

The Fracas at Antioch



Acts 11.1 "Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers (there) criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"

Earlier in chapter 4 of the Book of Acts, the author famously describes the early Church with these words: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and (one) mind" (32). This may have been a romanticized overstatement, as can be seen in today's reading when the 'circumcised (Christian)

believers' in Jerusalem criticized St. Peter for eating with uncircumcised Christians in Antioch. They were not all of one heart and mind apparently. St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (2.11-4) also is seen criticizing Peter, but for the exact opposite reason, writing that "when (Peter) ~~Cephas~~ came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James (presumably the brother of Jesus back in Jerusalem), (Peter) used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to (Peter) ~~Cephas~~ before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you (now) compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?'" This incident, referred to by my British New Testament Professor in Seminary as the "Fracas at Antioch," is a clear indication of growing disputes and theological parties within the early Church, especially the extent to which Gentile converts to Christianity had to keep the Law of Moses, or not, especially concerning circumcision and kosher food restrictions, and also who decides that question?

So, after Paul's so-called First Missionary Journey, the one with Barnabas to establish new churches throughout Asia

Minor, we are told in Acts 15 that "certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers (in Antioch), (that) 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them. Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders (there). So (Paul and Barnabas) were sent on their way by the church (in Antioch) . . . (And) When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, (according to Acts) and they reported all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the sect of the (Christian) Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses'" (15.1-5).

There followed the so-called Apostolic Council in Jerusalem, apparently prompted by the question from those Christian believers who belonged to the 'sect of the Pharisees' about whether gentile males who converted to Christianity had to be circumcised or not, an important question, to them especially. But there also seems to be questions about keeping kosher in the Council's discussions and in the Council's later final decision. What exactly is required then of new gentile

followers of Jesus as far as the law of Moses was concerned?
That is the real question here.

Acts records that "The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter . . . After there had been much debate . . . The whole assembly kept silence and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the gentiles. After they finished speaking, James (presumably the brother of Jesus) replied, 'Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols . . . and from whatever has been strangled and from blood'" (15.6-20). Thus, the decision recorded here doesn't mention circumcision at all and seems to be generally permissive as far as kosher requirements, abstaining only from food offered to idols or which had been strangled and from blood.

According to Paul in Galatians (2.1-14), "James (the brother of Jesus) and (Peter) ~~Cephas~~ and John (the son of Zebedee), who were acknowledged pillars (of the early church) (he writes) . . . (then) gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go the Gentiles and they to the circumcised" (2.9). That was a crucial Apostolic Agreement for St. Paul, whose mission was clearly defined here as to the Gentiles, while Peter and John would be the

missionaries to the circumcised, that is, to the Jews. But was the church becoming segregated here, keeping the Jews and Gentiles separate? Was that the solution to the kosher problem? That is certainly not how things played out subsequently in Antioch, and later in Galatia, or at Rome, where Christians continued to gather together, Jews and gentiles alike.

And remember that the earlier fracas at Antioch wasn't about circumcision. It was about whether a mixed community of Jewish and gentile Christians should observe kosher rules in their common shared eucharistic meals. Christians, followers of the Way, both Jews and Greeks, appear to be gathering now on the first day of the week, Paul writes, to share a eucharistic meal. Should that meal be 'kosher for all', with the gentile Christians deferring to the Jewish Christians? Or should it 'be kosher for none', with the Jewish Christians deferring to the gentile Christians?

Peter, Barnabas, and Paul it appears, had first accepted 'kosher for none', with no distinction made between Jew and Greek, at least until those sent by James to Antioch demanded that it be 'kosher for all'. The other apostles it seems then conceded to James' so-called 'circumcision faction', all except for Paul. He declared that the shift from 'kosher for none' to 'kosher to all' by Peter and the other Jewish Christians leaders was sheer hypocrisy, writing "The other Jews joined (Peter) in

this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray" (Gal. 2.13).

Paul's outraged refusal and belligerent language at Antioch was raised by those he calls, rather nastily, "false believers secretly brought in (to Antioch), who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us" (Gal. 2.4). You can sense his indignation and alarm throughout the second chapter of his letter to the Galatians. After Paul and Barnabas took back to Antioch that letter of decision from the Jerusalem Council with its rather permissive conclusions, and read the letter to the congregation there, Acts records that there was "rejoicing at the exhortation" (15.31). Shortly afterwards, Paul and Barnabas, we are told, considered revisiting the congregations that they had formed together on the First Missionary Journey, but then they had such a sharp disagreement between them that they split up instead, with Barnabas taking his cousin John Mark and sailing off to Cyprus, while Paul taking Silas headed overland, a disagreement perhaps influenced by the debate over circumcision and kosher requirements.

For the question of kosher food at the eucharistic meal in mixed Christian communities comes up again and again for Paul, especially later with the church in Rome, though note also that Paul seems to have modified his previous position here to

'kosher for all,' while still counseling the gentile Christians that keeping kosher doesn't really matter. Thus, it is essential that one understands this controversy when one reads Paul's letter to the Romans, where he writes, for instance: "Welcome those who are weak in faith but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything . . . Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat, for God has welcomed them (all)" (14.1-3). Later in that same letter, Paul continues: "Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself (a remarkable statement from Paul, a Jew, a Pharisee), but it is unclean for anyone who considers it unclean. (So) If your brother or sister is distressed by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. So do not let your good be slandered. For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who serves Christ in this way is acceptable to God and has human approval. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean (there's that statement again

from Paul), but it is wrong to make someone stumble by what you eat; it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. Hold the conviction that you have as your own before God. (And) Blessed are those who do not condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat because they do not act from faith, for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (14.13-23). Here, Paul seems to have retreated to a "kosher for all" practice for the early Church but writes these comforting and encouraging words to the gentiles in Rome who seem to be sharing kosher meals with fellow Jewish Christians, trying to navigate once again that dispute which began with 'the Fracas at Antioch.'

If one reads Paul's Letter to the Romans without awareness of these earlier disputes in Antioch and Jerusalem, one might wonder what the hell Paul was talking about there. Remember we are reading someone else's mail here, and we need to know the context in which this letter to the Romans was written to fully understand it. Paul is simply talking about keeping or not keeping kosher requirements in the church. Thus, once again, I suggest that this is the very value of Bible Study, and once again I invite any of you who are interested to come and join us on Fridays as we continue to examine the 'historical' Paul.

AMEN.