



PAUL'S TRIPS TO JERUSALEM AS DESCRIBED IN GALATIANS AND ACTS



Gal 2 vs. Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council

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Perspectives – Galatians 2 vs. Acts 15 – Jerusalem Council

Personally, my favorite Bible translation for study is the NASB 2020. For the most part, I have always found its translation to be very close to the Greek of the New Testament and very good at not “adding things” as a rule. However, I ran across one particular item that precipitated this article. The added title for Galatians 2 is “*The Council at Jerusalem.*” A further look at Acts 15, and the title there is “*The Council in Jerusalem.*” One would, I think, have to assume that what is being put forth here a reference to the same event. However, checking with the Lochman Foundation on this issue, they simply consider these events to be two “councils” both of which took place in Jerusalem. Other translations have different headings there. Keep in mind, all these headings are supplied for our benefit by the translators/editors of the respective versions and are not part of the original text.

Other Galatian 2 title examples are:

NIV / ESV – Paul Accepted by the Apostles

CSB – Paul Defends His Gospel and Jerusalem

NET – Confirmation from the Jerusalem Apostles

Setting that aside, this is still one of those “scholarly issues” which we sometimes need to deal with to keep our times correct. Some scholars are of the opinion that the trip to Jerusalem in Galatians 2 is the Jerusalem Council from Acts 15. Others see Paul’s discussions in Galatians 2 as referring to something else that happened when Paul and Barnabas brought the offering for famine relief to Jerusalem from Antioch.

To deal with this particular issue, we will take a look at some of the details involved in both passages and what led up to them as well as asking some questions – questions that we will allow scripture to answer and come to what I believe is the correct conclusion regarding this issue.

The Trips Detailed

The letter to the Galatians speaks of two trips to Jerusalem. The book of Acts mentions three trips. We will begin with the first trip which is contained in both accounts (Gal 1:18 ff and Acts 9:19 ff).

First Trip – Damascus to Jerusalem

The first trip is mentioned in chapter 1 of Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

Galatians 1:18–24 (NASB 2020)

¹⁸ Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him for fifteen days. ¹⁹ But I did not see another one of the apostles except James, the Lord’s brother. ²⁰ (Now in what I am writing to you, I assure you before God that I am not lying.) ²¹ Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. ²² I was *still* unknown by sight to the churches of Judea which are in Christ; ²³ but they only kept hearing, “The man who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith which he once tried to destroy.” ²⁴ And they were glorifying God because of me.

This is Paul’s trip to Jerusalem which takes place from Damascus. Paul stays in Damascus for a while after his conversion. He then leaves Damasus, goes to Arabia and finally returns to Damascus. In this Galatian passage Paul leaves out any details surrounding his leaving Damascus

for Jerusalem. However, when Luke describes the same event in Acts chapter 9, we see many more details about the reason for his leaving Damascus and what happens in Jerusalem but we do not hear of the trip to Arabia.

After describing his ministry in Damascus, Luke simply says “When many days had elapsed.” We then see that there was a plot against Paul, he then leaves Damascus and it is at this point that he makes this trip to Jerusalem.

Acts 9:19–30 (NASB 2020)

Saul Begins to Preach Christ

Now for several days he was with the disciples who were in Damascus, ²⁰ and immediately he *began* to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God.” ²¹ All those hearing *him* continued to be amazed, and were saying, “Is this not the one who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?” ²² But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.

²³ When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, ²⁴ but their plot became known to Saul. They were also closely watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; ²⁵ but his disciples took him at night and let him down through *an opening in* the wall, lowering him in a large basket.

²⁶ When he came to Jerusalem, he tried *repeatedly* to associate with the disciples; and *yet* they were all afraid of him, as they did not believe that he was a disciple. ²⁷ But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus at Damascus. ²⁸ And he was with them, moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. ²⁹ And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic *Jews*; but they were attempting to put him to death. ³⁰ Now when the brothers learned *of it*, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus.

