

Acts 21:17-26, Paul in Jerusalem

The incident of Paul's final trip to Jerusalem is an interesting test case for his relationship to the Law not only because of his actions in the Temple but also because of the clarification which Luke makes between this and the decision of the Jerusalem Council. The question to be answered is "Was Paul forced by the situation to show loyalty to ancestral customs for the sake of expediency or were his actions a transparent demonstration of his theology?" We will attempt to answer this question by scrutinizing first the incident and then its interpretation.

The Incident

Two points are particularly important for understanding the incident: the beneficiaries of Paul's action and the nature of his vow.

The Beneficiaries of Paul's Action

As soon as Paul had finished giving his report about the salvation of many Gentiles on his third missionary journey and the brothers had responded with rejoicing (21:17-20a), James presented him with a serious problem of perception by the Jewish believers in the area: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law;" (21:20b). Although Jerusalem was famous for its rejection of Christianity and persecution of believers (Acts 7-8) Luke tells us that rejection was only half the story. In reality, many thousands of Jews in the Jerusalem area also accepted the truth of Messiah and sought to live for him. An issue which is critical to the understanding of this passage is the nature of this group. Were they a fanatical fringe or were they the mainstream of the church of Jerusalem?

Some would argue that the group of which James speaks is only a segment of the church in Judea, that in reality they are outside the mainstream because they are particularly (and perhaps overly) zealous of the Law.¹ Some would go further in assuming that this group is not only distinct from the

¹Marshall identifies the people, "These will have been the same people as the converted Pharisees in 15:5," Marshall, *Acts*, 343. Cf. also Bruce, *Acts*, 430, n. 33. Kistemaker goes even further in identifying these saying, "Multitudes of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and Judea strictly observed the law and expected all believers to do the same. They were like the Judaizers who opposed Paul and Barnabas at the conclusion of their first missionary journey to Cyprus and Asia Minor (15:1, 5)," Simon Kistemaker, *The Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book

average believer but that they also differ from the leadership.² That is, James and the elders were not zealous for the Law but encouraged Paul as they did in deference to some “weaker brethren” who were Torah observant.

In response it should be noted first that the identification of this group with the instigators of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1, 5) is without foundation and also confuses the issue. The subject and decision of the council involved the relationship of Gentiles to the Law, not Jews. The believers in this chapter were clearly only concerned with their own lifestyle and that of their Jewish brothers who lived outside the land (21:21, 25). To say that they “strictly observed the law and expected all believers to do the same”³ misrepresents the situation. Furthermore, the wording of the text indicates that the people of whom James speaks are not a sect or particular group. All that distinguished them was that they were Jewish believers as opposed to Gentile believers (21:25). Otherwise, James affirms of those who have believed “they are *all* zealous for the Law” (πάντες ζηλωταὶ⁴ τοῦ νόμου ὑπάρχουσιν, 21:20). Rather than being a fringe group, James speaks about the mainstream. Finally, Luke is clear that a difference does exist between the laity and the leadership, but it is not in their relationship to the Law; rather, it is their knowledge about the rumor concerning Paul. James and the elders *know* the rumor to be false but the people are not so sure. Because of Paul’s previous meetings with the leadership (Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15) they knew him personally and were convinced of his stand but because of his time spent outside of Palestine, as Paul admits, he was not well known by the Churches in Judea (Gal 1:22-24).⁵ The implication of James’ statement is that when Paul demonstrates his stand publicly “all will know” as we already know “that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you . . . (21:24).”

House, 1990), 758.

²In his comments on 21:20 Kistemaker says, “The word *brother* intimates that James and the elders consider Paul a brother in Christ. And they also distance themselves from those Jewish Christians who in their zeal have voided the decisions of the Jerusalem Council (15:19-21, 23-29),” Kistemaker, *Acts*, 758.

³Ibid.

⁴The word should be understood in a general sense of enthusiasm or passion for as Lake says “The word has no technical meaning. The ‘Zealots’ did not exist as a party with that name before A.D. 66,” Lake, *Beginnings*, 4:271.

