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The Jerusalem Community before the Apostle's Conversion

The conversion of the Apostle Paul to Christianity is such an important event in the history of the just emerging community that it can be properly understood only by taking into account the condition in which the community found itself during the short period of its existence. But the only thing about which we can be certain during this earliest period is what is so closely connected with the name of the Apostle Paul, and to which he himself bears witness (Gal 1:13, 23; 1 Cor 15:9), that he became a Christian and apostle only after being a persecutor of the Christian community. The Jerusalem community had been persecuted from the beginning. Persecutions are also spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles, but historical criticism must insist on its right to doubt, or refuse to accept, the way they are portrayed here.

After its beginning the still weak Christian community had constituted itself (in the way we all know and into which we will not further inquire), first inwardly by the power of the Spirit imparted to it as the principle of a new, animating consciousness,[1] and then outwardly, after the rapid increase of its membership, by the initial structures of its common life (Acts 1–2). The Jewish rulers took a series of measures against the apostles, because Peter and John had miraculously healed a man lame from birth while on their way to the temple (Acts 3:1–10). The description of this first persecution of the apostles (Acts 3–5) has the same idealizing tendency as we see depicted in the original formation of the early community. The evident intention in the portrayal as a whole, as well as in its individual features, makes it impossible to think of this as a natural sequence of historical events. The intention, in a word, is that the apostles

1. Regarding the events at Pentecost, compare my article, "Kritische Übersicht über die neuesten, das γλώσσαις λαλεῖν in der ersten christlichen Kirche betreffenden Untersuchungen," *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 11 (1838) 618ff. [*Ed.*] Baur regards Pentecost and its aftermath as a legendary account of how the apostles were filled by the Spirit, and thus as a subject not open to historical investigation, rather like the resurrection of Jesus.

should appear in their full glory. From the beginning it is all about their exaltation, no matter what takes place and the attendant circumstances. Their glorification serves to show how grand and noble they are, and their excellence comes across even more clearly when those who oppose them are shamed and humiliated. This effect is intensified when their adversaries are confounded and humbled, by disgracing themselves with all the means at their command and in the most public manner. Everything about Acts here is designed to this end.

As soon as the apostles were arrested because of this miracle and the speech Peter made afterwards, the authorities arranged to treat the affair with all due importance and great formality (Acts 4). Early the next morning (for there was no time left for such proceedings on the evening of the day before, chap. 4:3), all the members of the Sanhedrin gathered, the elders and scribes, the high priests Annas and Caiaphas (who are known from the account of Jesus' condemnation), and all those who belonged to their party. No one of any importance could be absent. Even those members of the Sanhedrin who, for various reasons, were not then present in Jerusalem had to be called back in all haste to the capital[2] in order to participate in the proceedings. And what resulted from this? Nothing other than the whole assembled Sanhedrin being told by the two apostles under examination that the cause of the judicial proceeding against them was a good deed done for a suffering man; that the worker of this miracle was Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom they had repudiated and crucified, and that this healing of a lame man gave irrefutable proof that the very name of Jesus is alone salvific. In order to further emphasize the effect this must have had on the Sanhedrin, our attention is drawn to how much they had misjudged the apostles. It had taken them to be uneducated persons of low rank, as being the same ones who had demonstrated their weakness and timidity at the condemnation of Jesus. But now the Sanhedrin could only wonder at how fearlessly and courageously they behaved (Acts 4:13). To their amazement, the members of the Sanhedrin now perceived the apostles in a very different way,[3] even though their appearance in the temple attracted so much attention that it must already have shown the kind of men they were dealing with. That the Sanhedrin members had failed to see this was advantageous for the apostles brought before them.

But even more difficulties faced the Sanhedrin. What made them appear completely defeated and disarmed had to be the presence of the lame man who had been healed and so incontestably proved the truth of the apostles' assertions. The narrative does not state how this man came to be present at the trial, and only says that "when they saw the man who had been cured standing beside them, they had nothing to

2. This is how the words in 4:5 are to be taken: συναχθῆναι . . . εἰς Ἰερουσαλήμ (assembled [came back] in[to] Jerusalem), where εἰς (into) [a textual variant] is not equivalent to ἐν (in); it would make no sense to remark that those present in Jerusalem had assembled in Jerusalem.

3. The words "they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus" (4:13), express a recollection that only then, during the trial itself, dawned upon them.

say in opposition" (4:14). Interpreters [of this text] have no explanation for this certainly remarkable circumstance. Had he, as one might suppose, been summoned by the Sanhedrin itself? Or, since the author remarks earlier (3:11) that he never left the side of the two apostles after the miraculous cure, had he followed them to prison and from prison to the court? In either case, if the members of the Sanhedrin became so rattled merely by the presence of this man (which they must surely have permitted) that they had nothing at all to say against the defendants as regards the main issue of the proceedings, something they had to have prepared for, then they showed a lack of forethought unprecedented in such a court. In fact the members of the Sanhedrin did not know what they wanted. The points they ought to have thought of beforehand they now considered for the first time; what had been plainly seen by all Jerusalem now first struck those who had been blind to it. If this miracle was such a public one (4:16), they could not have been ignorant of it; they must surely have already been clear about it and decided how they were to counter the assertion of the apostles. The only unsurprising thing is that, given how such obtuse and weak-minded judges as these members of the Sanhedrin are made to appear throughout the whole narrative, the proceedings could end in no other way. And yet we do wonder how the writer could have thought that he had accounted for the failure of the whole process, to the discredit of the Sanhedrin, by remarking that nothing was done for fear of the people (4:21). If the people were so much to be feared, one would never have dared to seize the apostles during their discourse to the gathering of people amazed by the miracle; nor to carry them off to prison (4:3). All such matters could be disregarded only by viewing the apostles as more glorified when the deeds of their enemies turned to shame and humiliation.

