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Biblical Precedents for a General Assembly

S.Hutchinson

In the 'Plea of Presbytery', issued by four ministers of the General Synod of Ulster in 1840, Biblical authority for the Church courts of Presbyterianism was sought, not only in the Jewish Synagogue (usually cited as the model for the organization of the early Church), but also in three other institutions which functioned as superior courts. The Rev. James Denham, author of Letter III in the 'Plea', referred to

(i) "the appointment of the seventy elders (Numbers xi 17)"

(ii) "that great sanhedrim which ... had the cognizance of all matters of the greatest moment, both civil and ecclesiastical ... (and) sat in the temple, as also did two lesser Sanhedrims", (1) and

(iii) "the Synod of Jerusalem ... the model of our synods". (2)

### The Elders of Israel

Appeals to accounts of elders in the Pentateuch, particularly the 'court of seventy', are common in nineteenth century apologists for Presbyterianism, and in some pamphleteers of the twentieth. J.A. Hodge, quoting from Samuel Miller's 'Ruling Elder' (Princeton, 1832), states that the eldership "has been the permanent office in the Church under all dispensations, even under Abrahamic. (See Gen. 24:2; 50:7; Ex. 3:16; 4:29, 30; 12:21; 18:12; Deut. 5:23; Ps. 107: 32, etc.) Under the Mosaic ritual the Elders were the recognised representatives of the people. They were systematically arranged into courts having various jurisdictions, and the highest court of seventy Elders was a court of appeal (Ex. 18:21-25; Num. 11:16,25; Ex. 24:1)". (3)

Similar arguments occur in Irish pamphlets of the twentieth century. One states, "We might be bold to claim that Presbyterianism began with the elders of

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Israel, even before the time of Moses", (4) and another, "Under the rule of Moses the elders of the tribe became the representatives of the people and the court of seventy elders develops as the final court of appeal (Numb., 11:16-25; Exodus 24:1-9); and the supreme court of the land, 'the elders of Israel', the governing body of the nation". (5) A third links the institution of the eldership with the emblem of Presbyterianism. "Out of the burning bush came to the command to Moses, 'Go and gather the elders of Israel together'". (6)

There is no account in the Old Testament of a 'court of seventy elders' actually functioning. Moshe Weinfeld, stating that "the emergence of the elders has been explained in the Pentateuch etiologically", notes differences in the three traditions of their appointment, recorded in Exodus xviii, Numbers xi and Deuteronomy i. (7). In the first the suggestion is that of Jethro, in the second it is that of God and in the third it is that of Moses himself, while the qualities sought in the elders also vary from honesty, to divine inspiration and finally intellectual capacity.

Norman K. Gottwald, in his monumental work on the social development of Israel 1250-1050 B.C., takes a sceptical view of the historicity of accounts of that period. He warns that "The traditions of the fathers and of Moses tend either to give us traits of a social system which look suspiciously like naive retrojections of later Israelite features, or they suggest fragmentary aspects of a social system conspicuously different from that of later Israel ... the Mosaic age is ... a synthetic creation of canonical Israelite tradition". (8)

Unlike the Presbyterian apologists of the nineteenth century and later popular pamphleteers, the Reformers of the sixteenth century did not appeal to the 'court of seventy' or other material describing that epoch: they based their case for the eldership on the New Testament, particularly Romans xii 8, I Corinthians xii 28 and I Timothy v 17. (9)

In the seventeenth century the Westminster Divines did cite II Chronicles xix 8-11, which

describes the judicial reform of Jehoshaphat, who supplemented the traditional administration of customary law by village elders with a number of judges in key cities and a court of appeal in Jerusalem. The historicity of the enactment is not completely certain, as Jehoshaphat's reign was 873-849 B.C., while Chronicles is a product of the Persian period (537-331 B.C.), and there is no parallel account of these judicial provisions in the books of Kings, but there is no compelling reason to be unduly sceptical about them.

The 'Form of Presbyterial Church-Government' used this passage as a 'proof' of the statement that "there were in the Jewish Church elders of the people joined with priests and Levites in the government of the church", (10) and the 'Confession' cited it in support of the proposition that "magistrates may lawfully call a synod of ministers, and other fit persons, to consult and advise with about matters of religion. (11) If Old Testament precedent be required for the involvement of 'elders' in a religious court of appeal, then II Chronicles xix 8-11 is one of the most apposite passages.

There is however a general problem, of which a perceived resemblance between the institutions of ancient Israel and those of a modern church is but one illustration: bridging the gap, not merely between one language and another, but between one culture and another, is a complex matter. Chaim Rabin expresses it succinctly. "Translation is far from being a simple process of putting words from one language into another language. It imports into the process elements from the culture connected with the receptor language and thus changes the character of the material". (12) Old Testament proof texts are as susceptible as any to 'culture importation', so arguments based on 'the court of seventy elders' or Jehoshaphat's 'court of priests, Levites and elders' need to be viewed with caution.

### The Sanhedrin

Dr. John Kennedy mentions the significance of the Sanhedrin for the polity of the early Church. "The

growing hostility of the Sanhedrin to the followers of 'The Way' led to the formation of 'a Sanhedrin of those who were being forced to organise on their own, as in the Council of Jerusalem ... The old dispensation was fulfilled in the new. To form themselves under a governing body modelled on the Sanhedrin was in accordance with this conviction".(13)

Similarly, Professor Alan Richardson observes "The picture of the Church of Jerusalem, as found in Acts 15, suggests strongly that the government of that Church was modelled upon the Jewish Sanhedrin, with its chief priests and elders ... James the Lord's brother appears in Acts 15 as the high priest who presides over the Sanhedrin of the New Israel".(14)

The Jewish Sanhedrin of that era was the successor of earlier post-exilic governing bodies in Jerusalem. The earliest reference in Josephus to a central council there is in his copy of the rescript of Antiochus III giving the Jews the right to govern themselves by their own laws.(15) There it is called a *γερουσία*, a term which recurs in I Maccabees and Acts.(16) Another term for the council of elders, *πρεσβύτεροι* appears in Josephus, Luke and Acts.(17) The term *συνέδριον* which passed from Greek into Hebrew as the loan word *סנהדרין* was initially used by Josephus of the five *συνέδρια* into which Gabinius divided the country in 57 B.C.(18) and was first applied by him to a governing council when he records that Hyrcanus, as ethnarch of Judea, presided over the Sanhedrin when it tried Herod for a political murder.(19) This was obviously a judicial body, for most of the references to it in Josephus and the New Testament concern trials, but the actual composition and competence of the Sanhedrin are difficult to determine.