⁵It is understood that the reference in Galatians refers to the time before Paul’s meeting with the “pillars” (Gal 2) and the Jerusalem council, but it is likely that these incidents did little to personally acquaint Paul with the “thousands” of believers of Judea.

Thus, Paul's actions should be understood as paradigmatic of his understanding of all Jewish believers rather than an anomaly by which he accommodated a fanatical party.

The Nature of Paul's Action

James' recommended action for Paul was to join in with four men who were in the process of a Nazirite vow and pay their expenses. The Nazirite vow involved a minimum time element of thirty days and its conclusion entailed the offering of financially substantial sacrifices.⁶ It was not uncommon for others to pay the expenses of the Nazirite and such support was considered a special act of piety.⁷ The confusing element is that Paul is encouraged to purify himself along with them which could not have been done in a mere seven days. Conzelmann objects: "ἀγνίσθητι κτλ., "purify, etc.," can only be understood as 'enter into the vow with them!' But that could not be done for a period of only seven days (vs 27). Luke has misunderstood a report here."⁸ Several possible explanations have been offered. It could be that Paul had previously taken a Nazirite vow and was now joining in with the four men to complete his.⁹ Or perhaps these men were being purified from some defilement (21:26) so that they could fulfill their vow in seven days and Paul's purification was that required from every Jew returning from the diaspora. Thus, Paul would be joining in with the men in his purification at the Temple, though technically he would not be fulfilling a Nazirite vow.¹⁰ Whatever the solution, the important point for this discussion is that Luke affirms that Paul was not simply a bystander who endorsed the actions of the four men but also a participant in ritual purification. The word used of James' recommendation (21:24) and Paul's action (21:26), ἀγνίζω, is defined and discussed by Hauck:

⁶The time element is specified by the Mishnah tractate *Nazir* vi. 6ff. The completion of the Nazirite vow involved the offering of a male lamb, a ewe lamb, a ram, a drink offering and various grain offerings (Num 6:14-15).

⁷Marshall, *Acts*, 345.

⁸Conzelmann, *Acts*, 180.

⁹Although Paul had evidently taken a temporary Nazirite vow before (Acts 18:18) this purification would not likely have been the fulfillment of it since that would have most likely been fulfilled upon his return to Jerusalem at the end of the second missionary journey (Acts 18:22).

¹⁰This is the view of Haenchen, *Acts*, 611ff. and Marshall, *Acts*, 345. Cf. also Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 65-67, for a fuller discussion. The resolution of the details are not pertinent for the purposes of this section.

The word means “to set in a state of cultic qualification.” . . . The ongoing participation of the primitive community in the temple cultus made observance of the traditional external cultic regulations unavoidable. In particular, visiting the temple after returning from the Gentile world demanded additional cultic purification.¹¹

Thus, Paul agreed to and implemented James’ recommendation that he make a manifest display of his participation in, and support of the ritual system of the Temple.

The Interpretation

The interpretation of this incident is in many ways a cameo of the entire problem of the “Lukan” and the “Pauline” Paul. Thus, Paul’s actions have traditionally been understood in one of two ways, as either inconsistent or expedient. As one who is not bound by loyalty to the inspiration of the text, Lake argues that Paul was simply inconsistent; he clearly taught one thing but in the heat of the moment contradicted those teachings by his actions. “According to Acts Paul accepted the compromise. Did he really accept it? His epistles are logically inconsistent with it, and before long Christian practice recognized this fact and followed the epistles.”¹² The more common evangelical position is that Paul was merely acting out of expedience. Although Paul felt that Jews no longer needed to obey the law, this did not prevent him from occasionally keeping the Law when convenient or helpful, and he did not actively teach Jews to abandon it.¹³ Support for the consistency of Paul’s action is almost universally marshalled from 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, although even one who does so admits that the situations are different. “The truth would seem to be that Paul was prepared to live as one ‘under the law’ to those who were under the law, although he did this primarily with a view to winning unconverted Jews rather