This, however, is only the first part of what one might call the dramatic action, which does not develop in a straight line, yet continues in the same direction. A second part follows (Acts 5:12ff.), which follows the same pattern as the first part but with the important difference that everything in it is on a larger scale. This appears in the fact that not merely one but a great many miracles are performed, not only on one suffering man but on sick and suffering people of all kinds; and the attention of the enemies is again directed to the apostles because people are flocking to them, not only from Jerusalem but also from neighboring towns. In the first instance it was the two Apostles Peter and John who were seized, thrown into prison, and brought before the Sanhedrin; but now all the apostles are arrested (5:17–18).[4] The first time the enemies had seized Peter and John, detaining them in prison over night and producing them the next morning before the Sanhedrin. But this time the imprisoned apostles were freed in the night by an angel of the Lord, who led them out of the prison and commanded them to speak before the people in the temple. When the Sanhedrin

4. Now we hear simply of "the apostles" (5:18, 29, 40); the signs and wonders that gave rise to the prosecution "were done among the people through the apostles," who "were all together in Solomon's Portico" (5:12).

gathered the next morning in full and solemn assembly, and had the apostles brought before them by their officers, they were astonished by the news that the prison had been found most carefully locked and the guard standing before the door, but that on opening the prison no one was found in it (5:23). Perplexed by this situation, the Sanhedrin received information that the imprisoned men were in the temple speaking to the people. The apostles were persuaded to appear again before the Sanhedrin. (They could not have been forced to appear, because then the people might have stoned the temple-keeper and his servants.) But when the apostles repeated their previous declaration, that one must obey God rather than human beings, and that God the Father had raised the crucified Jesus from the dead, the same scene was repeated. The members of the Sanhedrin were enraged, and it seemed that the apostles would suffer the most serious consequences. However, the actual result once again stood in striking contrast to the plans and arrangements made by their enemies. The apostles were given the lesser punishment [of flogging] and were dismissed with the futile admonition [to cease their preaching]. That only enhanced their self-confidence. "When they heard this, they entered the temple at daybreak and went on with their teaching" (5:21).

How can anyone see this as anything other than an enhanced and exaggerated replay of the previous scene in this narrative, a replay simply intended to present the apostles in all their greatness and dignity, and in the glorifying light of the higher power under whose protection and guidance they stood? If we can find no natural course and connection in the previous sequence of events, how very improbable it is that it would recur as it does in this overblown replay of the prior scene! Simple enumeration of the individual elements through which the story moves cannot possibly make any other impression on an unprejudiced mind. It is self-evident that all the elements of the narrative ought to be taken together and considered in their relation to each other if we are to come to a reasoned judgment about the probability or improbability of the whole. Yet the affair appears in a totally different light in Neander's portrayal:

> Meanwhile the great work the apostles had performed before the eyes of the people (the healing of the lame man), the powerful words of Peter, and the authorities' fruitless efforts, resulted in increasing the number of the disciples to two thousand.[5] As the apostles, without troubling themselves about the command of the Sanhedrin, labored (as they declared openly they would do) more and more with word and deed to spread the gospel, it was inevitable that they should be brought before the Sanhedrin as rebellious. When the leader of the Sanhedrin criticized them for their disobedience, Peter renewed his earlier protest (5:29). . . . The words of Peter had already enraged the Sadducees and fanatics, and the many voices demanded the death of the apostles. But among

5. The conversion of the two thousand is, by the way, reported before the second trial (4:4). [*Ed.*] The text of 4:4 reads "five thousand."

> the angry crowd one voice of moderating wisdom was heard. . . . Gamaliel's words prevailed; the apostles suffered the customary punishment of flogging for their disobedience, and the earlier prohibition was repeated emphatically.[6]

Portrayed in this way, the whole affair assumes a different aspect; but is this the correct way to present it? By what right do we ignore the miraculous release of the apostles from prison, which is such a significant element in this part of the narrative, and which, if it is assumed to be a miracle, cannot be regarded as a merely fortuitous occurrence? If the reason for passing over this miracle in silence is that, without it the narrative would be simpler, more natural, and more credible, then that raises doubts about this whole view of these chapters of Acts. Therefore we ought not ignore the miracle, but instead should quite intentionally give it due consideration. If we have a right to doubt this part of the narrative, then we can also doubt another part, and this necessarily raises the question as to what in the whole section is historical fact and what is not. But omitting everything to which an objection might be raised, and using the rest of the material with the modifications required by such omissions—at the same time interpolating one helpful supposition or another, in order to make the whole hang together well and appear more plausible,[7] and then presenting the results of this subtraction and addition as the undoubtedly genuine historical contents of a narrative that has been subjected to this treatment—is none other than the well-known naturalistic method, which constructs its own arbitrary history. And if this method does not carry out its naturalistic principles consistently, but at one time dismisses miracle and at another defends it and treats it as an essential component of a narrative following the objective course of events, then it is easy to see where such a procedure must lead and that we necessarily face the alternative of either confining ourselves to a simple, literally exact narrative or, if we cannot altogether ignore its existence, allowing full scope to historical criticism.

Just as the way the main incidents are deployed reveals the tendency of the whole section, so too this tendency is no less apparent in the minor details of the story, indeed even more clearly and directly in some of them. The apostles are depicted throughout as superior, superhuman beings, who affect all around them with their

6. August Neander, *Geschichte der Pflanzung und Leitung der christlichen Kirche durch die Apostel*, 2 vols. (3rd ed., Berlin, 1841) 62ff. [*Ed.* The 2 vols. are numbered consecutively.]