Outcome of the First Trip

As we can see, his encounter with the disciples is much less than cordial. Barnabas becomes a friend and intercessor at this point and facilitates Paul’s continued, though short lived, ministry in the city. His stay in Jerusalem is short lived because he gets crosswise with some Hellenistic Jews and his brothers (assumed to be the apostles and elders) carry him from Jerusalem to Caesarea and send him off to Tarsus.

This concludes the first trip as described in both Galatians and Acts.

Time Between First and Second Trips

Paul spends many years with his home base being Tarsus. During this time, he is evidently ministering in Syria and Cilicia. Meanwhile, the church at his next destination, Antioch, has been established and is doing well. We read about the beginning of this church and its decidedly different growth in Acts chapter 11.

Acts 11:19–20 (NASB 2020)

The Church in Antioch

¹⁹ So then those who were scattered because of the persecution that occurred in connection with Stephen made their way to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except to Jews alone. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks as well, preaching the good news of the Lord Jesus.

This growth causes some concern in the Jerusalem Church and so, it is decided that they will send Barnabas to check out the situation.

Acts 11:21-22 (NASB 2020)

²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The news about them reached the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas off to Antioch.

Obviously, Barnabas stays in Antioch and is ministering there. As he continues his ministry he finds that he needs help and sets out to find Paul. After he finds him he convinces him to return with him to Antioch and presses him into service as his helper.

Acts 11:24-26 (NASB 2020)

24 ... And considerable numbers were added to the Lord. 25 And he left for Tarsus to look for Saul; 26 and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. And for an entire year they met with the church and taught considerable numbers of people; and the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.

Second Trip – Antioch to Jerusalem

The next trip to Jerusalem event begins with a prophet named Agabus who comes from Jerusalem to Antioch and was prophesying by revelation of the Holy Spirit regarding a worldwide famine. Because of this prophesy, the church decides to send relief, a gift, to their brothers living in Judea. Barnabas and Paul are selected for the task and make the trip to Jerusalem to deliver the gift to the elders. As we will see, Titus also accompanies Saul and Barnabas as we are told in Galatians 2.

Acts 11:29-30 (NASB 2020)

²⁹ And to the extent that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brothers and sisters living in Judea. ³⁰ And they did this, sending it with Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

We know the primary reason for this trip is to deliver relief contributions to the elders. However, Paul seizes this opportunity to make something else happen. He uses the trip as a means to meet with the apostles and elders (“those who were of reputation”) and to share with them the gospel he has been preaching during these past years. Continuing to look at the events outlined in the Galatian letter, Paul relates these events beginning in Galatians 2:1. It is important to note his stated reason for this trip given here – “It was because of a revelation that I went up.” The revelation is that given by the Holy Spirit to Agabus the prophet regarding the famine. As we will see, this stands in stark contrast to the reasons for the trip to described in Acts 15.

Galatians 2:1-2 (NASB 2020)

The Council at Jerusalem

¹ Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. 2 It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that somehow I might be running, or had run, in vain.

Outcome of the Second Trip

Looking at the Galatian account of what happens in Jerusalem during this visit, we can see that there were some issues with Titus not being circumcised, some “false brothers” who were pushing to see that that was done, and the fact that Paul and Barnabas stood their ground and did not allow it.

Galatians 2:3–10 (NASB 2020)

³ But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. ⁴ Yet it was a concern because of the false brothers secretly brought in, who had sneaked in to spy on our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us. ⁵ But we did not yield in subjection to them, even for an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain with you. ⁶ But from those who were of considerable repute (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no favoritism)—well, those who were of repute contributed nothing to me. ⁷ But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised ⁸ (for He who was at work for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised was at work for me also to the Gentiles), ⁹ and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰ They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do.

The final outcome as relayed by Paul to the Galatians was that first, the apostles and elders extended to him and Barnabas the “right hand of fellowship” and second, a decision stated that Paul was to go to the Gentiles and they would go to the circumcised or Jewish population. This was truly the best outcome for Paul’s continued ministry. I also believe that this decision when it is relayed to the church at Antioch is what precipitates the consideration, prayer, and blessing of the Holy Spirit for the first missionary journey.

