

Another Look at the Antioch Incident (Gal 2:11-14)

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Abstract

This paper will address the incident in Antioch (Gal. 2:11-14) in the context of the challenges from Jews outside the Christian church in Jerusalem. Peter was afraid, not of the men James sent to Antioch, but of the message they brought him about threats from fanatically minded non-Christian Jews in Jerusalem.

It has already been established (Burton) that the phrase phoboumenos tous ek peritomēs simply means “fearing the circumcised” – “the Jews” – rather than “converts from Judaism.” Longenecker argues that the preposition ek denotes character, as in hoi ek pisteōs (Gal 3:7,9; Rom 3:26; 4:16). Thus, the “circumcision party” would not be Jewish Christians at all, but simply “the Jews” or “the circumcised” who are described earlier in Galatians 2:7-9. Thus, Peter did not fear the brothers, but the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem.

The following considerations are the main point of this paper and support the distinction between “men from James” and “the circumcision party”, and thus create quite a different scenario:

(1) It is unlikely that James would send anyone to “audit” Peter’s work in Antioch since Peter was probably the most prominent church leader in Jerusalem. Rather, James informed Peter of the Jewish pressure.

(2) The ill advice the apostles gave Paul (Acts 21:20-24) shows how the Christian leaders in Jerusalem did not realize that they could never meet the expectations of the Jewish leaders.

(3) The persecution in Jerusalem was very real to Barnabas and the Jewish believers in Antioch (Acts 11:19) which explains why they joined Peter.

Thus, it seems Peter was shaken by the external threats which were political rather than theological. Paul reacted in his way because the Christian spiritual identity was at stake.

Introduction

The Antioch incident is a unique event described only in Paul's letter to the Galatians, and it highlights a major development in the early Christian church. The event has been variously interpreted through the centuries. The most heated discussion occurred during the first five centuries. The Ebionites blamed Paul (Roberts, 1950, 324), Marcion attacked Peter (Evans, 1972, 1.20), Tertullian said that it was Paul's overreaction (Evans, 1972, 5.3), Clement of Alexandria argued that "Cephas" was not Peter the disciple of Jesus but one of the seventy apostles (Eusebius, 1953, 1.12), and Origen (Buono, 1967, 2.1), Chrysostom, and Jerome (Longenecker, 1990, 64) believed that Paul and Peter set up this event in order to condemn the Judaizers more effectively. Augustine says plainly that Peter was wrong because he wanted to impose Jewish customs on the Gentiles, but nevertheless has kind words for him since "out of steadfastness and love ... (he) was entirely willing to endure this rebuke from a junior shepherd for the salvation of the flock" (Plumer, 2003, 145)¹ These views have continued in one form or another up until today.

This essay will briefly situate the passage of Galatians 2:11–14 in its overall context, reconsider the usual approach to the text, and suggest a more likely scenario for the event that happened almost two thousand years ago in the Christian community of Syrian Antioch.²

The Incident

The Antioch episode is a logical continuation of Paul's argument in favor of his apostleship in the first two chapters of Galatians. Likewise, chronologically it seems to follow the major events³ in Paul's argument which are introduced by

- 1 Augustine also draws a lesson out of this event: "Now this incident serves as a great example of humility, which is the most valuable Christian training, for by humility love is preserved. For nothing violates love more quickly than pride." Ibid.
- 2 This is the only place in the Pauline writings where Syrian Antioch is mentioned. In Acts, it is mentioned fourteen times, but Luke does not describe this episode in Antioch (Acts 6:5; 11:19, 20, 22, 26, 27; 13:1; 4:26; 15:22, 23, 30, 35; 18:22).
- 3 The first visit to Jerusalem (1:18), Paul's sojourn in Syria and Cilicia (1:21), and the second visit to Jerusalem (2:1).

epeita (then, next). However, it starts with a different time-modifier, *hote* (when). What happened in Antioch is the immediate life-setting of the theological discussion of Galatians in 2:15 – 4:31.

To take a look at what actually occurred at Antioch when Peter came from Jerusalem to visit the church, the drama can be divided into four acts:

1. Impressed by harmony between the Jewish and Gentile Christians in Antioch, Peter joined with other Jewish Christians in eating with Gentile believers *before* a delegation from Jerusalem arrived.
2. Peter stopped eating with the Gentile believers *after* the men from James came.
3. Jewish believers and even Barnabas also separated themselves from the Gentile believers at the fellowship table.
4. Paul called the whole situation an act of hypocrisy and openly rebuked Peter.