7. Neander avails himself of such an aid on p. 62, in reference to Acts 4:1–22, when he conjectures: "Perhaps also the secret friends (if not fully declared friends) that the cause of Christ possessed from the beginning, among the members of the Sanhedrin, used their influence in favor of the accused." Secret friends of the cause of Christ among the members of the Sanhedrin—how remote this idea is from the whole presentation in Acts! What has led to such a completely implausible and arbitrary hypothesis? Obviously because it must be admitted that the whole course and outcome of the affair makes no sense. But does this hypothesis solve the mystery? Hardly so! In fact it raises another difficulty that is falsely concealed and ignored as much as possible [namely, accounting for these "secret friends"]. Nothing is more blameworthy than a method of treating history that, instead of looking candidly, freely and directly at the basic situation, sets its arbitrary fictions in place of the historical truth.

indwelling, supernatural, miraculous power. Their imposing presence sways the assembled crowds, and their commanding authority attracts all who listen to their preaching. This is clearly expressed when we are told that great fear fell upon the entire community, and among all who heard these things, because of the miracles they performed (5:11). Acts depicts their impressive standing by stating that when they, the apostles, were all together in the Portico of Solomon, where large crowds usually gathered, they formed an isolated group that no one else dared approach. The high estimation in which they were held is suggested by the fact that people kept a certain distance from them as superior, superhuman, as it were magical beings one dared not approach.[8] This depiction clearly and definitively expresses the idealizing view of the apostles that underlies the whole account.

While the apostles collectively are in the spotlight here, the reader's attention is concentrated most fully on the person who stands at the head of the twelve, the Apostle Peter. In the first part of this section (chaps. 3–5) the Apostle John still shares this preeminence with Peter, but in the remainder of the narrative only the Apostle Peter is elevated above his fellow apostles just as they are elevated above all the rest of the church. While the apostles collectively perform many signs and wonders, the Apostle Peter's very shadow brings about these miraculous results. While at the first trial John is at least mentioned alongside Peter (4:19), at the second (5:29) Peter is the only one of the apostles mentioned by name. But the highlight of Peter's apostolic activity is the miracle he performed on Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11).[9] It may be assumed that there are historical reasons for weaving these two names into the history of the first Christian community. They may have exhibited a course of thought and action directly opposed to the example of sacrifice and unselfishness given by Barnabas, who is placed in direct contrast with them. This made their names so hated and despised that in their death, however it came about, people thought they could see an act of divine retribution. Everything beyond that relates to the writer's declared intention to present the Holy Spirit as the divine principle operating in the apostles, and can only be explained in connection with it. The Holy Spirit, operative in all Christians,

8. The word ἅπαντες ("all together") is commonly taken as referring not merely to the apostles but to Christians generally. Eduard Zeller also, in *Die Apostelgeschichte nach ihrem Inhalt und Ursprung kritisch untersucht* (Stuttgart, 1854) 125, prefers this reading because the community regularly gathered (2:42, 44, 46). But 5:12 has to do with the greatness the apostles emanated, because of which fear gripped the entire community, and the Christians too shrank from standing too close to such superior beings.

9. [*Ed.*] This "miracle" is one that causes their deaths, as an object lesson for the whole church, because they held back proceeds from the sale of a property, rather than donating them to the common good. Death was their punishment because they lied to the Holy Spirit. One of the disturbing implications of this story is that the people had to be coerced by fear to donate their possessions, so the picture of the early community is not as idyllic as it seems. Also, the Holy Spirit is complicit in the coercion along with the apostles. Here miracles are used not to heal and teach (as with Jesus) but to coerce and punish. Baur devotes great attention to this "punitive miracle," which discredits the account in Acts as a whole.

is a divine principle imparting an elevated and distinctive character to them, and it is bestowed in a quite special way on the apostles. Their human individuality retreats so much in relation to the divine principle acting in them that they seem to be only its instrument and agents, and all that they do directly bears a divine character. The words of Peter, in whom as the foremost apostle the Holy Spirit had to express itself in its full force and significance, must be taken in this sense when he said to Ananias (5:4), "You did not lie to men but to God." But if a striking illustration were to be given of the activity of this principle dwelling in the apostles, and of the divine character imparted to them by it, how better could this be done than by setting up a case in which doubt is cast on the principle, thereby, so to speak, putting the Holy Spirit itself to the test? Ananias and his wife Sapphira supposedly provided this case, inasmuch as they had conspired on a course of action that could only succeed if the divine principle animating the apostles did not involve the divine omniscience one had to think of as the Holy Spirit's most essential attribute. What other result could follow from such conduct than divine judgment of the two by their sudden death? For they had sinned not against men, but against the instruments of the divine spirit, against God himself.

There would be no need to speak of the attempts at a natural explanation of this event, as have been made by Heinrichs[10] and other interpreters, had Neander not given this mode of explanation fresh support and authority. For that is exactly what Neander is trying to do when he says:

> If we reflect on how Ananias saw Peter—how astonished and confounded this hypocritical, superstitious man must have been at seeing his lie exposed, how the holy earnestness of a man speaking to his conscience with such divine assurance, and rebuking him, must have worked on his terrified spirit, and how the fear of punishment from a holy God gripped him—we do not find it so difficult to understand how the words of the Apostle brought about such a great effect. Here the divine and the natural seem to be intimately bound together.[11]

Thus according to Neander we have to look at the death of Ananias as a natural event quite intelligible as such on psychological grounds. But if it is not psychologically impossible that the event of sudden death might result from a powerful mental shock, the case before us cannot be regarded from this standpoint. Such a manner of death is rare and uncommon enough as it is, but for it to have happened twice within the space of a few hours is even more unlikely. The death of Sapphira must be attributed to the same cause, and Neander does not hesitate to give it the same psychological explanation:

> When Sapphira returned three hours later, without suspecting what had happened,[12] Peter first tried to arouse her conscience by questioning her.

10. [*Ed.*] J. H. Heinrichs (1765–1850), pastor, theologian, and church official.
11. Neander, *Geschichte der Pflanzung und Leitung* (n. 6), 38.
12. This of course must be accepted on the naturalistic hypothesis, however it conflicts with v. 5.

