

**Hinne Wagenaar.**

**Stop harassing the Gentiles:**

**The importance of Acts 15 for African Theology.<sup>1</sup>**

**1. Introduction.<sup>2</sup>**

In the origin and development of African Theology, the book *'The Acts of the Apostles'* has been of considerable importance. Often we find African theologians referring to texts from the book of Acts. This may be related to the fact that African Christians identify themselves easily with the missionary situation as described in this book. The issues of incipient Christian communities in relationship to their traditional cultural and political context are very recognisable for the churches in Africa. However, there are also theological reasons for the centrality of the book of Acts in African Theology. Unfortunately, very little exegetical material has been developed so far. This is quite contrary to Black Theology in South Africa, whose most enduring legacy, according to Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, is its creativity in Biblical hermeneutics.<sup>3</sup> Just as John Mbiti complained in the 1960s that the church in Africa was lacking a theology,<sup>4</sup> we might complain in African Theology today about the lack of significant Biblical hermeneutics.

A few central passages from the book of Acts appear to stand out in popularity among African theologians. I have found several references in articles and books to Acts 2 (the Pentecost event), Acts 10 (the conversion of Cornelius), Acts 14 (especially vs. 17: 'Yet he has not left himself without testimony'), Acts 15 (the Council of Jerusalem) and Acts 17 (Paul's sermon at the Areopagus). In this article I want to concentrate on Acts 15: 1-35 as one of the most often mentioned passages. Many writers refer, in those books and articles, to Acts 15, but unfortunately usually without giving a precise exegesis. Most of them only hint at the

---

1. This article has also been published in the *Journal for African Christian Thought*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (June, 2003.): 44-54.

2. This article is dedicated to the Dean, the Rev. Dr. Jonas N. Dah, and the entire staff of the Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Kumba/Cameroon) for giving me the freedom and confidence to develop a course in African Theology during the years 1998-2002.

3. T. S. Maluleke, 'Black and African Theology after Apartheid and the Cold War: An Emerging Paradigm', *Exchange*, Vol. 29/No. 3 (2000): 206.

4. J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 232.

meaning and importance of the passage for African Theology. I will give some examples, which are in no way exhaustive.

At an early stage, E. Bolaji Idowu wrote that the Church in Africa came into being with a prefabricated theology and that converts found themselves in the position of those early converts before the Council of Jerusalem, by being required to undergo some equivalent of circumcision.<sup>5</sup> Kwame Bediako refers, both in his PhD dissertation *Theology and Identity* and his later *Christianity in Africa*, often to the book of Acts.<sup>6</sup> His references to Acts 15 are usually related to the issue of the Judaizers and Paul as the one who ensured that Gentiles would feel at home in the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> Justin Ukpong mentions Acts 15, relating it to Jesus' model and approach to inculturation, while hinting that this text fights against the imposition of Jewish culture.<sup>8</sup> Eugene Hillman quotes Acts 15 in support of his 'radically new attitude' towards a thoroughgoing Africanization of Christianity in Africa.<sup>9</sup> Kwesi Dickson devotes in his book *Uncompleted Mission* quite a few pages to 'mission in the Acts of the Apostles' in which he also writes on the Council of Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup> According to him mission in Africa is uncompleted due to the exclusivist character of Christian mission, especially by excluding Gentile traditions.<sup>11</sup> Though the last writer is more serious on exegesis, it still remains quite general. We must register a lack of thorough Biblical exegesis of the book of Acts in general and Acts 15 in particular. One exception is the dissertation of Mbachu Hilary, entitled *Inculturation*

---

5. I. Bolaji Idowu, 'The Predicament of the Church in Africa' in C. G. Baëta (ed.), *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies presented and discussed at the seventh International African Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 426 and 434.

6. K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992); *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press/Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

7. See e.g. *Theology and Identity*, 249.

8. J.S. Ukpong, 'Christology and Inculturation' in R. Gibellini (ed.) *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 58.

9. E. Hillman, C.S.Sp., *Toward an African Christianity: Inculturation Applied* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 28-48.

10. K. A. Dickson, *Uncompleted Mission: Christianity and Exclusivism*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 43-48.

11. *Ibid.*, 137.

*Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today*, which I have gratefully consulted.<sup>12</sup>

In this article I want to elaborate on the exegesis of Acts 15 and examine its importance for African Theology. From the above it seems that this passage plays quite a fundamental role in the existence of African Theology. That is why I will, firstly, draw the contours of the discourse in which this text is functioning in African theological thinking. Secondly, I will carefully try to understand the theology of the Apostolic Council as given by Luke. Finally, I will bring the first and second sections together by drawing out the implications of the Apostolic Council for African Theology.

## **2. The Discourse.**

Before plunging straight into the exegesis of Acts 15, it is important to demonstrate the discourse in which Acts 15 plays such a central role. In this way I also want to reveal, right from the beginning, my agenda for reading Acts 15. My hermeneutic presuppositions will therefore be explicit in order that nobody need guess for hidden interests. Surely, I want to examine whether Acts 15 can be used in support of the very existence of African Theology, as some African Theologians seem to suggest.

### **2.1 The roots of African Theology.**

The official beginning of African Theology is often marked by the publication of *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* ('Some black priests wonder') published in 1956 by a group of Roman Catholic priests from Zaire.<sup>13</sup> After that a host of publications followed both by Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians. Though it is difficult to retrieve all streams in African Theology under one heading, it is possible to identify some basic roots for the origin and development of African Theology. John Parratt identifies two fundamental shortcomings of Western missionary Christianity as the main roots.<sup>14</sup> These were expressed in the following two areas of complaint: (1) Western missionary Christianity was an ally of the colonial

---

12. Mbachu, H., *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today*. European University Studies, Vol. 520 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995).

13.A. Abble, et. al., *Des Prêtres noirs s'interrogent* (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1956).

14. J. Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 1-8.

process. As Christianity came together with a system of injustice and oppression, it had from the beginning a wrong ‘marriage’ with political power in Africa. Though this critique of missionary Christianity as ‘colonialism at prayer’ has been relativized in later periods,<sup>15</sup> it was a strong emotion pitted against the former missionaries. (2) Western missionary Christianity devalued African culture and dismissed African traditional religion as heathen and pagan. They stressed the discontinuity of the new Christian religion with the former traditional religious life. In order to substantiate this point, many authors quote the following, by now famous, statement of Edward Fasholé-Luke:

Western Missionaries stressed aspects of discontinuity between Christianity and African cultures and traditional religion to such an extent that they excluded the aspects of continuity between Christianity and African cultures and religion. They condemned without proper evaluation African religious beliefs and practices and substituted Western cultural and religious practices. This had the effect of making it impossible for a person to be a Christian and remain genuinely and authentically an African.<sup>16</sup>

According to Parratt, these two shortcomings of the Western missionary movement have led to the two chief concerns of African Theology, namely on the one hand its relationship with political power, and on the other its relationship with African culture.<sup>17</sup> These concerns grew later into the development of the two main streams of African theology, namely the ‘liberation stream’ and the ‘inculturation stream’. The liberationists were, generally, more concerned with the political implications of the gospel, while the inculturationists concentrated, almost exclusively, on issues of (traditional) culture. One of the main representatives of the liberation stream in Africa was Black Theology in Southern Africa, while African Theology was concerned with inculturation.<sup>18</sup>

According to Parratt, these two streams had a common origin in the rejection of missionary Christianity. The relationship between the liberation and inculturation streams, however, has not always been cordial, especially since John Mbiti attacked Black Theology so

---

15. The book of Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989) is a good example.

16. E. Fasholé-Luke, ‘Introduction’ in E. Fasholé-Luke, R. Gray, A. Hastings, and G. Tasié (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 357.

17. Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 4.