Exactly when Peter (Hawthorne, 1993, 54)⁴ came to Antioch⁵ is not possible to establish. However, according to the generally accepted dating of Paul's activities (Hawthorne, 117; Lüdemann, 1984, 75-77), it must have been either before or after the first missionary journey (47–48 AD) and prior to the Jerusalem council in 49 AD. According to Longenecker, the event took place “after the meeting narrated in 2:1–10” (64).

Upon arriving in Antioch, Peter saw how Jewish and Gentile Christians ate and socialized together, so he joined them readily. It seems that Peter did not have any problem with this practice since he himself had received a vision about

4 According to Eusebius, the first bishop of Antioch was Peter, who was succeeded by Evodius, and then by Ignatius of Antioch. See Author, “Antioch on the Orontes”, in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1993), 24. However, the most striking association of Peter with Antioch is the incident recorded in Gal 2:11–14.

5 Christian Antioch played a crucial role in the formation and development of the newly established spiritual community. According to Acts, “those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews” (Acts 11:19). After the mission was extended to the Greeks and “a great number that believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21–22), Barnabas was sent by the church in Jerusalem to Antioch. Immediately, Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul; and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch (Acts 11:25–26). It is believed that the year Paul arrived in Antioch was AD 43. From Antioch, three missionary campaigns commenced: 47–48 AD (Acts 13:1–3); 50–52 AD (Acts 14:35–36); and 53–57 AD (Acts 18:22–23). Thus, Antioch became the center of the Christian church's outreach program. This was one of the main reasons at the beginning of this mission that serious disagreement arose between the Christians from Judaism and those with a Gentile background. This tension instigated the summoning of the Jerusalem council.

“eating” and had stayed in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:1–43). He could also have remembered how the Pharisees and scribes used to accuse Jesus by saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2). So Peter was fully convinced that his Gentile Christian brothers were equal before God with his Jewish Christian brothers.

In Gal 2:12, the verb *synēsthien* (ate with) is in the imperfect tense, suggesting that eating together with the Gentiles was a habitual practice. It seems they enjoyed ordinary meals together as well as the Lord’s Supper. However, for Jews, such occasions would have been regarded as a forbidden association with the Gentiles. Through the centuries, the Jewish table-fellowship meals had become exclusively Jewish occasions with religious and social connotations. According to Joachim Jeremias, “in Judaism table-fellowship means fellowship before God, for the eating of a piece of broken bread by everyone who shares in the meal brings out the fact that all have a share in the blessing which the master of the house has spoken over the unbroken bread” (1971, 115). For the pious Jew, a mealtime was an occasion for leisure and conversation, but eating together also made men brothers. To eat without prayer was to defy the Giver of every gift. Eating without discussion about the Torah was like eating food offered to idols, and participation in heathen meals was regarded as apostasy from Judaism (Stamm, 1953, 478-479).

If the meals in Antioch were of such a nature, then one would expect that for the Jews such occasions were regarded as a threat to their religious and national identity. The fellowship meals in Antioch nourished the spiritual needs of Christians regardless of their nationality, but for the Jews they were provocative.

At first, Peter did not object to such occasions, but readily participated in them. However, despite all his pioneering work in the mission to the Gentiles, and his close association with Jesus, Peter capitulated to pressure after the delegation from James had arrived. He withdrew and separated himself from his Gentile brothers “fearing the circumcision party” (2:12b).

At this point in the discussion, it seems, the following two questions are crucial: (1) Who were the visitors from James? and (2) Of whom (or what) was Peter afraid?

Who Were the Visitors From James?

In describing the delegation from Jerusalem, Paul simply says that “certain men came from James” (2:12). It seems clear that James is the Lord’s brother, one of the pillar leaders from Jerusalem (2:9), but who were the men James had sent? What was their message? Frank Matera thinks that James sent the delegation “to investigate the situation at Antioch” (1992, 89). When they arrived, they were disturbed by seeing Gentiles and Jews sharing table fellowship. That “certain men”

were indeed sent by James to visit and screen the church in Antioch is possible but most unlikely since Peter, one of the three pillars, was already there. Was not Peter good enough to “audit” the church in Antioch?