> But when, instead of being led to reconsider and repent, she persisted in her dissimulation, Peter accused her of having conspired with her husband to test the Spirit of God, as to whether or not it could be deceived by their hypocrisy. He then proceeded to threaten her with the divine punishment that had just overtaken her husband. The words of Peter, supported here by the impression of her husband's fate, which startled the conscience of the hypocrite, produced the same effect on her as they did on her husband.

Such an event might occur rarely, but its happening again right away exceeds the bounds of probability. We could of course disregard this point, but the writer's narrative itself allows for nothing other than the acceptance of a miracle intentionally performed. Peter's words to Ananias adopt such a threatening tone that the immediately ensuing death of Ananias can only appear to execute the threatened punishment. We see this even more clearly in the declaration to Sapphira: "The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out" (5:9). A death that follows immediately such a clear declaration cannot be regarded as accidental; it can only be seen as a miracle intentionally wrought.

If Sapphira's death is considered to be a merely accidental, natural event that the Apostle did not explicitly will to occur, then a new issue arises. When the Apostle had just seen his words having such an unexpected and fatal outcome in Ananias' case, would he not have been duty bound to temper the impact they had on Sapphira rather than accentuating it? Without assuming a miracle, there would be no real point to this narrative. But the natural explanation as Neander gives it is not meant to be serious; it is just an easy way to introduce the topic of miracle to those who are wary of it. By learning that what appears supernatural about the miracle is in fact something natural, one is also more likely to concede in turn that the natural is supernatural. For not only does Neander speak in this connection of a divine judgment that was important for protecting the initial operations of the Holy Spirit from infection by the most dangerous poison [of naturalism], and for affirming the Spirit's regard for apostolic authority; he also remarks expressly that the divine and the natural appear to be closely connected here. Olshausen[13] in his commentary on Acts 5:1ff. informs us how we are to think of this connection between the divine and the natural:

> The absolute disconnect between the natural and the supernatural is also in this case harmful. Nothing can prevent us from giving a purely natural explanation of the death of Ananias, but this explanation does not set the miraculous

[*Ed.*] Acts 5:5 says that when Ananias died "great fear seized all who heard of it," but in v. 7 we are told that Sapphira did not know about it.

13. Hermann Olshausen, *Biblischer Commentar über sämmtliche Schriften des Neuen Testaments*, vol. 2 (3rd ed., Königsberg, 1838), 700–701. [*Ed.*] Olshausen (1796–1839), influenced by Schleiermacher and Neander in Berlin, was professor of theology at Erlangen, and one of the "rational supernaturalists" whose point of view David Friedrich Strauss amply displayed and refuted in his *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*. He frequently serves as a foil for Baur's own position.

> character of the event aside. The natural itself becomes miraculous through its connection with its circumstances and context, and such is the case with this death, which, taken in connection with the judgment of the apostle spoken in the power of the Spirit and penetrating Ananias like a sword to convict him of sin, was a miracle ordered by a higher power.

But what outlook does this halfhearted thinking serve? The absolute disconnect between the natural and the supernatural is *not* what is harmful, because the latter requires the concept of miracle, and a miracle, if it is not essentially or absolutely different from the natural, is no miracle. What *is* harmful is the illogical blending of two essentially different concepts—the neutralizing of the natural and the supernatural in an indifferent tertium quid, which on the one hand is supposed to be both natural and supernatural, but on the other hand is for the same reason neither natural nor supernatural, and thus is nothing at all. There are only two ways to look at this incident. The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were either natural events—natural results of terror and of apoplectic fits, and thus not miracles—or they were miracles, and thus not the mere results of fear and apoplexy. Even if fear and apoplexy were the cause of death, they did not operate on their own, because otherwise the two deaths would not have been miracles; rather death resulted because of the will of the Apostle Peter and the divine miraculous power accompanying his words.

It is clear, therefore, that if Neander and Olshausen attach such great importance to natural causes that a strictly natural explanation for the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira is conceivable, then that is truly a muddled way of looking at them. In illogical fashion it makes out to be the primary cause a secondary cause that just plays a part. This procedure inserts an intermediate cause [fear and apoplexy] of which the narrative says nothing, because the narrator certainly does not intend the miracles he relates to be taken in turn as accidental natural events. If we can simply decide to accept an actual miracle, then we are stuck with that. While the harshness of these deaths hardly fits well with the other New Testament miracles or seems sufficiently justified, that gives us all the more reason for including these punitive miracles among the evidence that discredits the historical character of the whole part of Acts to which it belongs.

Here we will take another look at the miracle that introduces the whole series of these events [the healing of the lame man, Acts, chap. 3]. In this whole series the glorification of the apostles is the overall aim; set apart in their full glory as majestic, superhuman beings, they are to be contrasted in particular with their enemies. The principal action in the narrative clearly betrays the complete lack of any connection with [healing miracles], and only serves as the means to present the main idea on which it is based. A miracle such as this one cannot be judged on any other basis. Its only purpose is to introduce, to show the occasion for, the events that follow, and for this purpose it has all the corresponding marks. The aim of glorifying the apostles required showing that the enemies of the cause of Jesus were taking fresh steps that

could lead to nothing other than their own shame and humiliation. In order, however, to draw the attention of the enemies once again to the apostles, something these enemies could no longer be indifferent to had to happen. The cause of Jesus therefore had to gain more participants, and the preaching of the apostles had to bring about a very considerable increase in the number of believers. But the apostles' preaching by itself had not been so very influential, and had to find a way of reaching people. Their interest had to be aroused by something striking that they saw with their own eyes.

