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BIB002: Survey of Scripture II: New Testament
First Exegetical Paper
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The Council of Jerusalem

I. The Textual Unit

The focus of this exegetical paper is Acts 15:1–41, the entire fifteenth chapter of The Acts of the Apostles. This chapter focuses on the lead-up to, and reason for the convening of, the Council of Jerusalem, the Council itself and the decisions and aftermath of the Council. The opening verse of the chapter describes the context: “And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.” (Acts 15:1). Here, Luke, the Evangelist to whom the authorship of The Acts of the Apostles is traditionally attributed, describes the situation: Certain of the early Christian sects are claiming that not only should one adhere to the ritual commands of the Torah (circumcision being the primary outward sign of adherence thereto [Gen. 17:9–14]). The second verse of the chapter introduces the involvement of Paul and Barnabas, the former of whom reckons elsewhere with this very controversy throughout the New Testament Canon (Galatians 2, 4, 5 and 6; I Corinthians 7 and 9, et. al.). Verses 3 and 4 describe the journey of the two men to Jerusalem, and their reception there. Verses 5 and 6 describe the beginning of the Council itself, during which the Apostles and Elders assemble to discuss the matter of the opinions of certain members of the sect of the Pharisees, ostensibly having been converted to Christ, who state their belief that Gentile converts must be required to maintain the Mosaic Law. Verses 7 through 11 relate the impassioned speech of the Apostle Peter: “Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe. And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us; And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.” (Acts 15:7–11) In verse 12, the assemblage listens to the speeches of Paul and Barnabas, which are not recorded in the text, but are summarised by indicating that they described the miracles and wonders wrought by Gentile converts to Christianity. Verses 13 through 21 describe the sentence of James, who declares that Gentile converts need not bear the full burden of the Law, but should nonetheless abstain from eating food offered to idols, sexual immorality, eating meat from strangled animals and eating blood. Verses 22 through 29 detail a letter written to the Church in Antioch to explain the rulings of the Council, to be delivered by men from the Church in Jerusalem, namely Judas Barsabas and Silas, who accompany Paul and Barnabas on their return journey. The letter relates the conclusion of the Council, alongside descriptions of Judas Barsabas and Silas as men that have “hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,” indicating the authority of the messengers. In addition, the letter emphasises that the findings of the Council “seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us,” further elucidating that these conclusions were not merely the rational conclusions of men, but divinely inspired, conciliar wisdom. Verses 30 through 35 describe the actions of Judas, Silas, Paul and Barnabas after their arrival in Antioch, where they

delivered the letter to the consolation of the gathered assembly there. These verses go on to explain that Judas and Silas exhorted the gathered faithful, that the latter of the two tarried there for some time and that Paul and Barnabas, alongside many others, continued to teach and to preach in the region. Finally, in verses 36 through 41, Paul and Barnabas decide to continue their missionary work by visiting cities they had been to previously. Barnabas wishes to bring John Mark, but Paul disagrees, citing John Mark's prior departure from their company (Acts 13:13). The chapter ends with Barnabas sailing to Cyprus with John Mark, and Paul travelling through Syria and Cilicia with Silas.

Most of this chapter, beginning with verse 5 and concluding with verse 41, is read liturgically in the Orthodox Church on Fifth Friday and the Fifth Saturday after Pascha, the primary liturgical season in which The Acts of the Apostles is read in church. The reading for Friday begins on verse 5 and ends on verse 34, while the reading for Saturday begins on verse 35 and ends on verse 41. These are pericopes 36 and 37, respectively. These readings omit the first four verses, but these are summed up in the first verse of pericope 36: "[In those days,] there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5) The Roman Catholic Church follows a similar lectionary reading of the chapter, reading verses 1–2 and 22–29 on the Sixth Sunday of Easter in Year C, and verses 1–6, 7–21 and 22–31 on the Fifth Wednesday, Thursday and Friday of Easter, respectively.

