

PETER ACCORDING TO PAUL. PAUL AND PETER IN PAUL'S LETTERS AND IN THE BOOK OF ACTS AND THE PROBLEM OF PLURALITY IN THE CHURCH

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Abstract. The apostles Peter and Paul are prominent as the two leading figures in early Christianity as well as in the history of the church through the centuries. They also function as focal for Christian confessions in particular ways until today. In historical approaches to the origins of Christianity following the direction of the "Tübingen School" (F. C. Baur) both Peter and Paul were considered two opposite powers that pushed ahead the historical development. In contrast, the following essay argues that, read in a canonical perspective as well as in a historical perspective that is critical against its own prejudices, the two key apostles can be valued much more in agreement to each other, notwithstanding their differences with regard to their particular function and mission in the beginnings of the early Jesus-movement. Therefore, Peter and Paul can be regarded as a model for ecumenical encounter and search for communion between the churches today.

Keywords: Peter/Kephas – Paul – apostles – doctrine of justification – canonical approach – communion of churches – apostolic council – incident at Antioch.

The theology of Paul the Apostle, and his doctrine of justification in particular, have been of special concern for Protestant theology and Protestant churches since the Reformation period. Moreover, according to Martin Luther and those who follow Luther's theological teaching, Holy Scripture must play the foundational and decisive role in forming and shaping any theological doctrine that claims to be authoritative in the church.¹ One may call this Lutheran understanding of Scripture the "Formalprinzip" of Lutheran hermeneutics that finds its realization the doctrine of justification according to Paul as its "Materialprinzip." Therefore, in

¹ See Ulrich H. J. KÖRTNER, „Legt die Schrift sich selber aus? Interpretation und Geltung in der Bibelhermeneutik Martin Luthers“, in: Andreas MAUZ / Christiane TIETZ (ed.), *Interpretation und Geltung, Hermeneutik und Interpretationstheorie*, Bd. 3, Paderborn 2022, 83-106. For my own understanding of the role of Scripture in the church see Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Schriftauslegung in der Begegnung mit dem Evangelium“, in: Friederike NÜSSEL (ed.), *Schriftauslegung, Themen der Theologie* 8, Tübingen 2014, 43-103.

Lutheran tradition Paul's theology of justification by faith without works of the Law gained an almost exclusive or canonical status (a "canon in the canon") in Protestant tradition.² On the other hand, in Orthodox theology other aspects of Paul's letters and theology have become much more important, such as Paul's view on the spiritual character of the Christian according to 1 Cor 1–2,³ or the interpretation of his doctrine of justification in the sense of *theosis*.⁴ In Roman-Catholic tradition, though Paul's theology also has been prominent since Augustine, the Pauline perspective always has been balanced by focusing particularly on Peter, the "rock" upon whom Christ the Lord will build his church (see Matt 16:18).⁵

In his interpretation of Paul's letters, Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in Northern Africa, understood the justification of the believer without works of the Law to be the foundational Pauline doctrine, and it was Augustine's understanding of this doctrine that became formative and authoritative for the church in the Latin West through the Middle Ages. The medieval "western" theological tradition of understanding Paul's theology also formed the basis of Luther's interpretation of the doctrine of justification, even though Luther developed his own particular, rather new and in some ways revolutionary understanding of the gospel of

² For an overview, see Christiane TIETZ, Art. Rechtfertigung III. Dogmengeschichtlich, *RGG*⁴ 7, 2004, 103-111; Gerhard SAUTER, Art. Rechtfertigung IV. Das 16. Jahrhundert, *TRE* 28, 1997, 315-328.

³ Cf. Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „The Spiritual Human Being in Paul: 1 Corinthians 2:15 from a 'Western' Perspective“, in: Cosmin PRICOP/Tobias NICKLAS/Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR (ed.), *Images and Stories of the Human Being according to the New Testament and Church Tradition*, WUNT, Tübingen (forthcoming).

⁴ In more recent "western" approaches to Paul's theology, this aspect gained some traction in debates on the understanding of justification as transformation, cf., e.g., Michael J. GORMAN, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord. A Theological Introduction to Paul & His Letters*, Grand Rapids 2017, 140-187; ID., *Inhabiting the Cruciform God. Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*, Grand Rapids 2009; ID., *Participating in Christ. Paul's Theology and Spirituality*, Grand Rapids 2019.