Yehoshua' Efron, Professor of Jewish History at Tel Aviv University, poses the problem thus: "According to the New Testament and Flavius Josephus, the Sanhedrin appears as a distinctly priestly hegemony, while it is described in the Talmud as a Pharisaic institution".(20) One solution is to concede no authority to the Talmud, "because this literature was

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compiled later and did not reflect situations of the Second Temple period, but the period of Yavneh, so that only to a very limited extent can it be used as a source". This means that the Talmudic Sanhedrin was "not based on historical experience, but it is a design prepared by circles of Chasideans and Pharisees, who established courts and councils for lawsuits and learning ..." (21)

In contrast, the picture given by both Josephus and the New Testament is of a Sanhedrin composed of the High Priests, members of privileged families from which the High Priests were taken, the Elders and the Scribes. (22) This composition, however, is not consistently maintained: in the Gospel of John, the Pharisees appear instead of the Scribes, and often only two of these classes are mentioned. (23) The New Testament indicates, and Josephus implies, that the current High Priest presided, (24) as Caiaphas presided at the trial of Jesus, (25) and Ananias at the trial of Paul. (26)

It is unclear how its two main areas of responsibility, political and religious, were related. The Sanhedrin's jurisdiction was wide, as it exercised both religious and civil responsibilities according to Jewish Law, but also in some degree criminal jurisdiction, with the Romans reserving the right to interfere in any area, if necessary independently of the Jewish court, Paul's arrest in Acts xxiii being a case in point. One possibility is that there were two Great Sanhedrins in Jerusalem in the Second Temple period, one Pharisaic and the other a criminal court with a political character. This was the solution of A. Büchler in 'Das Synedrion in Jerusalem' (1902), while Geiger and Derenbourg argued for three small Sanhedrins, each with a different composition and task - priestly, Pharisaic and aristocratic. A joint meeting of the three Sanhedrins, on this theory, constituted the Great Sanhedrin of 71. Yet others maintain there was a single Sanhedrin, but differ as to who presided, Schürer arguing for the High Priest and Hoffman for the 'nasi'. (27)

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Two different aspects of the Sanhedrin's functions are apparent in Josephus, who relates contrasting incidents. On the one hand, the Sadducean High Priest 'Ananus' "convened the judges of the Sanhedrin"(28) in order to condemn James, the brother of Jesus and some others, for transgressing the law. The implication is that the High Priest actually presided, and therefore that meeting must have been Sadducean in nature. On the other hand, Josephus also relates that the Levitic singers "persuaded the King (Agrippa II) to convene a Sanhedrin"(29) to permit the Levitic singers to wear linen garments as well as the priests. "It is evident", comments H. Mantel, "that it was not the High Priest who presided over this Sanhedrin".(30) He therefore concludes, "It was distinct from, though contemporaneous with, the political Sanhedrin under the direction of the High Priests".(31)

The theories that argue for two distinct bodies, though differing on the precise nature of the 'political' Sanhedrin, tend to agree in their assumptions, (a) that the term 'Sanhedrin' was applicable to a variety of council-courts, political, military and social,(32) and (b) that the Hellenistic sources and the Talmudic sources deal with different aspects of Jewish history.

Apart from those Jewish scholars who are less open to the suggestion that the Talmudic sources are late, anachronistic and idealistic, the balance of opinion is against the theory that there was a separate 'religious' body, though just how the various functions of the court were inter-related it is now impossible to say.

Yehoshua' Efron takes a radical view, stating that after the Hasmonean period "various councils, institutions and courts of limited significance existed, which could also be called Sanhedrins, but nowhere is there any reference to a Central Sanhedrin ... During the period of Roman rule, a city council called the 'Boule' was functioning in Jerusalem. It represented the upper classes, comprising leaders of

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the priesthood and the aristocracy, and was concerned with a measure of Jewish autonomy ... but it did not take the place of the 'Gerousia', nor that of the Central Sanhedrin described in the Talmud".(33) This view, that a Central Sanhedrin did not even exist in New Testament times, is not generally accepted: it may have been prompted by Efron's ill-concealed antagonism to the New Testament records, which he is anxious to portray as grossly inaccurate and prejudiced.

David Hill aptly sums up the disagreement and uncertainty about the true nature of this ancient Jewish court. "Just how ambivalent the evidence is from the Gospels, M. Sanhedrin (i.e. the Mishnah tractate 'Sanhedrin'), and such other slender pieces as remain, may be gauged from the quite contrary historical views that arise therefrom", (34) while Donald E. Gowan concludes "the problems of the Sanhedrin in the Roman era ... remain unsolved ... descriptions of the body ... are theories which have yet to carry the day". (35)

Despite this academic agnosticism, and the fragmentary and controverted nature of the evidence, there is no compelling reason to reject the general picture presented in the New Testament, that under the Roman Procurators there were not only regional tribunals, such as those alluded to in the teaching of Jesus, (36) but also a Central Sanhedrin, whose writ extended beyond Jerusalem. (37)

According to the New Testament, the Sanhedrin was far from being a subservient body under the domination of any one individual. While the opinion of the High Priest Caiaphas swayed the house at the trial of Jesus, (38) it was the advice of the Pharisee Gamaliel that influenced members not to impose the death penalty on the apostles. (39) Such sharing of responsibility was in accordance with the traditional Jewish precept, "Judge not alone, for none may judge alone, save One", (40) the real rulers in Judaism being not the individual judges but the courts. While the method of appointment to the Sanhedrin is not clear, it was not a body of representatives directly and



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democratically elected: its aristocratic origins, and the strong Sadducean influence in it, indicate that birth into priestly families and the co-option of scholarly members could have been the main means of entry.