II. The Historical Context

According to Church tradition, The Acts of the Apostles was written by the Apostle and Evangelist Luke, as a continuation of his Gospel. This is made apparent in the opening of the book, in which the author addresses the work to a certain Theophilus, to whom the Gospel had also previously been addressed (Luke 1:3, Acts 1:1). For this reason, Luke—Acts is generally considered one integral unit.

Attestation of the work to St. Luke is very early and consistent among Church Fathers, being directly referenced as such by St. Irenaeus of Lyons, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen, as well as in the ancient Muratorian Canon and the Peshitta, the ancient Syriac translation of the Bible. The same is hinted at by other early Fathers, and is supported by internal evidence within the work itself. Further proclaimed by Church tradition is the role of St. Luke as the travelling companion and fellow labourer of St. Paul.¹

Tradition elucidates that St. Luke, universally identified with the "beloved physician" of St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians (Col. 4:14), was also the first iconographer, having painted a portrait of the Theotokos, which a later tradition states was sent to the same Theophilus to which his Gospel and the Book of Acts are addressed. Further, he preached the Gospel in many places, eventually being martyred. His Feast Day is October 18.²

Six named figures play central roles in the pericope: Sts. Peter, Paul, James, Barnabas, Judas Barsabas and Silas. Since the Council is mentioned by St. Paul in his Epistle to the Galatians (Gal. 2:1-21), it is possible to determine that it took place in 51 AD.³

The chapter opens with an allusion to the heresy of the Judaisers, whom Archbishop Averky (Taushev) calls "the first Christian heretics."⁴ This same issue is discussed at length in various of the Pauline Epistles. In the midst of disputations of those assembled, St.

Peter arose to offer a robust apology of nascent Orthodoxy, citing the miracle of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Gentile converts, in a fiery speech reminiscent of the Apostle's preaching throughout the preceding chapters of the Acts. This being the last mention of St. Peter in Acts, chapter 15 marks the culmination of an important turning point in the narrative from focusing on St. Peter to focusing on the missionary work of St. Paul. Following Peter's speech, Sts. Paul and Barnabas rise to offer their own accounts of the miracles they witnessed in their missionary work among the Gentiles. Although the precise content of their accounts is not recorded, one can assume that events during the growth of the Church in Antioch, previously described in chapter 11, were among the focal points of their discourse.

The St. James mentioned as having given the concluding remarks at the Council is identified with James, the Brother of the Lord, then Bishop of Jerusalem, who is traditionally believed to have been a son of St. Joseph the Betrothed from an earlier marriage. This identification is particularly relevant to the historical context of the pericope, because St. James himself faithfully upheld the Law, and was universally recognised as an authority by both Jews and Gentiles, earning the epithet "James the Just."⁵

At the time of the Council, Judaism and Christianity cannot be said to have definitively split from one another. First-century Christians continued worshipping at the Temple in Jerusalem until its destruction in 70 AD, and Roman authorities considered those Jews who rejected Christ and those who worshipped Him to be different forms of Judaism. Even non-Christian Jews considered Christians to be not a distinct religion in and of itself, but rather a Jewish heresy.⁶ It is not surprising, therefore, that the Judaising heresy was such a persistent threat to the early Christian Church, or that it became increasingly necessary to address as the Church began to spread outside of Jerusalem and attract Gentile converts.

Internal textual evidence makes it possible to determine the approximate date of the authorship of the Acts. Since St. Luke does not mention the martyrdom of St. Paul, and tradition tells us that he was vindicated at his trial following the imprisonment to which he is still subject at the end of Acts, we can conclude that it was written either in 63 or 64 AD.⁷