⁵ Cf. Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Rechtfertigung – der einzige Weg zum Heil? Zur Stellung der paulinischen Rechtfertigungslehre in der Soteriologie des Neuen Testaments“, *ThG* 52, 2009, 2-15. In German theology, however, the "Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre" (Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification) of the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation gained great attention and created controversial debates on the role and place of the doctrine of justification. For a collection of voices from Roman-Catholic and Protestant exegetes in this debate see Thomas SÖDING (ed.), *Worum geht es in der Rechtfertigungslehre? Das biblische Fundament der "Gemeinsamen Erklärung" von katholischer Kirche und Lutherischem Weltbund*, QD 180, Freiburg u.a. 1999. On the ongoing discussion among biblical scholars from both Roman-Catholic and Protestant confessional backgrounds, see the results of an ecumenical study group in: *The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine of Justification. An Ecumenical Follow-Up to the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, New York 2012.

justification by faith without works of the Law.⁶ Yet, in western Christianity since the Reformation period the ways parted primarily with regard to the understanding of Peter's role as the founding stone of the church, and the Roman bishop(s) in his succession as the authoritative and final guardian(s) of church tradition and doctrine. In more recent research, however, this common "western," Roman-Catholic as well as Protestant theological perspective rooted in Augustine's and Martin Luther's interpretation of Paul has come under attack from the so-called "New Perspective on Paul." One of the allegations from representatives of the "New Perspective" against Augustine, and Luther who followed in his footsteps, has been that both of these "western" theologians were guided by an "introspective" view that forefronts the individual Christian and his / her status as a righteous sinner. Such a view, however, seems inadequate to any ancient Greek Christian anthropological and theological way of thinking.⁷ Another criticism of Luther's interpretation of Paul has been that his reception of Paul's theology is biased by his polemic against the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrine of Scripture and Tradition, which distracted him from reading the Pauline letters in their own contemporary contexts. Adherents of the new approach to Paul, therefore, attempted to do justice to the historical and sociological backgrounds of Paul's mission to the gentiles as the foundation of his theological argument. Therefore, they more strongly emphasized the ancient Jewish background of Paul's biography and how his gospel is rooted in Israel's faith.⁸

All three confessions mentioned so far agree today in principle by assigning to the Holy Scripture an authoritative character for any theological argument, although they may differ in how they describe the relationship between Scripture and T/tradition(s).⁹ In addition to such confessional distinctions rooted in the

⁶ Cf. Dietrich KORSCH, „Glaube und Rechtfertigung“, in: Albrecht BEUTEL (ed.), *Luther Handbuch*, Tübingen 2010, 372-381; for a fresh view on new readings of Paul by the reformers see Stephen J. CHESTER, *Reading Paul with the Reformers. Reconciling Old and New Perspectives*, Grand Rapids 2017, 13-103.

⁷ This critical approach to Paul and Luther was raised first by Krister STENDAHL, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West", *HTR* 56, 1963, 199-215, and later repeatedly accepted in the "New Perspective on Paul." For a short review of the more recent debates on Paul from "new" or "radical" perspectives, see my essay Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Einführung: Paulus im Judentum seiner Zeit. Der Heidenapostel aus Israel in neuer Sicht“, in: ID., *Paulus im Judentum seiner Zeit. Gesammelte Studien*, WUNT 489, Tübingen 2022, 1-40.

⁸ Cf. my essay Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Die paulinische Rechtfertigungslehre in der gegenwärtigen exegetischen Diskussion“, in: SÖDING, *Worum geht es in der Rechtfertigungslehre?*, 106-130 (= in: ID., *Paulus im Judentum seiner Zeit*, 235-256).

