

A Textual Analysis on Acts 15:1-21: The Council at Jerusalem

Mingyan Sun

Student no.: 1705373

A. Introduction:

The Acts, formally known as the Acts of the Apostles, is the fifth book of the New Testament written around 80 – 90CE. It is the second part of a two-volume work, Luke-Acts, with the first part being the Canonical Gospel of Luke. Both works share a similar style and are addressed to Theophilus; so traditionally, they are believed to have been written by the same author, Luke, who was the physician and companion of Paul. This view is challenged by modern scholars as the earliest manuscripts remain anonymous.

The Acts presents an account of Christianity in the 1st century, providing an insight on the development of missionary activities among the Gentiles. Events are based on the lives and works of the apostles of Jesus.

Chapter 15 is seen as a watershed in Luke's whole narrative.¹ This chapter begins by raising the issue of circumcision in the Christian community. As state in Gen 17, circumcision is a sign of the covenant between Abraham and God (Gen 17:9-14), and this Israel's essential identity marker had been further reinforced by the Maccabean crisis.² The "Apostolic Decree" in Acts 15 answers the question of whether circumcision was necessary for receiving salvation. Preparation for this answer begins in the precedent event of Peter's conversion of Cornelius³ and his gentile household in Acts 10-11.

In this chapter, an important meeting was held by the Jerusalem Council concerning the legitimacy and basis of the new outreach to the Gentiles. This meeting concludes with fundamental principles for Jewish-Gentile fellowship and for community identity, as well as recognising faith as the true basis of salvation.

In this textual analysis, all bible references are in accordance with the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) unless otherwise specified.

B. Textual Analysis of Acts 15: 1-21

James Dunn suggests Acts 15:1-21 in the following division; this textual analysis will proceed in line with this style:

I. The issue of circumcision raised once again (15:1-5)

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Epworth Press, 1996), p.195.

² Israel's Syrian overlords try to destroy Israel's distinctiveness by forbidding circumcision (I Macc. 1:48, 60-61). This evoked the priority to reassert that circumcision was indispensable for all Jews (I Macc. 2:46).

³ Cornelius, a roman centurion, is considered the first Gentile to convert to Christianity. His baptism is an important event in the history of early Christian church.

- II. Peter cites the decisive precedent (15:6-11)
- III. The determinative ruling of James (15:12-21)

I. The issue of circumcision raised once again (15:1-5)

1. The ‘certain individuals’ cannot be precisely identified except that they came down from Judea (to Antioch where Paul and Barnabas have been staying). ‘Judea’ may refer to the Jerusalem community as this passage looks at the conflict over Gentile conversion,⁴ and those individuals could be associated with the believing Pharisees introduced in 15:5, who also insisted on the Mosaic custom of circumcision. It is worth noting the conditional sentence here, in that circumcision becomes the condition for salvation. This connection may be attributable to the Jewish way of associating the customs of Moses with the Torah over the centuries (6:14; 21:21).⁵ For many first century Jews, circumcision carried the significance of religious commitment and withdrawing from it may indicate the abandonment of the holy covenant (1 Macc 1:11-15). However to Luke, the ritual was more a “custom of the people”, he does not connect circumcision to the matter of salvation.⁶

2 - 4. Paul and Barnabas take on a representative role as leading delegates to go to Jerusalem, the elders seem to share leadership with the apostles there (cf. 11:30). While passing through Phoenicia and Samaria, where the churches there could have been founded by Hellenists (8:4-5; 11:19), alluding to the more positive reception of a diaspora mission,⁷ “all the believers” there express great joy over the report of the conversion of the Gentiles. Luke wants to indicate from this response the positive prospect for the Gentile mission. As the delegation reached Jerusalem, their recount on “all that God had done with them” communicates Luke’s view that it is the initiative of God for the Gentile mission to take place, not that of Paul and Barnabas (cf. 14:27). The same justification is used for Peter’s action in Caesarea (11:17-18). This corresponds to a common Lucan theme that God was at work in the Gentile mission.⁸

⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sacra Pagina Series volume 5: The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992), p.258.

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *ibid*, p.199.

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p.259.

⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *ibid*, p.199.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p.272.

