

Chapter Seven

An “Official Policy” in Luke Regarding ‘blood, fornication and strangling’

Exegesis of Acts 15:1-35 Using Narrative Criticism²³³

The section of Acts 15:1-35 deals with resolving a Jewish Christian conflict which is a central theme in this second book of Luke.²³⁴

In simple terms the Jews that had converted to Christianity, especially those of the Pharisee sect, thought that Gentile converts should be required to be circumcised. The verse of 15:1 describes how some people from Judea had gone to missionary areas such as Galatia to pressure Gentile converts into doing this. It appears they gave the impression they were authorised to do so, probably from the "Hebrew" section of the Church led by James (not one of the apostle brothers James and John). The recurring visit possibly from these people had triggered the trip made by Paul and Barnabas from the church in Antioch to Jerusalem and it led to their request that a Church Council be held to sort out the question of

²³³ Note: This exegesis is largely adapted from the same writer of this research project *Is Christian Morality Unique?* that is, Michelle Nailon *Is there a Critique of Greek Philosophy in the Gospels* (Melbourne: Project Employment, 2016) [www.gospelofmark.org, accessed Oct 2018]

²³⁴ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation, Vol 2 The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, c1986-c1990), 28.

circumcision. This question also entailed observation of the many intricacies of Jewish law (15:2).

In 15:24 it was pointed out that the visitors trying to impose circumcision did not have permission from the church leadership to spread this message and this point was included in a letter from the Council that Paul and Barnabas took with them back to Antioch. The letter from the Council also included the decision that was reached by the Jerusalem Church leadership (15:23). However it also appears that the visitors to Antioch who wanted circumcision carried considerable status in the Church. This was evidenced in Paul's letter to the Galatians (c/f Gal. 2:6). Part of the outcome of their influence in Galatia was that their pressure had coerced Peter into refraining from eating with Gentile converts (Gal 2:11). On the one hand this separation may have fitted with a Jewish rule to refrain from eating with Gentiles, or eating their food or entering the houses of Gentiles. But it had serious implications for joint participation in the Agape-Eucharist of the community of the followers of Jesus. Paul pointed out that Peter was in a contradictory position here. In Acts 10:14, (before the Jerusalem Council), when Peter was more obviously the church leader as designated by Jesus, he recounted a vision when he was told "What God has cleansed you must not call common." So Peter's behaviour in Galatia showed a reversal and Paul confronted him about it (Gal 2:11).

The major point at issue in the Jerusalem Council was circumcision (15:1). This painful and even dangerous operation for adults was deterring Gentiles from joining the church. It also implied that people would be obliged to practice all the intricacies of Jewish law as well. A pro-circumcision lobby (whether from Jews or from Christian Jews) was also putting missionaries such as Paul into danger. For instance Paul had been dragged out of Antioch and left for dead after "Jews" (the major source of conflict in the narrative of Acts) had persuaded the crowds to stone him (Acts 14:19).

However despite this opposition, Paul continued to tell Gentile converts that circumcision was not necessary and salvation was to be found through faith or "the spirit of life in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).

At the convened Jerusalem Council, Peter recounted how he had witnessed the Holy Spirit descend on Gentile converts in the same way that the Holy Spirit had filled the apostles at the time of Pentecost (Acts 15:8-9). In terms of the story, the participants at the Council should have been familiar with this event showing how God's Holy Spirit, was guiding and empowering the church. The point being made here was that the Holy Spirit came to uncircumcised Gentiles as well as Jews.²³⁵ Also the implication here was that one could not expect to somehow "coerce" salvation from God on the basis of observing circumcision and the myriad rituals and observances that went with it as pursued by many Pharisees.

Peter's experience of the Holy Spirit as recounted in Acts 15 reflected an emerging realisation in the Church that Pentecost marked a new beginning for the followers of Jesus, one that was dominated by the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself had heralded such a beginning on his return to his native Nazareth, even though the people there rejected him.