While there were councils elsewhere in the ancient world, particularly in Greece and Rome, that were in many respects similar to the Great Sanhedrin, one distinguishing feature was the fact that it saw itself as a body under the 'Torah'. This can be illustrated by the appeal by the Jewish Leaders to Leviticus xxiv 16 in support of their demand for the death penalty for Jesus, (41) the allegation to the Sanhedrin that Stephen was "for ever saying things against this holy place and against the Law", (42) Paul's complaint against Ananias, "You sit there to judge me in accordance with the Law: and then in defiance of the Law you order me to be struck", and his subsequent apology, "Scripture, I know says, 'You must not abuse the ruler of your people'". (43)

The New Testament picture of the Sanhedrin produced a negative impression among the Reformers and their successors, who refer to it only infrequently. It was probably in the mind of Martin Bucer who, in his tract 'Quid de baptisate', says that "the Jews had not only their priests and their scribes, but also elders of the people", (44) for the reference to 'scribes' in association with priests and elders does not correspond to any Old Testament passage.

Calvin set the tone in the Reformed tradition when he branded the Sanhedrin "the council which the priests and Pharisees assembled at Jerusalem against Christ". He saw it as an example of a corrupt council, like those of the medieval church, whose authority he repudiated. "A solemn meeting is held: the high priest presides; the whole Sacerdotal order take their seats, and yet Christ is condemned, and his doctrine put to flight. This atrocity proves that the Church was not at all included in that council". (45) The best he could say of it was that "the right of the Sanhedrim is transferred to the fold of Christ". (46)

The topic was raised at the Westminster Assembly of Divines in the debates on the Erastianism. On the powers of the Sanhedrin there was 'a large dispute in the Assembly'. John Lightfoot accepted the theory of three subordinate sanhedrins of 23. "I deny not but there was a 3 fold Sanhedrim ... another of 23 in the gate of the house, and 23 in the gate of the mount; but all those were mixed(47) ... the kingdom of David was a type of the kingdom of Christ ... but that the Sanhedrim and their government was so, I am yet to learn", while George Gillespie, the Scottish commissioner, argued that "the priests and Levites made a great part of their civil court" and denied that "there is no distinct government in the Jewish Church.(48) In the end the proof text given for 'Other Church-Governors' was II Chronicles xix 8-10, and no reference to the Sanhedrin was made in either the 'Form' or the 'Confession'.

Charles Hodge makes only the briefest of passing references to it. "Under the Old Testament, in the assembly or congregation of the people, in the Synagogue and in the Sanhedrim, this principle of representation was by divine appointment universally recognized".(49) W.D. Killen gave it qualified praise when he wrote that "The scribes were men of learning ... the elders were laymen of reputed wisdom and experience ... It was not strange that the Jews had so profound a regard for their Great Sanhedrim. In the days of our Lord it had, indeed, miserably degenerated: but, at an earlier period, its members were eminently entitled to respect ... it constituted a court of review to which all other ecclesiastical arbiters yielded submission".(50) Both the original founders and subsequent defenders of Reformed polity were aware of the Sanhedrin. They were reluctant to cite it as a worthy model, yet could not disagree with giving a place to 'elders', exercising rule through courts rather than individuals, having a supreme judicatory to determine cases referred from subordinate bodies and operating under the sovereignty of Scripture.

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The 'Council of Jerusalem'

It was the proud claim of the 'Plea of Presbytery' that the 'Synod of Jerusalem' was 'the model of our Synods', and its authors were by no means alone in ascribing considerable importance to it. C.J. Hefele expressed the Roman Catholic view when he wrote "That the origin of councils is derived from the Apostolic Synod held at Jerusalem about the year 52 is undoubted".(51) Within the Reformed tradition it has been cited (i) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the foundations of Reformed church structures were being laid (ii) in the later theological polemics of the pre-ecumenical age and (iii) in contemporary usage, though now more often as an assumption than as an argument.

(i) Calvin, commenting on Acts xv 6, states "Further let us learn that here is prescribed by God a form and order in assembling synods, when any controversy arises which cannot otherwise be decided", (52) and on xv 12, "This is a living model of a lawful Council". (53)

The Westminster Formularies also used this chapter as a source of proof texts: it is cited in support of the propositions, "For the better government and further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called Synods or Councils", (54) and "... the ministers of Christ, of themselves, by virtue of their office, or they, with other fit persons upon delegation from their churches, may meet together in such assemblies". (55) The 'Form of Presbyterial Church-Government' in the section 'of Synodical Assemblies' similarly cites Acts xv.

(ii) The record of the 'Council of Jerusalem' also exerted a strong influence upon later writers. J.A. Hodge, in discussing "What is Presbyterian Law?" appeals to Acts xv frequently. (56) He cites it to support the right of appeal to the whole Church. "The synagogues were subject to the Sanhedrin. The first Christian churches were not isolated, but were united under the Apostles and the recognised authority of general councils (Acts 15:5,6,19,20)". (57) Similarly,

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in Chapter XII, entitled, 'Of the General Assembly', Hodge enumerates "the radical (i.e. basic) principles of Presbyterian Church polity and discipline", and quotes in support the declaration of the 1797 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, "For these principles and this procedure, the example of the Apostles and the practice of the primitive Church are considered authority (See Acts 15, 1-29 ...)"(58)

Irish Presbyterianism similarly appeals to the 'Council of Jerusalem' in defence of its polity. The Rev. Thomas Witherow, later Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Magee College, Londonderry, issued his best known work in 1856. Entitled "The Apostolic Church - Which is it?", it was written that people "might know the Scriptural grounds on which the Presbyterian form of Church government rests".(59) In it Witherow lays down six basic principles as marks of the Apostolic Church, the fifth being "The privilege of appeal to the assembly of elders and the right of government exercised by them in their corporate character".(60) The entire chapter dealing with this 'fifth principle' is largely an exposition of Acts xv.