5. The Pharisees are often portrayed as negative figures in the Acts as well as in the Gospel, being regarded as the ones opposing God's plan (Lk 7:30). Although some were attracted to the new movement, but they still placed great emphasis on following the Jewish law. In this verse, tone of authority is indicated by the double mandate of "it is necessary to be circumcised" and "order to keep the Law of Moses."⁹ Circumcision is identified here a fundamental requirement rather than an option. Luke is positive toward the Law of Moses¹⁰, but he believes by faith in Jesus everyone could be set free from sins, not by the Law of Moses (13:39).

II. Peter cites the decisive precedent (15:6-11)

6. The dynamics of the meeting are not very clear, but from this verse we can collect that the serious discussion and decision-making of the Council are to happen between the highest authorities, although the whole congregation is mentioned in 15:12.

7 - 9. In v.7, Peter recalls the preceding event of accepting Cornelius (Acts 10), and from that, he claims he was the first and the chosen one (among the apostles) to communicate the good news to the Gentiles. This again emphasises God's doing rather than the initiative of humans, Peter was merely a witness, not the Judge. "God knows the human heart", Peter underscores that God's judgment of human creatures is based on internal disposition (faith) rather than external criteria (ethnicity or rituals). Cornelius was qualified to receive the Holy Spirit as he exercised faith and practised righteousness, having fulfilled the conditions required for being a Christian,¹¹ nowhere was circumcision mentioned upon the giving of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit is understood to be God's testimony to the acceptability of the Gentiles, just as it was for the first believers (cf. 10:47; 11:15-17). In Acts, the Spirit is the essential element in the process of conversion initiation.¹² Peter realised that his vision of the presupposed "unclean" (10:10-15) was about the Gentiles and it was "faith" that God used to "cleanse the heart" (possibly the forgiveness of sins¹³), not the observance of the Law. This draws attention to the theme of "faith" which Luke has been

⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p. 260.

¹⁰ See Luke 2:22, 23, 24, 27, 39; Acts 7:53

¹¹ C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles Volume II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1998), p. 715.

¹² James D. G. Dunn, *ibid*, p. 201.

¹³ C.K. Barrett, *ibid*, p. 717.

building in the preceding chapters.¹⁴ God made no distinction between circumcised Jews and uncircumcised Gentiles as long as the condition of “faith” is fulfilled; this also ties in with the theological conviction of God’s “impartiality (cf. 10:34; Rom 3:22; 10:12).

10 - 11. Verse 10 is a strong statement, with implications that the Pharisaic party may not be posing the challenge to humans, but to God (given the Gentile mission was God’s initiative). “Test” is a term often used for resistance to God’s plan (cf. Ex 17:2; Deut 6:16). The turning point here is when Peter refers to the law requiring circumcision as a “yoke”, an unsupportable burden, which Jews themselves find difficult to bear (cf. Lk 11:46; Mt 23:4); how would it then be reasonable to expect the Gentiles to follow? Peter concurs here with the Pauline tradition where the law (Torah) is depicted as a yoke of slavery (Gal 5:1-6). Verse 11 comes back to the central theme of the Council and that is salvation; Peter clearly states that the grace of the Lord Jesus is the means of salvation for both Jewish people and Gentile. Johnson believes that Peter’s statement indicates the principle of salvation for Jews is measured by that for Gentiles, in an unexpectedly reversal order. This rebuts the opening accusation (15:1). Some translations use “gift” rather than “grace”, carrying the message of Jesus being the content of the gift, rather than the one who shows favour.¹⁵ This is a parallel to the giving of the Holy Spirit.

III. The determinative ruling of James (15:12-21)

12. Peter’s speech silenced the whole assembly; these are probably the people other than the apostles and elders.¹⁶ “Signs and wonders” can be found in other parts of the Acts (2:43; 4:30; 5:12) and mark the fact that the Holy Spirit has been at work to accomplish the Gentile conversion.

13 – 14. We will see from the upcoming verses, James plays the leadership role (spokesperson) in the Jerusalem Church and his decision influences the entire assembly. “Simeon” here is referring to Peter (old form as in II Peter 1:1). James evidently agrees with Peter’s view on God’s initiative in this event. Luke uses the term “people” almost exclusively to refer to Israel as the “people of God”, and “name” in the LXX (the Greek Old Testament)

¹⁴ See Acts 13:8, 9; 14:1, 9, 22, 27

¹⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p. 263.