How could this be better brought about than by a miracle performed by the apostles? But not just any miracle would do. It must be one of not merely passing interest, but the kind of miracle that drew public attention to it and had abiding results after it was performed. No other miracle could serve this purpose better than the healing of a man lame from birth—a man who had never walked before, but who immediately used the power given to him in such a way as to become a walking miracle that no one could help observing. The narrative itself presents the miracle in this light. As soon as it is performed, the lame man springs up, walks around, accompanies the apostles into the temple, and goes around there proclaiming what has happened to him and praising God for it. All the people saw him and were filled with wonder and astonishment at his transformation (Acts 3:8–10). He then clung to the two apostles, in order that alongside the miracle workers he could bear witness to what they had done (3:11), and appear with them (we are not told how) at the judicial inquiry before the Sanhedrin. The narrative points out repeatedly how the miracle had been proclaimed publicly throughout Jerusalem, and how it became recognized as a highly extraordinary event because the lame man was known as a beggar, more than forty years old, who sat daily at the gate of the temple (Acts 3:2, 4:14, 16, 21–22). As soon as we grasp the main idea of the story correctly, we see the connection of each separate feature to the whole, how one thing necessarily leads to another. If the historical character of the main event must be doubted, so too the individual minor circumstances that lead up to, and prepare for, what follows can hardly be regarded as historical facts. Every individual feature displays very clearly the internal cohesion deliberately making it a whole to serve the purpose for which it is intended.

However, the idealizing tendency distinctive to this entire part of Acts does not just concern its treatment of the apostles; the transfiguring luster of this same light also falls on the whole community of believers. The glorification in which the apostles share is in fact the Holy Spirit that dwells and works in them; and the same Spirit also fills all the believers. There is a divine principle in them too, which raises them above ordinary reality and has them appear in a higher light. The two short sections (2:42–47, 4:32–37) present them in this higher light. The aim of the author is to give a general description of the state of the first Christian community. What is reported of the apostles—that they enjoyed the admiration, reverence, and love of the whole population of Jerusalem—is a special commendation also extended to this first Christian community: "Awe came upon everyone" (2:43); "having the good will

of all the people" (2:47); "great grace was upon them all" (4:33). It is evident how little the persecution of the Christians, which broke out so soon afterwards, is compatible with this account. That makes it clear that such a conception of the relationship of the first Christian community to the populace as a whole must be attributed to the embellishment of legend, and other features in the narrative confirm this view. The spirit of unity and harmony that animated all the members of the body enabled the community to make a favorable impression on the people and to elicit their good will and trust. This spirit bound them together and showed itself especially in their social arrangements, in the community of goods they introduced among themselves and that eliminated all distinctions of private property. One was supposed to believe this is a genuine historical report of the social relations of the early community. But this is by no means the case, even for those who have the highest opinion of the historical credibility of the Book of Acts. Neander says:

> In the narratives of Acts itself there is a great deal that contradicts this picture of a community of goods. Peter expressly says to Ananias that it is up to him whether to keep the piece of land or to sell it, and that even after it was sold he was free to do what he chose with the proceeds (5:4). In the sixth chapter of Acts there is only a pro rata dispersal of alms to widows, but nothing in the nature of a common treasury for the use of the whole community. We find in Acts 12:12 that [a certain] Mary possessed a house of her own in Jerusalem, which she had by no means sold for the benefit of the treasury. These instances clearly show that we are not to imagine an entire cessation of property rights in this early community.[14]

However, the writer of Acts clearly says we should do this. If the contradiction between his depiction here and his own information requires us "not to take that depiction literally," as Neander says, then we must acknowledge that other interests than historical ones underlie the narrative. There is an undeniable interest in allowing the primitive community to appear in the beautiful light of a fellowship, one banishing from its midst all that is disturbing and divisive in human social relations, above all the distinctions between rich and poor. But such a state of affairs did not actually exist, and naturally could not exist. How can we think that, in a community where, according to the author (4:4), there were already 5,000 members, all those who possessed homes and goods sold even their houses (4:34), and thus no one in the whole community owned a place to live? And if (let this be added to the other considerations) it was a general rule that every individual should sell all that he possessed and contribute the proceeds to the general treasury, why is it especially noteworthy (4:36–37) that Joseph Barnabas sold his land and laid the money at the apostles' feet? Here again we must conclude that what the writer represents as a general arrangement of the early

14. *Geschichte der Pflanzung und Leitung* (n. 6), 34.

Christian community was not actually the general practice. We may perhaps accept as historical truth that

> a common treasury was established from which the needs of a large number of the poorest members of the community were met, and from which perhaps the expenses incurred by the whole community (such as the agape feasts) were defrayed; and that many sold their property to increase their contribution to the common treasury. So this was an arrangement similar to one in the earlier association of men and women who attached themselves to Christ—an arrangement subsequently copied everywhere in the customary collections for the poor.[15]

But none of this is borne out by the description in Acts. Unless other data were at our disposal, we would not be justified in assuming that even this much is true, since we must say that this narrative is, on the whole, not historically credible, and so we are uncertain as to how much historical truth may still lie at its basis. All that can lead us in this case to suppose a substratum of historical fact is the general truth that unhistorical narratives are not usually altogether invented, but in most cases rise out of something in actual history. But since neither passage is much help in discovering a historical element, we must add that, according to Epiphanius,[16] the Ebionites called themselves the "poor." They regarded this as an honorable distinction, because they sold their possessions in apostolic times and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. They adopted lives of poverty and renunciation, and said that is why they were called the "poor" everywhere. The expression "laid at the apostles' feet" shows that this account is closely related to the two passages in Acts. They cannot have simply adopted this expression from Acts, because this work would have no authority for the Ebionites, owing to their well-known hostility toward the Apostle Paul. Thus we really have here a historical datum that tells us of a similar τιθέναι παρὰ τοὺς πόδας τῶν ἀποστόλων (laying at the feet of the apostles) as a characteristic feature of apostolic times. But we must not suppose the poverty of the Ebionites arose first of all from their having sold all their possessions. It is much more likely that they were poor from the beginning, but because they considered their poverty as something honorable and distinctive, they wished it to be considered something they voluntarily adopted. This naturally gave rise to the story that they had originally possessed property, but that they had sold it and laid the proceeds at the apostles' feet. What we may assume to be historical truth in this instance is not so much the action as the disposition and view of worldly goods behind it. Since the disposition must be demonstrable, the resulting action is simply its visible reflection.