Witherow concludes, "Should any difference arise, which cannot be settled within the limits of the congregation where it occurs, it is to be referred for settlement to the rulers of the Church in their assembled capacity".(61) "... this ecclesiastical assembly, in the absence of the apostles, consisting simply of rulers of the Church, has the right to meet, to deliberate, to decide and to demand obedience to its decisions in the Lord ... The apostles and elders assembled, deliberated and decreed ... (they) ... were, as we would say members of the court".(62) He adds that the 'brethren' did not "act as constituent members of ecclesiastical courts".(63) His use of such terms suggests that the terminology and practice of a modern Presbyterian General Assembly were being 'culturally imported' into Acts xv. He clearly implies, even if he does not explicitly state, that the 'Council of Jerusalem' was the prototype for such an Assembly.

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While not one of the Church's most eminent historians, Witherow's ideas have been influential in Irish Presbyterianism. One early Code of Discipline also cites Acts xv 6. (64)

(iii) Modern Irish Presbyterianism continues to provide examples of the assumption that it is a direct descendant of the 'Council of Jerusalem', the process of 'culture importation' being facilitated by the use of the term 'assembly'. The 1982 Report of the Judicial Commission states, "In the New Testament ... congregations were subject to the Council of congregations - e.g. at Jerusalem". (65) In June, 1989, the outgoing Moderator, when constituting the General Assembly, prayed:-

"As Your Holy Spirit guided the first Assembly of the Church at Jerusalem, and enabled it to order its common life, and to move forward in mission; so grant us the guidance of Your Spirit".

The Church's Book of Public Worship, in a prayer 'For the General Assembly', includes a similar reference to "the first assembly of apostles and elders at Jerusalem", (66) and a recent article in 'The Presbyterian Herald' makes similar assumptions. (67)

The question of whether Acts xv is in fact an exact chronicle of the first supreme decision-making body of the Christian Church is part of the wider problem of the historicity of the book. On that subject the tide of scepticism has been ebbing and flowing since the nineteenth century Tübingen theory that Acts was a late attempt to paper over a rift between Peter and Paul. Towards the end of the century the researches of Sir William Ramsey did much to undermine that view, his re-affirmation of the historical value of Acts being supported by the commentaries of F.F. Bruce (1951) and C.S.C. Williams (1957).

Then the tide began to turn: E. Haenchen (1956) interpreted most of Acts as the work of a creative theologian who had little concern for facts, an approach supported by H. Conzelmann (1963). M. Hengel (1979) reversed that trend, affirming that Luke was no

less trustworthy than other historians of antiquity, while I.H. Marshall (1980) made the valid point "that theological motivation does not exclude historical interest, particularly when a writer like Luke deliberately states that his theological purpose led him to produce a historical account of the beginnings of Christianity".(68) He nevertheless concedes that Acts xv presents particular difficulties. "Probably no section of Acts has aroused such controversy as this one or led to such varied historical reconstructions of the actual situation".(69) It certainly presents New Testament scholarship with one of its most intractable problems, and much labour and ingenuity have been expended in trying to solve the difficulties. C.S.C. Williams gives a comprehensive summary of no less than 15 different attempts that have been made to reconcile apparently conflicting statements and dates.(70)

Of the many attempted reconciliations of the conflicting chronologies, no single one has gained general acceptance, and some recent theories have therefore abandoned the attempt to identify Acts xv 1-29 with any specific historical incident in Paul's actual career, and instead view the narrative as a literary creation. There are cogent arguments in favour of this view:-

i - It cuts at one stroke the Gordian knot of the complicated chronology of Paul's various visits to Jerusalem (mentioned above).

ii - It is in keeping with the ancient conventions of writing history. Writers in antiquity, whether Greek, Roman or Jewish, allowed themselves considerable freedom in the composition of speeches, as Thucydides admitted.(71) Other ancient historians followed the same conventions, often using speeches as a light interlude between sections of heavier material. One half of the record of the proceedings of the

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'Council of Jerusalem' (13 out of 26 verses), consists of two speeches, those of Peter and James. As with the other speeches in Acts, they could hardly be an exact record of the Apostles' 'ipsissima verba': as given in the text they are exceedingly brief, so even on the most literal interpretation they can only be a summary of what was said.

iii - The 'reconstruction' theory explains what is otherwise a difficulty in the speech attributed to James. Verse 17 contains a quotation from Amos ix 12, part of which is found only in the Septuagint,

"That the rest of men may seek the Lord,  
And all the Gentiles who are called by my  
name ..."

The Massoretic text however (referring to the people of Israel) may be translated,

"That they may inherit what remains of Edom,  
And of the other nations over which my name is  
named."

F.F. Bruce, argues, "We need not be surprised to find James, a Galilean, speaking Greek and quoting from the LXX, especially in the presence of 'certain others' from Antioch (verse 2) whose language would be Greek". (72)

R.P.C. Hanson however takes a contrasting view. "The historical James, brother of the Lord, the acknowledged leader of the Aramaic-speaking Church of Jerusalem, could not possibly have made a speech like this ... It is thus likely that Luke composed the whole scene". (73)

iv - The non-historical view of Acts xv explains what would otherwise be a conflict between Paul's meek submission to the edicts of others in Acts xv where he makes no recorded speech, and the attitude revealed in the Epistles, where he is quite firm about his authority over his own churches, implying that they were not subject to control by other apostles. (74)

To take this view is not to deny some historical core to Acts xv, especially the 'decree' and the accompanying letter, though even there the elegant Greek and the complex grammatical structure (resembling the Prologue in Luke i 1-4) indicate that it too is Luke's own composition, at least in its present form. Its rules of conduct were clearly of historical importance for the Jewish-Christian Church as it moved out into the Gentile world, but the arguments enumerated above suggest that the 'Council' as now portrayed in Acts xv is largely an ideal scene included for the primary purpose of providing a bridge from the mission to the Jews in the first part of Acts, where the Twelve were the leaders of the Church, to the mission to the Gentiles, where Paul was to occupy the central position. The problem of how far circumcision and other Old Testament legal requirements were binding on Gentile converts was a real historical issue, but the main purpose of the author here was to effect a transition from the first part of his narrative to the second. St. Luke combines a certain bias toward Jerusalem with consummate literary skill, and so depicts this scene to show the apostles, who represented the authority of the primitive Church, together with the elders and James, who were the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem, as sanctioning Paul's missionary move into the Gentile world. He is not primarily concerned to illustrate the working of councils.