¹⁶ C.K. Barrett, *ibid*, p. 721.

is essentially synonymous with God himself.¹⁷ When pieced together, the calling of the Gentiles suggests an association with Israel's own calling and its extension.

15 – 18. James provides scriptural proof from Amos in this part. The prophets (plural) may refer to the collection of the Twelve Prophets (7:42; 13:40). A number of commentaries agree that the citation from Amos 9:11-12 take influence from Jer. 12:15 and Isa. 45:21, with the first envisaging a restoration of Israel and the latter declaring there is only one righteous God. The Amos passage is primarily referring to the re-establishment of the Davidic Kingdom, the dwelling of David is possibly the Davidic royal house which came down with the fall of Jerusalem in 587/6 BC, and the passage promises its restoration. Barrett proposes that Luke (James) may have taken this to refer to the Messaiah, to his appearance in history or to his resurrection.¹⁸ Verse 17 has a divergence in its Greek and Hebrew versions. The Hebrew version conveys the promise of a restored Israel that would possess other nations, while the LXX version describes a restored kingdom on which the rest of humanity seeks the Lord (all the Gentiles).¹⁹ James may have used this citation to suggest the oneness of Jews and Gentiles and to invite the rest of the nations to join “the calling on the name of the Lord.” Some translations for v.18 use “eternity” rather than the NRSV of “long ago”,²⁰ but both manifest the same point that the inclusion of the Gentiles had always been part of God's plan, and it was God's intention from the start. This verse is not found in Amos and is considered to be the transition to James' concluding decision.

19. The way James speaks - “I have reached the decision...we should not trouble...” implies that he has the power to stop the troubling. In this verse, James is suggesting that demanding the Gentiles to follow the full legal observance, circumcision in this instance, is a form of harassment to the Gentiles and should be stopped. The acceptability of Gentiles should come from the acceptance by God, not by Jews; “turning to God”²¹ is the legitimate conversion of the Gentiles.

¹⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p. 264.

¹⁸ C.K. Barrett, *ibid*, p. 725.

¹⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p. 265.

²⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, p. 265.

²¹ See also Acts 14:15; 26:20; 3:19; 9:35; 11:21; 28:27

20. The verse is known for the proposal of the “Apostolic Decree”²² and it entails an attempt to formulate the minimum terms (“to abstain *only* from”) for recognition and association between Jewish and Gentile believers; undoubtedly, the prohibitions named are also considered necessary for salvation. The intended instructions are communicated in writing. Clearly, James means to ease things for the Gentiles but still holds a limit. He proposes to cast out circumcision and other Mosaic Law as precondition for mutual association, but provision for table purity (very closely linked to the Jewish identity, cf. I Macc. 1.60-63) and sexual immorality remain. Three areas of abstention are announced in v. 20.

1) to abstain from things polluted by idols: The polluted things mainly refer to the food and wine offered on altars to idols. At the time, meat supply came mostly from sacrifices offered at the local temples (including to pagan gods). The devout Jews believe that eating of those food causes defilement (Ex. 34:15) and it would be to tarnish their dedication to the one God (Ex. 20:3 – 6).²³ In I Cor. 8-10, Paul shows care in dealing with this prohibition as it is a sensitive issue in the early churches.

2) fornication: Fornication (*porneia*²⁴) was also to be avoided. In this context, *Porneia* refers to sexual union within the prohibited degrees (Lev. 18:6-18).²⁵ In addition, there also exists an association between idolatry and sexual immorality, since sexual imagery was used as the metaphor for covenantal fidelity. All forms of *porneia* are condemned by the New Testament.²⁶ Also, Paul’s warning against *porneia* can be found in his letters (I Cor. 6:13, 18; II Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; I Thess. 4:3). Failing to adhere to this abstention can indicate that one’s lack of self-control could result in other forms of overindulgences and vices.

3) from whatever has been strangled and from blood: This refers to the prohibition in Jewish law against drinking the blood of any creature or eating the flesh of animals whose blood had not been completely drained (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:10-13), since “the life of every creature is in the blood” (Lev. 17:14) and the blood (symbol of life) is to be offered to God. Therefore, the two elements of “strangled things” and “from blood” constitute one ritual prohibition, for strangulation would allow the blood to remain within the creature. This kind of meat is considered unclean, just as those polluted by idols. “Blood” could also signify the prohibition of murder (Deut. 21:7-8). The consumption of kosher meat was not simply a dietary

²² There are three versions (Acts 15:20; 15:29; 21:25) of the “Apostolic Decree” which are different in order and have textual variants for each of the versions.