In terms of biblical scholarship, Peter's reference to the coming of the Holy Spirit and Pentecost has relevance to the differing views amongst scholars as to whether or not the early Church believed that an "end time" or parousia was imminent. According to Hans Conzelman, whose book *The Theology of St Luke* (1957) has had such influence, the early Church thought in terms of three time phases - that of the Old Testament, the time of Jesus and a time of waiting for his

²³⁵ Neal M. Flanagan, *New Testament Reading Guide: The Acts of the Apostles*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1964), 6.

return or parousia.²³⁶ Conzelman said at the time of Luke such a time of waiting was becoming more extended and there was need for the Church to clarify its policies and future direction. On the other hand, more recent scholars consider that there was an eschatology in the early church that incorporated the idea of Jesus coming in a spiritual sense, rather than the church needing to wait for an "end-time".²³⁷ Such an opinion appeared to be increasing (within the story in Acts) as the position of the church and its mission became ever more secure and more widespread. It was through the Holy Spirit that God was empowering the successors of Jesus to carry on his mission and bring the good news of the gospel it to all "the nations" (Lk 24:47)

In this setting such a sense of the Spirit would have inspired confidence in church leaders to clarify and make decisions about their future direction as a whole church. The fact that Paul was self-confident enough in his own position to challenge Peter and the leadership in Jerusalem was an indication of this emerging confidence in the church as a whole. Luke's account of the Jerusalem Council also shows the outward movement that was being made towards the Gentiles. For instance mention of "the nations" (that is, the Gentiles) is repeatedly mentioned in the text c/f verses 15:3, 7, 12, 14, 17, 19 and 23.

In terms of interpreting Acts 15 using narrative criticism, it is helpful to keep in mind the observation made by the Catholic Pontifical Commission document of 1993.²³⁸ This describes the value of narrative criticism which is a "synchronic" approach to gospel interpretation. It says narrative criticism

²³⁶ Hans Conzelmann *The Theology of St Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Boswell (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 40.

²³⁷ Mark Allan Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 59-60

²³⁸ Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 497-524

helps to complement the necessary "diachronic" approach of Historical Critical Exegesis.²³⁹ In its discussion of narrative criticism, the Commission points out the need to distinguish between the "writer" and the "narrator".²⁴⁰ Thus even while Luke the narrator was shaping the text to give an account of the Jewish Council, at a deeper level Luke the writer, was also organising the presentation of his theological ideas, which may or may not, have been explicitly mentioned in the story. Thus he could have embedded ideas into the story that are not explicitly mentioned or explained by the narrator.

Luke the narrator, was shaping his account of the Council to persuade his implied readers that the Council decision was both credible and inspired by the Holy Spirit. The speeches made at the Council were crafted into a rhetorical style similar to that described by Greek philosophers such as Aristotle.²⁴¹ Thus on the one hand the literary tools of Greco-Roman culture were being used even while Luke (through the speakers) was persuading a largely Jewish Christian audience to admit Gentile Christians into their company.

Prior to the presentation of Peter's speech and the Council's decision, Luke mentions the great joy that was given to people in Phoenicia and Samaria when Paul and Barnabas had told them of the "conversion of the nations." (15:3). This "good news" was repeated at the Council as well (15:12). In terms of the characterisation of the story, Paul and Barnabas were themselves adroit in relating the success of their mission to the Gentiles on their way to Jerusalem. Some of their listeners, who were also on their way to the Council, would thus be likely to spread this good news amongst other attendees before the Council itself got underway.

²³⁹ Pontifical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 502.

²⁴⁰ Pontifical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," 503.

²⁴¹ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 97.

Scholars describe Luke's approach to his texts as an optimistic one.²⁴² This was discussed in the introductory section above when it was pointed out that he would want to give encouragement to the emerging Gentile Christian leaders. At the theological level as well there would also be an overall purpose in this optimism. Luke was stressing the glory and joy of God's on-going, planned action rather than the dimensions of Jesus' suffering. His tone of optimism also helps to keep a sense of momentum continuing on as the story of God's actions unfolds. It might be argued that Luke was failing here to present a theology of the cross. However as Joseph Fitzmyer points out, Luke's theology should be approached on its own terms rather than being compared with the theologies of Mark and Paul.²⁴³ In fact, according to Fitzmyer, Luke never gives any indication of having read the letters of Paul.²⁴⁴ Fitzmyer's claim can of course be disputed. The text of Acts implies that they knew each other. The "we" passages of the text of Acts (cf. 16:10), claim that Luke was a fellow missionary with Paul and he was a travelling companion on Paul's lengthy sea journey (Acts 27-8). Also at one point in his letters Paul claims "Luke alone is with me" (2 Timothy 4:11). But with regard to Fitzmyer's claim, apart from Paul's speeches in Acts (recounted by Luke), Luke's concepts do differ from Paul's as also from the other evangelists.²⁴⁵

Obviously, in writing, Luke had his own agenda, even while he was picking up on the ideas of other writers. His gospel for instance shows clear indication that he, like Matthew, relied heavily on Mark.²⁴⁶ What was Luke's "agenda"? Throughout the narrative of Luke-Acts there is a geographical movement towards Jerusalem in the gospel and then in Acts a similar sort

²⁴² Kasemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 66.

