

The Origin of Paul's Religion

The Triumph of Gentile Freedom (Part 3)

By [John Gresham Machen](#)

In the second chapter of Galatians, having finished proving that in the decisive early period before he was well engaged in his distinctive work there was not even any extended contact with the original apostles at all, Paul proceeds to the telling argument that the very men who were appealed to by the Judaizers themselves had admitted that he was entirely independent of them and that they had nothing to add to him. If the famine visit had occurred in the early period, or if, whenever it occurred, it had involved the important event of a conference with the apostles about the Pauline gospel, in either case Paul would probably have been obliged to mention it. But, as it is, the visit, according to Acts xi. 30; xii. 25, did not occur until Paul had already been engaged in the Gentile work, and there is no reason to suppose that it involved any contact with the original apostles. The omission of the famine visit from Galatians, therefore, as a visit distinct from Gal. ii. 1-10, does not absolutely require either the identification of Gal. i. 1-10 with that famine visit or the denial of the historicity of Acts.

Certain other difficulties emerge, however, when Gal. ii. 1-10 is compared with Acts xv. 1-29 in detail.

In the first place, the leaders of the Jerusalem Church, it is said, are represented in Acts xv. 1-29 as maintaining Pauline principles, whereas in Gal. ii. 1-10 it appears that there was really a fundamental difference between them and Paul. This difficulty constitutes an objection not against the identification of Gal. ii. 1-10 with Acts xv. 1-29 but against the historicity of Acts, for if at any time there was a really fundamental difference of principle between Paul and the original apostles then the whole representation in Acts is radically incorrect. But the objection disappears altogether when Galatians is correctly interpreted. The Epistle to the Galatians does not represent the conference between Paul and the pillars of the Jerusalem Church as resulting in a cold agreement to disagree; on the contrary it represents those leaders as giving to Paul and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship. And Gal. ii. 11-21, rightly interpreted, attests positively a real unity of principle as existing between Paul and Peter.

The one objection that remains against the identification of Gal. ii. 1-10 with Acts xv. 1-29 concerns the "Apostolic Decree" of Acts xv. 28, 29 (compare Acts xv. 19, 20; xxi. 25). According to the Epistle to the Galatians the apostles at the time of the conference "added nothing" to Paul (Gal. ii. 6); according to the Book of

Acts, it is argued, they added something very important indeed—namely, the requirements of the Apostolic Decree that the Gentile Christians should "refrain from things offered to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication." Since these requirements are partly at least ceremonial, they seem to constitute an exception to the general principle of Gentile freedom, and therefore an addition to Paul's gospel. If when Paul presented to the original apostles the gospel which he was preaching among the Gentiles, involving the free offer of salvation apart from the Law, the apostles emended that gospel by requiring at least certain parts of the ceremonial Law, were they not "adding" something to Paul?

But are the provisions of the decree really ceremonial? Apparently they are in part ceremonial if the so-called "Neutral text" attested by the Codex Sinaiticus and the Codex Vaticanus be correct. According to this text, which here lies at the basis of all forms of our English Bible, "blood" can refer to anything except meat that has the blood let in it or else blood that might be prepared separately for food; for "things strangled" certainly refers to a closely related provision of the ceremonial Law about food. But at this point an interesting textual question arises. The so-called "Western text" of the Book of Acts, attested by the Codex Bezae and the usual companion witnesses, omits the word translated "things strangled" or "what is strangled" in Acts xv. 20, 29; xxi. 25, and in the first two of these three passages adds the negative form of the Golden Rule. Thus the Western text reads in Acts xv. 28, 29 as follows: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no further burden upon you except these necessary things — that you refrain from things offered to idols and from blood and from fornication, and that you do not do anything whatsoever things you do not wish to be done to you." It is generally agreed that the Golden Rule has here been added by a copyist; but the omission of "things strangled" is thought by many modern scholars to preserve the reading of the autograph.

If this short text without "things strangled" be correct, then the provisions of the Decree need not be regarded as ceremonial at all, but may be taken as simply moral. "Things offered to idols" may refer to idolatry in general; "blood" may refer to murder; and "fornication" may be meant in the most general sense. But if the provisions of the Decree were simply moral, then plainly they did not constitute any "addition" to the message of freedom which Paul proclaimed among the Gentiles. Paul himself had of course enjoined upon his converts the necessity of leading a true moral life. If when the original apostles were urged by the Judaizers to impose upon the Gentile converts the requirements of the ceremonial Law, they responded, "No; the only requirements to be imposed upon the Gentiles are that they refrain from deadly sins like idolatry, murder and fornication," that decision constituted merely a most emphatic confirmation of Paul's gospel of freedom.

The textual question cannot here be discussed in detail. In favor of the Western text, with its omission of "things strangled," may be urged not only the general principle of textual criticism that the shorter reading is to be preferred to the longer, but also the special consideration that in this particular passage the shorter reading seems to account for the origin of the two additions; (1) the word translated "things strangled," and (2) the Golden Rule. The short text, supposing it to be the original, was ambiguous; it might be taken either as ceremonial ("blood" meaning the eating of blood) or as moral ("blood" meaning the shedding of blood or murder). Those copyists who took it as ceremonial, it is maintained, fixed the meaning by adding "things strangled" (because animals that were strangled had the blood still in them, so that the eating of them constituted a violation of the ceremonial Law); whereas those who took the Decree as moral fixed the meaning by adding the Golden Rule as the summation of the moral law.¹