Could these “certain men” be identified with the self-appointed troublemakers who did not get their instructions from the Jerusalem leaders, as was clearly stated in the letter (Acts 15:13, 24) from the Jerusalem council to Antioch? It hardly seems likely because then James would have been lying at the Jerusalem Council by distancing himself from those he actually sent to Antioch with authorization to represent him there.

Are the people from James Paul’s opponents or “false brothers” (Gal 2:4) who caused the disturbance in the Galatian churches, and elsewhere challenged Paul’s mission to the Gentiles? It seems unlikely that Paul would associate James with the extremists he was writing this epistle against because James gave him “the right hand of fellowship” (2:9) to evangelize the Gentiles.

Who, then, were the members of the delegation James sent to Antioch while Peter was there? They could have been some decent and trustworthy Jewish Christians from Jerusalem who brought Peter an important and disturbing message from James. Is it too much to assume that the leaders in Jerusalem worked together remembering their Master’s last prayer for their unity (John 17), and trusting each other more fully after Pentecost (Acts 2:1,44)? On a number of occasions, the Jerusalem leaders expressed their positive attitude towards the mission to the Gentiles. Peter was the first to defend it after his visit to Cornelius (Acts 10:1 – 11:18). At the end of the so-called Famine visit (Gal 2:1–10; Acts 11:27–30), Paul received clear support for his mission to the Gentiles from James, Peter and John. Later, at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:1–34), this unanimous backing of the Gentile mission from the apostles was not only voiced, but recorded in a special letter (Acts 15:24–26) to Antioch.

The Jerusalem church with its leaders was supportive of the mission to the Gentiles though they encountered serious challenges and persecutions. It is true they faced problems from inside the church, so they reacted by distancing themselves from the troublemakers (Acts 15:24). However, they also endured persecution from fanatical Jews to the extent that they had to flee from Jerusalem to save their lives. It was some of these refugees who established the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19). So James did not send a delegation to Antioch to spy on Peter and make the life of the church miserable. The Jerusalem Christian community had serious problems, especially outside the church, which James was communicating to Peter and the church in Antioch. The situation in Jerusalem was delicate and had the potential to create further troubles. James was not being hostile toward the believers in Antioch, but he was seeking help and understanding. Such a description of “certain men... from James” in this context seems possible and even plausible.

Of Whom (or What) was Peter Afraid?

It has already been established by De Witt Burton that the phrase *phoboumenos tous ek peritomēs* (2:12) simply means “fearing the circumcised” rather than “converts from Judaism” (1920, 108). Longenecker argues that the preposition *ek* here denotes character, as in *hoi ek pisteōs* (Gal 3:7, 9; Rom 3:26; 4:16). The “circumcision party” would therefore not be Jewish Christians at all, but simply “the Jews” or “the circumcised”, who are described earlier in Galatians 2:7–9. Thus, Peter did not fear the brothers from Jerusalem, but Jewish leaders from Jerusalem.

If this distinction between “the men from James” and “the circumcision party” is taken into account, then the entire situation in Antioch should be understood accordingly.

Peter was not shaken by pressure which came from James and the church in Jerusalem. Rather, what scared him were the external threats in Jerusalem which were not theological but political in nature, advocated by religious and national Jewish extremists. Peter was not afraid of the *men*, but rather their *message*. It seems that James had sent a report of the fierce reaction from the non-Christian Jews to what was going on in Antioch.

The problem was not only that the Jews and the Gentiles were associating at fellowship meals, but when one of the top leaders of the Jerusalem church, Peter, came to Antioch, he joined them too. The extremists, who were probably associated with the Zealots, saw this as an occasion to protest and threaten the Christians in Jerusalem. It seems possible that James said or even wrote something like this to Peter:

Dear Brother Peter, the persecution in Jerusalem has increased since you left for Antioch. The zealous Jews are complaining and threatening us because of what is happening in Antioch. Please do not be a stumbling block for the fanatical Jews and Zealots by participating with our Gentile believers in the public table fellowship meals. Our lives are in danger. Greet all the brothers, and ask them to understand our situation.

If the basic tenet in politics is conformism and pragmatism rather than truth itself, then the incident in Antioch fits well in such a mode. According to Robert Jewett’s thesis, “Jewish Christians in Judea were stimulated by Zealot pressure into a nomistic campaign among their fellow Christians in the late forties and early fifties” (1970, 205) which promoted Jewish nationalism and growing antagonism against the Gentiles. On the other hand, Peter publicly preached in the house of Cornelius: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35). So, theologically he was clear about the issue, but in a life-threatening situation he attempted to be diplomatically wise.

