

Between Jerusalem and Antioch: The Advent of the Gentile Mission

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Abstract: *The primitive Christian movement was a diverse phenomenon – all the more so with the advent of the missionary outreach to the Gentiles. Our earliest and most direct evidence for the origins of the Gentile mission is derived from the letters of Paul, which, however, tell us little of events that transpired prior to his conversion (c. 34 CE) and association with the Christians in Antioch. Our only significant source of information on the pre-Pauline period is the initial eleven chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, and therein lays certain problems. It is widely recognised that the data supplied by Luke in Acts is late and secondary and generally accepted that Luke has woven together disparate and conflicting traditions to present an artificially idyllic picture of primitive Christianity. Close, critical attention is necessary if we are to tease out the genuine historical reminiscence from the tapestry of the Lukan narrative.*

Key Words: Gentile mission; Antioch; Christian Hellenism; New Testament history; Bible N.T. Luke-Acts; Bible N.T. Paul's letters

THE CONVERSION OF CORNELIUS

One account of the advent of the Gentile mission is given to us in Acts 10:1-11:18, which describes Peter's conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion of the Italian Cohort stationed at Caesarea. Luke reports how Peter, during a missionary tour of the coastal towns of Lydda and Joppa (9:32-43; 10:9), accepts an invitation of hospitality from the household of Cornelius, whom he subsequently visits (10:24-28), evangelises (10:34-43) and, following a spontaneous outpouring of the Spirit, baptises (10:44-48). Returning to Jerusalem, Peter is forced to justify his behaviour by recounting the miraculous events that led to Cornelius' conversion (11:1-18). On hearing Peter's defence, his erstwhile detractors conclude: 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life' (11:18). Similarly when Paul and Barnabas travel from Antioch to Jerusalem to consult with the apostolic authorities there, Peter again appeals to his experience with Cornelius to support the legitimacy of the Gentile mission at Antioch (15:7-13). This threefold recounting emphasises that what is being reported here with the Cornelius incident is not just another conversion story, but the very origins of the Law-free mission to the Gentiles – a subject that will dominate the subsequent chapters of Luke's story. However, the consensus opinion held by commentators on Acts is that the Cornelius story can hardly be historical, at least in present form.¹

¹ See, for example: E. Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*, trans. B. Noble and G. Shin (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 357-63; H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on Acts of the Apostles*,

It has often noted that the Cornelius episode is replete with numerous literary features and legendary motifs that are unique to Luke. F. Watson, who is prepared to dismiss the story as a clear Lukan creation on this basis alone, has catalogued several of these traits.² First, there is the figure of Cornelius who is but one of a series of devout centurions populating the pages of Luke (7:1-10; 23:47) and Acts (27:1-3, 30-32, 42-44); testament to Luke's concern to demonstrate the generally favourable attitude of the Roman authorities to the new Christian movement. Second, the motif of divine guidance given through the agency of angels and visions is also typical of Luke (Lk 1:11-20, 26-38; 2:9-14; 24:2-7; Acts 1:10-11; 5:19-20; 7:55-56; 8:26; 9:3-6, 10-12; 12:7-11; 16:9-10; 18:9-10; 23:11; 27:23-24). Finally, the description of the descent of the Spirit on Cornelius and his household and their subsequent gift of glossolalia is clearly composed to mirror the reports of the events of Pentecost and similar outpourings of the Spirit in Acts (2:1-13; cf. 4:31; 8:14-17; 19:1-7). These considerations force us to conclude that the Cornelius episode is a Lukan literary construct.

Still it could be argued that despite Luke's creative work, the story of Cornelius' conversion may contain some reliable historical information. Luke may have exaggerated, embellished, and conflated earlier traditions concerning Peter's vision and the conversions of certain individual Gentiles who joined the movement in its initial phase – that is, in the period prior to the advent of the large-scale mission to the Gentiles.³ After all, Cornelius is described in terms reminiscent of a God-fearer (10:2, 22) which, as we saw in the Introduction, refers to that category of Gentiles who had attached themselves to the Jewish synagogue and adopted some Jewish customs and faith-practices. It may be reasonable to assume that many if not all the earliest Gentile converts to Christianity were probably either proselytes to Judaism or God-fearers. As individuals with a pre-existing affinity for Judaism and an established relationship with Jewish synagogues, they were the most likely candidates for any mission amongst the Gentiles. Moreover, C. C. Hill makes the point that nowhere in Acts 10:1-11:18 does Luke say that Cornelius and his family joined the community in Jerusalem.⁴ Cornelius, like other individual Gentiles who converted to the Jesus movement in its initial stages, were seen as exceptional cases that posed no more threat to the essential Jewish character of the movement than they did formally as God-fearers and proselytes attached to the Jewish synagogues.