¹¹F. Hauck, “Αγνίζω,” *TDNT*, 1:123. He cites Str.-B vol. 2, 757ff. Furthermore, even before receiving James’ admonition Paul’s aim in coming to Jerusalem was to obey the law by presenting offerings (24:17 “Now after many years I came to bring alms to my nation, and offerings”). The word προσφοράς is not an appositive for “alms.” “In the NT προσφορά is used both for the Levitical offerings (Hb. 10:5 quoting ψ39:7; Hb. 10:18; Ac. 21:26; 24:17) and also for the sacrifice of Christ (Hb. 10:10, 14; Eph. 5:2),” K. Weiss, “φέρω,” *TDNT*, 9:68.

¹²Lake, *Beginnings*, 271. He continues “Yet human nature is so inconsistent, and especially in religious matters we cling to customs so long after we can justify them or wish to enforce them on others, and are so loath to break with a church of which we have inherited the traditions, that I am not sure that Paul may not have been much nearer the standard of custom implied by Acts than his own writings would indicate,” and “The sentimental power of tradition always affects men’s conduct in the practice of religion, and frequently overpowers logic,” *Ibid*.

¹³I believe this faithfully represents the positions of several including Marshall, *Acts*, 344; Kistemaker, *Acts*, 759; and Toussaint, “Acts,” 416.

than to pacifying Christian Jews.”¹⁴ Luke makes it clear within the text (21:20) that Paul’s action was not to conciliate and win unbelieving Jews but for believers.

Whatever the meaning of 1 Corinthians 9 may be,¹⁵ one thing which it can not mean is that Paul may deceive or lie.¹⁶ The careful wording of James’ recommendation is simply too explicit to allow that Paul was feigning obedience to the Law or giving mere temporary obedience to it when he felt the freedom to abandon it elsewhere. James’ counsel not only involves the negative, a denial of what he teaches (21:21), but also the positive, an affirmation of his own personal lifestyle (21:24).¹⁷ Paul’s purification at the Temple was designed to prove not only that he did not teach Jews to forsake Moses (21:21) but more importantly that he “he himself walked orderly and kept the Law” (21:24). The word translate “walk orderly,” στοιχέω was used in the military sense of “to be in rank” and is thus paraphrased in 21:24 as everyone “will see that you too are in the ranks as one who keeps the

¹⁴Marshall, *Acts*, 346.

¹⁵With reference to 1 Cor 9:19f. Wilson comments, “The degree to which this statement can be used to justify the ‘Jewishness’ of Paul in Acts is open to some dispute, but it is remarkable that Luke reveals only one side of Paul’s accommodation ‘for the sake of the gospel’, i.e. becoming a Jew to those who were Jews. Despite Luke’s interest in the Gentile mission and the central role Paul performs in it, there is not a single example in Acts of Paul behaving as a Gentile to those who were Gentiles, whether ‘for the sake of the gospel’ or for any other reason. Even when preaching to the Gentiles Paul behaves like a Jew,” Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 67-68. Wilson’s observations are duly noted to which we would like to offer an unsupported answer: it may be that Paul really was a Law-observant Jew and that Luke correctly and simply describes his consistent lifestyle. It may be that 1 Corinthians speaks of Paul’s style in presenting the message (certainly Paul’s motive within the passage of 1 Corinthians is evangelistic) rather than his personal lifestyle. That is, when in the synagogue Paul appealed to the Law and the prophets (Acts 17:17-18) but when on the Areopagus he related the gospel through pagan poets (Acts 17:19-34), becoming like one under the law to those under the law and becoming like one without the Law to those without the Law—without reference to how Paul lived. For a similar view cf. also H. L. Ellison, “Paul and the Law—‘All Things to All Men’” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays presented to F. F. Bruce on his 60th Birthday*, eds. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 195-202.