18. See for terminology and the theological development of these streams: E. Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

severely in an early stage of its development.<sup>19</sup> Desmond Tutu tried to prevent Mbiti's article from doing more harm by writing one year later, in 1975, his *Black Theology and African Theology - Soulmates or Antagonists?*<sup>20</sup> He argued passionately that Black Theology and African Theology, despite differences due to their different contexts, were soulmates and had much in common. He stressed that both forms of theology 'have arisen as reaction against an unacceptable state of affairs'.<sup>21</sup> African Theology objects against the identification of Christian faith with Western civilization, while Black Theology objects against the bias that humanity is defined in terms of the white man. 'To be really human, the black man had to see himself and be seen as a chocolate coloured white man.'<sup>22</sup> Both react against Western ethnocentrism and attitudes of superiority; against the claim that white is right. Tutu tried to keep Black and African Theology close together by understanding Black Theology like the inner and smaller circle in a series of concentric circles of African Theology.<sup>23</sup>

Like Parratt and Tutu, Tinyiko Sam Maluleke also identifies commonalities between the liberation and inculturation streams of African Theology. He observes the following:

Cold-war era African Theology whether it be 'inculturational' or 'liberational' proceeded out of the recognition of Africa's massive victimization and exploitation.<sup>24</sup>

Maluleke notices that the new African Theology, originating after the Cold-war era and after Apartheid, has a different gaze than seeing Africans only as door-mats trampled upon by civilizers, missionaries and colonialists. 'It is a gaze from within and a gaze that zooms on Africa's creative, innovative and *agentive* spirit.'<sup>25</sup> But the earlier African Theology stood on common grounds in the explicit rejection of their victimization, both in the field of political

---

19. J. Mbiti, 'An African views American Black Theology' in *Worldview*, Vol. 17/No. 8, (August, 1974): 41- 44. Reprinted in J. H. Cone and G. S. Wilmore (eds), *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979).

20. D. Tutu, 'Black Theology and African Theology - Soulmates or Antagonists?' in J. Parratt (ed.) *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 36-44.

21. *Ibid.*, 39.

22. *Ibid.*, 40.

23. *Ibid.*, 43.

24. T. S. Maluleke, 'Black and African Theology after Apartheid and the Cold War: An Emerging Paradigm', *Exchange*, Vol. 29/No. 3 (2000): 197.

25. *Ibid.*, 201.

power and in that of culture. African Theology is the result of a reaction against cultural and ecclesiastical colonialism.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 Identity.

African Theology is thus protesting against the implicit message of colonization and missionary expansion, namely that being African is equal to being inferior. Alioune Diop expresses in a sharp way what many would assert: 'Western religion has succeeded in converting African Christians into a people without soul or visage, a pale shadow of the dominating pride of the Christian West'.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, Engelbert Mveng has stressed the devastating effects of this implicit message, for which he uses the term 'anthropological poverty':

When persons are deprived not only of goods and possessions of a material, moral, intellectual, cultural, or sociological order, but of everything that makes up the foundation of their being-in-the-world and the specificity of their 'ipseity' as individual, society, and history - when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history, their language, their faith universe, and their basic creativity, deprived of all their rights, their hopes, their ambitions - they sink into a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being, essence, and dignity of the human person. It is this poverty that we call anthropological poverty.<sup>28</sup>

But, more than anyone else, has Kwame Bediako capitalized on the importance of the rejection of this implicit message that African traditions are inferior. He has, in the wake of his mentor Andrew Walls,<sup>29</sup> struggled to emphasize the importance of continuity between the Christianity present and the pre-Christian past, introducing the term 'identity' as a central

---

26. D. Tutu, 'Whither African Theology?' in E. Fasholé-Luke, R. Gray, A. Hastings, and G. Tasié (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 364.

27. Alioune Diop quoted in J. Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company/Trenton: Africa World Press, 1995), 7.

28. E. Mveng, 'Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World' in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 156. See also E. Mveng, 'Third World Theology. What Theology? What Third World?: Evaluation by an African Delegate' in V. Fabella and S. Torres (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology. Papers from the 5th International Conference of EATWOT* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 220.

29. See: A. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books/Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).

theological category for African Theology.<sup>30</sup> In line with the analysis given above, Bediako identifies European ethnocentrism, with its denial of the value of African traditions and African humanity, as the root of African Theology.<sup>31</sup> The resulting anthropological poverty needs to be encountered with a return towards African traditions. African Christians become ‘nobodies’ without a history; without their own religious and cultural past; without their own identity. That is why Bediako writes at one point that ‘the very issue of identity becomes the single most helpful tool for interpreting the early literature of African Theology’.<sup>32</sup> All early African theologians were searching for the recovery of African traditions, pride and dignity and found themselves, to the surprise of the Western theological establishment, forced to move into areas for which no Western theological syllabus had prepared them. They had to embark on the study of African traditions and religions.<sup>33</sup> For a proper African Christian identity, it then became important that there should be ‘integrity of conversion’. This was defined by Kenneth Cragg as ‘a unity of self in which one’s past is genuinely integrated into present commitment, so that the crisis of repentance and faith that makes us Christian truly

---

30. Though others have also used these terms. See e.g. G.W. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1985), 98-99.

31. This is the leading thought in many of Bediako’s publications: K. Bediako, ‘The Roots of African Theology’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol. 13/No. 2 (April, 1989): 58-65; *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990); *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992); *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press/Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); K. Bediako, ‘Understanding African Theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century’, *Bulletin for Contextual Theology*, Vol. 3/No. 2 (1996):1-11.

32. K. Bediako, ‘The Roots of African Theology’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol.13, No. 2 (April, 1989): 59.

33. E.g.: E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longman, 1962); *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973); H. Sawyerr, ‘Ancestor Worship II: The Rationale’, *Sierra Leone Bulletin of Religion* (8/1966); *God: Ancestor or Creator* (London: Longman, 1970); K. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.) *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969); J.S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969); *Concepts of God in Africa* (London: SPCK, 1970); *The Prayers of African Religion* (London: SPCK, 1975); A. Shorter, *African Prayers in Traditional Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1972); G.M. Setiloane, *The Image of God among the Sotho-Tswana* (Rotterdam: A.A. Balkema, 1976); G.C.M. Mulago, *La Religion traditionnelle des Bantu et leur vision du monde*, 2nd ed. (Kinshasa: Catholic Theological Faculty, 1980); P.A. Kalilombe, ‘Spirituality in an African Perspective’ in R. Gibellini, *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 115-135.

integrates what we have been in what we become'.<sup>34</sup> In this way the term identity became a critical category against a Christianity which had robbed African Christians of their history, culture and religion, and which had thrown them into anthropological poverty. In order to stop the continuous harassment of African Christians by missionary Christianity, Christianity in Africa needed to be decolonised!

This discourse concerning the roots and origin of African Theology will set the stage for the further discussion on the Apostolic Council as described in Acts 15. All the examples of African theologians mentioning Acts 15, which I quoted in my introduction, are intrinsically related to this discussion. The theologians mentioned all consider Acts 15 as an important source of inspiration in their search for an authentic African Theology and Christian identity. In the following sections we will investigate whether this assertion is justifiable.

### **3. The Apostolic Council (Acts 15: 1-35)**

This chapter has been the subject of passionate debate among scholars. Nearly every one of them has hacked his own way through the jungle of problems and often it was done in a thoroughly violent fashion.<sup>35</sup>

In this study I am not intending to hack my own way through the jungle of problems. I am not intending to repeat the debate which can be found in the major, and in some cases very detailed, commentaries on the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>36</sup>

Firstly, I am not so much interested in the source-question. Many scholars have discussed the sources which Luke might have used in writing the Acts of the Apostles. Though there certainly will have been manuscripts and oral sources available to Luke, I am of the opinion that we have to deal with the texts as handed over to us. To me, it is quite

---

34. K. Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 258.

35. E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), 455.

36. I have mainly consulted the following: E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971); F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988); Mbachu, H., *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today*. European University Studies, Vol. 520 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995); B. Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company/Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1998); C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles, Volume II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).



presumptuous to want to know better than the author of the text. Luke was far more than a transmitter of sources. He had his own theological programme. I quite agree with Haenchen when he states:

It becomes clear that he did not write for a history-obsessed twentieth century generation, but meant his narrative to implant in his own generation the certainty that its Gentile Christianity was in order, authorized by God and responsible men.<sup>37</sup>