²⁴³ Joseph Fitzmyer, intro, trans, notes *The Gospel According to Luke (I-Ix)* (New York: The Anchor Bible Doubleday, 1981), 22.

²⁴⁴ Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 28.

²⁴⁵ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 110.

²⁴⁶ Powell, *What are They Saying About Luke?* 18.

of movement towards Rome. At another level there is also the sense that God, the main character, is pushing Jesus and then his successors ever forward and outwards in terms of a Divine "plan."²⁴⁷ Thus in the gospel Luke presents Jesus as the "hero". Then in Acts the successors of Jesus are also shown to be "heroes" who continue on with God's plan. Darrell Bock has drawn comparisons between the "action heroes" of Luke-Acts and the heroes of the Greek writer Homer, for example in Luke's use of verbs.²⁴⁸

In Acts 15:1-35 the sense of movement throughout the text is also evident here. In fact at times it appears to override some of the detail in a way that is more "sweeping" than one would find in Luke's gospel. His style of telescoping events and glossing over negative complexity may add to his 'looser' use of language in Acts.²⁴⁹ Paul and Barnabas for instance are at the Council, but they appear to have a passive role in the decision making. Then in Acts 21:25 it even appears that Paul was barely aware of the Council's outcome.²⁵⁰

This brings our discussion to the proceedings of the Council itself and any possible links here with the three key commandments which have been the focus of our overall investigation.

As mentioned, a close look at the text of Acts 15 raises questions about whether or not all of the people at the Council actually understood what was going on. This lack of awareness is arguably reflected in biblical commentaries to this day that describe the text relating to the Council as very "problematic"²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 39.

²⁴⁸ Darrell L. Bock, "The Son of Man in Luke 5:24," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 1 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 109-121.

²⁴⁹ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 66.

²⁵⁰ Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 748

²⁵¹ Laymon, ed. *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, 748.

On the one hand the text of Acts 15:5 says the Council controversy was fuelled by converted members of the Pharisee sect who said that Gentile converts should be circumcised and should be required to keep the law of Moses. The mention of Pharisees here is significant. Pharisees did not simply observe a rule of circumcision. Rather their whole lives were dominated by ritualistic rules that had been linked to the commandments. These rules were like an exterior cover for the ten major commandments of Moses (cf. Exodus 20: 13-15). But it also appears in the gospel that these people assumed by keeping the many detailed rules they would also be more likely to observe the commandments of Moses. This assumption led Jesus in the gospel of Mark to have confrontations with the Pharisees on this very issue. For instance he pointed out the failure of Pharisees to keep the essential commandment about honouring their parents. Rather they were putting their property into "Corban" (a form of dedication) and then saying because of this they did not have to support their parents (Mark 7:11). This is of course against the commandment "Honour thy father and thy mother" (which precedes the three commandments discussed above about "Thou shalt not kill, commit adultery or steal" as recalled in Mark 10) In the context of his reprimand Luke 11:26 Jesus even said that the Pharisees' Gentile converts to Judaism were finishing up morally worse than they were before. Following this same line of logic that had been pointed out by Jesus in Luke 11, Peter, at the Council of Jerusalem, talked of the inability of both himself and those present to keep the details of "the law." Peter said it was therefore unfair to place such burdens on converts (15:10). His mention of this point shows that he, and presumably many of the people present, also realised that with circumcision, more was being imposed on the Gentile converts than just circumcision itself.

In the text of Chapter 15, after Peter's statement about the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8), the meeting was taken over by another

leader called James. The emergence of James at this point gives some indication of the early church's structure and history. In fact some writers such as Kaseman claim that it was an early indication of the development of "catholicity" in the Church and a move away from the church's original, more flexible shape.²⁵²

In any case in the story Peter appeared to defer to this leadership of the elders and James, who was now apparently the elected leader.²⁵³ Paul in turn appeared to defer to the leadership of the church in Antioch, given that he was appointed by them to attend the Council. The Antiochene Church appeared in turn to defer to the "Mother Church" in Jerusalem. At least these implications about leadership show that decisions made at the Jerusalem Council showed a united, corporate direction.