There are certain problems with this proposal. First, it is important to note that Peter accepts Cornelius into the movement without first insisting that he and the other male members of his household submit to circumcision. The whole thrust of the Lukan account of Peter's vision and the miraculous outpouring of the Spirit on the Gentile

trans. J. Limburgh (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 78-86; G. Lüdemann, *Early Christianity according to the Traditions in Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 124-33; and P. F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lukan Theology*, SNTSMS 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 95-97.

² F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, SNTSMS 56 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 23-25.

³ This is the view taken by M. Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 121-22. His arguments are rehearsed anew by S. G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, SNTSMS 23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 172-73 and Conzelmann, *Acts*, 80. Others who accept that the Cornelius story contains a kernel of historical truth include M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, trans. J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1979), 92-98; Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 132-33; J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 72-73, 125; C. C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews: Reappraising Division within the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 122-25; and C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994, 1998), 1:496-98, 535.

⁴ Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews*, 123. See also Dunn, *Partings*, 125.

converts, as well as Peter's later problems with the circumcised brothers of Judea, serves to stress this point. Moreover, as we noted above, Luke's purpose is not just to note the extraordinary character of this event, but to signal the initiation of the Law-free Gentile mission *per se*. Cornelius is presented by Luke, not as the exception to the Jerusalem's current Law-observant polity, but as the first instance of a new Law-free policy on the part of the Jerusalem church with regard to the Gentile converts (Acts 11:18; cf. 15:7-11), which will later be ratified at the Jerusalem council (15:13-29).

Second, Luke's take on the Cornelius story seems incredible, especially in the light of what Luke has told us previously of the constituency and faith-practice of the earliest apostolic community.⁵ At the outset of Acts the constituents of the community are described as chosen apostles (1:2) and 'men of Galilee' (1:11) who looked to Jesus as their risen Lord and Messiah (2:36; 5:23), as the one who was to restore the kingdom to Israel (1:6; 2:38-39; 3:21). This description is confirmed by Paul who indicates that the first followers of Jesus saw Jesus' resurrection as a vindication of Jesus' messianic status (Rom 1:3-4), the first fruit of the general resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 6:14; 15:12-23; 1 Thess 4:13-18; Rom 8:11), which would signal the start of the eschatological reign of God (1 Cor 15:23-28).⁶ While parallels could be drawn between this description of the Jerusalem church and the Qumran Covenanters, the Jerusalem church differed in many respects from the constituents of the Qumran community. Most importantly, they were not as stridently sectarian. The Christian Jews at Jerusalem saw no need to separate themselves from the wider Jewish society. Nor did they see themselves, like the Qumran Covenanters, as a priestly community established as an alternative to the corrupted temple-cult in Jerusalem. From the end of his Gospel and on throughout Acts, the picture Luke consistently paints of the earliest constituency of the Jerusalem church as a Jewish group who saw no conflict between their devotion to Jesus Messiah and their status as devout Jews; that is, as faithful adherents to Temple and the Torah (Lk. 24:53; Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:42; 10:14, 28, 45; 11:1-18; 15:1, 5; 21:23-24).

Acts explicitly depicts members of the Jerusalem community like Peter and John as going frequently, or even daily, to the Temple to pray at the traditional hours set aside for the morning and evening sacrificial services (2:46; 3:1; 5:12, 21; cf. Ps. 141:2; Lk. 1:10; 24:53).⁷ Acts 6:7 tells us that 'a large number of priests' joined the roster of the Jerusalem church. One prominent member of the congregation, the Joseph Barnabas who will later play a significant role at Antioch, is described as a Levite (4:36). But there is no indication that these priests and Levites exercised a sacerdotal function within the Jerusalem community.⁸ Nor is there any suggestion that the Twelve adopted a priestly role with regard to the rest of the believers.⁹

⁵ I have dealt with this issue in greater depth elsewhere. See upcoming article 'The Two Ways: A Diversity of Spiritualities in the Earliest Jerusalem Church' in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, Vol. 4 (to be published 2006).

⁶ J. D. G. Dunn correctly observes that Paul, writing twenty years after the events described in Acts 1-5, can hardly have created *de novo* this belief in an imminent eschaton – J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, 2nd ed., (London: SCM Press, 1990), 323.

⁷ See the detailed discussion in D. K. Falk, "Jewish Prayer Literature and the Jerusalem Church in Acts," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Vol 4: The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). Also Haenchen, *Acts*, 213-24; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B. C. - A. D. 135)*, trans. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Goodman (vol. 3), 2nd ed., 3 vols., (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1973-87), 2:302-7; Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 25-49; and Dunn, *Partings*, 57-60.