My second point is related to this. I do not want to concentrate too much on the historical questions. Generations of scholars have struggled to get to the historical truth of the book of Acts in general and the Apostolic Council in particular. Endless are the comparisons between Acts 15 and Galatians 2. Long debates are held on the chronology of the life of Paul. And indeed, scholars have hacked their way through a dense forest. Though all of this is not unimportant, I am more interested in Luke the theologian than in Luke the historian. I want to read the Acts of the Apostles, in first instance, theologically, because the author, I believe, used his historical information to fit his theological position.<sup>38</sup> This may seem irresponsible from a 'modern' perspective. But, as Haenchen writes:

evidently Luke has a conception of the narrator's calling that is different from ours. For him, a narration should not describe an event with the precision of a police-report, but must make the listener or reader aware of the inner significance of what happened, and impress upon him, unforgettably, the truth of the power of God made manifest in it. The writer's obedience is indeed fulfilled in the very freedom of his rendering.<sup>39</sup>

It is quite clear, for example, that Luke presents us with a different Paul compared with the Paul we know from his own letters.<sup>40</sup> Also, Luke gives historical information which deviates from other sources. The example of the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:20 is striking. Paul gives us in Galatians 2 another version. Most commentators tend to accept Paul's version as historically more reliable.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Luke seems in the Acts to downplay the main conflict of

---

37. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 457.

38. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, xxxix-xl.

39. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 110. See his section 'Luke the Writer and Edifier', 103-110.

40. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, xxxiii-xliii and cxii-cxviii; Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 112-116; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 430-438.

41. E.g.: Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 711; Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 464.

the early church by harmonising the positions of the opposing parties.<sup>42</sup> From this, scholars like Barrett conclude that Luke was writing from a perspective quite distant from the actual conflicts, and that his understanding was coloured by the period in which he lived, namely a period in which consensus had at last been reached.<sup>43</sup>

Though the questions on sources and historical facts are not unimportant, and certainly not uninteresting, we are searching for the theological implications of Luke's position, in this article especially concerning the Apostolic Council. After that we may indeed wish to ask whether Luke's theological position, as expressed in Acts 15, is in conflict with other theological positions taken in the New Testament, especially the theology expressed in the letters of Paul. Though it is clear that Luke is not explicitly aware of the Pauline theology expressed in Paul's letters,<sup>44</sup> I wonder whether his theological position is in conflict with Paul's theology. We will consider this point further at a later stage (under section 3.3. g.).

At this point we wish to read Acts 15 not, in first instance, in comparison with Paul's letters but as a central passage in the book of Acts as a whole. The debate in Acts 15 may be described as the centre of Acts, both literally and content wise.<sup>45</sup> According to Witherington it is no exaggeration to say that Acts 15 is the most crucial chapter in the whole book. The chapter is structurally and theologically at the very heart of the book.<sup>46</sup> But it is at the same time, in the theology of Luke, the watershed and turning point. Up to chapter 15 all roads lead to Jerusalem.<sup>47</sup> Everything that happens is related, in one way or another, to the Jerusalem congregation and the apostles. But in chapter 15 Peter makes his last appearance. Also the other apostles disappear from the scene. Before Acts 15 lies the period of apostolic rule, but afterwards the church stands under the sign of the presbyters/elders.<sup>48</sup> There is a shift in

---

42. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 95. For a sharp outline of the conflict, see: M. Goulder, *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

43. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, xl.

44. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, li and cxii; Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 15; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 438.

45. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 696.

46. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 439.

47. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 461

48. *Ibid.*, 462.

emphasis from the Jewish-Christian church to the Gentile-Christian church. Acts 15 stands in the middle between the commandment of Acts 1: 8 ('You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.')

and the arrival of the mission in Rome, at the ends of the earth, in Acts 28. Acts 15 marks the episode which rounds off and justifies the past developments, and makes those to come intrinsically possible.<sup>49</sup> In this way, Acts 15 must be seen in the perspective of the Lukan theology of the Acts of the Apostles as a whole.

### 3.1 Harassment (vs. 1-5)

The developments initiated by the conversion of Cornelius and the mission executed by some men from Cyprus and Cyrene (11:20) led to a situation which required debate. Actually, an initial answer had already been given in 11:18, where the circumcised believers (11:3) had no further objections and concluded that 'God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life'. But the problem turned out to be more fundamental than expected. It was not anymore about accepting a single God-fearing Roman centurion, but about the direction and future of the Jesus-movement concerning ethnic identity. It was in first century Judaism the general view that God had chosen the Jews to be his elect people, which gave them a special status vis-à-vis the other nations of the world. As such, Judaism was a religion which emphasized ethnicity. The circumcision of men was a sign of belonging to the covenant people. Those born into the nations were, by birth, not members of the elected covenant people.<sup>50</sup>

Though we sometimes get the impression that the position against circumcision represents the generally accepted view in the early church, I believe this not to be correct. The demands of 'some men who came down from Judea to Antioch' (15:1) were nothing but normal and probably represented the common position in churches of the first decades. They just asked what the Jewish tradition had always required from outsiders who wanted to join their religion. They just asked that the new converts, who wanted to belong to Jesus, should fulfill the basic rules of proselytes. These requirements are summarised through the password 'circumcision'. Clearly, it was not solely about the physical act of circumcision. Luke adds

---

49. Ibid., 461.

50. David. C. Sim, 'Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew' in M. G. Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Biblical Interpretation Series, Vol. 19 (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996), 171-195.

‘according to the custom taught by Moses’ (vs. 1) and later ‘to obey the law of Moses’ (vs. 5).

Proselytes, according to Bruce,

undertook to observe the Jewish law in its entirety and were accepted as full members of the religious community of Israel. Their initiation involved circumcision (in the case of men), a special sacrifice at the Jerusalem Temple, and (probably by the beginning of the Christian era) a purificatory bath or baptism.<sup>51</sup>

The general characterization of proselytism, as given by Philo of Alexandria, contains three points. Conversion of Gentiles to Judaism implied: (1) religious conversion; (2) ethical conversion; and (3) social conversion.<sup>52</sup> Especially this last aspect implied that proselytes had to leave their family, their country and their customs. Philo writes that proselytes made their kinsfolk into mortal enemies, because they entered the Jewish nation.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, however, Jeremias ranks proselytes under the heading ‘Israelites with a slight blemish’.<sup>54</sup> A converted Gentile was considered in all things an Israelite, but this did not mean that a proselyte enjoyed the same rights as a full Israelite, for they had no authentic Israelite genealogy.<sup>55</sup>

It was, therefore, not unreasonable of those ‘coming from Judea’ to require the Gentiles to become proselytes. They had, in order to follow Jesus, to be brought into the covenant with God which was symbolised through the circumcision of all male believers. We may be quite sure that they were fully convinced of the legitimacy of their position. Probably they could not even imagine another position; how could people follow Jesus without doing it in the Jewish tradition? Sim comments on this circumcision party:

They were not conservative legalists who failed to understand the implications of the Christ event, but ordinary Jews who clearly took seriously the ancient Jewish traditions in the Hebrew scriptures which emphasised the eternal covenant between God and the nation of Israel, and the role which the law played in the context of that covenant.... Given the traditional views of these people, their attitude towards Gentile converts to their messianic movement

---

51. F.F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday-Galilee, 1980), 266.

52. P. Borgen, *Early Christianity and Hellenistic Judaism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 56-57.

53. *Ibid.*, 57.

54. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 320-334.

55. *Ibid.*, 328.

within Judaism is both understandable and logical.<sup>56</sup>

Barrett reminds us correctly that these Judaeans do not say: Gentiles cannot be saved at all.

They say: You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised. This almost all Jews would have allowed, though some Jews were more, others less, enthusiastic about making proselytes, it was generally recognized that Gentiles, if they complied with the necessary conditions, might enter the Jewish fold. The Judaeans simply affirm the familiar proposition: the Jews are the elect people of God, and male Jews are circumcised - as infants if born into a Jewish family, otherwise upon conversion.<sup>57</sup>

The problem the Judaeans were confronted with in Antioch was completely new. Now they were confronted with people from the nations who wanted to follow Jesus *without* becoming proselytes; without becoming part of the elect people of God. These people did not want to leave their pagan language, culture and traditions. The Judaeans must have been astonished and embarrassed by the impossibility of this option.