On the other hand within the dynamics of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the debate appeared to move from the question of circumcision towards the dietary rules that would have been affecting Gentile Christian participation in the agape-Eucharist. Special weight was given to James' view about this, not just because he was (apparently) Bishop of Jerusalem but also because traditionally, his credentials about law observance were above reproach.²⁵⁴

Some scholars such as Richard Pervo claim that Luke primarily wrote for entertainment and edification.²⁵⁵ But at depth there is more than "just a story" going on in Luke's account of the Council.²⁵⁶ Actually it is to the credit of Luke's

²⁵² Kasemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes*, 132-3.

²⁵³ Black, Rowley eds. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 907.

²⁵⁴ James D. G. Dunn, John W. Rogerson, *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 1245.

²⁵⁵ Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: the literary genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, c1987), 138.

²⁵⁶ Flanagan, *New Testament Reading Guide: The Acts of the Apostles*, 6.

story-telling skills that someone could think he was mainly interested in story as such.

In any case there appears to be a contradiction in Luke's story of the Council. The chapter begins with the presentation of a heated debate about circumcision that threatens to split the church. But the solution offered in verse 20 does not appear to even touch on this subject! Rather it deals with four requirements that are parallel to those already required of Gentile aliens who are living in Palestine. These entail rules against the pollution of idols including eating meat sacrificed to idols (Lev. 17:8-9), sexual immorality including certain types of marriages (Lev. 18:1-30), eating strangled animals that is, those animals that have not been ritually slaughtered (Lev. 17:13), and also consuming animal blood (17:10-14).²⁵⁷ These appear to be summarised at the Council by telling Gentile converts they were to avoid "blood, fornication and strangling" (Acts 15:20).²⁵⁸ It appears this is what the church voted overwhelmingly for "it seemed good to us becoming of one mind" (v. 22) but this was something already set out in Jewish law. So what was the point of the Council?

James diplomatically puts forward the proposal that if Gentile converts avoid these things this would enable them to participate in meals with Jews, especially the Agape-Eucharist, without further cause of disruption in the overall church.²⁵⁹ According to the Council, its decree on this was to be carried by Paul and Barnabas to Antioch, and this (according to Luke) appears to resolve the question at issue (15:25).

²⁵⁷ Robert L. Wilken "The Bible and Its Interpreters: Christian Biblical Interpretation," in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays et al (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 1099.

²⁵⁸ Note: The Jerusalem New Testament translates a phrase here as "the meat of strangled animals. But the RSV translates it more accurately as "what is strangled," This latter translation could thereby be understood metaphorically. . . "

²⁵⁹ Black, H. H. Rowley eds. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 907.

However, it appears that the circumcision question was not really resolved here at all. For instance in the 2nd Century, in Justin Martyr's *Letter to Trypho* the question is (again) raised²⁶⁰ Moreover, further along, in the narrative of Acts itself there is still tension about circumcision and full adherence to the Jewish law. For instance, in Acts 21 when Paul returned to Jerusalem he was greeted by James and the elders (v. 8). But now James tells Paul he is being challenged by "tens of thousands of believing Jews who were all zealots of the law." (v. 20). And here, even with the quote about huge numbers of opponents, Luke appears to be understating the sort of pressure that James and the elders were under.

Further complications about the effectiveness of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 also appear, when Luke's account of it is compared with Paul's apparent account of this Council in Galatians 2. Inconsistencies between the two accounts include the inference that after his conversion, Paul only went to Jerusalem twice. But Acts implies he went three times, that is, after his conversion (9:26), in relation to a famine (11:30) and then to the Council (15:2). More significantly, Paul does not mention the "edict" of the Council in the letter to the Galatians even though in Acts, Luke says he was entrusted to take this edict back to the missionary Churches and in particular to the church in Antioch which is in Galatia.

The failure of Paul to mention the Council edict in Galatians is magnified by the special emphasis that Luke gives to this event in the structure of Acts. The Council is placed in the centre of Luke's narrative. It is presented as a decisive turning point in the story and so it acts as a "story kernel."²⁶¹ Also, (as

²⁶⁰ Wilken "The Bible and Its Interpreters: Christian Biblical Interpretation," 58.