On the other side may be urged the connection which seems to exist between the omission of "things strangled" and the manifest gloss constituted by the Golden Rule. Documentary attestation of a short text, without the Golden Rule and without "things strangled," is exceedingly scanty if not non-existent-Kirsopp Lake can point only to the witness of Irenaeus. The omission of "things strangled," therefore, may be only a part of a moralizing of the Decree (carried out also in the addition of the Golden Rule), which would be quite in accord with that habit of scribes by which they tended to ignore in the interests of moral commonplaces what was special and difficult in the text which they were copying. In reply, Lake insists that just at the time and at the place where the short text (without "things strangled") was prevalent, there was a food law for which the long text (with "things strangled") would have afforded welcome support. Why should the text have been modified just where in its original form it supported the prevailing practice of the Church? The conclusion is, Lake believes, that if the Western text prevailed, despite the welcome support which would have been afforded by the other text, it was because the Western text was correct.²

Decision as to the textual question will depend to a considerable extent upon the conclusion which is reached with regard to the Western text as a whole. The radical rejection of that text which was advocated by Westcott and Hort has by no means won universal approval; a number of recent scholars are inclined at least to pursue an eclectic course, adopting now the Western reading and now the Neutral reading on the basis of internal evidence in the individual cases. Others believe that the Western text and the Neutral text are both correct, since the Western text is derived from an earlier edition of the book, whereas the Neutral text represents a revised edition issued by the author himself.³ But this

¹ See Lake, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-53.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 57-59.

³ An elaborate attempt has recently been made by Zahn, in addition to former attempts by Blass and Hilgenfeld, to reproduce the original form of the Western text, which Zahn believes to be the earlier

hypothesis affords absolutely no assistance in the case of the Apostolic Decree; for the Western reading (if it be interpreted in the purely non-ceremonial way) presents the Decree in a light very different from that in which it appears according to the Neutral reading. It is impossible that the author could have contradicted himself so directly and in so important a matter.

Therefore, if one of the two readings is due to the author, the other is due to some one else. Cases like this weigh heavily against the hypothesis of two editions of the book; that hypothesis can be saved only by supposing either that the Western documents do not here reproduce correctly the original Western form of the book, or else that the other documents do not here reproduce the original revised edition. In other words, despite the manuscript evidence, the two editions of the book must here be supposed to have been in harmony. At any rate, then, whether or no the hypothesis of two editions be accepted, a choice must here be made between the Neutral reading and the Western reading; they cannot both be due to the author, since they are contradictory to each other.

On the whole, it must be said that the Western text of the Book of Acts does not commend itself, either as the one genuine form of the book, or as an earlier edition of which the Neutral text is a revision. The Western readings are interesting; at times they may contain genuine historical information; but it seems unlikely that they are due to the author. Here and there indeed the Western documents may preserve a genuine reading which has been lost in all other witnesses to the text—even Westcott and Hort did not altogether exclude such a possibility—but in general the high estimate which Westcott and Hort placed upon the Neutral text is justified. Thus there is a possibility that the short text of the Apostolic Decree, without "things strangled," is genuine, but it is a possibility only.

If then, the Neutral text of the Decree is correct, so that the requirements of the Decree are partly ceremonial, must the Book of Acts here be held to contradict the Epistle to the Galatians? If the Decree really was passed at the Apostolic Council, as Acts xv. 29 represents, would Paul have been obliged to mention it in Gal. ii. 1-10? Answering these questions in the affirmative, a great many scholars since the days of Baur have regarded the account which the Book of Acts gives of the Apostolic Council as radically wrong; and since the book has thus failed to approve itself at the point where it runs parallel to a recognized authority, it must be distrusted elsewhere as well. The Apostolic Council, especially the Apostolic Decree, has thus become, to use a phrase of B. W. Bacon, the "crux of apostolic history."⁴

edition of the book. See Zahn, *Die Urausgabe der Apostelgeschichte des Lucas*, 1916 (*Forschungen zur Geschichte des neutestamentlichen Kanons*, ix, Teil).

⁴ B. W. Bacon, "Acts versus Galatians: the Crux of Apostolic History," in *American Journal of Theology*, xi, 1907, pp. 454-474. See also "Professor Harnack on the Lukan Narrative," *ibid.*, xiii, 1909, pp. 59-76

It is exceedingly unlikely, however, at any rate, that the Decree has been made up "out of whole cloth"; for it does not coincide exactly with the usage of the later Church, and seems to be framed in view of primitive conditions. Even those who reject the narrative of Acts as it stands, therefore, often admit that the Decree was really passed by the early Jerusalem Church; but they maintain that it was passed after Paul's departure from Jerusalem and without his consent. This view is thought to be supported by Acts xxi. 25, where James, it is said, is represented, at the time of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem, as calling attention to the Decree as though it were something new. Acts xxi. 25 is thus thought to preserve a bit of primitive tradition which is in contradiction to the representation of the fifteenth chapter. Of course, however, the verse as it stands in the completed book can only be taken by the unsophisticated reader as referring to what Paul already knew; and it is a grave question whether the author of Acts was unskillful enough to allow contradictory representations to stand unassimilated in his book, as the hypothesis demands. Acts xxi. 25, therefore, is at any rate not opposed to the view that the Decree was actually passed with the consent of Paul, as the fifteenth chapter represents. But is this representation really in contradiction to the Epistle to the Galatians? Does Gal. ii. 1-10 really exclude the Apostolic Decree? In order to answer these questions, it will be necessary to examine the nature of the Decree.

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