⁹ For an overview on hermeneutical principles dealt with in ecumenical dialogues between Orthodox and "western" churches, see my essay Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Das Alte Testament in der orthodoxen und der 'westlichen' Bibelwissenschaft. Zum Stand und zu den Perspektiven des Gesprächs“, in: I. Z. DIMITROV/J. D. G. DUNN/U. LUZ/K.-W. NIEBUHR (ed.), *Das Alte Testament als christliche Bibel in orthodoxer und westlicher Sicht. Zweite europäische orthodox-westliche*

particular determination of the relationship between Scripture and T/tradition(s), all confessions also face the problem of plurality not only in their own traditions in theology and church, but in their common theological basis, the Holy Scripture, itself. Therefore, it may be appropriate in an ecumenical and inter-confessional context¹⁰ to ask from a Protestant perspective whether and in what way the problem of plurality in the church, as represented in an exemplary manner by the apostles Peter and Paul, emerges in the Holy Scripture itself. What place are the apostles Peter and Paul entitled to in the Bible and how do they search for their own particular role and authority in the emerging church? According to my understanding, this question seems to be paradigmatic for contemporaneous theological and hermeneutical arguments as well.¹¹

In what follows I will treat this topic in three distinct methodological steps. First, I will argue from a canonical, exegetical perspective that Paul and Peter are two key figures of the apostolic generation and letter writers according to the New Testament canon. Second, from a historical point of view I will analyze their place in the earliest expressions of Christianity by focusing on the pictures presented in Paul's authentic letters and in the book of Acts. Finally, in a few brief statements I will draw some implications from the biblical evidence for our actual ecumenical debates on church authority and church relationships.

1. Peter and Paul in the Canon of the New Testament

The New Testament canon as transmitted through the centuries owes its existence and structure to a long process of the collection, selection, and ordering of documents beginning already in the initial decades of early Christianity.¹² As

Exegetenkonferenz im Rilakloster vom 8.-15. September 2001, WUNT 174, Tübingen 2004, 365-400.

¹⁰ It is a great pleasure and an honor for me to present the following deliberations as a gift to my dear colleague and friend Stelian Tofană whom I met first at the East-West symposia of the Eastern Europe Liaison Committee of SNTS and later several times as a member of the official delegation of the Romanian Orthodox Church for dialogue with the Evangelical Church in Germany.

¹¹ For more recent readings of Peter and Paul in an ecumenically open-minded mood see Raymond E. BROWN/Karl P. DONFRIED/John REUMANN (ed.), *Peter in the New Testament. A Collaborative Assessment by Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars*, Minneapolis/New York 1973; David E. AUNE (ed.), *Rereading Paul Together. Protestant and Catholic Perspectives on Justification*, Grand Rapids 2006. Foundational for an ecumenical perspective on both apostles was Franz MUSSNER, *Petrus und Paulus – Pole der Einheit*, QD 76, Freiburg 1976.

¹² For an overview on the history of the canonical collection of biblical writings cf. Christoph MARKSCHIES, „Zur Geschichte eines christlichen ‚Kanons‘ der Bücher des Alten und Neuen Testaments“, in: ID./Jens SCHRÖTER (ed.), *Antike christliche Apokryphen in deutscher Übersetzung*, I/ 1, Tübingen 2012, 25-74; Lee Martin McDONALD, *The Biblical Canon. Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority*, Peabody 2007.

testified by Eusebius of Caesarea in the early 4th century and Athanasius of Alexandria several decades later, the corpus of writings recognized as authoritative for the church consisted of three larger sub-collections (four gospels, fourteen Pauline letters, and seven letters written by other apostles), as well as two works of a singular genre (Acts and Revelation). Moreover, the compilations of the four gospels as well as a Pauline letter collection appear to have been completed much earlier. Strikingly, the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts never occur in one single manuscript, although both originally formed a coherent literary work consisting of two volumes written by the same author.¹³ Moreover, it deserves our attention that in the ancient manuscript tradition there is no evidence of a mixture of single members of the three sub-groups of New Testament writings. Therefore, the origin and shape of the New Testament does not seem to be a matter of mere coincidence. Instead, the collection of authoritative writings that was formed during the first centuries of the Christian movement emerged as the result of a purposeful, systematic configuration, despite its plurality in many details.¹⁴

The figures of Peter and Paul in particular contributed to this process of collection, selection, and ordering of documents which would later form what is now called the New Testament. They not only appear as figures in the narrative books of the canon, but also as authors of letters attributed to them.¹⁵ Notwithstanding any modern debates about their historical reliability, the indication of the names of Peter and Paul in the prescripts of the letters in question force any reader of the Bible to combine what the narrative writings of the New Testament testify about these two apostles with the contents of the letters attributed to them. Therefore, seen from a canonical perspective, the roles of Peter and Paul as the two most important figures in the first generation of followers of Jesus Christ deserve our attention also in theological reflection.¹⁶

¹³ For the “dynamic” unity of the Lukan “Doppelwerk,” see most recently the comprehensive monograph by Knut BACKHAUS, *Das lukanische Doppelwerk. Zur literarischen Basis frühchristlicher Geschichtsdeutung*, BZfN 240, Berlin 2022, 240-441.