²⁶¹ Ian Chabay "Narratives in the context of Global Systems Science and ICT"
<http://ec.europa.eu/digital->

mentioned above) prior to the Council, the Jerusalem Church and the apostles are central to the action. But after the Council, the main actor is Paul and apart from 16:4 the apostles are no longer mentioned. Again, immediately after the Council Paul sets out on his second missionary journey which takes in places such as Asia Minor 15:36, Macedonia 16:11, Athens 17:16 and Corinth 18:1. Thus focus in the Lukan text of Acts has now moved to Paul's mission to the Gentiles.

Given Luke's ability to present accurate background details, one would expect that his account of the important Council to be historically accurate as well, even if, according to the style of the time he dramatised this.²⁶² According to Powell, Luke was using all three types of the genre of a Greek novel known at the time, that is, history, biography and the novel.²⁶³ Luke also shows flexibility in his ability to shape speeches to fit the viewpoints of the speaker. Thus the earlier speeches in Acts appear more primitive and they echo Semitisms (cf. a Jewish style). But in later speeches, for example at the Areopagus in Athens (17: 21-31), a classical Greek style is being used.²⁶⁴ Luke also shows sensitivity to people's viewpoints. Thus expressions peculiar to Paul are used in Paul's speeches even though these expressions are scarce in the rest of the text.²⁶⁵

All this being the case, one must wonder what dimensions are at work in the speech of James when he presents the Jerusalem Council with an "edict" that is supposed to resolve the

agenda/futurium/sites/futurium/files/Chabay%20I_Narratives%20in%20the%20Context.pdf 4th March 2013., [accessed 20 October 2013].

²⁶² Martin Hengel, *The 'Hellenization' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*. In Collaboration with Christoph Marksches, Trans. John Bowden. (London: SCM Press Ltd, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 7.

²⁶³ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 9.

²⁶⁴ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 25.

²⁶⁵ Flanagan, *New Testament Reading Guide: The Acts of the Apostles*, 2nd ed., 5.

circumcision crisis but in fact only appears to be about dietary rules.

There appears to be at least two key omissions in the so-called "dietary rules" solution (cf. avoid blood, fornication and strangling). Firstly, it appears that Gentiles are being accepted into the church as if they themselves have little if anything to offer Christianity. Thus on the one hand the Jews have the tradition and strengths of the Mosaic Law. But the Gentiles only appear to have negative customs that need to be prohibited. This omission of what Gentiles can contribute appears to contradict the whole tenor of Luke's writing. His writing for a start was solidly based on the sophistications of Greek culture.²⁶⁶

Secondly it appears on the surface that James finds a solution to the present Church crisis by harking back to the book of Leviticus and elsewhere in the Old Testament. This may have carried weight with an audience of hostile Pharisee Christians. But the decision of James ("I have therefore decided..." Acts 15:19) is presented by Luke as being pivotal in the narrative and in the future direction of the whole church. Why then would there not be some reference to the teachings of Jesus himself?

These two "difficulties" plus other problems raised in Biblical commentaries could possibly be explained if there were a connection between the "dietary rules" and "the way" that Paul said he had been preaching. Here as well, there were problems in explanation. A (very) literal translation of Acts 19:23 has Paul saying "Now there was about time that trouble no little concerning the way".²⁶⁷ In fact Paul's first confrontation with "the way" was in his own misunderstanding of it. In Acts 9:2

²⁶⁶ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 24.

²⁶⁷ Alfred Marshall, trans., *The RSV Interlinear Greek-English New Testament* (Oxford: Marshall Pickering, 1988)

he was arresting both men and women that he had found to be following the "way".

To pick up on the two points raised above. What would Gentiles have to offer the church that would enable them to make their own response to and interpretation of the law of Moses? The whole of Hellenistic culture of course, cannot be summed up in a few words. But a quick overview would accept that Hellenism was (and is) largely based on rationalism and abstract concepts. Plato's *Republic* for instance was about an idealised society, which was in fact impossible to actually put into practice. But it presented ideals that could be pursued. Thus in terms of the commandments, rather than taking the minimalist approach of 'thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery or thou shalt not steal', these could be interpreted in an "idealistic" fashion. People could push beyond the boundaries of the "thou shalt not kill" and towards the avoidance of cruelty as such. They could nurture respect for the prime social supports of themselves and others rather than 'just' avoid adultery. They could avoid unjust business practices rather than 'just' avoid stealing. They could push even further with such an 'idealistic' interpretation of the commandments. Thus they could move beyond a tribal social structure outwards - towards the universal provision of health care, social security for all and the production and provision of material goods for all. An argument could be developed to show that in the many associations of the Greco-roman Empire it was already doing this sort of thing to some extent and, it provided a framework for a positive approach to the commandments. Arguably present day industry structures are also based on such "ideals."