III. Textual and Translational Issues

There are several important considerations and potential translational hurdles one may encounter in this pericope. One such issue is the question of later additions, three of which across two textual traditions have been identified by scholars. The first, Acts 15:34, is found in the Textus Receptus, and reads thus: "Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still." Often omitted in modern critical texts, scholars contend that it was added to resolve perceived incompleteness of the narrative. The second such addition is found in some ancient manuscripts of the Western tradition, notably Codex Bezae, which includes two apparent inversions of the so-called Golden Rule, in verses 20 and 29 of chapter 15. Verse 20 of the Codex reads: "but that we enjoin on them to abstain from the pollutions of idols, and from fornication, [and from what is strangled] and from blood: and that whatsoever they would not should be done to them ye do not to others," while verse 29 reads: "that ye abstain from idol sacrifices, and from blood, [and from things strangled], and from fornication and whatsoever ye would not should be done to yourselves, ye do not to another. From which if ye keep yourselves ye do well, being sustained by the Holy Spirit. Fare ye well." (emphasis added).⁸

In addition to the potential additions to the text, some issues apply in translating the original Greek to English. The most prominent example, and one which seems to be especially relevant in modern Biblical scholarship and exegesis, occurs in verses 20 and 29 of chapter 15: namely, the most accurate English-language translation of the Greek πορνεία. Strong's Concordance defines the word as harlotry, to include adultery, incest and fornication, in other words, any kind of sexual immorality, or figuratively as idolatry.⁹ Although this word is attested in multiple locations throughout Scripture, and its meaning is generally understood unambiguously among Orthodox patristic sources, its precise meaning and application is rendered controversial in light of contemporary sexual politics and how they relate to Biblical exegesis. A related issue, detailed below, is the potential for the text to be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that sexual immorality is irrelevant to Christians.

Another translational issue comes in the form of a point of conflict between the Greek Septuagint text, as quoted by St. James cites the Prophecy of Amos at the conclusion of the Council of Jerusalem, and the Hebrew text of the same book. In the Septuagint, the cited passage (Amos 9:12) reads: "that the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, may earnestly seek me, saith the Lord who does all these things."¹⁰ In contrast, the Masoretic text reads: "That they may possess the remnant of Edom, and of all the heathen, which are called by my name, saith the Lord that doeth this." While translations using the Septuagint as the source for Old Testament texts are consistent, versions that use the Hebrew Masoretic text include a conflict between the quote spoken by St. James and the text of the Prophecy of Amos.

IV. Literary Genre

Although it is considered part of a textual unit alongside the Gospel of Luke, the literary genre of the Book of Acts is narrative history, making it unique among the books of the New Testament Canon. The four Gospels contain portions of narrative history, but the genre of Gospel is better understood as ancient biography. The opening words, "[t]he former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up, after that he through the Holy Ghost had given commandments unto the apostles whom he had chosen" (Acts 1:1–2), set the tone for the rest of the book as the chronicle of events pertaining to the nascent Church that took place immediately after the Gospel account. Despite the general historiographical nature of the Acts, the book may also be interpreted partly as an ancient biography, as the approximate first half focuses primarily on St. Peter, while the approximate latter half focuses primarily on St. Paul.

Throughout Acts, the reader encounters various proofs of the Resurrection of Christ, along with testimonies of His Apostles, their work to spread the Gospel and the pitfalls and triumphs they experienced in their mission. Because of its heavy Resurrectional focus, Acts is read in the Orthodox Church throughout the entire period of the Pentecostarion, that is, in daily liturgical readings from Pascha through Pentecost. In addition, it is read in its entirety on the evening before the Sunday Pascha services begin. On the Sunday of Pascha, the Apostol reading during the Divine Liturgy consists of the first eight verses of Acts, setting the tone for the remainder of the liturgical readings for the season.