They were actually confronted with a problem any missionary religion is confronted with sooner or later in its existence, namely 'how do we allow a foreigner to join us? Should they assume our culture and identity or can they remain themselves?' Lamin Sanneh, in his book *Translating the Message*, has developed the thesis that there are, in general, two paradigms of doing mission. Any missionary religion has to decide whether they want to perform mission by 'diffusion' or by 'translation'.<sup>58</sup> The first paradigm makes the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. This implies that the message, which is carried to other peoples and cultures, cannot be extracted from the culture of the carrier, the missionary. The indigenous culture and traditions (on the receiving end) are automatically in an anomalous position as they are profane over against the religious culture and tradition of the missionary. Mission by translation is, on the other hand, characterized by making the recipient culture the true and final locus of the proclamation. In this paradigm the message needs to be translated into the language and cultural traditions of those who receive the

---

56. David. C. Sim, 'Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew', 180.

57. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 699.

58. L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 29.

message. Consequently, there is in such a case no holy language or God-chosen cultural tradition to be implanted in another context.<sup>59</sup>

‘Those coming from Judea’ could not imagine dissolving the link between the message of Jesus and the Jewish culture and religion. They could only perceive the new situation in the perspective of the proselytization of the Gentiles, which fits neatly with Sanneh’s description of ‘mission as diffusion’. And so they required circumcision for ‘unless you are circumcised according to the custom (ethos) taught by Moses, you cannot be saved’ (vs. 1). The new converts must not just be circumcised, they need to live according to the normative way of the Israelites. ‘Ethos’ is synonymous with custom and tradition.<sup>60</sup> The requirement added in vs. 5 explains the position of this party explicitly: they are required to keep the law of Moses, implying that they must become Jews and leave their culture and traditions.

Luke describes the response of the leaders in Antioch in just one sentence: ‘this brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute (stásis) and debate (zètesis) with them’ (vs. 2). Zètesis signifies debate on a controversial issue. Stasis, however, is stronger in connotation and has the meaning, besides dispute, of riot and revolt (compare Mk 15:7; Acts 19:40). The meaning of these words, qualified by the Lukan understatement ‘ouk oligos’ (not a little) depicts very well the intensity and extent of the dissension and quarrel that took place.<sup>61</sup> It was more than a hot debate. The people from Judea excluded the believers in Antioch from Jesus, and from salvation. This must have been an utter shock to the party in Antioch. Later on, James in his speech declares that ‘we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles’ (vs. 19). ‘Not make it difficult’ is, however, a weak translation of the Greek word ‘parenochlein’. Others translate ‘we should not trouble’<sup>62</sup> or ‘stop overburdening’<sup>63</sup> or ‘stop annoying’.<sup>64</sup> In a modern English vocabulary of (ethnic) conflict, I would prefer to translate: stop harassing the Gentiles. James

---

59. Ibid., 9. Also: L. Sanneh, ‘Translatability in Islam & Christianity in Africa: A Thematic Approach’ in T.D. Blakely, W.E.A. van Beek & D.L. Thomson (eds.), *Religion in Africa: Experience and Expression* (London: James Currey, 1994), 23-45.

60. Mbachu Hillary, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995), 109.

61. Ibid., 114.

62. Ibid., 196.

63. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 448.

64. Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles II*, 729.

was referring to the demands made by ‘some men from Judea’. It was a harassment to excommunicate the believers in Antioch if they refused to give in to the requirements of the dominant party, i.e. the church of Judea. It was felt by the believers in Antioch as a harassment that they were forced to become proselytes and give up their Gentile identity.

This did not mean that they simply ignored the position of those coming from Judea. The Jerusalem church (in vs. 24 we hear that the men from Judea were indeed identified as ‘some of us’, i.e. from the Jerusalem church) was the centre of the Church! It would have been extremely difficult for Paul and Barnabas, together with the believers in Antioch, to ignore the signals from Judea and Jerusalem. That was the dominant centre. There, according to Luke, it had all started with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The movement was from Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth (1:8). They could not continue without the blessing of the church of the apostles. They wanted to preserve the movement from its first schism, and thus were prepared to go, with a high-powered delegation,<sup>65</sup> to Jerusalem and discuss the matter properly.

In Luke’s account they do not just visit the apostles. They are welcomed by the church (ekklesia), and the apostles (apostolois) and the elders (presbyteroi) respectively, indicating that the matter was not settled indoors, but that the whole Jerusalem church was involved. Even though the church as a whole is not mentioned in vs. 6, it becomes clear in vs. 12 that the whole assembly was present. Luke does not waste much time in getting to the point. Again, his account is not trying to give us historical details. Luke wants to get his theological message across. The Judaeans are now specified as ‘some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees’. They repeat the prerequisites for belonging to the believers in Jesus Christ (vs. 5), namely that they should become proselytes and leave their heathen ways.

### **3.2 Resolution (vs. 6-19)**

Unfortunately, we do not receive the content of the debate as such. Luke only gives us the resolution as expressed by the mouths of Peter and James. We do not even get any words from the side of Paul or Barnabas, only the information that ‘the whole assembly became silent as they listened to them telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (vs.12). Again, Luke is not interested in giving an account of what actually happened. He only gives us the theological reasoning of Peter and James. Besides,

---

65. Mbachu Hillary, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15*, 114.

Luke has informed the reader sufficiently about the conversion of the Gentiles in the preceding chapters. There is no use in repeating it.

The speech of Peter is unintelligible without a knowledge of chapters 11 and 12 on the conversion of Cornelius and its implications for Peter. Based on that, Peter describes himself as an apostle to the Gentiles (vs. 7). For Luke it is very important to stress not only that the Apostolic Council accepted the Gentile mission, but that God initiated this mission by both choosing Peter for this task (vs. 7) and by giving the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles (vs. 8). Compared with the impressions we get from the letters of Paul, we may conclude that Luke's version is trying not to oppose Paul and Peter, but to conceive of them as direct colleagues. We might even say that in the perspective of Luke's theology, Paul is the successor of Peter!

The speech of Peter must be understood from what happened to him during the period of the conversion of Cornelius, as it influenced his world-view fundamentally. Peter was an orthodox Jew and he expressed himself the implications of being a Jew in chapter 10:28: 'You are well aware that it is against the law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him'.

Witherington makes the following comments on this verse:

Peter advises the assembled group that it was taboo for a Jew to associate with or visit a foreigner, that is, if he or she wished to remain a clean Jew in good standing. The word *αθεμιτον* here could be translated 'unlawful', but it probably has its weaker sense of 'taboo' or 'strongly frowned upon.' There was no formal law that strictly forbade Jews from associating with Gentiles, it was just that they had to be prepared to pay the price for doing so, the price being becoming ritually unclean. Texts written by Roman authors show that Jews did regularly refuse to associate with Gentiles, and were objects of suspicion because of their 'antisocial' behaviour.<sup>66</sup>

Of central importance was that social intercourse with Gentiles, though not categorically forbidden, was liable to render a Jew ceremonially unclean. Bruce explains that entering Gentile buildings, handling articles that belonged to Gentiles and most especially food from Gentiles made Jews unclean and thus made almost all forms of intercourse intolerable.<sup>67</sup>

Sanders writes extensively on the importance of purity as part of observing the Law of God<sup>68</sup>

---

66. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 353.

67. Bruce, *The Book of the ACTS*, 210.

68. E.P. Sanders, 'Observing th Law of God II: Circumcision, Purity, Food, Charity and Love' in *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE - 66 CE* (London: SCM Press/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 213-240.



and concludes that ‘the peculiarity of the Jewish diet was almost as famous as observance of the Sabbath’.<sup>69</sup>

It is, therefore, not surprising that the vision, which Peter experienced, was related to food and purity, the very problem at stake (in Luke’s following chapters) between Jewish believers and believers from the Gentiles. Three times Peter refused to eat the food presented to him in the vision. Peter refused because ‘I have never eaten anything impure or unclean’ (10:14). But the voice insisted and told him ‘not to call anything impure that God has made clean’ (vs.15). When Peter later entered the house of Cornelius, he apparently had understood the message, for he added, after his statement that he was acting against the Jewish law, the confession ‘but God has shown to me that I should not call any man impure or unclean’ (vs.28).