The question arises. Does this sort of development into a positive approach to the commandments come from the teaching of Jesus? A discussion of this has already been provided above. To recap. The gospel of Mark records a man asking Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark

10:17). Jesus replies, "You know the commandments; Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honour your mother and father." (Mark 10:19) The man replies that he has observed these commandments since his youth. Jesus then challenges him to "Go sell what you have, give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me." (Mark 10:21) In simple terms the challenge here is to go beyond "do not kill, commit adultery or steal." The same sort of "raising of the bar" of these three key commandments is found in Matthew 5:21-42 and allegorically in Luke when he resists the temptations of devil in 4:1-12. As noted above the devil tempts him to produce material goods v.4 (c/f thou shalt not steal), assume power over others v. 6 (c/f thou shalt not kill) and assume the support of his 'social' group v. 11 (c/f thou shalt not commit adultery). But in the context of these temptations Jesus asserts that there is more to found in life than material wealth, power and social adulation.

With such a positive focus on the key social commandments which have been the focus of our investigations, there would not be the need for the observance of ritualistic details to "protect" the commandments.

While the challenge of Jesus to "raise the bar" of the three key social commandments is threaded through the three synoptic gospels, such a presentation of the law would not have been easy in the environment of Jewish Christians. At the time, most of Paul's problems were caused by Jews, (and arguably) Christian Jews who identified themselves as being Jews. In Acts Paul had said he had problems teaching "the way". Such problems are apparent when he was trying to explain his position before Governor Felix in Acts 24:14. Paul told the Governor he was been trying to live according to "the way" even while his accusers claim he has been a founder of the 'Nazarine sect' (24:14). Paul did not agree with this.

In terms of "the way," which is possibly a key to understanding the edict of Acts 15:20, there are instances in Acts when a full commitment is being made by people along the same lines of the challenge by Jesus to the apparently young man in Mark 10:20. When Paul eventually returned to Jerusalem and James tells him of the hostility "tens of thousands" of Jewish converts all "zealous for the law" this implied that the tension in Jerusalem about law observance was ready to erupt (c/f 21:20). James therefore asked Paul to participate in a Temple ceremony in which some Christians were taking a "vow" (v. 24) in the hope that this would provide an opportunity for Paul to show his respect for the law. But before the ceremony, Paul was seen with a Gentile friend in the street (v. 29). So attendees at the Temple ceremony then claimed that he took this Gentiles into the restricted area of the Temple (v. 28). A riot erupted and the Romans had to take Paul into protective custody (v. 30-32). Later, Paul's nephew found out (apparently from within these same "Christian" circles) that forty plus people had taken a vow not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (23:16). An implied reader of Acts could wonder here if the vow being taken by these people was some sort of "parody" of the vow that had already been taken by four people earlier on in the Temple. One could also wonder if the story is also a indication in the text of the deep hostility that was taken by some Christian Jews towards the "way" of observing the commandments that was being taught by Paul. Luke says it was Asian Jews in the temple who had triggered the riot 21:27. But there were many people who were quickly ready to support them and one wonders to what extent Christian Jews were amongst these protestors – some of the people James had warned Paul about. .

All these surrounding factors in the story of Acts, leads to an exploration of the layers of meaning to be found in the "edict" presented by James to the Jerusalem Council (15;20). On the surface it dealt with some dietary regulations, already set out in the Old Testament. A quick read of this suggests that

observance of these rules would help to smooth the entrance of Gentile converts into the Agape-Eucharistic meal.

But at the same time the edict could have carried a double meaning which encompassed a whole approach to the law based on "the way" as taught by Paul and which was both inspired by and suited to, a Gentile view of the law. It is interesting to note that in the story, when James asks Paul to attend a Temple ceremony in which a vow is taken, James again referred to the edict of the Jerusalem Council (21:25).

Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you but that you yourself live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity.

((Acts 21:24b-25))

On the one hand it appears from this that Paul still observes the letter(s) of the Jewish law while the Gentiles only have to abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols or which contains blood because the animal had been strangled and from Temple prostitution. However (yet again) recall what Peter had said at the Council about "putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). Given the situation of mounting tension James may have been exaggerating the extent of Paul's continued observance of the details of the Jewish law. However Paul had – up to his conversion, been a meticulous observer of the law. And, at any rate he certainly knew from his upbringing and earlier life about observance of the details of the law.