¹⁴ For a canonical reading of the Christian collection of authoritative writings in due consideration of their historical origins and their theological meaning see my essays Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Die Gestalt des neutestamentlichen Kanons. Anregungen zur Theologie des Neuen Testaments“, in: Egbert BALLHORN/Georg STEINS (ed.), *Der Bibelkanon in der Bibelauslegung. Methodenreflexionen und Beispiele exegesen*, Stuttgart 2007, 95-109; ID., „Exegese im kanonischen Zusammenhang. Überlegungen zur theologischen Relevanz der Gestalt des neutestamentlichen Kanons“, in: J.-M. AUWERS/H. J. DE JONGE (ed.), *The Biblical Canons*, BETHL 163, Leuven 2003, 557-584.

¹⁵ For the two big letter collections in the NT canon, see my essay Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Die Apostel und ihre Briefe. Zum hermeneutischen und ökumenischen Potential des Corpus Apostolicum im Neuen Testament“, in: Heike OMERZU/Eckart David SCHMIDT (ed.), *Paulus und Petrus. Geschichte – Theologie – Rezeption*, ABG 48, Leipzig 2016, 273-292.

¹⁶ For Peter in the New Testament and church tradition see Helen BOND/Larry W. HURTADO (ed.), *Peter in Early Christianity*, Grand Rapids 2015; for scholarly debates about Peter in more recent research see Markus BOCKMUEHL, *The Remembered Peter in Ancient Reception and Modern*

Certainly, the positions held by Peter and Paul in the formative period of Christianity and their actions and conduct in the earliest Christian congregations were different from what can be found in the canon. Moreover, several of the documents collected in the New Testament apply the term “apostle” to them in quite different ways.¹⁷ Nevertheless, both apostles played a singular role in the development of the church in its beginnings. This particular role remained alive in the memory of the church that was responsible for collecting and ordering the letters attributed to them. Furthermore, it is of eminent importance for the origin of the church according to the New Testament that both Peter and Paul did not develop their own communities separated from each other in the early Christian movement or exclusively shaped by their own convictions. On the contrary, as the narrative books of the New Testament and the letter collections attributed to Peter and Paul conjointly testify, both apostles continued interacting with each other throughout the entire period of their apostolic ministry.

Thus, any reader of the biblical collection for instance must be aware that according to Gal 1:18f. Paul had visited Peter/Cephas in Jerusalem, and had met James the brother of the Lord there as well, only a few years after his call and assignment to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is in the year 33 CE at the latest (may be earlier), as is also retold in Acts 9:26–30.¹⁸ In his letter to the Galatians Paul, motivated primarily by his particular intentions in writing to the Galatians, seems to downplay his first meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem by limiting the length of his visit to a fortnight. However, he cannot entirely avoid reporting about his meeting with Peter and the authorities in Jerusalem at this very early stage of his career because it seemed to be a well-known fact for anybody in the early Jesus movement, including his Galatian addressees.

Later in Galatians, Paul refers to another, more formal meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem (Gal 2:1–10) that corresponds to a report about a similar meeting in Acts 15. Afterwards in Galatians, Paul points to his conflict with Peter (and Barnabas as well) in Antioch about problems concerning table fellowship (cf. Gal 2:11–14), this time without any parallel story in Acts. Both meetings of the apostles, nevertheless, belong together for readers of the canonical collection even though the exact order of events and the details of the problems and solutions

Debate, WUNT 262, Tübingen 2010; cf. ID., *Simon Peter in Scripture and Memory. The New Testament Apostle in the Early Church*, Grand Rapids 2012; Martin HENGEL, *Saint Peter. The Underestimated Apostle*, Grand Rapids 2010.

¹⁷ Cf. as an overview my short article Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Apostel / Apostolat“, *ELThG*² 1, 2017, 351-355.