We are witnessing here the ‘conversion’ of an orthodox Jew. Actually, in these chapters the change is not so much on the part of Cornelius but far more on the part of Peter! He underwent a fundamental shift in understanding. He had to distance himself from the idea that Jews were pure while Gentiles were impure. He needed to break with Jewish ethnocentrism and exclusivism. The confession that ‘God shows no favouritism but accepts people from every nation who fear him and do what is right’ (10:34) was explosive. Explosive because it exploded the confines of his narrow-minded thinking and cultural practice and opened the way to a multi-cultural and multi-national movement. From a Jewish perspective this was unheard of, stunning and unbelievable. That is why the believers in Jerusalem criticized and questioned Peter upon returning to Jerusalem. Again we notice the emphasis on circumcision and food: ‘you went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them’ (11:3). In his explanation Peter mentioned his vision. But the most important argument in favour of the acceptance of the Gentiles was the fact that the Holy Spirit had been poured out on them. Peter could not oppose God! This is the main argument in 10:47, 11:17 and also in 15:8. The change in opinion is not Peter’s whim of the day, but is initiated by God in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Mentioning Acts 15: 8 brings us back to Peter’s speech at the Apostolic Council. The former paragraphs on Cornelius’ conversion explain that Peter understood himself as chosen by God to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles and that God accepted the Gentiles (i.e. Cornelius and his household) by giving the Holy Spirit to them. Luke stresses here that the Gentiles are

---

69. Ibid., 237.

being treated by God just as the Jewish believers. Luke makes Peter use three times the same phrase to express this equality. First in 10:47 Peter states that ‘So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us...’. In Greek Luke uses the words: ‘as also us’. He repeats the same formula in 11:27 and again in 15:8. This is emphasised even more in the next verse saying ‘God has made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith’. Luke refers here to God who shows no favouritism (10:34) as this is essential in his theological programme. The old separation between Jews and Gentiles does not exist anymore, for we are not purified by ritual laws or external belonging to the people of God, but by faith.

When we further analyse the speech of Peter, it is important to notice that he is particularly negative on Jewish traditions. He does not mention the law explicitly, but refers to it as a yoke (vs. 10). That does not express adequately the general view of Jews concerning the law. For most it was a blessing and a privilege.<sup>70</sup> Bruce acknowledges that certainly not all Jews saw the law as an intolerable burden, but adds that this might be more the opinion of the dominant centre than the feeling of ordinary believers, especially those from the periphery, like Galilean Jews. Bruce reminds us of the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus’ ‘yoke’ is compared with the heavy loads put on the shoulders of others by the Pharisees who sit at Moses’ seat (Matt.11:29-30/23:4).<sup>71</sup> Again, we have to understand Luke’s position within the theology of Acts as a whole. Luke does not have the same dialectical relationship with the law as is the case in Paul’s theology. Paul makes a distinction between the spiritual meaning of the law and the cultural expression of it.<sup>72</sup> Luke, however, does not have this dialectical relationship and does not say much that is positive about the law in the Acts of the Apostles. A careful reading of the Pentecost event (Acts 2) might give us an understanding of Luke’s position towards the law.<sup>73</sup> The coming of the Holy Spirit is described in terms closely related to the coming of the law at Sinai (Ex. 19:16-20). Even the feast of Pentecost had become primarily, by the first century AD., a celebration of God’s gift of the law of Moses to Israel.

---

70. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 718; Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 446.

71. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 291.

72. We cannot possibly give an analysis of Paul’s theology concerning the law in this article, but Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians clearly show his dialectical relationship with the Jewish law.

73. See: H. Wagenaar, ‘Babel, Jerusalem and ...Kumba: Missiological Reflections on Genesis 11:1-9 and Acts 2: 1-13’, *International Review of Mission*, No.366 (July 2003).

As the law was the gift of God to guide and lead the people of Israel after their liberation from Egypt (passing through the sea of death) and on their journey towards the promised land, the Holy Spirit is the gift of God to the church after the resurrection of Jesus (passing through death) and on the journey towards the Kingdom of God. In this sense, the Holy Spirit replaces the role and position of the law. The Holy Spirit is the blessing and privilege of the church! That is why several scholars have proposed that the title of the book of Acts be 'the Acts of the Holy Spirit'.<sup>74</sup>

Luke perceives the law not primarily theologically but culturally. The law is for him a yoke of rules and regulations which give identity to the Jewish people as a people. For him the law is related to the events described in the passages on Cornelius. The law makes a division between pure and impure, between insiders and outsiders. Luke wants to tear down the law which he conceives to be a dividing wall between Jewish and Gentile believers. The equality between the two groups of believers is given in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Are believers saved through the Jewish culture? 'No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are' (vs. 11). It is important to stress at this point that Luke relativizes Jewish culture and identity and denies it as a means of salvation. We are not saved by our cultural heritage and identity, or whatever other identity we may have, but through the grace of Jesus! This means that the culture of the Jewish people should not be imposed on the Gentiles. There is no need of proselytization. But the reverse is true also. The Jews may stick to their culture just as much as the Gentiles may stick to theirs. We could say that culture is theologically contingent in Luke's perspective. Theologically it is contingent; it has no value as to salvation. Mission should not be done by diffusion; the message needs to be preached without cultural imperialism from the side of the missionary party.

This does not mean, however, that culture is unimportant in Luke's view. On the contrary! Luke cherishes cultural diversity as shown in the Pentecost-event already. The Hebrew language is apparently not the language of the Holy Spirit and is consequently not imposed on the Gentiles. The Holy Spirit expresses himself in languages from every nation under heaven (2:5). Languages (and cultures) are used in the process of proclaiming the message to the ends of the earth.

---

74. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 31.

The speech of James is basically in support of Peter's speech and picks up where Peter left off. It links with Peter's experiences and description (vs.14) as giving the main solution to the problem at stake. Luke cannot make a link to any earlier appearance of James. James is only mentioned as a leading figure among the Jerusalem Christians in Acts 11: 17 and 21:18. But there is, for Luke, no theological nor narrative link to be established as was the case with Peter who was the main hero up to Acts 12. James seems to be the second witness in support of the important decision to be made at this council. But he is an important witness. A witness who does the exegesis and interpretation of Scripture and speaks with authority (vs.13: 'Listen to me'; vs. 19: 'I judge'). The use of Peter's Hebrew name Simeon attracts attention. Barrett quotes a beautiful Latin sentence of Bengel: 'Jacobus, Hebraeorum apostolus, Hebraico nomine Petrum appellat'.<sup>75</sup> Beautiful as it may be, it is fallacious also for the judgement is based on material outside Luke's theological thinking. The judgment is mainly based on Paul's Letter to the Galatians and to the Letter of James, where James is understood as an orthodox Jew close to the ideals of the Judaeans. The main problem of picturing James here as close to the Judaeans, following extra-Lukan material, will be revealed when discussing the Apostolic Decree and the Pastoral Letter. James is thus seen as a diplomatic figure, who accepts the radical view of Peter, but compromises between him and the Judaeans by formulating some basic rules for the Gentile believers. In the following (under 3.3) I will reject this image of James. Though it may have been intended to give the passage a Semitic air, regarded as suitable for James,<sup>76</sup> it hardly conceals the fact that 'James speaks throughout as a Hellenistic Jew dependent on the LXX'.<sup>77</sup> The fact that he quotes from the LXX, which has a textual difference with the Hebrew original, proves that Luke does not portray him as a Jew close to the ideals of the Judaeans.<sup>78</sup> Haenchen writes: 'Nearly every expositor concedes that the Jewish Christian James would not in Jerusalem have used a Septuagint text, differing from the Hebrew original, as scriptural proof.'<sup>79</sup>

---

75. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 723. 'James, the apostle of the Hebrews, uses Peter's Hebrew name.'