Interpretations of the evidence on the



membership, chairmanship and authority of the meeting vary. Some verses imply a membership of 'apostles and elders', but others a wider church circle. Verse 2 alludes to a deputation "to see the apostles and elders", but verse 4 records that "They were welcomed by the church, and the apostles and elders". Those verses, however, may refer to an earlier preliminary gathering. The main meeting of the 'Council' is introduced by verse 6, "There gathered the apostles and elders", though a minor textual variant adds 'with the whole company' σὺν τῷ πλήθει. That wider term πλήθος definitely occurs in verse 12. Arndt and Gingrich define it, as 'a (stated) meeting, assembly', ... and "in the usage of religious communities, a technical term for the whole body of their members, 'fellowship, community, church'"(75) Verse 22 continues the wider emphasis, "Then the apostles and elders, with the agreement of the whole church, resolved ...".

Verse 23, the preamble of the 'decree' issued by the 'Council', presents another textual problem. There is however strong textual support for reading, not οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι καὶ οἱ ἀδελφοὶ (as in the Textus Receptus), but rather οἱ ἀπόστολοι καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἀδελφοὶ , (omitting the second καὶ οἱ ) which the Revised Version translates as "The apostles and elder brethren ...". If that reading is correct, it is the only occurrence of this phrase in the New Testament, but is "a title which the Jerusalem Church might use in addressing younger Churches".(76)

It is possible that ἀδελφοί is to be taken in apposition to ἀπόστολοι and πρεσβύτεροι , meaning that as brethren they sent a message to brethren. William Barclay translates "The apostles and elders, brethren, to the brethren ...".(77) On either interpretation the term 'brethren' describes the elders, and possibly the apostles, but not a third element in the membership of the 'Council'. Conclusions derived from the A.V. and the Textus Receptus, such as Witherow's observation, "the 'brethren' must have been the non-official members of the Church, or, as in modern times they would be

Hutchinson, General Assembly, IBS 13, January 1991 called, the laity" (78) are based on an incorrect text. Could the differing descriptions of the membership reflect different sources used by the writer, or even the work of a later redactor with an ulterior motive? The 'decree' certainly suffered at the hands of redactors, the original form being substantially altered in the Western text. (79)

It is not necessary, however, to speculate about a redactor or different literary origins to account for the broader and narrower emphases in the membership. F.F. Bruce comments, "Apparently other members of the Church were present, although the deliberation and discussion rested with the leaders", (80) while William Neil expresses it pictorially, "The Council of Jerusalem seems to have been a public Assembly, with the apostles and elders 'on the platform' as it were". (81) Further light from Qumran on the significance of  $\pi\lambda\eta\theta\omicron\varsigma$  will be considered later.

Meantime it may be noted that Acts xv contains no evidence that, apart from the deputation from Antioch, any delegates were either summoned or present from any location outside Jerusalem, though the subsequent 'decree' was addressed to "our brothers of gentile origin in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia". (82) Attempts have occasionally been made to find some hint of a wider geographical representation, e.g., 'Sundry Ministers of Christ within the City of London', writing in 1646 at the time of the Westminster Assembly, claimed "Here was an authoritative mission of delegated officers from the presbyterial church at Antioch, and from other churches of Syria and Cilicia also, ver. 23,41, to a synodal assembly with the presbyterial church at Jerusalem" ... "the brethren of Antioch, Syria and Cilicia were troubled with this question, ver. 23,24. Therefore it cannot be reasonably imagined but that all those places ... severally and respectively sent their delegates to the synod at Jerusalem ..." (83) Such a suggestion can, at best, be described as speculation.

W.D. Killen, accepting the lack of evidence for

the summoning of representatives, advanced no less than three hypotheses simultaneously to explain it. (i) The various Christian communities scattered throughout Pamphylia etc. "were not directly concerned in sending forward the commissioners ... as these communities had been collected and organized by Paul and Barnabas, they considered that they were represented by their founders". (ii) "The Council's deliberations took place at the time of one of the great annual festivals ... the elders throughout Palestine ... usually repaired to the capital to celebrate the national solemnities". (iii) "The times were perilous; and the ministers of the early Christian Church did not deem it expedient to congregate in very large numbers".(84) The degree of 'culture importation' in his use of terminology like 'sending forward the commissioners' and 'the ministers of the early Christian Church' is obvious, but his ingenious theories should not be judged too harshly: at that period strained interpretations of Scripture (and later writings)(85) were not uncommon, as apologists for various ecclesiastical polities tried to reconcile the evidence they could find with the systems they would defend.

The role of James as chairman of the 'Council' has also been variously interpreted. His crucial pronouncement  $\delta\iota\omicron\ \epsilon\gamma\omega\ \kappa\acute{\rho}\iota\nu\omega$  (v.19) has been variously rendered as:-

'Wherefore my sentence is' (A.V.)

'My judgement therefore is' (N.E.B.)

'It is my opinion ... that' (G.N.B.)