⁸ Whether these priests were functionaries of the Jerusalem Temple, members of the Essenes, or both cannot be determined. See Haenchen, *Acts*, 2169; D. A. Fiensy, "Composition of the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Vol. 4: The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. R. Bauckham (Grand

Acts (4:1-22; 5:20-21) records two instances of conflict, where members of the apostolic circle are arrested, imprisoned, questioned, and in the second episode flogged (5:40) at the instigation of the Sadducean party in the Sanhedrin. In 1 Thessalonians (2:14), Paul confirms that the churches in Judea did suffer mistreatment from the 'Jews'. Still, there is no indication that these instances of mistreatment were anything more than isolated events.¹⁰ More to the point, there is no evidence in the account of either event in Acts that the members of the church were censured because they had gone beyond the limits of acceptable Jewish practice and questioned the validity of the temple cult or the Mosaic Law. In Acts 1-5 Luke stresses the community's continued allegiance to the Temple and, later, in Acts 11:1-18 he signals that the Jerusalem congregation also remained faithful to the precepts of the Law. Moreover, the Jerusalem church survived and flourished for four decades, up until the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE.), which can only be explained if we conclude that any persecution the community suffered was relatively minor and infrequent. The best explanation for this is that the constituents of the first community of believers in Jesus Messiah remained throughout the life of their congregation in Jerusalem manifestly loyal and Law-observant Jews. If this picture of the Law-observant Jerusalem community is correct, then we must assume that any change of policy that allowed the admission of uncircumcised Gentiles would have been unthinkable.

To pursue this issue further, even more incredible than assigning the advent of the Gentile mission to the original members of the Jerusalem community is the fact that Luke elects Peter as the primary advocate for this change of policy. Any line of argument that credits Peter with initiating a mission to the Gentiles, or even playing a part in admitting individual, uncircumcised Gentiles to the movement, seems unlikely when we consider all that we know of Peter and the Jerusalem church in both Acts and the letters of Paul. Most importantly, the notion that Peter would have taken the revolutionary step of admitting an uncircumcised Gentile to the movement stands in contradiction to the primary evidence of Paul in Galatians (2:1-10). While Paul admits that Peter and the other 'pillars' James and John were not opposed to the Gentile mission, he mentions nothing of Peter's prior engagement with that mission. In point of fact, Paul asserts that it was widely accepted that Peter was commissioned to exercise his apostolic ministry exclusively amongst the Jews (2:7-8). The import of this statement cannot be blunted even if we contend that Luke has simply placed the Cornelius story too early in the chronology of events, prior to rather than after the apostolic council.¹¹ There is no indication in Galatians (2:1-10) that, as result of Paul's consultation with the pillars at Jerusalem, there was to be any modification of procedure in the future. Paul seems to have understood the agreement forged at Jerusalem in terms of a strict demarcation of the mission field. He would go to the Gentiles, while Peter and by extension the Jerusalem church would continue as before to focus on the Jews in Palestine. Any attempt to argue for an historical core to the Cornelius story by affirming a role for Peter in the Gentile mission, albeit limited, ultimately

Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 213-36; and O. Cullmann, "The Significance of the Qumran Texts for Research into the Beginnings of Christianity," *JBL* 74 (1955): 213-26.

⁹ Dunn, *Partings*, 59.

¹⁰ See discussion in Haenchen, *Acts*, 213-24. See also Conzelmann, *Acts*, 31-34, 40-43; Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 55-60; and Dunn, *Partings*, 57-60.

¹¹ As argued by J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 100.

flounders on the evidence in Galatians 2:1-10.¹² We can only concur with the conclusion of F. Watson that Luke has probably created the Cornelius story *de novo*. Moreover, it is likely that Luke inserted it into the narrative at this point to vindicate the Gentile mission by bringing it under the apostolic authority of Peter and the Jerusalem church, rather than attributing it to the questionable authority of Paul or, more importantly at this stage, the Hellenists.¹³

THE HELLENISTS IN ANTIOCH

Luke provides an alternative and much more plausible explanation of the origins of the Law-free mission to the Gentiles in his subsequent narrative on Antioch (Acts 11:19-16).¹⁴ At this point (11:19) Luke again picks up the thread of the Hellenists story-cycle. Earlier, Luke reported how the Hellenists, who were Greek-speaking Jewish converts to the movement, had clashed with the Hebrews, the Aramaic-speaking members of the Jerusalem Church over charitable distributions (Acts 6:1-6), resulting in the appointment of seven Hellenist leaders – Stephen, Phillip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas – as a sort of oversight committee to control the common purse (6:3-6).¹⁵ Despite the innocuous tenor of this conflict and the amicable nature of its resolution, the account of this contest serves to introduce a series of further controversies and dramatic developments. Stephen embarks on a ministry of preaching amongst the other Diaspora Jews in Jerusalem, resulting in his trial and execution on the charges of apostasy and blasphemy (6:8-8:1). His circle of supporters amongst the Hellenists are subsequently persecuted and dispersed (8:1-4), and Philip carries the Christian message to Samaria (8:4-40). At this point in his story, describes how those who had been scattered following the death of Stephen carried the Christian message as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Syrian Antioch (11:19). In the ensuing verse, he relates that in Antioch the Hellenists focused initially on the Jewish community. But certain men from Cyprus and Cyrene eventually took the next step and approached the ‘Greeks’ (11:20).