What the Acts of the Apostles tells us about the social circumstances and arrangements of the first Christians is to be understood as not referring to a real, total,

15. Neander, *Geschichte der Pflanzung und Leitung* (n. 6), 36.

16. *Against Heresies*, 30.17.2.

and universal community of goods, but only to a general willingness of individuals like Barnabas to demonstrate by their action the sacrifice of their earthly goods and possessions for the cause of Jesus and the social good—in this sense "laying them at the apostles' feet." But the actual renunciation of worldly possessions and the general community of goods mentioned in the Book of Acts only goes to show in a remarkable way the peculiar nature of the mythic tradition. Myth likes what is concrete, living, and sensibly visual, whereas mere disposition is too bare and empty for it. Disposition must be realized in action if it is to have life and meaning of its own and become a worthy object of tradition. This may also explain the discrepancy that, while the Ebionites claimed they became poor by laying their goods at the feet of the apostles, the Book of Acts declares instead that by doing this all poverty and need vanished from the community. Although this is to be understood in relative terms, it is expressed in the words, "There was not a needy person among them" (4:34). If we just consider the disposition that prompted the renunciation of this worldly property and possession, we could simply focus on the concept of poverty. But thinking about really doing this for the good of the community also has to involve actually meeting the needs of the community.

If we ask what the actual historical content of Acts 3–5 is, it does not amount to very much. Given the state of all the narratives in this part of Acts, they apparently tell us very little about this first period of the early Christian community. What most has the character of a historical fact, the advice given by Gamaliel,[17] lets us surmise that the enemies of Jesus troubled themselves very little about his disciples immediately after his death. When they no doubt came to observe that, instead of becoming fewer, his followers were increasing in numbers and flourishing, their enemies were obliged to take more notice of them. But it did not seem worthwhile to take stricter measures against them. Even the opposition between the two parties, the Sadducees and Pharisees, as portrayed in the different attitudes adopted by Gamaliel and the members of the Sanhedrin, can scarcely be regarded as historical fact. It has been rightly noted: "Although the Sadducees had allied themselves for a common purpose with Caiaphas the High Priest, who had condemned Jesus and afterwards endeavored with special zeal to destroy the apostles, we find no historical evidence that Caiaphas himself was a Sadducee. The Sadducees first appear with true partisan zealotry against the apostles because of the resurrection of Jesus."[18] This is exactly what must make us suspicious about the role the Sadducees are now said to have played for the first time in this affair. It cannot but occur to us that, since their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus was the most important thing the apostles had to preach about, the Sadducees—the declared enemies of the doctrine of the resurrection—must have been their most bitter

17. [*Ed.*] In Acts 5:34–39 Gamaliel advises the Israelites to leave the Christians alone, because if their plan "is of human origins it will fail, but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them."

18. See H. A. W. Meyer, *Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen, 1835), on Acts 5:17.

and decided opponents. The repeated and pointed observation that the Sadducees did the most to stir up persecution against the disciples (4:1, 5:17)—and principally from annoyance that they proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus from the dead as a fact (4:2)—appears very much like an a priori assumption on the author's part.[19]

But if the Sadducees had the greatest interest in suppressing the disciples of Jesus, and if despite this desire their plans and measures remained unsuccessful, what could have restrained them other than the influence of the opposing party, the Pharisees? It must have been a very weighty authority that could exert so much influence over the Sadducees and cool their passions. Who else could have done this but the most prominent Pharisaic rabbi at that time, the well-renowned Gamaliel? And yet Gamaliel does not seem very well fitted for the role assigned to him, and for the moderate and even-tempered nature of the counsel ascribed to him, when in reality the most zealous persecutor of the Christian community at the time was Saul, who had been educated in Gamaliel's school and on his principles. Thus we must also dispense with the figure of Gamaliel, and trace his celebrated counsel back to the opinion prevailing among the Jewish rulers at that time—that it would be best to leave the cause of Jesus to its fate, in the full assurance that it would soon prove to be of little consequence.[20]

19. [*Ed.*] Acts 4:1b–2: ". . . the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection from the dead." The Sadducees were the Jewish party holding that there is no resurrection (for Jews or anyone else) after death, whereas the Pharisees thought there is one. That is what makes it an a priori assumption that the Sadducees would be the most hostile to reports of Jesus being resurrected.

20. That Gamaliel cannot really have spoken the words placed into his mouth by the author of Acts in 5:35–39, is shown by the striking chronological error in the appeal to the example of Theudas (5:36), who, according to Josephus (*Antiquities*, 20.8), first appeared as a false prophet and agitator about ten years later, under the procurator Cuspius Fadus. Since Cuspius Fadus became procurator of Judea about the year 44 of the Christian era, the revolt of Theudas could not have occurred before that time. The view expressed in the words of Gamaliel in Acts 5:38 ["keep away from these men and let them alone"] hardly agrees with the statement of facts as related in the whole section comprising chs. 3–5. If all these miracles were really performed as narrated here, and in so authentic a manner that the Sanhedrin itself could not ignore them, nor bring forward anything against them—if the man lame from birth was healed by the word of the apostles, and if the apostles themselves, without any human intervention, were freed from prison by an angel from heaven—how could Gamaliel, if he was such an unbiased and thoughtful man as described here, resting his judgment on experience, express himself so problematically as he does here, and leave it to the future to decide whether or not this cause was divine? If the miracles related here were really performed, it must have been quite evident that they were a publicly recognized, authentically witnessed matter, about which no one could have any doubt. What more could Gamaliel be waiting for in order to give a decisive opinion on the matter? For new miracles, which would not prove anything more than those already performed? Or for whether the disciples of Jesus would gain even more adherents among the people? But all one might expect had already happened. Every address by the apostles had been followed by the conversion of thousands; the whole people hung with wonder and awe on the proclamation of the new faith, so that even the rulers did not dare to use force for fear of being stoned. What greater witness to the popularity of the new doctrine could there have been, and what danger must not the Sanhedrin have incurred by continuing its opposition to the many supporters among the people? If on the other hand we assume that Gamaliel could not deny the miracles that had been performed, but did not regard them to be divine, even then we cannot understand why he should express himself so weakly and indecisively, and speak in favor of ceasing to deter the apostles' interference. If the miracles were regarded as actual, but not as