¹⁸ For Paul’s visit in Jerusalem after his call see in more detail Martin HENGEL/Anna Maria SCHWEMER, *Paulus zwischen Damaskus und Antiochien. Die unbekanntes Jahre des Apostels*, WUNT 108, Tübingen 1998, 214-236; ID., *Die Urgemeinde und das Judenchristentum*, Geschichte des frühen Christentums II, Tübingen 2019, 243-247.

discussed there may partly remain obscure for them, as for us today.¹⁹ Whereas according to Paul's reports in Jerusalem, after exchanging their different positions with regard to the circumcision of believers and after warning about intruders and troublemakers within the congregations, the apostles came to an agreement about the practice of their mission, in Antioch the dispute about regulations of table fellowship between Jewish and non-Jewish members of the congregation ended in a split between Peter and Barnabas on the one side and Paul on the other. However, according to the evidence from Paul's letters this was not the end of contact and interaction between Paul and Peter. In 1 Corinthians, Paul without any constraints later refers to Peter as the first of the apostles, called by a personal encounter with the risen Christ (1 Cor 15:5).²⁰ At another place in the same letter, Paul mentions Peter as a model of apostleship when he travels as a married missionary (1 Cor 9:5). Similarly, in his letters Peter not only recounts his own encounter with the glorified Jesus on the mountain in Galilee (2 Pet 1:16–18, cf. Matt 17:1–8), but also refers to “our beloved brother Paul” who's letters are partly “hard to understand,” yet in any case worth reading because of the “wisdom given him” (2 Pet 3:15–16).

Thus, the New Testament, read as a canon of writings that are authoritative for the church, at its narrative level appears as a great story about community and union among the apostles. This picture of canonical apostolic union could be completed by adding James, the brother of the Lord, whom Paul also calls an apostle (Gal 1:19), even though everybody knew that during Jesus's lifetime his family – his mother, brothers, and sisters – had been rather reserved or almost in opposition to his ministry.²¹ Nevertheless, any reader of the biblical canon would be forced to follow its parameters and accept a letter authored by “James, the servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” directed to “the twelve tribes in the dispersion” (Jas 1:1) as coming from the brother of the Lord in Jerusalem, together with the other apostolic letter authored by a certain “Jude, servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James” (Jude 1).²²

¹⁹ There is an ongoing debate in scholarship that cannot be reported here on the events in Jerusalem and Antioch and their outcomes for the further developments of the early Jesus movement; for an overview see Markus ÖHLER, *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, Göttingen 2018, 195-214 (ET: *History of Early Christianity. Religion, Culture, Identity*, Waco forthcoming).

²⁰ For Paul's review in Galatians of his encounters with Cephas, James, and Barnabas, see Marlis GIELEN, „Kephas – Jakobus – Barnabas. Drei frühchristliche Führungspersönlichkeiten und ihr Verhältnis zu Paulus im ‚Rückspiegel‘ des Galaterbriefs und des 1. Korintherbriefs“, in: Ulrich MELL/Michael TILLY (ed.), *Der 1. Thessalonicherbrief und die frühe Völkermission des Paulus*, WUNT 479, Tübingen 2022, 93-131.

²¹ Cf. Mark 3:31–35; 6:1–6.

²² For the epistle of James from the perspective of its readers, see Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Wer war ‚Jakobus‘ in den Augen seiner Leser? Zu meinem Ansatz der Kommentierung des Jakobusbriefs im EKK“, in: Eve-Marie BECKER/Sigurvin LÁRUS JÓNSSON/Susanne LUTHER (ed.), *Who Was „James“? Essays on the Letter's Authorship and Provenance*, WUNT 485, Tübingen 2022, 161-

The image of *koinonia* (communion) between the apostles as a model for the church occurs in Acts 15 as well as in Gal 2.²³ It is striking that, according to the evidence of the New Testament, this model comes just at the moment when Peter and Paul meet personally in Jerusalem for a second time in order to resolve a severe conflict that threatened to split the diverging branches of the early Christian movement. Thus, taken together and read as part of the canonical collection of the New Testament, the letters of Paul and Peter, along with the collection of the seven Catholic Epistles, appear to form the common testimony of the apostles about Jesus Christ as proclaimed by all prominent authorities in the earliest era of Christianity. This does not mean that all apostles would express exactly the same convictions or intentions. They all may maintain their own voices and hold their particular views on the gospel. The New Testament by no means conceals the conflicts that arose between them. Nevertheless, any reader of the canon who wants to understand what one of the apostles had written about a certain topic cannot refrain from also taking into consideration what the others had expressed about the same or a similar matter. This allows the apostles, when read canonically, to enter into a vital and fruitful debate, if only virtually in the minds of the readers of the New Testament canon.