The term Luke uses here is rendered in some manuscripts as ἑλληνοισταί (Hellenists), rather than Ἕλληνας (Greeks or Gentiles). However, given that Luke uses this term in contrast to the ‘Jews’ we must assume that it is Gentiles he has in view.¹⁶ The implication here is that this was the first time that the Christian message was addressed to Gentiles.

¹² So noted by Haenchen, *Acts*, 361; Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, 23; Esler, *Community and Gospel*, 95-96; and D. C. Sim, *The Gospel of Matthew and Christian Judaism: The History and Social Setting of the Matthean Community*, (SNTW Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 89.

¹³ Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, 25. See also Haenchen, *Acts*, 360.

¹⁴ Some scholars argue that the Hellenists initiated the Gentile Mission prior to their expulsion from Jerusalem; see Esler, *Community and Gospel*, 157-59 and H Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and the Torah: Collected Essays*, (JSNTSS 43 Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 186-68. However, a close reading of the Lukan narrative suggests that the Hellenists had not previously approached the Gentiles, either during their time in Jerusalem or in the initial stages of their missions beyond the city. Luke makes no mention of a Gentile mission in Jerusalem or Palestine, and that is what we might expect. For surely, the Law-free mission to non-Jews would have only developed later, when the dispersed Hellenists embarked on their missions in the more culturally mixed environments of Syria, Phoenicia, and Cyprus.

¹⁵ According to the scholarly consensus, the designations ἑλληνοισταί and ἑβραίοι need mean no more than ‘Greek speakers’ and ‘Aramaic speakers’ respectively; a view that dates back to John Chrysostom (Hom. 11, 14, 21). See C. F. D. Moule, "Once More, Who Were the Hellenists?," *ExpTim* 90 (1978). See also Haenchen, *Acts*, 259-61; M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, trans. J. Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1983), 4-11; and Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews*, 22-24.

¹⁶ See further Haenchen, *Acts*, 365 n. 5. Also Conzelmann, *Acts*, 87; Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 134; Barrett, *Acts*, 1:550-51; and L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (SPS 5 Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 203.

This clearly contradicts his previous account of the conversion of Cornelius and probably, therefore, indicates that Luke has drawn this information from an independent source. If we are correct in arguing that the entire Cornelius story is a creation of Luke, then it is likely that this source was a reliable one.¹⁷ Several additional points speak in favour of this view.

For one, Luke earlier presentation of the Hellenists (Acts 6:1-8:39) suggests that they were much more liberal in their attitudes to the Law. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that in consideration of the earlier presentation of the Hellenists as holding liberal views regarding the Temple and the Torah it would be they who would take the radical step of approaching the Gentiles. For another, while Luke does not specifically name those who first initiated this outreach, we might plausibly speculate that Nicolaus, the proselyte from Antioch and one of the Seven named in Acts 6:5 as a leader of the Hellenists, played some role in this mission.¹⁸ One name that is specifically linked with the Antiochene mission is Joseph Barnabas mission (11:22-26, 30; 13:1; 15:2-4) who was mentioned twice previously as a prominent member of the Jerusalem community (4:36-37; 9:27). There remains some contention regarding the manner in which Barnabas came to be involved in the affairs of the church at Antioch. According to Acts 11:22-23, Barnabas traveled to Antioch as an envoy of the Jerusalem church to offer support and encouragement to the fledgling community. Scholars have rightly regarded this information as a pure Lukan device, intended as yet one more attempt to secure the continuity between the apostolic community in Jerusalem and the latter missions of the early Church.¹⁹ As a Greek-speaking Cypriot, Barnabas was probably once a member of the Hellenist faction in Jerusalem who, when the split between the Hebrews and Hellenists first occurred, sided with the Hebrews. With the failure of Peter and John in Samaria, the authorities in Jerusalem may have felt that Barnabas, as a former colleague of the Hellenist ringleaders at Antioch, would have more success in stemming the rising tide of the Law-free Hellenist mission as it gained further ground in Syria.²⁰ Luke implies that this strategy fared no better than the Samaritan gambit. Barnabas, apparently impressed by the success of the Gentile mission, promptly joined the Antiochene community and quickly became one of the foremost figures in the Gentile mission (13:1; 15:2-4). In view of these considerations, it would appear that Luke is correct; former members of the Hellenists