'This is my vote ...' (F.F. Bruce)(86)

Here too, commentators can allow their translations and observations to be coloured by their own preconceptions. R.P.C. Hanson, writing from an Anglican background, comments, "This certainly suggests that Luke attributes considerable authority to James, more than to Peter, at least as far as the Jerusalem

Church goes. It could be translated, 'I decree'.(87) F.F. Bruce, on the other hand, writing from a Brethren background, attributes a much less influential role to James. "James acts more or less as chairman; he winds up the debate and formulates the motion which he puts to the meeting".(88) R.J. Knowling, in "The Expositor's Greek Testament", takes an intermediate view. "St. James apparently speaks as the president of the meeting ... and his words, with the emphatic ἐγὼ (Weiss) may express more than the opinion of a private member - he sums up the debate and proposes the draught of a practical resolution".(89) W.D. Killen, uneasy about the implications of the Authorized Version's rendering of James's comment as 'wherefore my sentence is' went to far as to call it "somewhat pompous", arguing that the phrase is often used in Thucydides for the individual opinions of members of Greek Assemblies, and is paralleled by the common Latin phrase 'sic censeo'.(90) That is one of many possible nuances of κρίνω, which is actually closer to the Latin word 'cerno'.

Christopher Rowland comes nearer the mark when he points out the status enjoyed by James as the Lord's brother, it being common at that period of Judaism for the leadership of a sect to be kept in the family. "What we can reconstruct of the Church in Jerusalem suggests that its officers were more doctrinal authorities and interpreters of the tradition (cf. Acts 6.2), whose main task was in controlling the spread and development of the Christian interpretations of the Jewish traditions".(91) An authoritative decision was a matter for them rather than for democratic debate.

There is a divergence of view on the question of how far St. Luke regarded the Council's decision as binding and authoritative, the key phrase being τὰ δόγματα τὰ κεκριμένα (Acts xvi 4). Elsewhere in the New Testament δόγματα denotes 'laws', 'statutes' or 'decrees', whether of Caesar (Luke ii 1; Acts xvii 7), or of Moses' ceremonial law (Col. ii 14, Ephesians ii 15). In the Septuagint it is used of laws (Daniel vi 8) and of decrees (Daniel ii 13; iii 10, 29; iv 24 and

vi 9). In the New Testament, Acts xvi 4 is the only place where this word is used of decrees of the Christian Church. Some claim that Acts xv portrays a body with full and final legislative powers. The 'Sundry Ministers of Christ within the City of London' regarded the 'Council of Jerusalem' as "vested with juridical power and authority for composing and imposing of these their determinations", (92) claiming "that there is an authoritative, juridical synod; and that this synod, Acts xv, was such a one; and that this synod is a pattern to us". (93)

F.J.A. Hort takes a more balanced view, seeing δόγμα as "one of those curiously elastic words which vary in meaning according to the persons to whom a thing is said to seem good, and to the other circumstances of the case". He regards 'resolutions' as more nearly expressing the force of this passage. "The New Testament is not poor of words expressive of command ... yet none of them is used ... the independence of the Ecclesia of Antioch had to be respected, yet not in such a way as to encourage disregard either of the great mother Ecclesia, or of the Lord's own Apostles, or of the whole Christian body ... A strong expression of opinion, more than advice and less than a command ... A certain authority is thus implicitly claimed. There is no evidence that it was more than a moral authority: but that did not make it less real". (94)

Any assumption that Acts xv provides a clear warrant for a specifically Presbyterian General Assembly is therefore open to serious question. The chapter describes how the guardians of the Jewish-Christian tradition in Jerusalem were consulted by enquirers from Antioch, rather than a democratic forum attended by representatives of congregations from far and near, while arguments derived from various key words, such as κρίνω and δόγματα are open to a variety of interpretations, even if they are the exact words originally used, which is by no means certain, as Luke probably followed the Thucydidean convention of composing speeches appropriate to the occasion. Any

similarity between the 'Council of Jerusalem' and a modern Assembly proves upon examination to be fainter than it might seem at first glance. Only in a very general sense can it be claimed that 'the Synod of Jerusalem is the model of our synods', and that claim could equally be made by a variety of denominations, each of which looks into Acts xv, as into a mirror, and beholds its own likeness reflected therein.

### The Qumran Assembly

There was, however, one other influence upon the Church at Jerusalem, of which the authors of the 'Plea of Presbytery' could have had no inkling. A study of the Qumran sect reveals parallels with the Jerusalem Church as portrayed in Acts: both lived lives of communal sharing, closely connected with which was a holy poverty, and both had a place for a duodecimal council in their constitution. Specific Essene influence will be considered shortly, but a more general point must first be made. O. Linton argued that Primitive Christianity can only be understood in its Oriental context and in the light of procedures peculiar to the East and strange to us, e.g. that of a 'nonegalitarian, legislative Assembly'. (95) In Acts xv 22 the decision is reached by "the apostles and elders, with the whole church". The 'apostles and elders' did not stand over against the congregation, but there was rather a single congregation unequally constituted. The elders were in fact specially honoured persons; their honour did not consist in being elected to a Committee, but rather that they were given the place of esteem and their words highly regarded. This unequally structured legislative Assembly was identical with the worshipping congregation, the cult group, the people of God. "This explains why in primitive Christianity the local congregation could identify itself with the church as a whole and why it liked to conceive of its resolutions as the expression of the Will of God". Linton also cites I Cor. v 3-5, where Paul says, that despite his absence, he has resolved, together with the Corinthian Church, to excommunicate a certain offender.

The apostle had an almost monarchical authority, but the resolution had no legal force without the agreement of the congregation. "This system of organization was possible because of the patriarchal authority of the leaders and because of the common awareness of the community, both factors which had their common precondition in the Orient".