During this period, in which the disciples of Jesus were not troubled by their enemies, they had time to gain fresh confidence from faith in the resurrection, and to strengthen themselves by winning new adherents to their cause. Jerusalem was the best place to do this. The decision of the disciples to remain in Jerusalem cannot be viewed as anything other than a momentous one for the cause of Jesus in these early times. Here alone could all the elements come together that united them in the resurrection faith; here alone could their activities be successful. Not without reason does the Acts of the Apostles trace this resolve of the disciples back to the explicit command given by Jesus shortly before his departure, that they should not leave Jerusalem but remain there until the promise of the Holy Spirit should be fulfilled, by whose power they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all of Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:4).[21] If this sending of the Spirit is to be understood chiefly in terms of the confidence and boldness with which the disciples of Jesus proclaimed the gospel and endeavored to work on its behalf,[22] their actual success naturally indicates the internal connection between these two points—their remaining in Jerusalem, and their being filled by the Holy Spirit, which was linked to it [their remaining]. The same phenomenon that the history of the development of early Christianity presents to us—that the larger cities such as Antioch, Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus became the first seats of Christianity and the hubs for its wider activity—we also see in the fact that the first Christian community took shape in Jerusalem.

But here we must greatly reduce the scale from that which is found in the Acts of the Apostles when it speaks of the conversion at one time of several thousands; indeed, we can scarcely speak of hundreds. A remarkable instance of how little these numbers are to be relied on is found in Acts 1:15, where we are told that immediately after the ascension of Jesus there were one hundred and twenty believers altogether. But on the other hand the Apostle Paul, whose testimony is far earlier than the Book of Acts and has a far greater claim to credibility, speaks of five hundred brothers and sisters to whom Jesus appeared at one time after his resurrection (1 Cor 15:6). If the smaller number is obviously incorrect, so too the subsequent statement of much larger

being divine, how could there be any doubt that this was an even worse deceit it was certainly the duty of the authorities to investigate and punish? If we conclude that the events took place as the narrative says they did—but as we can scarcely think they did—the advice of Gamaliel appears to be lacking in the prudence required by the circumstances, since too much had already happened to allow such a business to continue as is. Either accept the testimony to miracles or take active steps to halt such an obvious deceit. The alleged facts and the wise measures counseled by Gamaliel are incompatible. Either the events took place as they are narrated, and Gamaliel did not give such counsel; or if he did give it, his counsel does not fit the facts as narrated here.

21. [*Ed.*] Acts 1:4, 8: "He ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. . . . You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

22. Cf. esp. Acts 4:31: ". . . the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness." Also 6:5, 10 [concerning Stephen, who spoke with wisdom and the Spirit].

numbers (Acts 2:41, 4:4) is no more worthy of credit. We must come to the realization that the lesser numbers precede the greater [in Acts] in order to give a very vivid impression of the rapid and remarkable growth of the community. Both numbers are suspicious. Moreover, the persecution of Stephen does not allow us to think of the community in Jerusalem as being so important and as large as must be assumed if we accept all the increases mentioned in Acts (2:41, 4:4, 5:14, 6:1, 7). We gain the impression from all of this that, if we wish to arrive at a suitable picture of this earliest period, we must not place much weight on individual details and accounts.

This verdict applies equally to the speeches contained in this part of Acts that were delivered on various occasions by the Apostle Peter, and to the Christian hymn in 4:24.[23] They may be taken as fragmentary images of the circle of life and ideas within which this first Christian community moved, and as eloquent proof of how the first disciples of Jesus sought, both for themselves and for others, to harmonize faith in him, the Risen and Ascended One, with their existing Jewish standpoint, by appealing to those passages in the Old Testament where it was thought possible to find a messianic reference to Jesus. However suitably these passages may have been interwoven with the historical narrative, they cannot make the historical sequence itself more plausible for us. In light of all the rest, we must regard them as just incidentally and arbitrarily related to the factual account.

After the preceding investigations, the only remaining question is whether, in the unhistorical parts of this section, the author of the Book of Acts composed freely on his own account or followed an already-existing tradition. Doubtless both elements are found closely interwoven here. In considering the arena in which the narrative takes place—where we are transposed into the sacred circle of the first Christian community—while we may relegate much of this material to tradition, we cannot deny that a writer like the author of Acts also freely dealt with this traditional material.

So here we hardly stand on firm historical ground. This means we cannot with certainty conclude from Acts' presentation that the apostles and the first Christian community were subject to persecution. However, following the idealized scenario [of the early community], Acts presents the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of Christians connected with it, and this has the sense of historical reality.