¹⁷ In the past, scholars have proposed that behind the initial chapters of Acts lie two sources: (a) a Jerusalem-Caesarea source behind Acts 3:1-5:16; 8:5-40; 9:31-11:18; 12:1-23, supplemented by certain legendary components (2:1-41; 5:17-42); and (b) an Antiochene-Jerusalem source focusing on the Hellenists story cycle (6:1-8:4; 11:19-30) and the events surrounding the Jerusalem council (12:25-15:35). This theory was first suggested by A. Harnack, *New Testament Studies III: The Acts of the Apostles*, trans. J. R. Wilkinson, (CTL 27 London: Williams & Newgate, 1909), 162-202, and has been retained and modified by subsequent commentators; see discussion in Haenchen, *Acts*, 14-50, 81-90; Hengel, *Acts*, 65-66; and Conzelmann, *Acts*, xxxvi-viii. Recent trends in the scholarship have tended to stress Luke's creative use of source material without directly attempting to reconstruct that material, appealing to the extreme difficulties presented by the lack of any similar extant sources on the pre-Pauline period. The consensus appears to be that whatever Luke had was probably no more than fragmentary and anecdotal – see Hengel, *Acts*, 61-62; R. J. Dillon, "Acts of the Apostles," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 722-67; and Johnson, *Acts*, 3-4. Still, most commentators on Acts agree that with regard to the advent of the Gentile mission in Antioch Luke was in possession of some reliable information – see eg. Haenchen, *Acts*, 371; Hengel, *Acts*, 99-100; Conzelmann, *Acts*, 87; and Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 136.

¹⁸ W. A. Meeks and R. L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*, (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978), 14.

¹⁹ Haenchen, *Acts*, 370-71. See also G. Bornkamm, *Paul*, (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1975), 29-30; Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians*, 14-15; and G. Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 2 vols., (HTKNT Freiburg: Herder, 1980, 1982), 1:354.

²⁰ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 74-75.

from Jerusalem did establish the community in Antioch and were responsible for initiating at Antioch the first large-scale missionary outreach to the Gentiles.

It may be pertinent at this point to consider Paul's association with the church in Antioch. Paul is notably circumspect about his early association with the Antiochene community. In Galatians (1:11-17), he attributes both the content of the Law-free gospel he preached among the nations and the commission to preach it to a 'revelation from Jesus Christ', which he did not receive via any human agency (1:11-12). One might be forgiven for imagining that Paul is here claiming sole responsibility for the advent of the Gentile mission. A recent trend in the study of Paul has stressed that Paul never speaks of his revelatory experience as a conversion to new community of faith *per se*, but rather as a call or a commissioning to be the apostle to the Gentiles.²¹ F. Watson argues that behind Paul's claims for the import of his revelation lies the historical reality that it was Paul (in the company of Barnabas) who first initiated the mission to the Gentiles.²² In Watson's view Paul began first as an unsuccessful Christian missionary among the Jews who, in response to his failure and in the cause of missionary expediency, turned to the Gentiles in Antioch. But this reconstruction of events can only be sustained by denying the historicity of the entire Hellenists story cycle, a move that lacks any solid, logical justification. Luke's redaction of the material on the Hellenists does present certain exegetical problems, but there seems no reason to reject this entire section of the story as pure fabrication. To do so, raises a number of additional problems and questions.²³

First, it is not entirely clear that from the very outset Paul understood the nature of his revelation as a specific vocation to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Nowhere in his letters does Paul explicitly describe the exact nature of the revelation he received. We know only that it was an experience of the Son accorded to him by the Father (Gal 1:16), in which he 'saw Jesus the Lord' (1 Cor 9:1). Paul equates this experience with that of the post-resurrection Christophanies granted to the official witnesses, suggesting that the only difference between his vision and theirs was that his vision took place much later (1 Cor 15:5-8). Luke claims (Acts 9:3; 22:6; 26:12) and Paul implies (Gal 1:17c; cf. 2 Cor 11:32-33) that the incident occurred near Damascus.²⁴ Both situate the episode within the context of Paul's pursuit and persecution of the infant Church (Gal 1:13-16; Acts 9:1-2; 22:4-5; 26:11-12). Therefore we must assume that it was in Damascus that he became acquainted with the Christian gospel, and more specifically with the Law-free version of the Gospel propagated by the Hellenists who had fled there following Stephen's martyrdom. Only that form of the Christian message would have incited a Law-abiding Jew like Paul to persecute the Christian community and thus, his revelation diverted him from the path of persecution of the Law-free mission onto the path of propagation.²⁵

²¹ So W. D. Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," *NTS* 24 (1977-78). See also J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, (London: SCM Press, 1977), 11-35 and K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, (London: SCM Press, 1977), 1-23.

²² Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, 28-38.

²³ Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and Torah*, 151-58 and W. P. Bowers, "Mission," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 611.