Reflecting on the apparent simplicity of Acts as a historical account, St. Jerome, in his fifty-third epistle, remarks on the hidden beauty of the book: "The Acts of the Apostles seem to relate a mere unvarnished narrative descriptive of the infancy of the newly born church;

but when once we realize that their author is Luke the physician whose praise is in the gospel, we shall see that all his words are medicine for the sick soul.”¹¹ Likewise, Blessed Theophylact of Ohrid pays special focus to the Resurrectional nature of the work, describing the overall purpose of Acts as “a demonstration and evidence of the resurrection.”¹²

V. Context of the passage within Scripture

Acts chapter 15 sits roughly at the mid-point of the book, just after we begin to see the narrative transition from a focus on St. Peter and his ministry in Jerusalem just after the Lord’s Ascension, to a focus on St. Paul and his missionary work abroad. As mentioned above, this is the last appearance of St. Peter in the narrative, forming a textual bridge that reflects the transition of the early work of the Apostles among the Jews to their later work among the nations.

As early as the Gospels, we begin to see conflict between Jesus and His followers and the Jewish authorities in matters pertaining to the Mosaic Law. Famously, in His discourse with the Pharisees regarding ritual washing (Mark 7:1–23), the Lord remarks that there is “nothing from without a man, that entering into him can defile him: but the things which come out of him, those are they that defile the man” (Mark 7:15). This apparent abrogation of the Law remains a point of contention throughout all four Gospels, particularly with reference to work on the Sabbath.

These laws stem from the commands given by God to the people of Israel by way of Moses, especially in the book of Leviticus. In Old Testament Judaism, the Law was given so that the Jews might have a means of emulating the holiness of God (Lev. 20:7–8), atoning for their sins (Lev. 1:1–7) and setting themselves apart from the other peoples of the fallen world of their habitation (Lev. 20:24–26). The ritual acts of the Law were not only part of the religion of the Jews, but indeed markers, even a shibboleth, that defined membership in the people of God and who could inherit salvation. Further, St. Paul himself explicitly describes later in Acts that the sect of the Pharisees, of which he was a member and the group from which those who began troubling the Gentile converts in this pericope emerged, were the strictest followers of these rules (Acts 26:5).

From the later Epistles of St. Paul, we see that the Judaiser heresy did not end, despite its formal and decisive condemnation at the Council of Jerusalem. In his Epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul explains in detail the error of those who promote the heresy, even going so far as to call them “false brethren” (Gal. 2:4). He further details an interaction he had with St. Peter, in which the former harshly scolded the latter for ending his practice of eating with Gentiles for fear of Judaisers who had come to Antioch from Jerusalem (Gal. 2:10–11).

VI. Patristic Understanding of the Text

In his second homily on the chapter, St. John focuses on St. James’ concluding remarks at the Council. Interestingly, Chrysostom here proffers a different interpretation about the prohibition against blood, stating that the prohibition refers to murder rather than to consumption of animal blood as food.¹³ This understanding seems to be at odds with that of other early Fathers: St. Clement and Origen both interpret this prohibition to consumption of blood as food.^{14, 15}

In his commentary on the pericope, the Venerable Bede, in discoursing about verse 16, plays upon the dual meaning of the Latin word *traditio*, meaning both “tradition” and “betrayal,” to describe the actions of the Pharisees who insist upon forcing harsh requirements on Gentile converts, in an apparent conflation of their demands with the sin of Judas.¹⁶

VII. Patristic Application of the Text

Although the Judaizing heresy was explicitly condemned by the Council of Jerusalem, and this condemnation is explicitly repeated in the epistles of St. Paul, we see that it did not cease to trouble Christian communities even to the time of the Nicene Fathers. In St. John Chrysostom’s so-called first “Homily Against the Jews,” preached in Antioch in 386 or 387, he explains that “[t]he greater portion of the city is Christian, yet some are still sick with the Judaizing disease.”¹⁷ In his second homily on the same subject, St. John engages in a detailed criticism and deconstruction of the heresy condemned in the pericope, saying that “those who wish to find justification from the Law will also fall from grace. They will not be able to enjoy the King’s loving-kindness because they are striving to gain salvation by their own efforts; they will draw down on themselves the curse of the Law because from the works of the Law no flesh will find justification.”¹⁸