²³ James D. G. Dunn, *ibid*, p. 205.

²⁴ The term *porneia* derives from *porne* (“prostitute”) and covers a broad range of sexual immorality.

²⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *ibid*, p. 205.

²⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, pp. 266-267.

preference but marks the Jewish identity and way of living. Following the food law shows respect and sensitivity to the Jewish community.

21. This statement shows the long-standing (“from generations past”), widespread (“in every city”) and regular (“every Sabbath”) practice of the norms of Torah in diaspora synagogues,²⁷ those norms should not be unfamiliar to the Gentiles (Lev.17:8, 10, 13, 15). James endeavours to compromise the provisions for the Gentile believers with the proposal, and from it, he hopes to facilitate fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, but only on the basis of continued respect for the law.

C. Interfaith Perspective of Acts 15

The development of Early Christianity experienced ethnic conflict in the inclusion of the Gentiles. Bennema describes the Gentile inclusion as a cause for early Christianity to become a trans-ethnic movement (the Christian identity transcends ethnic identities).²⁸ Acts 15 clearly states that Christian identity is based on one’s faith in Jesus Christ, not on the works of the law; faith is also believed to be the condition for salvation, not circumcision.

Although table-fellowship, a matter of intense controversy in the early church, is not overtly discussed in Acts 15, but its presence is implied through the proposal of the fourfold prohibition. Throughout history, Israelites’ hostile neighbours disputed their title to the land, from which they experienced political and social problems that evoked the Jewish purity regulations.²⁹ Mary Douglas in her essay, “Deciphering a Meal”, states that “whenever a people are aware of encroachments and danger, dietary rules controlling what goes into the body would serve as a vivid analogy of the corpus of their cultural categories at risk.”³⁰ So it is not unreasonable for the Jewish Christians to want to sustain the food laws, as eating with outsiders does not only pose risk of being offered prohibited food, but such Jewish-Gentile commensality is potentially a threat to the preservation of the distinct identity of the Jewish people.

²⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *ibid*, pp. 267.

²⁸ Cornelis Bennema, ‘The Ethnic Conflict in Early Christianity: An Appraisal of Bauckham’s Proposal on the Antioch Crisis and the Jerusalem Council’, *the American Theological Library Association*, 2013, p. 755.

²⁹ Philip Francis Esler, *Community and gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p.74.

³⁰ Philip Francis Esler, *ibid*, p.75.

When new converts of exotic ethnicity and ritual begin to come into the Christian community, it is rational for the Jewish believers to start thinking about the essential and non-essential belief and practice in Christianity. The Pharisees are particularly strict on this matter, as this group is known to have a much more zealous attitude to the subject of purity from the rest of Israel, and in Acts 15, they claim circumcision as a condition for salvation (15:1); the Pharisaic party does not represent the view of the entire Jewish community. Although James uses a concrete scriptural argument to welcome Gentile inclusion (15:15-18) and proposes a decree of minimum terms to facilitate fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers (15:20), some still believe the decree favours Jewish conservatism as “from what is strangled and from blood” refers to the kosher laws. Nevertheless, this decree functions as a catalyst of harmony in the Jewish-Gentile commensality. Each of the four prohibitions is appropriate in the context where Jews and Gentiles engage in table-fellowship, allowing a basis for full communion between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Furthermore, by following the abstentions, the Gentiles show respect to the Jewish way of living and are more culturally aware of not performing activities that are offensive to their Jewish brothers. It is important to recognise that the Jewish believers had been observing the Mosaic Law for generations past (15:21). From the perspective of the Gentiles, the prohibitions are neither new nor a burden, as they would have learned about them in the synagogues and might have already been observing them. In Leviticus 17-18, the prohibitions are explicated as requirements for “proselytes and sojourners.” As seen in 15:31, the fourfold prohibition was incorporated into a letter and the brothers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia accepted the exhortation with much joy.