²⁴ Paul says that after his revelation he withdrew to Arabia (1:17b) and then later 'returned' to Damascus (1:17c) – the verb 'returned' (ὑπέστρεψα) implies that the former revelation occurred in or near Damascus.

²⁵ This view has been consistently maintained by J. D. G. Dunn in a series of recent publications. See J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1990), 251-66; Dunn, *Partings*, 119-22; J. D. G. Dunn, "Paul's Conversion - A Light to Twentieth Century Disputes," in *Evangelium, Schriftauslegung, Kirche. P. Stuhlmacher Festschrift*, ed. J. Ådna, S. J. Hafemann, and O. Hofius (Göttingen: Vanderhoek & Ruprecht, 1997); and J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 352. According to Dunn's thesis, Paul persecuted the Hellenists, not because they

Second, it is quite clear from Galatians that Paul's association with any other form of the Christian movement was extremely limited. Even by his own admission it was not until three years after his call that he made his way to Jerusalem to consult with those who were apostles before him (Gal 1:18). Following this, he went to Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:21), and it was probably at this time that he joined the community in Antioch. He did not return to Jerusalem until fourteen years later (Gal 2:1). During the intervening years he seems to have exercised his ministry in Antioch, where he quickly became a leading member of that community. But the evidence in Acts suggests that Paul's initial role was inferior to that of Barnabas and others, such as Simeon Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen (Acts 13:1), who were already involved in a vigorous and successful Law-free mission to the Jewish and Gentile citizens of Antioch.²⁶ In the traditional list of the prophets and teachers who constituted the leadership at Antioch in Acts 13:1, Paul's name appears last. When Acts (13:1-14:26) has the church in Antioch embark on a mission to expand the scope of the Law-free Gentile mission into Cyprus and Asia Minor, Barnabas is named before Paul as the head of the embassy (13:2; cf. 13:7). Thus, as H. Räisänen rightly contends, both Acts and the letters of Paul indicate that it was during and probably as a result of Paul's affiliation with the Hellenists' mission in Antioch that Paul worked out the full implication of his 'call' to preach the gospel among the Gentiles.²⁷

So what was Paul's relationship with Barnabas at Antioch? Acts (11:25-26) credits Barnabas with having sought out Paul in Tarsus to enlist his help with the Gentile mission at Antioch. While some scholars are prepared to accept the veracity of this information, it must be seen that the historicity of this episode depends heavily upon the historical worth of Barnabas' earlier association with Paul at Jerusalem in Acts 9:26-30.²⁸ In that prior episode (9:27) Barnabas is seen as the only member of the Jerusalem church to offer his assistance and encouragement to the newly converted Saul (Paul), introducing Saul (Paul) to the Apostles and supporting Saul's cause. The story serves not only to present Barnabas as the champion of the newly converted Paul (9:27), but also to explain how Paul was forced to escape to Tarsus following a series of disputes with, and threats made on his life by, certain Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem (9:29-30). But this entire episode conflicts with Paul's own statements in Galatians (1:16-24) regarding his initial career in the Jesus movement, which says nothing of any association with Barnabas or of any

proclaimed Jesus as Messiah, but because they accepted Gentiles without requiring circumcision, which he perceived to be a serious threat to 'Israel's integrity and purity' ('Paul's Conversion,' 90). Thus, the 'immediate' and 'primary feature' of Paul's conversion was his call to the Gentile mission. Paul's understanding of what his Gentile mission meant in terms of its 'the implications for the law and its bearing on the Gospel' was only a 'corollary,' which was 'worked out with increasing sharpness over the early years of his work as a missionary to the church in Antioch' (*Jesus, Paul and the Law*, 92).

²⁶ Haenchen, *Acts*, 370.

²⁷ H. Räisänen, "Paul's Conversion and the Development of His View of the Law," *NTS* 37 (1987); cf. also H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 251-63; and Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and Torah*, 288-95. A similar view has been expressed by Dunn (see n. 60 above). Recently, S. Kim has criticised Dunn's view for separating (in chronological terms) Paul's call to be a missionary amongst the Gentiles from Paul's antinomian theology, especially in regard to the 'works of the law' as Dunn defines them – see S. Kim, *Paul and the New Perspective: Second Thoughts on the Origin of Paul's Gospel*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1-84. However, Kim also accepts Dunn's view that 'Paul learned of Jesus' teaching and ministry ("Jesus-tradition"), especially "his disregard for the rules of the covenant" (Mark 2:15-17; Matt 11:9/Luke 7:34) and his teaching critical of the food laws as Pharisaically interpreted (Mark 7:1-23/Matt 15:1-20), as they were directly relevant to the gentile mission which the Hellenists were pursuing and he had been opposing' (*Paul and the New Perspective*, 43; cf. Dunn, *Jesus*, 92, 101).