The Jerusalem Incident

It seems that among the early Christians in Jerusalem, some sort of emphatic sensitivity to Jewish public opinion was present. One example of this in Paul's lifetime was the so-called "Jerusalem incident." Returning from his third missionary journey in AD 57/58, Paul arrived in Jerusalem, and the brothers received him gladly, but they gave him poor advice which shows how irresolute they were in regard to the strong Jewish pressures. They kindly asked Paul to please the zealous-for-the-law Jews by participating in a purification ceremony in the temple together with four men who were under a vow. Paul did what they asked, never again to be a free man, but a prisoner who was unjustly accused by the Jews from Asia, arrested, and transported from one prison to another until he was finally deported to Rome where he died as a martyr (Acts 21:17–40). The same volatility could be the main reason for James' intervention and Peter's vacillation in Antioch.

The petition from Jerusalem was so reasonable that it was not easy to disregard. After all, the safety and lives of the members from Jerusalem were at stake. There are no indications that the church in Antioch was under any attack from the Jewish extremists since the religious and national structure of their society was predominately non-Jewish. Perhaps this growing anti-Christian sentiment in Jerusalem could have provided some alibi for Barnabas and other pious Christian believers from Judaism who followed Peter's example. The Jewish Christians who had to leave Jerusalem because of persecution knew best how destructive Jewish national hatred could be. Some of them barely managed to save their lives by fleeing.

Paul's Intervention

When Paul realized⁶ that they were not *straightforward* (*orthopodousin*, 2:14) about the truth, he reacted openly, not addressing the believers, not even Barnabas, but the pillar leader, Peter. Instead of sympathizing with the Jewish Christians, he accused them publicly. Paul's radical reaction⁷ at this juncture would

6 In Galatians 2:14, the question of timing is introduced with the conjunction *hote* (when). When did Paul learn what was going on in Antioch? Having in mind the imperfect tenses of the verbs *synēsthien* (ate with), *hypestellen* (drew back), and *aphōrizen* (separated) in verse 12, this practice extended over some time in the past. One may ask why Paul did not react earlier. Was he absent from Antioch when Peter arrived, or maybe uncertain at first of how to react? The text simply just does not answer these questions.

7 It appears that Paul was too sharp in his public rebuke of Peter. According to Christian ethics, he should have first approached Peter privately (Matt 18:15ff). One would expect Paul to have

seem at least unbalanced if not fanatical. Was Paul correct in calling Peter's behavior hypocritical? Was he right when instead of joining them in brotherly concern and mindfulness for the Jerusalem believers, he proceeded to unmask this, for him, unhealthy compromise? In describing Peter's behavior, Paul uses the verb *synypekrithēsan* (acted insincerely, 2:13), and the noun *tē hypokrisei* (insincerity, 2:13) which indicates how resolute Paul was in his assertions.

It seems obvious that Paul's reaction should be viewed against the background of his deep concern for *tēn aletheian tu euaggeliu* (the truth of the gospel, 2:14), and the consequences of any compromise to the Gentile mission. Paul's basic argument would have been that Jewish nationalistic pressure must not be stronger than the reality of the Christ event. If allegiance to Christ is not above all other concerns, then the Gentiles could also justify their liberal tendencies which they brought from their former way of life. Besides protesting this unhealthy compromise, Paul must have emphasized the divine indicative in Antioch which he would underline so many times in his letters: "We are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom 8:16-17).

Paul decided to deal with the situation in a decisive way. Since the schism was public, Paul confronted Peter publicly. However, Paul never attacked Peter's apostolic authority, neither his position in the Christian church. On the contrary, he accepted him as one of the pillars in the church (Gal 2:9).

What Paul was probably telling Peter might be expressed in these words:

Peter, you have restrained your Jewish prejudices toward the Gentiles ever since your experience in Cornelius' house. You told all the leaders in Jerusalem that "the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning" and they praised God (Acts 11:15-18). Because of that, you gladly used to fellowship and live with the Gentile believers in Antioch. Now, what has happened to you, and all the other Jewish Christians in Antioch? Why have you distanced yourself from your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you want them to become proselytes by accepting Jewish religion and getting circumcised? That might appease Jewish extremists, but would destroy the Christian identity of the Gentile believers. I beg you, Peter, do not exchange the precious truth of the gospel which unites us all for the diplomatic, political maneuvers which Jewish religious fanatics compel you to. Peter, let us "endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (1 Cor 9:12).

behaved according to his precept of being "all things to all men" (1 Cor 9:11-14), gently restoring one who is caught in sin (Gal 6:1). Could not Paul see that Peter was under "peer pressure" prompted by increasing Jewish nationalism?