Doubtless informed by his own familiarity with this heresy, St. John Chrysostom sermonises in great detail on the pericope in his 32nd, 33rd and 34th homilies on the Acts of the Apostles. In his first homily on Acts 15, Chrysostom uses the remarks of Sts. Peter and Paul at the Council as an example of the remarkable gentleness, but not indifference, to which all Christians should strive in their discourse.¹⁹

VIII. Contemporary Orthodox Interpretation

Modern Orthodox scholarly interpretations of Acts 15 tend to focus on the Council of Jerusalem as paradigmatic of future councils, and the conciliar nature of the Church herself. From this basis of understanding, Fr. Sergei Bulgakov comments that the Council of Jerusalem is not only a paradigm, but an ideal model of synergy between episcopal authority and laity. According to Bulgakov, the fact that later councils platformed only bishops is merely a practical accommodation to account for the immense geographical distribution of the Church in the following centuries, and that even in this model, the bishops can only be seen as representatives of the faithful and not rulers over them.²⁰

Professor Philip Kariatlis, Sub-Dean and Associate Professor of Theology at St. Andrew’s Greek Orthodox Theological College in Sydney, Australia, also emphasises the Council as the model of Orthodox synodality. However, he invests more power in the authority of the bishops, theoretically over and against that of the clergy and laity, writing that although councils must be adjudicated by bishops, it may be advisable to invite “presbyters and knowledgeable lay persons to contribute, yet without a vote.”²¹

Fr. Stephen De Young, an author and Ancient Faith Radio podcast host, comments on the tendency of some modern interpreters to understand Christ’s fulfillment of the Mosaic Law, as outlined explicitly at the Council, as a complete abrogation of the moral laws of the Torah. De Young goes on to write that, far from abrogating or subordinating the Law, the Apostles and Elders at the Council applied its core tenets very closely in the final decision. In

order to dwell with God's people, he writes, they need not become Israelites, but they must uphold the Holiness Code of Leviticus. He says that this understanding is reflected in Orthodox Church history throughout the ages, down to the present day.²²

IX. Protestant and Catholic Interpretations

Protestant commentary on Acts 15 tends to focus primarily on two things: the lack of necessity for ritual aspects of the Law, and the decentralised nature of the Early Church, especially perhaps with respect to the role of St. Peter in the proceedings.

The Presbyterian minister Matthew Henry, in his commentary on Acts, in reference to the decision of the Council, urges readers to "let not things foreign and circumstantial be upon [converts], which will but trouble them." He goes on to write that not only must ritual laws not be imposed, but that even those which the Apostles did levy upon Gentiles at the Council were chosen not because of intrinsic morality, but so as not to offend the Jews and cause scandal among them.²³

Regarding the role of St. Peter at the Council, Protestants and Orthodox will likely find a point of agreement. Remarking on the Apostle's part in the pericope, Henry writes that St. Peter did not "in the least pretend to any primacy or headship in this synod."²⁴

As might be expected, Roman Catholic commentators are likely to come to a divergent understanding of the text in this respect. The Roman Catholic Priest Charles Callan, in his commentary on the Acts, reframes the proceedings of the Council of Jerusalem to place St. Peter, rather than St. James, at its head. According to Callan, "Peter, as head of the Church, having heard both sides of the dispute, rises up to give the decision."²⁵

X. Application in Our Context

There are a few elements of the pericope that might have special relevance in our context as 21st-century Orthodox Christians.

Most of the chapter is read during the fifth week of Pascha, the liturgical season in which The Acts of the Apostles is the primary portion of the Apostol read liturgically. As we near the Feast of Pentecost, the birth of the Church, we are reminded of the growing pains of the nascent Christian movement and how we, like the Apostles, can and must relate to the world beyond our walls in truth and love. We are shown an example of the Church branching out, no longer being limited to an insular community of likeminded individuals sharing a cultural milieu, but being joined by people whom the existing power structures judge to be living undesirable lifestyles.