²⁸ Scholars who accept the historicity of this episode include Hengel, *Acts*, 101-2; B. Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles*, CBNTS 11 (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978), 63; and J. C. Beker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1993), 85.

attempt on his part to join the apostolic mission in Jerusalem.²⁹ In view of Paul's silence, it seems difficult to maintain that either Acts 9:26-30 or Acts 11:25-26 represents solid historical information.

J. Painter is doubtless correct in dismissing these episodes as yet another attempt by Luke to gloss over the ongoing dispute between the Hebrews and the Hellenists.³⁰ By having Paul join the work of the Hellenists at Antioch only at the request of Barnabas acting as the representative of the Jerusalem church, Luke both distances Paul from the Hellenists and averts any notion of a sustained conflict between the leaders of the churches in Jerusalem and Antioch. The more likely scenario is that Barnabas and Paul met when Paul made his way independently to Antioch following his visit to Cephas (Peter) in the year 36 CE when, as Paul himself states, he went to Syria and Cilicia (Gal 1:21). Moreover, it was in Antioch that Barnabas and Paul became both fast friends and convinced allies of the Gentile mission initiated by the Hellenists.³¹ Paul did not return to Jerusalem until fourteen years later (Gal 2:1). During the intervening years he seems to have exercised his ministry in Antioch, where he quickly became a prominent figure and a leading proponent of the law-free mission to the Gentiles.

The notion that the Hellenists' mission to the Gentiles was Law-free is given credence by Acts 11:26, which relates that it was at Antioch that the followers of Jesus first became known as Christians. É. Trocmé observes that Χριστιανός is a political term (Latin suffix *-ianos*) that may have been used in a derisory fashion ('supporters of the oiled one'), and thus indicates a first contact with pagans who, lacking any biblical background, did not fully comprehend the Jewish roots of the term Χριστός.³² As such, the popular recognition of the movement in Antioch as 'followers of the Χριστός' is significant. It testifies both to the success of the Gentile mission in Antioch and its emergence as an innovative religious movement that was considered by the wider, multicultural society in Antioch as independent of its Jewish origins. It is unlikely that such a designation would have been devised earlier in Jerusalem. As Aramaic-speaking, Law-observant followers of Jesus the Messiah from Nazareth, the initial membership of the Jerusalem community would have been perceived as no more than another Jewish sect (24:14; 28:22; cf. 5:17; 15:5). Perhaps amongst their fellow Jews the Christian-Jews at Jerusalem were even known commonly as the 'Sect of the Nazarene', as Luke suggests in Acts 24:5. It is only later, when the Hellenists had severed their attachment to the Torah, and initiated a vigorous and successful Law-free mission amongst both Jews and Gentiles in the predominantly pagan city of Antioch, that such a term could arise. No longer were the Hellenists perceived as mere Jewish apostates – as happened in Jerusalem, leading to Stephen's tragic death and the persecution of his circle of supporters. But with the addition of their Gentile converts at Antioch, they came to be seen increasingly as the tradents of an entirely new religious tradition in which the established boundary markers distinguishing Jew from Gentile (circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the dietary and purity proscriptions of the Torah) were completely abolished.

²⁹ Haenchen, *Acts*, 335. See, also, Lüdemann, *Early Christianity*, 117-19 and J. Painter, *Just James: The Brother of Jesus in History and Tradition*, SPNT (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 46-48.

³⁰ Painter, *Just James*, 46. A similar observation is made by Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 2:88, 91-92.

³¹ Sim, *Matthew and Christian Judaism*, 76.

³² É. Trocmé, *The Childhood of Christianity*, trans. J. Bowden, (London: SCM Press, 1997), 32. See also P. Zingg, *Das Wachsen der Kirche*, OBO 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 217-22; Meeks and Wilken, *Jews and Christians*, 15-16, 18; and Dunn, *Partings*, 73.

It is at this point that we can properly speak of two distinct and independent movements within the primitive Church. On the one hand, we have a Law-Observant Christian Judaism persisting in Jerusalem following the expulsion of the Hellenists, and on the other, a Law-Free Christianity developing in Antioch under the aegis of the Hellenist refugees who fled north in the wake of Stephen's martyrdom. With the defection of Barnabas, the conversion of its once zealous persecutor Paul, and the continuing success of the Law-free mission to the Gentiles in Antioch, the battle lines between the Law-free Christians and their Law-observant, Christian-Jewish opponents were now clearly drawn and further skirmishes were soon to break out.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