As Bo Reiche points out, "Linton had no proofs for the existence of such a constitutional form in the Orient", (96) but these gaps we can now fill in from the Qumran Manual of Discipline (1 QS) and the Damascus Documents (CD). These two documents are not only examples of Oriental practices but also belong geographically and chronologically to the immediate milieu of the early church. In the Qumran Community there was a definite order of rank. The 'Community Rule' orders all the members to sit in their correct places: "The priests shall sit first, and the elders second, and all the rest of the people according to their rank ... No man shall interrupt a companion before his speech has ended, nor speak before a man of higher rank; each man shall speak in his turn".(97) "Thus shall they do, year by year, ranked one after another according to the perfection of their spirit; then the Levites; and thirdly, all the people one after another ... that every Israelite may know his place in the Community of God according to the everlasting design.(98) In the Damascus Community there was a similar ranking of members, though there provision is also made for proselytes.(99) There is a clear similarity between the composition of the Qumran Assembly and that of the 'Council of Jerusalem', each being threefold in nature - first the priests (or apostles), then the elders and finally the people. The actual term 'ha-rabbim' ('the Many') of 1 QS may well lie behind the use of  $\pi\lambda\eta\theta\omicron\iota$  in Acts xv 12.

Vermes comments, "The most likely domain of Qumran influence on Christianity is that of organization and religious practice. After all, the Qumran sect was already a well-tried institution when the Judaeo-Christian Church was struggling to establish

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itself, and it would have been only sensible for the inexperienced men of the fellowship of Jesus to observe and imitate existing patterns". (100) Because of the influence it exerted on the organization of the Jewish-Christian Church at Jerusalem, the Qumran Assembly may be counted among the distant ancestors of the councils, synods and assemblies of the modern church, and its 'Community Rule' may be seen as a precursor of ecclesiastical manuals of discipline from the 'Didache' onwards.

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\* 1990 has seen the issue of several publications to commemorate the formation of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland by the union of two Synods in 1840. Most look at what the Church has achieved during the last 150 years: this paper was part of a Dissertation submitted to Queen's University in connection with the Master of Theology degree in September 1990.

(1) Ministers of the General Synod of Ulster: The Plea of Presbytery, Glasgow, 1840, pp.311-312. Because it occurred in the Talmud, 'Sanhedrin' was misinterpreted in the seventeenth century as an Aramaic plural and 'corrected' to 'Sanhedrim', an anomalous form which is found until late in the nineteenth century.

(2) Ibid., p.369.

(3) J.A. Hodge: What is Presbyterian Law? 2nd ed., Philadelphia, 1884, p.53.

(4) W. Martin Smyth: Why Presbyterian? (pamphlet), Belfast, n.d. (circa 1965), p.2.

(5) Ministers of the Presbyterian Church: The Rock Whence we are Hewn, Antrim, 1951, p.115.

(6) David Stewart: The History and Principles of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Belfast, 1907, p.188.

(7) Cited in Encyclopedia Judaica, Jerusalem, 1972, Vol. VI, p.579.

(8) Norman K. Gottwald: The Tribes of Yahweh, A



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Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel 1250-1050 B.C.E., New York, 1979, pp.32, 40.

(9) e.g. John Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge, London, 1962, Book IV, Chapter xi.

(10) The Westminster 'Form of Presbyterian Church-Government', Sect. 'Other Church-Governors'.

(11) Westminster 'Confession of Faith', Chapter XXXI.

(12) Chaim Rabin: 'Bible Translation' in Armenian and Biblical Studies (ed. Michael F. Stone), Jerusalem, 1976, p. 41.

(13) John Kennedy: Presbyterian Authority and Discipline, Edinburgh, 1960, p.26.

(14) Alan Richardson: An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament, London, 1958, p.327.

(15) Flavii Josephi Opera, ed. B. Niese, Berlin, 1892, Antiquitatum Judaicarum Libri, XII 138.

(16) I Maccabees xii 6; Acts v 21.

(17) Josephus: op. cit., xi 83; xii 406; Luke xxii 66; Acts xxii 5.

(18) Josephus: op. cit., xiv 91.

(19) Ibid: xiv 168-170.

(20) Yehoshua' Efron: "The Sanhedrin as an Ideal and as Reality in the Period of the Second Temple" in Immanuel, Bulletin of Religious Thought and Research in Israel, Jerusalem, No. 2 Spring 1973 p. 44.

(21) Ibid. p.49.

(22) Mark xiv, 53.

(23) John xi, 47, 57; xviii, 3.

(24) Josephus: Antiq. Jud. XX, 200; Matthew xxvi, 57; Acts v, 17ff; vii, 1; ix, 1ff; xxii, 5; xxiv, 1.

(25) Matthew xxvi, 57.

(26) Acts xxiii, 2.

(27) Cited in Encyclopedia Judaica, Vol. XIV, p.837-838.

(28) Josephus: Antiq. Jud. XX 200.

(29) Ibid., XX 216-8.

(30) H.D. Mantel: "The High Priesthood and the Sanhedrin in the Time of the Second Temple" in The World History of the Jewish People ed. M. Avi-Yonah,

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London, 1975, vol. VII p. 276.

(31) Ibid. p. 277.

(32) as in H.G. Liddell & R. Scott: Greek Lexicon, 9th ed., Oxford, 1948, p. 1704

(33) Y. Efron: op. cit. p. 47.

(34) David Hill: "Jesus before the Sanhedrin - On what Charge?" in Irish Biblical Studies, Volume 7, October 1985, p. 174.

(35) Donald E. Gowan: Bridge Between the Testaments, 2nd ed., Pittsburg, 1980, p.297.

(36) Matthew x 17; Mark xiii 9. (Matt. v 22, however, may refer to a 'celestial' Sanhedrin, as suggested by Joseph M. Baumgarten in "The Duodecimal Courts of Qumran, Revelation and the Sanhedrin" in Journal of Biblical Literature Vol. 95, 1976, p. 78. The reference to 'hell fire' would tend to confirm this interpretation).

(37) Acts ix 2; xxii 5; xxvi 12.

(38) Matthew xxvi 59-60.

(39) Acts v 33-41.

(40) Aboth IV 8 in The Babylonian Talmud trans. I. Epstein, London 1935, p. 48.

(41) John xix 7.

(42) Acts vi 13 (N.E.B.).

(43) Acts xxiii 3,5. (N.E.B.).