76. *Ibid.*, 723.

77. *Ibid.*, 724.

78. See for this discussion: Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 722-728; Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 448; Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 293-294.

79. *Ibid.* Against Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 456-460.

Theologically important in the speech of James is the fact that ‘God at first has shown his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself’ (vs.14: eks ethnoon laon). This is a paradoxical statement from a Jewish perspective,<sup>80</sup> because a people (laos) is taken out of the nations (ethnoon), meaning separating them from the others, according to Deuteronomy 14:2. Now a people (laos) for God himself is taken from *among* the nations (ethnoon: Gentiles). This is properly in line with the experience of the early church, both Jewish and Gentile believers, but it does not yet say anything about *how* the Gentiles will be a people of God, i.e. as Gentiles or as proselytes. For this the next verse is of adamant importance. Verse 19 may be considered the central verse of the whole chapter. Earlier I have already voiced my opinion that the translation ‘we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God’ is too faint for expressing the impact of these words. We might want to translate verse 19 as follows: ‘Therefore, I judge, we must stop harassing those from the nations (the Gentiles) who are turning to God’.

So far we could summarize our findings as follows. The conflict raised by the visit of the ‘some men from Judea’ (vs.1) resulted in a major meeting between the representatives of the Gentile-believers (Paul and Barnabas) and the whole Jerusalem congregation. Luke minimizes the role of Paul and Barnabas, while he makes Peter and James express the theologically important issues: God, through the Holy Spirit, has initiated the Gentile mission, and this is in agreement with the words of the prophets. The implications are far-reaching and that is why we said earlier that this is the central chapter in the Acts of the Apostles, which rounds off the past developments, and makes possible those to come. The position of the Judaeans, and those who belonged to the party of the Pharisees (vs. 5), has been rejected. The believers from the nations do not have to become proselytes when they want to confess and follow the Lord Jesus. The Jewish culture will not be imposed on them, implying that they do not need to shed or abolish their own cultural identity. This must be considered as a fundamental decision with consequences which the Jerusalem Council could not possibly perceive fully at that moment. In this council, Luke shows us that the early church chose against ‘mission as diffusion’. It is actually a choice leading to a church which is intrinsically plural. The Council chose against a future in which the Church would have one language, one cultural identity, one homogeneous appearance. Imposing requirements on the Gentiles is not

---

80. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 293.

allowed, while their language, culture and traditions should not be considered inferior. Forcing them to change their cultural identity is considered a harassment.

### **3.3 Apostolic Decree and Pastoral Letter (vs. 20 - 35)**

James' speech, however, has not finished yet! He adds a sentence, which has become known as the Apostolic Decree. This is perhaps one of the most debated verses in the entire Scripture, yet it has remained a puzzle. John Proctor writes that 'even under the most careful historical enquiry, the meaning and rationale of the decree were never entirely clear'.<sup>81</sup> This makes us careful in making final statements. I will try to read the Decree in the perspective of Luke's theological thinking.

Because Luke does not give us the content of the deliberations of the council, we are left empty handed as to the theological reasoning behind this Apostolic Decree. While no (other) theological reasoning is given, we are only allowed to read the Decree against the theological reasoning given in this chapter. I believe that several authors have been 'too creative' in their search for external theological answers. Some seem to recreate Luke into a sophisticated theologian who knew the writings of the New Testament and who was well aware of all the difficulties which we are able to identify today.

I propose that we should not read the Apostolic Decree as containing a decision which goes against the content of the rest of the chapter, like some of the authors seem to suggest, unless there is clear evidence to do so. As I wrote above, some authors try to portray James as being close to the ideas of the Judaeans (as Paul portrays him in Galatians) and think James formulates a compromise, in which the Gentiles are not forced to be circumcised but are still required to keep a basic set of rules. In that way James would have been able to draw the meeting into acceptance. This, however, does not correspond with Luke's account in Acts 15. Luke does not portray James like that. There is also no reason to suppose that vs. 20 suddenly undermines the earlier speech of Peter. There is no reason to assume that the hearts of the Gentiles are suddenly not purified by faith only (vs. 9), but by some additional requirements. There is no reason to assume that some food is impure now, while Peter had been taught not to call impure what God has made clean (10:15). There is no reason to assume that there are

---

81. J. Proctor, 'Proselytes and Pressure Cookers: The Meaning and Application of Acts 15:20', *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXXV/No. 339 (October 1996): 469.

new requirements which are needed for salvation, apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus (vs. 11). I will develop my position further in the 7 following points.

**a.**

As we do not have obvious reasons to assume that we should read vs. 20 against the resolution of the Council, we must try to extricate the meaning of the verse in the Lucan context. Luke's main concern has been the relationship between the believers from the Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. Jewish believers insisted on the proselytization of the Gentile believers. The Council, however, decided definitely against this and insisted that salvation was not related to cultural rules and regulations. Accepting this resolution does not imply, however, that all problems are over. The concern for the relationship between the different groups in the Church remains of ultimate importance. The relational problems, caused by purity limitations, are not solved by this theological decision. By giving cultural and ethnic freedom to the Gentiles, the problems of the Jewish believers are not yet solved.

It must have been quite obvious for the Council that the resolution was going to be very disquieting and difficult to accept for the Jewish believers. Centuries of exclusivist and ethnocentric thinking could not simply be abolished by the decision of a council. And thus the Council must have been concerned about the future unity of the Church, for in most cities Jewish and Gentiles believers were living alongside. They could anticipate a split in the Church, for Jewish believers would not associate with ritually impure Gentile believers and certainly not at table. Remember the food issue was the core of the problem in the passages on Cornelius and Peter. This now would pose a very serious problem for worship, because table fellowship was an intrinsic part of Christian worship (e.g. 2:42; 2:46; 20:7).<sup>82</sup> The Decree, I believe therefore, is the logical consequence of the Council's resolution as they could not take a decision and then leave the pastoral and practical consequences untouched. They had to respond to the problem the resolution would pose for the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers, as this had been the preliminary concern in the preceding chapters.

**b.**

Based on point a. we can read vs. 20 only in the perspective of the food-issue which has been the leading theme in Luke's context. Hence, we must understand the Decree as a proposal to

---

82. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, xc-xciii.

solve the problem of ritual obstruction to social intercourse with the Gentiles from the side of the Jews. Actually, the Gentiles were initially portrayed as the problem, but now the tables are turned and the Jewish believers become the problem. Their food and purity regulations, as external expression of their ethnic reasoning, pose a problem for the social intercourse between the different groups. Vs. 20, baptised the Apostolic Decree, which has the connotation of ‘command’ and ‘order’, should be read as a piece of pastoral advice to the Gentile believers in their practical intercourse with Jewish believers in order that the unity of the Church should not be endangered. Earlier we wrote that the Council’s resolution was explosive. It could indeed explode the unity of the Church.

That is why the Council advises to keep some basic requirements in their relationship with Jewish believers, in order to accommodate them: ‘It is necessary to keep these regulations (vs. 28: these necessary things), otherwise it will be impossible for the Jewish believers to associate with you, and certainly at table. You should not jeopardize the unity of the Church. You are free, but your freedom is limited by the constraint of the community in which you find yourself’. Bruce writes:

It was natural that, when the stumbling block of circumcision has been removed, an effort should have been made to provide a practical *modus vivendi* for two groups drawn from such different ways of life. The *modus vivendi* was probably similar to the terms on which Jews of the dispersion found it possible to have a measure of fellowship with God-fearing Gentiles.<sup>83</sup>

c.