In Acts, the second trip’s conclusion is not mentioned until chapter 12 verse 25. The one new piece of information that is given here is that John Mark returned with Barnabas (his uncle) and Paul to Antioch.

Acts 12:25 (NASB 2020)

²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned when they had fulfilled their mission to Jerusalem, taking along with them John, who was also called Mark.

Time Between Second and Third Trips

Paul makes no further mention of trips to Jerusalem in the letter to the Galatians. The remainder of the letter is dedicated to the task at hand – stopping the Galatian Christians from becoming enslaved under the Law of Moses because of Judaizing teachers. With that I think it becomes obvious why he shared the details of the private meetings and outcome of the second trip with these folks.

Another obvious point to be made here is that, since we are discussing a letter to the Galatian churches, it is easy to realize that the first missionary journey would have taken place in the period between the second trip to Jerusalem and the writing of the letter – otherwise, there would have been no Galatian churches to which to write.

This leads us then to the Acts account of the events between the second and third trips to Jerusalem. Paul, Barnabas, Titus (assumed), and John Mark return to Antioch after delivering the relief gift. We pick up the narrative again in Acts in chapter 13.

Acts 13:1–3 (NASB 2020)

First Missionary Journey

¹ Now there were prophets and teachers at Antioch, in the church that was there: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ² While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set Barnabas and Saul apart

for Me for the work to which I have called them.”³ Then, when they had fasted, prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.

The remainder of Acts 13 and 14 details the events of this first missionary journey. In the last verses of chapter 14, Luke tells of their return to Syrian Antioch. We really do not know the exact length time taken for the first missionary journey, it could have been as short as 4 months or as long as 18 months. If one takes even a quick read through the events of this journey, I think it is more than obvious that the amount of time taken for this effort would be more in line with the 18-month number. There were many churches planted and then revisited on the return journey back to Antioch, all of this takes time and Paul was not one to rush his sharing of the Gospel message.

Acts 14:26–28 (NASB 2020)

²⁶ From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been entrusted to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished. ²⁷ When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report all the things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.

²⁸ And they spent a long time with the disciples.

We close chapter 14 with Paul and Barnabas “spending a long time with the disciples.” Again, we are not given a definition of “long” in this case but, consensus is it may have been as much as one or two years.

Third Trip – Antioch to Jerusalem

Luke opens chapter 15 giving us the details of the problem which results in what Acts reports as the third trip to Jerusalem.

Acts 15:1–2 (NASB 2020)

The Council in Jerusalem

¹ Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” ² And after Paul and Barnabas had a heated argument and debate with them, *the brothers* determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.

The inference here is that there can be no local solution to this issue, either for the Antioch church or for the rest of the churches that are in existence at this time. The only real solution must come from the Holy Spirit and a consensus of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

The actual trip from Antioch to Jerusalem will take a minimum of 6 days given a 20 mi per day rate and the distance of 300 miles. However, it likely took longer, since we are told that they stopped at the various churches along the way to share the blessings of the results of Paul and Barnabas’ first missionary journey.

Acts 15:3–4 (NASB 2020)

³ Therefore, after being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were bringing great joy to all the brothers *and sisters*. ⁴ When they arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church, the apostles, and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.

On their arrival, they share the same report of the results of the missionary journey with the church, the elders, and the apostles. This is significant in that it is the first of two times these results are shared during their stay in Jerusalem.

What Happens in Jerusalem

Very quickly, it becomes obvious as to what this meeting will be about – binding of the Law of Moses including circumcision on the Gentile believers.

Acts 15:5–35 (NASB 2020)

⁵ But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to keep the Law of Moses.”

At this point in the life of the Church it is equally obvious as to what the impact of this decision would have, not only on the church at Antioch but on all the newly established churches throughout Galatia, Syria, Cilicia, and for that matter any and all churches having Gentile members.

The apostles and elders come together and discuss the issue at great lengths. They specifically hear from Peter and James, and Paul and Barnabas. Peter and James give different reasons but both are in favor of not binding “such a yoke” on these Gentile believers. Paul and Barnabas contribute to the meeting by telling again of their success on their first missionary journey. The details are contained in the following verses.