(44) M. Bucer: Quid de Baptismate, cited in J.M. Barkley, The Eldership in Irish Presbyterianism, Belfast, 1963, p.11.

(45) John Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge, IV ix 7.

(46) Ibid., IV xi 1,

(47) A.F. Mitchell and John Struthers: Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, Edinburgh, 1874, p.439.

(48) Ibid., p.442.

(49) Charles Hodge: The Church and its Polity, London, 1879, p.125.

(50) W.D. Killen: The Ancient Church, 2nd ed., London, 1861, pp.249-250.

(51) C.J. Hefele: A History of the Christian Councils to A.D. 325, trans. W.R. Clarke, 2nd ed., Edinburgh,

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1883, p. 1.

(52) Joannis Calvini Opera, (Corpus Reformationum ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss), Brunswick, 1863-1896, Vol. XLVII p. 343.

(53) Ibid. p. 353.

(54) Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter XXXI, Section 1.

(55) Ibid. Chapter XXXI Section 2.

(56) J.A. Hodge What is Presbyterian Law?, pp. 29, 47, 115, 117, 118 etc.

(57) Ibid. p. 185.

(58) Ibid. p. 247.

(59) Thomas Witherow: The Apostolic Church - Which is it? (reprinted Edinburgh 1954), Preface.

(60) T. Witherow, op. cit. p. 54.

(61) Ibid. p. 51.

(62) Ibid. p. 54.

(63) Ibid. p. 53.

(64) The Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland with a Directory for the Administration of Ordinances, 1887, p.14.

(65) Reports to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Belfast, 1982, p.34.

(66) Book of Public Worship of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Belfast, 1965, p.90.

(67) The Presbyterian Herald, July 1990, p.7.

(68) I.H. Marshall: Acts, Leicester, 1980, p.36.

(69) Ibid., pp.243-244.

(70) C.S.C. Williams: The Acts of the Apostles, 2nd ed., London, 1964, pp. 22-35.

(71) Thucydides: Peleponnesian War, Book 1, Chapter 22. In a recent article Stanley E. Porter has questioned whether there is a 'Thucydidean view' of the speeches in Acts. Looking at Thucydides 1.22.1., some conclude that the Greek historian tampered with the facts of historical circumstances in his speeches, others that he was showing the trustworthiness of his account by demonstrating the difficulties he has overcome, e.g. that it is hard to recollect speeches exactly. Porter concludes that "Interpretation requires an interpretative act of faith to begin with".

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(Stanley E. Porter: 'Thucydides 1.22.1 and Speeches in Acts: Is there a Thucydidean View?', Novum Testamentum XXXII 2 (1990), pp.121, 142).

(72) F.F. Bruce: The Acts of the Apostles, London, 1951 p. 29.

(73) R.P.C. Hanson: The Acts of the Apostles, Oxford, 1967, p. 154.

(74) e.g. Galatians 2: 9, 11. David R. Catchpole, in a lengthy article published in 1977, points out that "the theological presuppositions of the Decree would have been repugnant to Paul", as (1) Christ had in a real sense jeopardized Moses, (2) the Christian Gospel does a very great deal to the Jew/Gentile distinction, (3) any application of the holiness principle on a Mosaic basis is ruled out by Romans xiv 14, (4) the contents of the Decree are in no sort of harmony with Paul's treatment of the problem of things offered to idols. He therefore concludes that "the Decree must be traced to a situation not involving Paul". (David R. Catchpole: 'Paul, James and the Apostolic Decree', in New Testament Studies, Vol. 23, 1977, pp.430-431).

(75) W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich: A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 4th ed., Chicago, 1952, p.674.

(76) The Expositors Greek Testament ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, London, 1901, Vol. II, p. 326.

(77) William Barclay: Daily Study Bible, "The Acts of the Apostles", Edinburgh, 1953, p. 126.

(78) Thomas Witherow: op. cit. Preface.

(79) Acts xv 20 (N.E.B.)

(80) F.F. Bruce: op. cit. p. 292.

(81) William Neil: The Acts of the Apostles (The New Century Bible Commentary), London, 1977, p. 171.

(82) Acts xv 23 (N.E.B.).

(83) The Divine Right of Church Government, by Sundry Ministers of Christ within the City of London, London, Reprinted 1844, pp. 202-3. (Hetherington in his 'History of the Westminster Assembly' (pp.269 f.) states that the 'Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici' "embodies the substance of the answer prepared by the Assembly" to Parliament on Erastian questions.)

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- (84) W.D. Killen: The Early Church, 2nd ed., London, 1861, pp.78, 80, 250.
- (85) Cf. his publication The Ignatian Epistles Entirely Spurious, Edinburgh, 1886.
- (86) F.F. Bruce: op. cit. p. 299.
- (87) R.P.C. Hanson: op. cit. p. 162.
- (88) F.F. Bruce: op. cit. p. 299.
- (89) R.J. Knowling: op. cit. Vol. II p. 323.
- (90) W.D. Killen: The Ancient Church, pp.252-253.
- (91) Christopher Rowland: Christian Origins, London, 1985, p.264.
- (92) The Divine Right of Church Government, p. 208.
- (93) Ibid. p. 209.
- (94) F.J.A. Hort: The Christian Ecclesia, London, 1908, p. 82f.
- (95) Cited from O. Linton: Das Problem der Urkirche in der neueren Forschung, by Bo Reicke in The Scrolls and the New Testament ed. K. Stendhal, London, 1958, pp. 146ff.
- (96) Bo Reicke: op. cit. p. 148.
- (97) The Community Rule (1QS) VI, trans. G. Vermes in The Dead Sea Scrolls in English 3rd ed., London, 1987, p. 69.
- (98) The Community Rule (1QS) II, trans. G. Vermes, op. cit., p. 63.
- (99) The Damascus Rule (CD) XIV, trans. G. Vermes, op. cit., p. 98.
- (100) G. Vermes: The Dead Sea Scrolls - Qumran in Perspective, 2nd. ed., London, 1982, pp. 218-219.

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