This leads us to the content of the requirements of this piece of pastoral advice. We will certainly have to turn to ‘Moses’ as hinted in vs. 21. Haenchen writes in this respect:

This (i.e. vs. 21) would suggest that these four requirements are generally known as ‘Mosaic’, hence can be found in the Pentateuch. And in fact they stand in Lev. 17 and 18. What is more... they stand in the same order as in the ‘official’ text of the decree (15.29 = 21.25). Lev. 17.8 contains the condemnation of heathen offerings, 17.10ff. that of ‘aimatos’ (blood), 17.13 that of ‘pniktou’ (that which is strangled) and 18.6ff that of marriages to near relatives. What links these four prohibitions together, and at the same time distinguishes them from all other ‘ritual’ requirements of ‘Moses’, is that they - and only they - are given not only to Israel but also to strangers dwelling among Jews. Whereas in other respects the law applies solely to Jews, it imposes these four prohibitions on *Gentiles also!*<sup>84</sup>

---

83. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 295-296.

84. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 469.



This implies that the Council required the same rules from the Gentiles as those that had been given to the Gentiles who lived among the Jews. If these prohibitions were followed, then the purity rules would allow Jewish believers to have social and religious intercourse with Gentile believers. If the Gentiles would abstain from food polluted by idols; from blood; from the meat of strangled animals and from ‘porneia’, i.e. marriages to near relatives (‘porneia’ is not fornication in the ordinary sense but forbidden family relationships,<sup>85</sup> cf. I Cor. 5:1), i.e. observe basic ritual purity, then the unity of the Church would not, from the outset, be jeopardized. These regulations are not to be explained as an external yoke on the shoulders of the Gentiles through which they may receive salvation (though these could be experienced as quite a heavy burden), but a piece of advice for accommodating the Jewish believers. The Jewish believers would be able to have social intercourse with the Gentile believers if these kept those basic prohibitions. Mbachu writes with insight:

Once the Gentile converts observe the prescriptions of the Mosaic Law as laid down in the decree, they have done what is necessary for a harmonious relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Church. This demand is a *burden* but it is a *necessary burden* to remove barriers and tensions in the Christian community. Any demand beyond the mentioned four is an unnecessary burden on the Gentile Christians.<sup>86</sup>

**d.**

Based on the points a. - c. above, I reject an ethical reading of the Decree as strongly defended by Witherington.<sup>87</sup> He reads the Decree as a basic set of ethical requirements to be followed by Gentiles Christians. They are, according to him, all related to the Jewish rejection of the detestable pagan temple worship. He explicitly writes that food and fellowship were issues of Acts 10-11, while ‘here in Acts 15 another social matter is under discussion, namely, what to do about Gentiles’ associations with pagan temples..., a rather different matter’.<sup>88</sup>

I reject such an ethical reading, not because I assume that there was no problem with pagan temple worship for Gentile Christians, but, firstly, because it is a theme strange to the Lucan context in this chapter and in those preceding Acts 15. Studying Witherington’s argumentation it becomes clear that he reads this passage from a general New Testament

---

85. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 734.

86. Mbachu, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15*, 218.

87. Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 462-470.

88. *Ibid.*, 469-470.

perspective, with many references to Paul's letters. He turns all 4 prohibitions into moral rules (e.g. blood becomes bloodshed; 'porneia' becomes temple prostitution) and dissociates them from the purity-perspective, which was at stake in the social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles. Haenchen writes correctly that 'indeed these legal obligations do not concern 'morality' but are requirements from what we would nowadays call the 'ritual' sphere.'<sup>89</sup>

Secondly, Witherington's reasoning would imply that, apart from these 4 basic rules, everything else would be permitted to Gentile Christians. I cannot believe that other rules and regulations of the Old Testament would not be of importance anymore. What of keeping the Sabbath; what of the 10 commandments; what of the basic requirement of love? The ethical reading of the Decree seems to relativize the (ethical) meaning of the Old Testament. The fact that Luke rejects the law as a yoke does not mean that he rejects the Old Testament! Here it is of fundamental importance to understand the main issue at stake in Acts 15. Namely, that it concerns the issue of cultural and ethnic identity. It is this cultural identity which should not be imposed on Gentile Christians. The Jewish culture and traditions are relativized, not the ethical relevance of the Old Testament! From the perspective of reading the Decree as an ethical instruction, it is quite understandable that the Western text has included the negative version of the Golden Rule ('Do not do unto others ...').<sup>90</sup> The copyists and editors must have frowned at the sight of such a minimalist ethical approach and decided to include, at least, a fundamental ethical law, expressed in the Golden Rule. However, it was a mistake to read the Decree as a minimum set of ethical rules.

e.

Based on the points a.- c. above, I also reject a reading of the Apostolic Decree as a compromise, as defended by Barrett.<sup>91</sup> He understands the Decree as a compromise between Paul and James, the extremists of right and left, who were both defeated by the centre party.<sup>92</sup> The problem, again, is that this reasoning does not follow the Lucan context. The idea of Paul and James as extremists is not part of the Lucan thinking. Besides, the reasoning of Barrett

---

89. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 469.

90. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, 735; Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 460.

91. *Ibid.*, cxiii; cxvi; 744.

92. *Ibid.*, cxiii.

leads to acceptance of certain rules as necessary for salvation. He writes at two separate places:

If the Gentiles are to be saved they must accept certain legal conditions - a sharply reduced list of conditions but conditions nonetheless.<sup>93</sup>

It is not said, You Gentiles are completely free of legal requirements, but as a matter of courtesy to your Jewish brothers you might be so kind as to abstain from... This is important for the understanding of the Decree; Luke at any rate understood it as a matter not of courtesy but of compulsion, and therefore presumably as a condition of salvation.<sup>94</sup>

This is, however, radically against the theology of the book of Acts in general and Acts 15 in particular. I am quite astonished to see Barrett contravening the main decision of the Jerusalem Council, namely that the hearts of all believers are purified by faith, and that salvation is obtained by the grace of the Lord Jesus (15: 9-11).

**f.**

I would prefer to baptize the Apostolic Letter as a Pastoral Letter. Not only do I base my opinion on the content of the former points, but on the style and language of the letter as well. The letter is not styled in an authoritarian way as Bruce observes: 'Significance has been attached to the fact that none of the Greek verbs of commanding is used when the council's directives are conveyed'.<sup>95</sup> Though it is an important Pastoral Letter, whose requirements need to be kept for a harmonious living together, it is not pronounced as an imposition from above; from the centre of the Church to the periphery. The language of the letter, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' and 'You do well to avoid these things', implies a piece of pastoral advice in which the reader is seriously urged to take his/her responsibilities towards the community.

**g.**

Earlier, I wrote that we might wonder whether the theological position taken in Acts 15 is in conflict with the theology as expressed in the letters of Paul. I agree with Barrett's opinion

---

93. Ibid., cxvii.

94. Ibid., 745.

95. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 298. Against Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 469.

that Luke's theology seems to be quite ignorant of Paul's letters,<sup>96</sup> but on the point of the Pastoral Letter I recognize a basic convergence with Paul's thinking. Paul would certainly not accept any legalistic imposition related to salvation. His position 'by grace only' stands. But he, too, is willing to limit his freedom when the concerns and problems of the community make this necessary. Especially I Corinthians 8 attests to the fact that our freedom in Christ should not become a stumbling block to the weak (vs. 9). In the interests of the community certain rules and regulations can and should be accepted. This is actually the position taken in the Pastoral Letter in Acts 15: 'You do well to avoid these things. Farewell!'

#### **4. The Implications for African Theology.**

At this point, after having analysed the theology of the Apostolic Council and the Pastoral Letter, we need to summarize our findings, and relate these to the initial discourse of this paper, namely the importance of Acts 15 for African Theology.

Due to the exclusivist ethnocentric convictions of the Jewish tradition, some Jewish believers could not accept Gentile believers as followers of Jesus without their being circumcised and brought into the Jewish nation, nor could they therefore engage in social intercourse with impure Gentiles. The solution to the problem, according to them, was to force the Gentile believers into proselytization, as was acceptable in the Jewish traditions. The Gentile believers, however, did not want to abandon their ethnic and cultural identities but wanted to follow Jesus in their own ways! They saw no necessity in becoming Jews, implying that they had to lay down their own identity and even become hostile against their own traditions and people. As the Jewish believers continued insisting, the Gentile believers experienced this as a continuous harassment. The problem called for a serious meeting.