¹⁶After appealing to 1 Corinthians 9, Bruce says “A truly emancipated spirit such as Paul’s is not in bondage to its own emancipation,” Bruce, *Acts*, 431, but neither Bruce’s reference nor rhetoric can answer the demands of this situation.

¹⁷The text of 21:24b is explicit. First the contrast is emphasized between the falsehood and the truth “there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but (ἀλλὰ)” then the personal lifestyle is depicted, “that even you yourself (αὐτὸς) walk orderly, keeping the Law.”

law.”¹⁸ The word translated “keep,” φυλάσσω is also a strong word especially denoting the careful keeping of God’s commandments.¹⁹

James’ words describe a lifestyle which is consistent. What Paul was communicating by his actions was that his personal lifestyle was one of Law observance. By definition, one does not keep the Law part of the time. If a Jew kept the Law while he was in the presence of Jews but abandoned the Law when with Gentiles he was not a keeper of the Law but a breaker of the Law.²⁰ If this was not the case, none of the Jewish believers would have been convinced by Paul’s actions. Consistency is a necessary component of the concept of keeping the Law.

Although the text affirms that Paul joined in the vow in order to affirm his consistent Law observance, what it does not affirm is *why* Paul observed the Law in the first place. Did he “walk orderly and keep the Law” on a voluntary basis alone or because he felt it was the proper way for a Jewish believer to express his obedience to God? Although this text does not speak to the issue of motive we would suggest that the passage could accommodate the latter meaning. James’ parallels the necessity of Jews keeping the law with the necessity of Gentiles to keep the Apostolic decree (21:25).²¹ Paul *may* well have been acting, not merely out of expedience but out of conviction.

Conclusion

Paul’s actions in this incident were not inconsistent with his lifestyle at other times. And although his actions were at least expedient (for they apparently pacified the Jewish believers of

¹⁸G. Delling, “στοιχέω,” *TDNT*, 1:667-68.

¹⁹G. Bertram discusses the word in non-biblical Greek, “The verb φυλάσσω . . . comes from φύλαξ ‘watchman’ and denotes the activity or office of a watchman whose job is ‘to protect’ those who are asleep from harm during the night. It refers to deliberate and conscious ‘watching,’ ‘being on the alert,’ translated ‘to guard,’ . . . and takes on the sense ‘to protect,’ ‘to watch over,’ ‘to care for.’” In the LXX “φυλάσσω occurs often . . . in most of the meanings familiar from secular Greek, but it serves especially to express the divinely required attitude of man to the divine covenant, Ex. 19:5 etc., and to the cultic statutes, laws, commandments, admonitions and warnings; in this sense it becomes a technical term in the legal traditions from Ex. to Dt,” G. Bertram, “φυλάσσω,” *TDNT*, 9:236-40. Its usage in the New Testament corresponds to that in the Old.

²⁰Cf. Howard C. Kee, “After the Crucifixion—Christianity Through Paul,” *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, D. C.: Biblical Archeology Society, 1992), 109.

²¹Interestingly, the same word φυλάσσω, is used in Acts 16:4 concerning Paul’s dissemination of the Apostolic decree, “As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them *for observance* (φυλάσσειν) the decisions which had been reached by the apostles and elders who were at Jerusalem.”

Jerusalem) they may also have been done out of conviction. Clearly Luke saw no incompatibility between salvation by faith and continued observance of the Law by Jewish believers. The thousands of believers in Jerusalem are not reprimanded for their position and Paul displays his loyalty for them in as public a way as possible. Wilson summarizes some of Luke's perspective, particularly as it is found in this chapter:

It is made unquestionably clear that living according to the law ultimately has no bearing on the salvation of Jews or Gentiles. At the same time it is always implicit, and on one occasion explicit (Ac. 21), that there is no conflict for Jews between living according to the law, indeed doing so zealously, and being a Christian. As a means of expressing piety, as distinct from a means of achieving salvation, it is viewed in a wholly positive light.²²

Conclusion

Luke's story began in the Jewish capital and ended in the Gentile capital. Many hold that before that transition could occur the nation of Israel and/or her Law had to first be rejected. We have sought to show however that the Gentile mission was not launched at the expense of Israel but rather in harmony with God's dealings with the nation. We have surveyed four major incidents in the book and evaluated them in light of this theme (1) the martyrdom of Stephen (6:1-8:2), (2) the salvation of Cornelius (10:1-11:18), (3) the Jerusalem Council (15:1-16:3), and the purification of Paul (21:19-26).