This brings us back to the question. Was there a double meaning in the edict of the Jerusalem Council as described in Acts 15? If so what was it? In looking for parallels, one could work out that when James mentions "blood" it could imply

cruelty of all kinds, including of course the blood sports which were so popular in Greco-Roman culture. Thousands of people for instance would attend gladiator fights to the death in local amphitheatres. When James mentions "fornication" he is talking about uncommitted sex as such rather than 'only' adultery with another married person. When he talks of "strangling" he could be picking up on the preaching of Amos whom he quoted at the Council cf. "I will rebuild the tent of David" (Acts 15:16). This comes from Amos 9:11. It was Amos who most loudly railed against unjust business practices

They sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes. They that trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside the way of the afflicted" etc
(Amos 2:6).

This fits in with James' prohibition against "strangling". Why else would he be quoting Amos in support of the rationale of his proposal and before putting this to the Council?

Such an interpretation of Acts 15:20 (about blood, fornication and strangling) would solve many of the difficulties that have been raised by biblical commentators on this text. It would combine the circumcision question with a dietary one and thus deal with the prime purpose of the Council which was about circumcision. It would help to explain why "fornication" was mentioned in this context. It would also tie in with Paul's preaching about "the way" in which he had been teaching observance of the law. It would also help to explain Paul's silence in the Council about this edict. He would not want to elaborate on and draw attention to a secondary meaning of what James was saying given that some people at least at the Council were likely to oppose it. On the other hand it is understandable that the church people at Antioch who included people of Gentile origin were more likely to realise there was a secondary meaning in the edict and they rejoiced about it

(15:31). Another reason why Luke did not discuss Paul's understanding of the edict was that Paul himself was developing his own distinct theology in support of "the way"

Some commentaries such as Peake claim that there could not be a link between dietary regulations of the Jerusalem Council and morality. It says "a simple moral law would not have been transformed into a dietary law."²⁶⁸

However it should be noted that an alternative ancient text for Acts 15, that is, the Western text, as distinct from the probably older Alexandrian text, does make a connection between verse 20 and a moral meaning. Ernst Haenchen says that the Western text is about ten per cent longer than the Alexandrian text and he provides explanations for this. It also appears the Western text has a harsher view of Judaism and it emphasises 'Gentile' aspects and Christian differences from Judaism such as theology of the Holy Spirit.²⁶⁹ In Acts 15:20 the Western text omits reference to "things strangled" and it replaces the phrase with a decree to "refrain from doing to another what you would not want done to you." This phrase gives a moral slant to the other aspects of the decree as well, that is, the worship of idols and the shedding of blood. As Martin Powell points out, "Thus the Western text presents the four restrictions placed on Gentile Christians in a way that **avoids** any reference to Jewish dietary laws."²⁷⁰

It may be an unfortunate omission that in most Bibles and therefore commentaries, the version of the Western text for verse 20 is overlooked.

The Western text may appear to be later. However some parts of it do date back to the second century. Also it was cited by

²⁶⁸ Black, H. H. Rowley eds. *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, 909.

²⁶⁹ Ernst Haenchen *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), Intro.

²⁷⁰ Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* 23.

many of the church writers in the West, for example, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Cyprian.²⁷¹ Even if the Western text entailed the re-writing of an earlier text this re-writing was a form of interpretation. The people writing the text were “implied readers” living soon after Acts was written and they were still aware of its historical situation. This was a time when there was an emphasis on interpretation taking into account the whole of Scripture as stressed by Irenaeus. Irenaeus was trying to re-claim the Scriptures for Christianity in opposition to the heresy of the Gnostics. This time was before the use of commentaries, as introduced by Origen in the third century.²⁷² Thus in re-writing an earlier text, the Western text writers could be taking into account the earlier challenge (about raising the bar of the commandments) put out by Jesus and repeated in Matthew and Luke.

In conclusion, an exegesis of Acts 15 shows the extent to which Luke as author was able to provide a narrative that both taught his theology and also presented the complexities that the Church faced in trying to set up a new social system. This social system was not only based on Judaism. It also incorporated the idealism of Greek culture as well. Such idealism was to be seen in its interpretation of the three key social commandments – “Thou shalt not kill, commit adultery or steal.”

