PAUL AND BARNABAS: THE ANATOMY AND CHRONOLOGY OF A PARTING OF THE WAYS

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Both the Letter of Paul to the Galatians (2:11-14) and the Book of Acts (15:36-41) refer to a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas. In the former, although Barnabas is not the main protagonist, he is mentioned as siding with Peter and the other Jewish Christians in the church in Antioch-on-the-Orontes who are persuaded by “those from James” to withdraw from table-fellowship with the Gentile Christians in that church. He is, however, singled out from amongst all the other Jewish Christians there and mentioned by name; this may simply be because Paul has already mentioned him as also present as a delegate of the Antioch church at the meeting described in Gal 2:1-10. It would, however, have an added point if the Galatian churches to whom Paul writes are in fact those in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia, which, according to Acts 13 and 14, Barnabas and Paul founded on the so-called first missionary journey.

This identification of the churches addressed has long enjoyed considerable support in English-speaking scholarship; until recently this theory has found little favour in the German-speaking world, which has preferred the so-called “North Galatian”-theory, but now certain voices have called this dominant consensus in question.¹ The strength of the case of these scholars lies, above all, in the difficulty of postulating a plausible route for the travels of the apostle which would take him from the southern part of the province northwards into that area which is postulated as an alternative, the heart-land of the territory of the ethnic Galatians around Ancyra.

Breytenbach, for instance, regards a route via Pessinus and Germa as the only possibility within northern Galatia, but points out that only in the case of Ancyra is there evidence of pre-Constantinian Christianity in this area; further Acts 16:6–8 and 18:23, usually seen as evidence of Paul’s work in northern Galatia, say nothing of missionary work there (147). Although one may not want to exclude the possibility of emissaries as responsible for the troubles in the Galatian churches (not only Jewish patterns of self-propagation are relevant here, but also Christian ones), Breytenbach, who sees Galatian Jewish Christians who remained loyal to the synagogues of the region as responsible for the troubles, is correct in supposing that such a situation, whoever provoked it, is more plausible in the area further to the south, where a far more considerable Jewish presence is attested. Yet one need not assume that it is also necessary to prove the existence of people of Celtic descent in the southern region in order to justify Paul’s addressing them as Γαλάται (Gal 3:1). That there were also Celts in the south may be assumed, but that the churches founded in this region contained only converts of Celtic extraction is most unlikely. In an area containing such a mixed population Riesner’s question (255) is a legitimate one: “How could the apostle have addressed Lycaonians, Phrygians, Pisidians, those who spoke Greek and Roman colonists collectively if not by reference to the province to which they jointly belonged?”

Whether the account in Galatians 2 requires that we assume that Barnabas and Paul were still working together at the time of this dispute is an issue to which we must return; it would, of course, make Barnabas’ taking sides against Paul a yet more grievous betrayal, but is that necessarily meant here? Paul’s disagreement with Barnabas in this account is, at any rate, a most serious matter: effectively it threatened to split both the Antioch church and the Gentile mission in two; if “those from James” had their way, Gentile Christians, in Antioch and by implication elsewhere, would henceforth have to choose between two alternatives: either they must accept the demands which the Jewish Christians laid upon them which would enable them to have table-fellowship with the Jewish Christians without endangering the latter’s status as Jews, or they would exist as a separate community, unable to enjoy full fellowship, including presumably eucharistic fellowship, with their Jewish Christian sisters and brothers. The latter alternative in turn raised the question of the status of the Gentile Christians: the people of God was either one and undivided and both groups could not then belong to it, or it was divided. And Paul never recounts that his arguments won the day; does that then mean that he failed to persuade his fellow Jewish Christians? In all probability it does, for to be able to tell of a vic-