. IV Macc. 5.2). It was not a dietary fad but part of the Jewish way of life which identified it as Jewish. The Cornelius episode had called in question the need to retain the laws of clean and unclean (10.11-15), but Jewish sensitivities could be respected by observing the kosher laws.

(4) The fourth element, 'blood', could denote murder (cf. Gen. 9.6; Deut. 21.7-8), the shedding of blood rather than the consuming of blood, but probably goes with the previous item and highlights the reasoning behind the kosher laws. It was precisely because 'the life (of the animal) is (in) the blood' (Gen. 9.4; Lev. 17.11, 14) that the blood had to be drained away: human dominance over the animal realm permitted human consumption of some animal flesh, but not the absorption of their life.

15.21 The implication is that knowledge and observance of the law was well sustained in diaspora synagogues and not at all threatened by the compromise proposed. The hope would be for a mutual respect within the extended communities between Jews who insisted on stricter practice and those who consorted with Gentiles on the basis of the rules just proposed. Again it should be noted that the whole proposal is put from a Jewish perspective and is geared to maintaining relationships across the Jewish spectrum. The thought is not of Christian communities as such, the basis of whose fellowship

was their common faith in Christ (again we note the absence of any overt reference to Jesus). The thought is rather of communities whose basis for fellowship is continued respect for the law.

Consensus achieved

15.22-29

The proposal of James ('from the chair') brings discussion to an end. All that remains is to discuss its implementation. The formulation of James' proposal in a letter sent to the churches of the Antioch mission reinforces his authority with regard to the Jerusalem church (cf. 21.18-25). More important, it secures in a lasting and definitive way the continuity with Jewish law which holds the new churches true to their Jewish origin and heritage. The maturity displayed in the whole proceedings is remarkable. The mention of Judas Barsabbas and Silas (15.22) must come from Luke's tradition (only Silas is really relevant to his ongoing story), and the reference to the churches of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia alone probably indicates that in the event the compromise emerged in relation to the churches of the immediate Antioch mission (perhaps even as early as the aftermath of the incident referred to in Gal. 2.11-14). The letter begins and ends with the traditional Greek greeting and conclusion, rather than the more distinctively Christian forms developed by Paul.

15.22 That a genuine consensus, without dissenting voice, was achieved is emphasized ('the whole church'); the believing Pharisees (15.5) either go along with the consensus or maintain a diplomatic silence. The appointment of delegates to return to Antioch reinforces the continuing links between Jerusalem and its most expansive daughter church. Is Judas Barsabbas the same man mentioned in 1.23? Silas was to become Barnabas' replacement in Paul's further missionary work (15.40). It is interesting that they are described as 'leading men among the brothers', but are neither apostles nor elders, though both are later described as 'prophets' (15.32). At any rate their mention is a sign that Luke's information here was provided by tradition.

15.23 The letter is sent by 'the apostles and elders', but presumably in the name of 'the brothers' at large. It is addressed to the Gentile

believers only, since it was a plea to them to adopt the minimum degree of law observance reckoned necessary to enable conscientious Jews to consort with Gentiles. It is not insignificant that the recipients (the churches of 'Antioch, Syria and Cilicia') accord with Paul's own version of his missionary work prior to the Jerusalem consultation (Gal. 1.21). But in both cases the list presumably includes the work in Cyprus and southern Galatia as part of the mission from Antioch.

15.24–27 The disowning of the troublemakers is explicit (15.24; does Paul's use of the same term in Gal. 1.7 and 5.10 indicate some awareness of such a disowning?). The fact of consensus is emphasized (15.25; with one of Luke's favourite words). And the commendation of Barnabas and Paul (again named in their Antiochene order of precedence) is warm (15.25–26).

15.28 A little late in the letter comes the acknowledgment of the Spirit's guidance. Is it significant that in the course of this crucial event Luke has related no heavenly vision and no word spoken under inspiration, in contrast to his common practice elsewhere? Perhaps a church council is a different kind of operation! Or is it simply the realism of ongoing daily life that Christian communities have to make important decisions without depending on vision and prophecy and in trust that a genuine seeking for and openness to God's will can be expected to produce decisions which are indeed inspired by the Spirit? If so, we should recall two points of importance: that the discussion and decision seems to reflect a genuine willingness to come together on both sides (see Introductions to ch. 15 and 15.12–21); and that the decision is presented as a genuine consensus and not as a power play by one faction dictating its will to the rest.