Conclusion about Paul and Luke

In an overall conclusion, we have seen how Paul (in the 50’s CE) isolated the three key social commandments and gave them an eschatological dimension. Insofar as one cultivated their spirit the Holy Spirit in turn was able to “grow” a spiritual body within the Temple of one’s body and this would share in the resurrected life of Christ. We also saw how, in

²⁷¹ Flanagan, *New Testament Reading Guide*, 6.

²⁷² Wilken “The Bible and Its Interpreters: Christian Biblical Interpretation,” 58-9.

about 70 CE at the height of the destruction of Jerusalem and the whole sacrificial system of the Temple, Mark the first gospel writer put out a challenge, as spoken by Jesus, to “sacrifice” one’s rights to possessions, family and self-determination in a following of him (cf. Mark 10) In Matthew, again with a focus on these three commandments, the followers of Jesus were challenged to “convert” the attitude with which they obeyed the law and put an emphasis instead on the spirit with which the commandments were observed (cf. Mt.5).

In Luke there was a linkage made between following the spirit of each of the commandments and a following of Jesus. The following of Jesus was to take precedence over concerns about material possession, the comforts of home living and self-determination.

Then in Acts the early Church met in a Council of Jerusalem to clarify its position in relation to the law and the commandments that the intricacies of Jewish law were designed to protect. Acts said the Jewish Council was convened to deal with the issue of circumcision. But instead it came up with a “solution” which appeared to repeat requirements as set out in Leviticus and relating to Gentiles who were living in a Jewish community. This apparent “solution” was unanimously accepted by those present at the Council. To this day it is still apparently accepted as the correct interpretation of this text by many biblical commentaries.²⁷³ The “snag” here about such an interpretation, whether now or in the time of Luke, has been that the circumcision question still appeared to linger on in places such as Antioch (cf. Gal. 3:1). A dietary solution also failed to recognise the contribution that Gentiles could make to the community at a moral level. Rather the “dietary interpretation” has implied that these uncircumcised people

²⁷³ Cf. Black, H. H. Rowley eds. *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible*, 909.

remained “outsiders” to the Christian Jews. Also, the text of Acts repeats the outcome of the Council at least three times in the text (cf. 15:20, 15:29, 21:25) in order to apparently stress that there was a real breakthrough with regard to obedience to the law. This resolution would be required of all Christians (cf. Acts: 15:20, 29, 16:4). But if the “solution” only referred to dietary laws it could be argued that Jewish Christians already avoided the consumption of blood and the meat of strangled animals. They already avoided the fornication rituals of pagan temples. So what if anything was in the “solution” for them. Did it even apply to them?

In the exegesis above and in the context of the three social commandments being continually threaded into the text of Paul, Mark, Matthew and Luke, it fits that all Christians, not just Gentile Christians, were urged to avoid “blood” as such, that is, cruelty to any sentient being. All Christians were urged to avoid not just adultery but fornication, that is, uncommitted sex. Indeed as Matthew had pointed out they were all urged to “upgrade” their attitude towards sexuality as such into respect for other persons. Also, by recalling the prophet Amos at the Council and his railing against “selling their sandals “ etc. (Amos 2:6), the meaning of the word “strangling” in the “solution” was extended to fair dealing in business practices. Again this requirement would apply to all Christians whether they be of Gentile or Jewish background.

The interesting thing about the threefold “solution” of the Council was that it telescoped the teachings about law from Paul and the gospel writers and others who had preceded Luke. True the Jeruslaem Council would have been convened in the 50’s CE. when Paul was still writing.²⁷⁴ But most scholars claim Luke was writing in the 80’s CE.²⁷⁵ This meant there had been thirty years for the Church to clarify the meaning of

²⁷⁴ Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, (382-3).

²⁷⁵ Mark Allan Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 37.

what had been resolved between the time of the Council and the writing of Acts.

From the time of Jesus there had been a distinctive change in the way that the followers of Jesus would observe the Commandments. Centuries later this distinct “way” of obeying the commandments has become incorporated into Western Culture and the implications of the edict remains. For instance in the writings of Shakespeare, the difference between a Jewish and a Christian interpretation of the commandments was highlighted in the *Merchant of Venice*. Shylock the Jew was ready to take his “pound of flesh” from Antonio. But then he was warned if he made the slightest of deviations from the exact weight his own fate would be the same. Again the spirit of the law takes precedence over its letter.

In the Council of Jerusalem there was a shift from material observance of the letter of the law, to a practice of its spirit. This shift was obligatory for all those people who claimed to be followers of Jesus, whatever their background. It was not an option.