On the same day that Stephen became the first martyr because of his energetic activity in spreading the new teaching, a great persecution was launched against the community in Jerusalem (Acts 6–8). All the Christians left Jerusalem and scattered into Judea and Samaria. Acts 8:1 expressly states that only the apostles remained behind in Jerusalem. This may rightly surprise us. We might think that they were made

23. [*Ed.*] Acts 4:24–26: "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them, it is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.'" The quotation is a paraphrase of Ps. 2:1–2. The speeches of Peter in Acts 2:14ff. and 3:12ff. also appeal to Jewish tradition and its Christian fulfillment.

an exception from the rest simply because it seemed inconsistent with their dignity to flee from danger and leave the appointed scene of their activity; although the Apostle Peter, when placed in a similar position, did not have any such scruples (12:7).[24] However, there is no doubt that they did remain behind in Jerusalem, where we find them immediately afterwards (8:14). But if they did remain in Jerusalem, we can scarcely imagine that they were the only ones to do so; we are rather led to suppose from all the circumstances that the persecution, brought on by the actions of the Hellenist Stephen, was directed chiefly against the Hellenistic part of the community [the Gentile Christians], which, together with Stephen, had openly opposed the existing temple worship. The Hebraists [the Jewish Christians], together with the apostles still closely associated with them (Luke 24:53; Acts 3:1 and 11, 4:1, 5:25), were not persecuted as enemies. Had all the Jerusalem Christians left the city with the sole exception of the apostles, something would surely have been said about the return of fugitives to a Christian church[25] continuing to exist in Jerusalem throughout this time. But it is only stated that they [the Hellenists] dispersed even further and founded new congregations in other lands. One of the fugitives, Philip, remained in Caesarea (8:40, 21:8) after he had preached the gospel in Samaria, although, since he is named with Stephen as one of the first seven deacons, he would have been expected to return to Jerusalem as soon as circumstances permitted.

We must therefore assume that this first persecution of Christians had the important consequence for the church in Jerusalem that its two components, the Hebraists and Hellenists, previously united though already apparently differing, were now outwardly separated from each other. From that time on the church in Jerusalem became purely Hebraistic, adhering closely to its strictly Judaizing character, because of which it came to oppose the freer form of Hellenistic Christianity. In the interest of its Judaism, it seems that the Jerusalem church even then desired to bring the Christian churches forming outside of Jerusalem into closer dependence on it in order to prevent the free development of Hellenistic principles. This was probably the reason for the mission of the Apostles Peter and John to Samaria (Acts 8:14ff.). The purpose according to the text—that they might bestow, on the Samaritans Philip had converted and baptized, the gift of the Holy Spirit by laying on of hands—does not give a clear picture of the situation. For the text just speaks of an outward communication of the Holy Spirit bestowed by the apostles as its direct instruments, and accompanied by miraculous signs. In the same manner as Peter and John were sent to Samaria, Peter afterwards visited the Christian communities established in Judea, Samaria, and

24. [*Ed.*] In Acts 12:7ff. Peter accepts the help of an angel to escape Herod's prison.

25. [*Ed.*] Thus far we have translated *Gemeinde* as "community," but at some point the community became institutionalized into a church, which we may assume to have happened around the time of the first persecutions and the inner division between Hellenists and Hebraists, requiring the appointment of deacons—when, according to Baur, historical reality makes an appearance for the first time in the Acts account. From now on we translate *Gemeinde* as "church" or "congregation" when appropriate. Baur begins using *Kirche* only later in the book.

Galilee (9:31ff.) in the name of the Jerusalem church, and in the interests of the Judaistic principles it affirmed (see 11:1ff.); but there is nothing said here about the aim of imparting the Holy Spirit to the newly-converted by the hands of an apostle.

We might also assume that, when it was known in Jerusalem that the Christian faith was accepted in Antioch, Barnabas paid a similar visit to that city. But this is very doubtful. Neander himself acknowledges that: "Consternation and mistrust seem to have been awakened in Jerusalem by the news that in Antioch a church of Gentile Christians was taking shape that did not observe the ceremonial law."[26] But if this were the case, Barnabas the Hellenist would scarcely have been selected for such an assignment, since his liberal principles, so nearly allied to the Pauline standpoint (as shown by what follows), could not have been unknown at that time to the Jerusalem church. There is every indication that he did not undertake the journey to Antioch as a mandate from the church, for there is no trace of his being in any way subordinate to Jerusalem. It even seems doubtful that he had been in Jerusalem before he went to Antioch, since his name (9:27)[27] is associated with events that we will show cannot have happened in the manner described. Perhaps, therefore, after the persecution following the death of Stephen, he had left Jerusalem, and at last found with Paul in Antioch the freer sphere of action that better suited him personally.

So the split brought about at that time, between the two formerly allied elements of the Jerusalem church, became wider and wider, but it existed before this. The persecution itself shows that the Jews in Jerusalem did not view the Hebraists and the Hellenists [among the Christians] in the same way. We probably have to seek the initial seed of the dissension that arose between the two factions of the Jerusalem church in the facts reported in Acts 6:1ff., where we are told that "the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews [Hebraists] because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food." This γογγυσμός ("muttering") of the Hellenists against the Hebraists brings us down at once from the ideality of harmonious conditions in the primitive community to the ordinary realities of life. It seems to have had deeper grounds in the ill feelings between the two parties, from which such disputes as these derived their importance. The church had grown predominantly by the addition of Hellenists. This conclusion correctly follows from both the complaint itself and the means said to remedy the situation. For it seems that, without exception, all those chosen to be the first deacons were Hellenists.[28] This of course allowed the more liberal orientation, which the Hellenists presumably had and set them apart from the Hebraists, to develop. If these appointments were really made as reported, the fact

26. Neander, *Geschichte der Pflanzung und Leitung* (n. 6), 139.

27. [*Ed.*] Acts 9:27: "Barnabas took him [Paul], brought him to the apostles, and described for them how on the road he had seen the Lord."

28. [*Ed.*] Seven men were appointed to perform this task for the community (6:3–5), and all seven have Greek names, which presumably makes them Hellenists. Later church tradition called these men deacons, whereas at this time their role was not a formal office that they held.

that Stephen (whom we know more about) was one of those chosen because of the tension, gives some indication of the spirit in which they were made and of the overall circumstances on which they were based.