It is difficult to determine why the Hellenistic members of the Jesus movement embraced views so at odds with those of the original founders of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem. J. D. G. Dunn, M. Hengel, E. Haenchen, and others have argued that the Hellenists seized upon that emphasis in Jesus' teaching with regard to the Law and the Temple that raised the opposition of the Jewish religious authorities, and resulted in Jesus' trial and execution.³³ In particular, the Hellenists, as a charismatic eschatological group, focused on Jesus' apocalyptic pronouncements regarding the imminent destruction of the Temple (Matt. 26:61; Mk. 14:58; 15:29; Lk. 21:5-36; Jn. 2:19), the corruption of its cult (Mk. 11:15-17; Matt. 21:12-13; Lk. 19:45-46; Jn. 2:13-22), and the inadequacies of the laws governing the dietary proscriptions (Matt. 15:10-20; 23:25-26; Mk. 7:14-23; Lk. 11:37-41) and Sabbath observances (e.g., Mk. 3:1-6; Matt. 12:9-14; Lk. 6:1-11). But such a theory has one obvious fault – Jesus did predict the end of the Temple, which the Hebrews most likely knew. However, that knowledge did not encourage them to criticise the Temple cult or the Mosaic Law that governed its practice. On the contrary, it led them to become quite exemplary in their observance of the Law and their devotion to the Temple. Attempting to tie the Hellenists' criticisms of the Law and the Temple to Jesus traditions requires that we assume that Jesus' original disciples, understood the import of Jesus' message far less than the Hellenists who were converted to the movement only after his death.³⁴ But, surely, the only knowledge the Hellenists had about Jesus was what they had received by way of catechetical instruction from the Hebrews. Are we then to imagine that the former were able to separate the misunderstanding of the latter from the real intent of Jesus' message? This is a rather difficult assertion to defend.

The picture Luke consistently paints in Acts 1-5 of the apostolic community is that of a group that saw no conflict between their devotion to Messiah Jesus and their devout adherence to the precepts of Jewish faith-practice. Accordingly, the nascent Jerusalem church attracted further converts from a broad cross-section of Jewish society – Galileans (Acts 1:11; 2:7), diaspora Jewish pilgrims (Acts 2:8-10), priests (Acts 6:7), Levites (Acts 4:36), and Pharisees (Acts 15:5) – all of whom are explicitly labeled as 'Jews and proselytes to Judaism' (Acts 2:5, 11). While much of this material is clearly tendentious, it is partly corroborated by Paul's statements in Galatians (2:7-8) indicating that Peter and the apostolic circle focused their proclamation of the gospel exclusively on the wider Jewish population in Judea. Taken together this evidence suggests that the bulk of the

³³ Haenchen, *Acts*, 67-68; Hengel, *Jesus and Paul*, 22-24; Dunn, *Jesus*, 92, 101; Dunn, *Partings*, 63; also B. F. Meyer, *The Early Christians: Their World Mission and Self-Discovery*, (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1986), 71 and Conzelmann, *Acts*, 45.

³⁴ See discussion in Räisänen, *Jesus, Paul and Torah*, 89-90, 164-65.

converts to the new Christian movement in Jerusalem did not interpret the content of their catechesis as a license to question the enduring value of the Torah and the Temple. It is far more reasonable to assume that the Hellenists' negative views on these two Jewish cultural institutions represented a radical departure from the theological position of the original followers of Jesus and their Aramaic-speaking converts. A departure that the Hellenist converts to the movement instigated, and which ultimately led them to initiate the mission to the Gentiles in Antioch.

Ultimately, the paucity of information makes it impossible to explain their actions. All we can say with certainty is that, whatever the cultural, philosophical, or social ingredients that went into the ideological mix predisposing the Greek-speaking Christian Hellenists to their views, it was they, not the Aramaic-speaking, Palestinian-born 'Hebrews', and not the later Gentile converts to Christianity, who first detached themselves from the Temple and the Law.³⁵ As a consequence, the Hellenists' pre-eminent leader Stephen was stoned and their community members *alone* were scattered. The attention Luke devotes to the whole Stephen affair, the detail with which he recounts the advent of the Samaritan and Gentile missions resulting from the persecution that Stephen's martyrdom unleashed, underline the paradigmatic significance of the dispute between the Hebrews and Hellenists at Jerusalem and later in Samaria and Antioch. Through a series of narrative vignettes, Acts advances the story of the Hellenists in such a way that it is not difficult to picture how Stephen's companions steadily began to realise the full implications of their divorce from the Temple and its cult. Via the agency of these refugees and others from Jerusalem, the Hellenistic *kerygma* is carried first to Jewish communities outside Jerusalem (8:1b), and beyond Judea (11:19). Thence, it travels to the Samaritans (8:4-40), to an Ethiopian Eunuch on the Gaza Road (10:1-11:18), and eventually to the Gentiles in Syrian Antioch (11:19-21). With each step, the mission moves progressively beyond the original principles of the original Christian-Jewish foundation in Jerusalem. Ultimately, this sequence of events climaxes with the admission of the Gentiles, signaling the emergence of these new, multi-cultural congregations as an identifiably distinct Law-free Christianity (11:26).

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³⁵ A point made strongly by H. Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 83.