Acts 15:6–21 (NASB 2020)

⁶ The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. ⁷ After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; ⁹ and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Since this *is the* case, why are you putting God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our forefathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

¹² All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles.

James’ Judgment

¹³ After they stopped speaking, James responded, saying, “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has described how God first concerned Himself about taking a people for His name from among the Gentiles.

¹⁵ The words of the Prophets agree with this, just as it is written:

¹⁶ ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return,
AND I WILL REBUILD THE FALLEN TABERNACLE OF DAVID,
AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS,
AND I WILL RESTORE IT,

¹⁷ SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD,
AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’

¹⁸ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS known from long ago.

¹⁹ Therefore, it is my judgment that we do not cause trouble for those from the Gentiles who are turning to God, ²⁰ but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols, from *acts of* sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood. ²¹ For from ancient generations Moses has those who preach him in every city, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

The end result is the decision by the apostles and elders to write a letter to the entire church and send it with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch. They also send along Judas and Silas to further show the strength of their convictions put forth in the letter.

Acts 15:22–29 (NASB 2020)

²² Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas: Judas who was called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, ²³ and they sent this letter with them:

“The apostles and the brothers who are elders, to the brothers *and sisters* in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles: Greetings.

²⁴ Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have confused you by *their* teaching, upsetting your souls, ²⁵ it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, ²⁶ men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷ Therefore, we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word *of mouth*. ²⁸ For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: ²⁹ that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from *acts of* sexual immorality; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.

Farewell.”

The letter itself has some very interesting facets that have a bearing on distinguishing this meeting from the meeting of Galatians 2. First, the apostles and elders own up to the fact that the men who started this were not authorized by them to go to Antioch. It also appears that after hearing about this, despite Luke’s saying they were from Judea (non-specific), the indication here is that they were from the church in Jerusalem – not authorized but, from that group anyway. All of this is tacitly saying that they (the apostles and elders) did not agree with what these men were teaching. Second, they recognize the value and work of Paul and Barnabas. All of this stands in contrast to the private meeting described in Galatians 2 with a simple outcome of an extension of the righthand of fellowship to Paul and Barnabas.

Finally, the results of this third trip to Jerusalem are given to the church at Antioch.

Acts 15:30–35 (NASB 2020)

³⁰ So when they were sent away, they went down to Antioch; and after gathering the congregation together, they delivered the letter. ³¹ When they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement. ³² Judas and Silas, also being prophets themselves, encouraged and strengthened the brothers *and sisters* with a lengthy message. ³³ After they had spent time *there*, they were sent away from the brothers *and sisters* in peace to those who had sent them out. ³⁵ But Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

The letter and its content, the fact that this meeting was anything but private, combined with all the other parties mentioned throughout this account, tells us that this was truly a different meeting than that presented in Galatians 2. We would also be remiss if we did not point out that had this letter been an output of the meeting of Galatians 2, it would have surely figured prominently in its content. We are even told that on the second missionary journey, Paul and Silas share the results of this council with the churches throughout Galatia.

Acts 16:4–5 (NASB 2020)

⁴ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the ordinances for them to follow which had been determined by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

Conclusion

The above text speaks for itself.

Reasons stated for the meetings to take place:

- Gal 2 – a revelation
- Acts 15 – a problem of theology in the Antioch church.

Attendees:

- Gal 2 – private Apostles and elders, Saul, Barnabas, Titus
- Acts 15 – the entire Jerusalem church, Apostles, elders, Paul Barnabas, and others from the Antioch church.

Result:

- Gal 2 – Righthand of fellowship to Saul and Barnabas and Paul's ministry affirmed.
- Acts 15 – letter to the churches and specifically the church at Antioch addressing the specific problem that was brought to them.

From the reasons stated in each case for the meeting to be taking place, to the content, and to the outcome of each itself – all point to a single conclusion. Considering all of the evidence, I think there is only one conclusion at which one can logically arrive – the two meetings described in Galatians 2 and Acts 15 are truly different – held for different purposes, with different attendees, and different results.

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