Conclusion

This paper has addressed the incident in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14) in the context of challenges from the Jews outside the Christian church in Jerusalem. The text in Galatians 2:11-14 does not have to be read as an open fight between Paul and Peter in which one of them won the battle. Rather, it is an account of an open and resolute confrontation about serious challenges in the apostolic church which was finally resolved in a brotherly manner. This approach seems to provide a more balanced view of the actual event.

Peter was afraid, not of the men James sent to Antioch, but of the *message* they brought him about threats from fanatically minded non-Christian Jews in Jerusalem. They objected fiercely because Peter, one of the top leaders of the church in Jerusalem, joined the table fellowship of the Jews and Gentiles in Antioch. If this scenario is closer to the actual event in Antioch, then James pleaded with Peter to be more mindful of their position in Jerusalem. The petition from Jerusalem was too convincing to be disregarded, so that even Barnabas supported it. Thus, it seems Peter was shaken by external threats which were political rather than theological.

For his part, Paul reacted as he did because the Christian spiritual identity was at stake. He resolutely stood against any compromise with the fanatical Jews whose mentality he understood well. Despite the disagreement, Paul never attacked Peter's apostolic authority nor his position in the Christian church. At the same time, it seems, Peter never objected to Paul's admonitions. Both apostles had graduated from the school of humility and were courageous enough to endure hardship for Christ's sake.

In Syrian Antioch, the most promising Christian mission center of the first century, the fiercest battles were fought for Christian spiritual identity. The Antioch incident could have been one of the reasons for the summoning of the Jerusalem council where brotherly unity of love and respect was demonstrated. The church in Antioch was reunited and continued organizing, together with Paul, missionary outreach programs - the second and the third missionary journeys.

(All biblical quotations are taken from RSV)

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Dragutin Matak

Još jedno razmatranje događaja u Antiohiji (Gal 2,11-14)

Sažetak

U radu ću razmotriti događaj u Antiohiji (Gal 2,11-14) u kontekstu prigovora Židova izvan kršćanske crkve u Jeruzalemu. Petar se nije uplašio ljudi koje je poslao Jakov, već poruke koju su mu prenijeli o prijetnjama fanatički nastrojenih nekršćanskih Židova u Jeruzalemu.

Već je dokazano (Burton) da izraz *phoboumenos tous ek peritomēs* jednostavno znači 'bojeći se obrezanih', 'Židova', a ne 'obraćenika iz Judaizma'. Longenecker tvrdi da prijedlog *ek* označava karakter kao u *hoi ek pisteōs* (Gal 3,7.9; Rim 3,26; 4,16). Stoga, 'strana koja zagovara obrezanje' nisu židovski kršćani, već jednostavno "Židovi" ili "obrezani", koji su opisani ranije u Galaćanima 2,7-9. Dakle, Petar se nije bojao braće, već židovskih vođa iz Jeruzalema.

Sljedeća razmatranja su glavna poanta ovoga rada i podupiru razlikovanje između "neki od Jakova" i "strane koja je zagovara obrezanje" stvarajući na taj način sasvim drukčiji scenarij:

1. Malo je vjerojatno da bi Jakov poslao bilo koga da "provjeri" Petrov rad u Antiohiji jer je Petar najvjerojatnije bio najistaknutiji crkveni vođa u Jeruzalemu. Naprotiv, Jakov je informirao Petra o pritisku od strane Židova.

2. Loš izvještaj koji su apostoli dali Pavlu (Dj 21,20-24) pokazuje kako kršćanski vođe u Jeruzalemu nisu shvatili da nikada neće moći ispuniti očekivanja židovskih vođa.

3. Progonstvo u Jeruzalemu je uistinu bilo stvarno za Barnabu i židovske vjernike u Antiohiji (Dj 11,19), što objašnjava zbog čega su se pridružili Petru.

Stoga, čini se da je Petar uzdrman vanjskim prijetnjama koje su bile političke, a ne teološke. Pavao je reagirao na taj način zbog toga što je bio ugrožen kršćanski duhovni identitet.