The martyrdom of Stephen clearly represented the rejection by much of the leadership in Jerusalem of the message of the Church. The point of their objection, however was not the revolutionary new ideas espoused by Stephen, because his speech proclaimed fidelity to the Law and the Temple. The reaction of the crowd came from the martyr's fearless accusations that they were disobedient to the Law, had abused the Temple and had rejected the Messiah Jesus. Stephen's message was certainly not against the Law of the Jews, only against those who were disobedient to the Law. Stephen's death was a catalyst in the growth of the Church because of the persecution which physically scattered his fellow believers not because he preached a universal message which had superseded the Law and Temple.

The salvation of Cornelius records the addition of Gentiles to the Church, which was certainly in conflict with Jewish practice of the day but not with the Law. Peter understood the meaning

²²Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 102. "[Paul] has always kept the law and keeps it now, performing even more than the law requires (16:3; 18:18; 21:20-26; 22:3; 23:1-5; 24:11f., 14, 17, 18; 26:5; 28:17). All charges against Paul for breaking the law (21:21, 28; 28:18) are shown to be false," Jervell, *The Unknown Paul*, 120.

of the vision to be that no longer could any man be considered unclean rather than as the abrogation of the food laws of Leviticus. Neither Peter nor his fellow believers understood that the end of the Law was a necessary prerequisite to the salvation of Gentiles. Luke demonstrates that Peter, in obedience to the vision, freely associated with his new Gentile converts, but it does not teach that he ceased being Jewish in doing so.

The issue which was discussed at the Jerusalem council did not concern the Law *per se* but more particularly the relationship of Gentiles to the Law. It was decided that not only were Gentiles saved by grace just as Jews were but that the prophets also spoke of “God calling out of the Gentiles a people for his name.” Therefore, with the twin precedents of Peter’s miraculous witness of the conversion of Gentiles and the Scripture, it was decided that Gentiles were welcome as Gentiles along with believing Jews in the Church. They were only required to observe certain minimal regulations which the Law had always required of Gentiles who wished to live among the Jews.

During Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem he took the opportunity to publicly demonstrate his own unflinching loyalty the Law. He joined in the normal Temple purification procedures and paid for the sacrifices of men in a Nazirite vow in order to show that even when outside the land of Israel he always walked orderly and kept the Law.

In the last scenes of the book of Acts Luke is careful to record the rejection of the Jews in Rome. While it is true that many Jews believed not only in Rome but throughout the rest of the evangelized world, the reader is left with the impression that this response from individual Jews is insufficient. Paul’s condemnation of unbelieving Israelites has forbidding tones of finality (28:26-28) and the future of the corporate Jewish whole looks dim. But as bleak as the future looks for the nation, Luke stresses that the rejection of the Gospel by the Jews has not occurred because the Christian message was incomprehensible to them or antagonistic toward their traditions. “On the contrary, Jewish rejection occurred despite the fact that the Christian message was harmonious with Jewish religious traditions.”²³ Throughout the book Jewish Christians continued to faithfully observe the Law of Moses, seeing it as the proper expression of faith for the sons of Jacob who had trusted Messiah, and

²³Joseph B. Tyson, “The Problem of Jewish Rejection in Acts,” *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, ed. J. Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 130.

Gentiles were welcomed into the Church as Gentiles. The truths revealed in the book of Hebrews had not yet been given and were not a necessary prerequisite for the Gentile mission.