We can also use the example set forth in the pericope as a model for handling disagreements, both ecclesial and everyday. We see that the Apostles, in presenting their cases and making their decisions, did not shut out the Pharisees, but allowed them to speak and carefully considered their objections. These are not the actions of despotic leaders, but of wise shepherds.

Finally, the decision of the Council reminds us that for as much as we are liberated from the ritual obligations of the Mosaic Law, we must still fulfill the moral obligations of all Christians. Although the Law is fulfilled by Christ, it is not abolished (Matt. 5:17), for in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus elevates it beyond merely fulfilling the minimum moral

obligations to a call to Godly perfection (Matt. 5:48).

XI. Homily Outline

“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.” (Acts 15:5–6)

In this reading, we see the beginnings of a controversy affecting the very early Church. No sooner than the Christian community begins expanding, and new groups of people are being brought into the faith, we see followers of the old ways come into conflict with these fresh outsiders. Perhaps we have seen something similar happen in our own parish lives, amid the recent growth of Orthodox church communities. Although we rejoice along with the angels at every baptism, maybe we sometimes feel like the Pharisees in this chapter. Or maybe we feel like the converts, the Gentiles who seem to be facing an uphill battle in their search for God.

“Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.” (Acts 15:10–11)

Here we see the sect of the Pharisees make another appearance in the New Testament after the Gospel accounts. In the Gospels, this sect frequently comes up against Jesus and His Disciples, and many of the Lord’s seemingly harshest words of rebuke are directed against them. But we often fail to understand why Christ took such issue with them. A careful reading of the Gospels reveals the truth, and a common misconception.

Jesus does not rebuke the Pharisees for their strict adherence to the Mosaic Law. Quite the contrary, He instructs His Disciples to listen to and follow their teachings (Matt. 23:3). Rather, He takes issue with their hypocrisy, that is, their outward appearance of faithfulness while harbouring evil within. They follow the Law to the letter, or at least they appear to do so, but they miss the forest for the trees.

How many times have we done this? How many times have we, while ostensibly doing everything right, followed the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit? Have we fasted, but judged our brethren who have not? Have we crossed ourselves at the appointed times with an eye toward others who remain motionless?

“Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.” (Acts 15:19–20)

Here we see the proof that the steadfastness of the Pharisees was not their crime, for they did will to keep the Law, as must we. Like everything that is given us by God (the Church, the Sacraments, the Scriptures and the Saints), observance of the Law is, and never was, for Him, but for us. Although we need not bear the superficial burdens of the Law, we remain under its moral precepts. Here we must speak the truth in love; we do no one a service by telling him what is untrue. All things can be sanctified, except those things which are inherently evil.

Our culture today is inculcated with sexual immorality and growing demands to accept it, and even embrace it, in all its forms. We are told that if we do not, we are not loving. In an inversion of the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, we make the external evil into an outward virtue, identifying with sin and imputing acceptance of it as righteousness.

“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;” (Acts:15:28)

The Apostles reiterate that this decision is not theirs, first and foremost, but the work of the Holy Spirit in and through them. This is not men creating the rules of a man-made institution, as contemporary Protestant belief asserts. Nor do we see the subjects of a single universal hierarch powerlessly acquiescing to his decree, as Roman Catholic exegesis interprets it. Instead, we see the paradigm of conciliarity, a gathering of the faithful in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty, ultimately concluded by mutual respect and deference to the will of God.

This is a model for so many aspects of our lives. As much as it models the conciliar model of Church governance, it also models how we handle disputes and difficult realities in our personal lives. As St. John Chrysostom says, we should make our homes “little churches,” an icon of the mutual love of Christ for His Church and His Church for Him. We must always face the difficulties with prayer, patience and understanding, while always remaining resolute in the objective truth of God.

In this way, we can live by the words of St. Paul (Rom. 2:29), being circumcised in the heart, in the Spirit and not the letter, that our praise be not that of men, but of God.

Notes

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural quotations are from the King James Version.

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