The talk of 'no greater burden' reflects nothing in James' speech, but echoes Peter's Paul-like comment in verse 10. Its presence again may suggest a statement composed to represent in at least some degree a Gentile perception (many Jewish traditions burdensome – cf. Rom. 14.2–3, 6) as well as minimum Jewish essentials for fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

15.29 'The apostolic decree' is repeated, though with a different term for the first item (see on 15.20), and with the remaining items in reverse order, though there is similar evidence of disturbance in the manuscript tradition of the text (see on 15.20). The parting

The transition to the next phase 15.30–41

encouragement reinforces the impression of a thoroughly Jewish perspective – the verb 'keep' denoting the quality of covenant faithfulness (Gen. 17.9–10; Deut. 33.9).

The transition to the next phase 15.30–41

Luke's concern here is to bridge the gap between the end of the Jerusalem council, as he has recorded it, and the next phase of Paul's mission. This stresses Paul's role both as emissary for the apostolic decree (15.30–31, continued into 16.4) and as representative of the Antioch church (15.35). The fact that Paul subsequently chose Silas to be his companion also enables Luke to suggest that Paul's link to and continuity with the Jerusalem church remained strong (15.40).

This latter fact also enabled Luke to pass over with brevity the most awkward feature of the transition period – the breach between Paul and Barnabas. He does not hide the fact that there was a sharp dispute, but he relates it solely to the question of John Mark's resuming the role of their assistant (15.37–39). Yet, almost certainly it was within this period that the dispute at Antioch took place, which Paul's record (Gal. 2.11–14) shows to have been exceedingly distressful to Paul, and not least for his relationship with Barnabas (Gal. 2.13 – 'even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy'). Paul had clearly felt that the question of Jewish and Gentile believers sharing table-fellowship together raised the same fundamental issues as had the question of Titus being circumcised (Gal. 2.1–10); but Peter, Barnabas and the rest of the believing Jews (even in Antioch) had disagreed. Since Paul gives no indication to the contrary, it is likely that he failed to persuade them otherwise – a failure which evidently still rankled as the tone of the letter to the Galatians itself shows. With such a failure to secure backing on an issue which he himself regarded as crucial, it is unlikely that Paul was able to continue serving as a representative and missionary of the Antioch church. The breach, in other words, was not only with Barnabas, and it was much deeper than disagreement over Mark's suitability. Over these more important dimensions to the breach between Paul and Barnabas Luke has chosen to draw a veil. He maintains the portrayal of Paul's solidarity with Jerusalem at some cost to the Pauline side of the story.

15.30-32 There is a blandness in Luke's account: the letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem resolved all problems and was received with universal rejoicing. The fact that Judas and Silas were also prophets is noted in passing, presumably to explain the effectiveness of their exhortations; was the title 'prophet' accorded to all who spoke with such effect? The language ('exhorted and strengthened the brothers') is again fairly stereotyped (see on 14.22).

15.33-35 The reported return of Silas to Jerusalem (15.33) created an obvious problem in the light of 15.40, which some scribes resolved by inserting verse 34. We should probably deduce that Luke was simply cutting one corner too many and failed to notice the anomaly his concertina-technique left in his narrative. The description of Paul and Barnabas continuing their ministry in Antioch, as both teaching and evangelizing (cf. 5.42), with many others (no more fully identified) also likewise suggests a casualness or haste in composition.

15.36 An indefinite time note allows Luke to hide the fact that he has passed over the serious Antioch incident (Gal. 2.11-14) in silence. That Paul should want to revisit the churches he had established is certainly consistent with what we know of Paul's pastoral concern from his own letters (see also 14.21).

15.37-39 The dispute (the Greek verb implies deeply felt irritation and anger) between one of the most conciliatory of men (Barnabas; see on 4.36-37) and one of the most dynamic and forceful of Christianity's early missionaries is inexpressibly sad, but reminds us of how impossible it is to separate human temperament from heart-felt commitment. The reference is back to 13.13; whatever the reason for Mark's return to Jerusalem, Paul thought it revealed a weakness in character which made Mark an unreliable associate. There are, however, subsequent hints that Paul and Barnabas were reconciled (1 Cor. 9.6; Col. 4.10), and that when given a second chance by Paul, Mark did not fail him again (Col. 4.10; Philemon 24).

15.39-41 Barnabas and Mark followed Paul's earlier suggestion (15.36) and returned to Cyprus – despite the fact that Luke had given no real indication of success or church founding there. Paul chose Silas (because he was a prophet, or a link with Jerusalem?) and took responsibility for revisiting the other half of the previous Antioch

mission (again described in terms simply of Syria and Cilicia – cf. 15.23). That they were commended to the grace of the Lord (God – 14.26; or Jesus – 15.11?) by the brothers in Antioch may owe more to Luke's assumption that relations were still strongly positive than to any record from Paul's side. Yet the fact that Silas/Silvanus was a close associate of Paul in the phase about to be launched (II Cor. 1.19; I Thess. 1.1; II Thess. 1.1) may mean that Paul himself made efforts to keep his lines of communication with Jerusalem as open as possible despite the catastrophic outcome at Antioch.