The Jerusalem Council took a definitive stand, especially based on Peter's experiences concerning the conversion of Cornelius: Gentiles would not be forced into becoming proselytes! Salvation, according to the Council, is not found in the 'conversion' towards the Jewish culture and traditions. The Gentiles are purified by faith and saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus. This stand against proselytization did not solve, though, the initial problem of the exclusivist ethnocentric thinking of the Jewish believers. The concern remained that the unity between Jewish and Gentile believers would not be achieved. Thus the resolution would

---

96. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles II*, cxvi.

automatically lead to two separate churches: a Jewish Christian church and a Gentile Christian church. In order to avoid this danger, the Council of Jerusalem advised the Gentile Christian communities, by means of a Pastoral Letter, to keep some basic prohibitions in order to accommodate the Jewish believers in their cities and communities: 'We admonish you to stick to some basic rules in order that Jewish believers will not, because of purity prescriptions, be forced to separate themselves from you'. In Luke's theological thinking this resolution opens the way to a pluralistic, cross-cultural and multi-national movement of Jesus-followers, instead of a Jewish sect consisting of born Jews and Gentiles converted to Judaism.<sup>97</sup> The Pastoral Letter offers the limitations of the (cultural) freedom which believers have received in the Lord Jesus.

The general opinion of African Theologians in relation to Acts 15 is voiced properly by Mbachu in his dissertation:

Whether its decision is accepted or not, the JC (Jerusalem Council) has enunciated once and for all the basic principle of unconditioned and unconditional evangelisation for the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles within their socio-cultural milieux. So no race or people has any ecclesial authorization to impose its culture on the other - all in the name of spreading the Good News of salvation.<sup>98</sup>

Just as the JC theology did not require the Graeco-Roman people to be judaized and the Jews to be graecized or hellinised in order to be saved, so also should the Igbo not be europeanised or americanised by the missionary message in order to be saved.<sup>99</sup>

When we relate this to the roots of African Theology (2.1) and the theme of 'identity' (2.2) then we understand why Eugene Hillman cried out 'Where the Judaizers had failed the Europeanizers triumphed'.<sup>100</sup> What almost all African theologians have in common against the Western missionary enterprise is the fact that they did not just bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ (for which they are very grateful) but forced Western cultural and ecclesiastical traditions upon African believers. They blame the missionaries for a Judaising attitude: 'you

---

97. David. C. Sim, 'Christianity and Ethnicity in the Gospel of Matthew' in M. G. Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible*. Biblical Interpretation Series, Vol. 19 (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996), 171-177.

98. H. Mbachu, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15*, 272

99. *Ibid.*, 351.

100. E. Hillman, C.S.Sp., *Toward an African Theology: Inculturation Applied* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 38.

cannot be saved in your heathen and backward traditions, unless you are ‘circumcised’ into Western traditions’. Just like the Judaeans, the Western missionaries were (and are!) victims of the exclusivist and ethnocentric traditions of the Western dominant world.

This missionary approach has accomplished that African historical churches are (im)properly influenced by Western Christianity in the fields of education, world view, language, liturgy, music, dressing, church architecture etc. These accomplishments are today largely supported by the African Christian leadership and elites. Hillman observes:

Although lip service was often given to the principle of incarnation, this is usually taken to mean literal translations and cautious adaptations. As in the past, a few indigenous cultural tokens are considered tolerable in practice. But missionary work continues to be reduced to establishing and maintaining western spiritual colonies throughout the non-western world.<sup>101</sup>

This missionary strategy has led, and still leads, African believers away from their own traditions and has left these believers somewhere lost between Africa and Europe. I recall the very serious analysis of Engelbert Mveng on anthropological poverty (2.2). In the same vein Desmond Tutu has diagnosed the African Christian as suffering from a form of religious schizophrenia, a split in the African soul:

With part of himself he has been compelled to pay lip service to Christianity as understood, expressed and preached by the white man. But with an ever greater part of himself, a part he has often been ashamed to acknowledge openly and which he has struggled to repress, he has felt that his Africanness was being violated. The white man’s largely cerebral religion was hardly touching the depths of his African soul; he was being redeemed of sins he did not believe he had committed; he was given answers, and often splendid answers, to questions he had not asked.<sup>102</sup>

These ‘diseases’ of anthropological poverty and religious schizophrenia are the result of the proselytization of African believers into Western Christianity. That is why we need to emphasize and support the quest for an African Christian identity in which African Christians can be authentically African and truly Christian.<sup>103</sup> The resolution of the Jerusalem Council gives African believers the freedom to follow Jesus in their own cultural contexts. Bediako

---

101. Ibid.

102. D. Tutu, ‘Whither African Theology?’ in E. Fasholé-Luke, R. Gray, A. Hastings, and G. Tasié (eds.), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collings, 1978), 366.

103. K. Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990), 12.

writes that the quest for an African Christianity is still not freely granted by the Western churches:

It is unfortunate that the quest for an African Christian identity in terms which are meaningful for African integrity and also adequate for Christian confession, should become so pervasively bedevilled by the missionary enterprise that was instrumental in bringing African Christianity into being...<sup>104</sup>

## **5. Conclusion.**

The purpose of this article was to elaborate on the exegesis of Acts 15 and examine its importance for African Theology. Based on the exegesis given above, we must conclude that this given chapter is indeed very important for African Theology and that African theologians have correctly based their critique of the Western missionary enterprise on it. Of course, every context is different. One of the main differences with the missionary enterprise in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century is that they have never insisted on proselytization in the sense of changing one's nation. On the contrary! But the central issue in Acts 15 was that the Gentile believers were not forced to relinquish their language, culture and traditions in favour of another one, namely the Jewish. So they were allowed to become Christians without being 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens of a foreign nation. They were free in Christ. African theologians thus correctly rebuke the Western missionary enterprise in the restriction of African Christians in their freedom. They understandably criticize them of subtle forms of 'proselytization'. They rightly accuse them of having done (and of doing!) mission by diffusion, and thus becoming an instrument of cultural and ecclesiastical colonialism,<sup>105</sup> while creating Western spiritual colonies.

If someone wants to argue that the decision of the Jerusalem Council was a very difficult and precarious decision, I will admit that without delay. Indeed, the council did not take the easiest way, by giving in to the dominant party. The easiest way would have been to force the converts to change into the likeness and image of the dominant group, and to make them proselytes. The solution of the circumcision party would probably not have been open for much misunderstanding. It would have established the Jesus movement as a proper Jewish

---

104. K. Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 252.

105. D. Tutu, 'Whither African Theology?', 364.

sect with Jews and converted Gentiles who accepted Jesus as Messiah. Though the Jerusalem Council withstood this obvious way, it has remained the main temptation of Christian mission throughout the ages. Usually and generally, Christian mission has been done by diffusion. The Jerusalem Council, however, wanted to relativize the dominant Jewish traditions and destigmatize the cultures of the peripheral Gentiles. This is actually fundamentally different from other multinationals (the Church was able to become a 'multi-national' through the decision of the Council) which force the policies of the mother-office on their branches in other nations, despite their context, culture or traditions.

Based on Acts 15 we may conclude that African Christians are free to follow Christ in their own way. This does not mean that their cultures and traditions do not have to change. On the contrary! The process of inculturation challenges and transforms these cultures and traditions into a new creation.<sup>106</sup> But this process cannot be imposed from outside, it grows from inside.<sup>107</sup> It is like the growth of a mustard seed, which will need its own time and process of maturing. This has always been difficult to accept for those in the centres of Christian theology and those in circles of ecclesiastical power, even within Africa! But the only reasons for limiting our freedom, according to Acts 15, is because of respect and responsibility vis-à-vis other believers.

African Theology has needed time to free itself from Western imposition and victimization. When that has once been done, the way is free for its real vocation, namely, to reflect on the question how to follow Christ in an African context without being forced by outside dominant forces and being plunged into anthropological poverty and religious schizophrenia. The message of Acts 15 leaves us without doubt: the Holy Spirit will purify the Gentiles. Stop harassing them!

---

106. See: A. Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988).

107. J.S. Ukpong, 'Christology and Inculturation' in R. Gibellini (ed.) *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 41.