Catherine Cornille considers five conditions as critical to the success of interreligious dialogue, including humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy and hospitality. Although the union of Jewish and Gentile Christians is not a typical case of an interfaith encounter, for both worship the same God and follow the teachings of the same Messiah (Christ), but to varying degrees, each of the two parties brings their own traditional ritual and belief into the commensality. Hence the decree can act as a peacemaker to allow for empathy to transpose oneself into the feelings, the thoughts and the experiences of another,³¹ and to

³¹ Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad/A Herder and Herder, 2008), p. 138.

encourage hospitality for an open-minded and receptive attitude towards learning from the other.³²

The first Gentile convert is the conversion of Cornelius by Peter (10:1-11:18), for which he was criticised by the Jerusalem church for his association with the uncircumcised (11:3). Peter is clearly aware of the Jewish law (10:9-14, 28), but God has revealed to him that he must not call anyone profane or unclean (10:15; 28). In the end, the Spirit confirms this principle by gifting the Gentiles essentially a Pentecost experience (10:45-6; 11:15). Therefore, the entire proceeding of this Gentile conversion is not Peter's own logical deduction from the vision, but he was instructed by God and directed by the Spirit (10:19-20). Acts 15 reinforces that the true author of the Gentile mission is God himself who testifies to them by gifting the Holy Spirit.

Malcolm defines *conversion* as wanting to change other people's hearts and minds to be like their own, and *conversation* as not seeking to change other people's minds because in their hearts, they believe we are really alike.³³ It is rational to say that the apostles in Acts 15 strive for conversation with the Gentiles rather than imposing forcible conversion (to obey the Law). Malcolm believes conversion and conversation converge in Acts; the purpose of the outreach is not to make others like ourselves, but to participate in an event that calls everyone involved to transcend themselves and become something new and larger than themselves.³⁴ The Holy Spirit that Jesus sends to the ends of the earth (1:8) is an event that generates new ways of thinking, feeling, acting and experiencing that bring everyone encountered to transcend themselves to the reign of God where the participants become larger than themselves and are no longer prejudiced by the different ethnic and ritual identities.³⁵ Peter's insight on the reception of Gentiles expressed in verse 8 evidently coincides with this concept. The Spirit acts as an "interconnection", implying a shared common religious experience, between the Jews and the Gentiles; "interconnection" is proposed by Cornille as one of the five conditions for achieving successful interreligious interaction.³⁶

³² Catherine Cornille. *ibid*, p. 177.

³³ Lois Malcolm, 'Conversion, Conversation, and Acts 15', *Word & World Volume 22 no. 3*, 2002, p.246.

³⁴ Lois Malcolm, *ibid*, p. 246.

³⁵ Lois Malcolm, *ibid*, p. 251.

³⁶ Catherine Cornille. *ibid*, p. 121.

D. Conclusion

We can deduce from the establishment of the “Apostolic decree” in Acts 15 that Luke did not see Christianity as an entirely new belief system per se, completely superseding and detaching from Judaism and Jewish tradition. James proposes the essential prohibitions to alleviate the tension rising from ethnic conflict during the Gentile mission; the decree works as a compromise between maintaining fundamental Jewish laws and welcoming more Gentiles to hear the good news of Jesus.

Those who demanded the Gentile Christians to observe the circumcision law may fear for discontinued existence of the Jewish identity, but in fact, greater danger lies in being “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (7:15), having hearts that are unkind and prejudiced, ears that refuse to hear the gospels.

Although the “trans-ethnic” Christianity ultimately overcame an ethnocentric law observant Christianity, but it did not happen immediately or without undergoing disputes and challenges. In this process, the Jerusalem Council certainly played a significant role in uniting the Jews and the Gentiles and in facilitating their fellowship.

Bibliography

Barrett, C.K. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles Volume II*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark LTD, 1998.

Bennema, Cornelis. 'The Ethnic Conflict in Early Christianity: An Appraisal of Bauckham's Proposal on the Antioch Crisis and the Jerusalem Council'. *The American Theological Library Association*, 2013.

Cornille, Catherine. *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. New York: Crossroad/A Herder and Herder, 2008.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Acts of the Apostles*. London: Epworth Press, 1996.

Esler, Philip Francis. *Community and gospel in Luke-Acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Sacra Pagina Series volume 5: The Acts of the Apostles*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Malcolm, Lois, 'Conversion, Conversation, and Acts 15', *Word & World Volume 22, No. 3*, 2002.