2. Peter and Paul in Historical Perspective

The “canonical approach” taken so far in this essay, however, runs counter to most historical approaches of biblical exegesis as it developed in modern, “western” biblical scholarship for almost 300 years. One of the major principles of historical analysis since the period of enlightenment has been to distinguish between different sources, groups, and positions and to reconstruct the historical developments caused by different powers that competed with each other. One popular model of historical development designed by Georg Friedrich Hegel in his philosophy of history became almost prescriptive for all historical studies since the middle of the 19th century. This “dialectic” model of historical reconstruction and interpretation was applied by Ferdinand Christian Baur in his reconstruction of the

178; ID., “James”, in: H. K. BOND (ed.), *From Paul to Josephus: Literary Receptions of Jesus in the First Century CE*, The Reception of Jesus in the First Three Centuries 1, London 2020, 259-275.

²³ For an interpretation of the passages from an ecumenical perspective, see Karl-Wilhelm NIEBUHR, „Gemeinschaft der Apostel. Das ‚Apostelkonzil‘ als Bezugspunkt und Modell konziliarer Gemeinschaft in der Kirche“, in: Dagmar HELLER/Johann SCHNEIDER (ed.), *Die Ökumenischen Konzilien und die Katholizität der Kirche. Das elfte Gespräch im bilateralen theologischen Dialog zwischen der Rumänischen Orthodoxen Kirche und der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland*, ÖR.Beih 83, Frankfurt 2009, 46-69.

early history of Christianity.²⁴ According to Baur, Peter and Paul played their roles as opponents who represented two different or even opposing powers. Their conflicts led to the historical development of early Christianity and eventually flowed into the so-called “früh-katholisch” church. Certainly, from a historical point of view, this was not viewed as a positive development and therefore should encourage the historian to search for the “pure” origin of Christianity with Jesus.

Depending on the confessional standpoint of the individual exegetes, some of them sided more with Paul (mostly Protestants) and others with Peter (mostly Roman-Catholics). Orthodox exegetes who generally did not follow the “western,” differentiating historical approach to the canonical writings of the Bible were not forced to side with any of the positions of the apostles but rather attempted to combine all of them in a wholistic and harmonizing approach that intended to do justice to all voices in the biblical canon as parts of the Apostolic tradition that has been vital in the life of the church. Nevertheless, exegetes of all confessional traditions who intend to study the biblical sources with a historical agenda in mind today join in a common interest to reconstruct the events hidden behind the New Testament texts. They agree that, from a historical perspective, these texts should be read and analyzed as sources distinguished from each other to realize their different voices and positions that form a many-voiced choir to proclaim the gospel. Yet, frequently in such approaches the second step of historical analysis is neglected, namely, explaining how different and sometimes diverging positions and voices came together in the end to form the authoritative collection of the New Testament canon, as it is testified by Eusebius or Athanasius in the 4th century.

I do not intend for this observation to devalue historical exegesis as a whole. At any rate, historical-critical research has notably enriched and rendered much more precisely our knowledge about the origins of the New Testament and the first steps of the Christian movement. This success has become possible only by carefully distinguishing between different and sometimes opposing powers that occur in the sources and reading them critically and independently. These original sources should be separated not only from each other but also from later harmonization resulting from the process of canonization. This allows them to have their own say. On the other hand, the historian's task is not finished when he or she has dissected the sources to distinguish between different voices, views, or actions. Historical analysis must explain also how the biblical writings achieved their final shape and by which actions or processes they were selected, collected, and integrated

²⁴ Ferdinand Christian Baur who founded the “Tübingen” school of historical-critical biblical theology was the most famous representative of this reconstruction of the origins of Christianity according to the Hegelian model. Cf. for Baur Martin BAUSPIESS/Christof LANDMESSER/David LINCICUM (ed.), *Ferdinand Christian Baur und die Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, WUNT 333, Tübingen 2014.

into the biblical canon. This part of historical analysis is equally significant for any theological interpretation informed by historical knowledge.

The evidence offered by the sources collected and transmitted in the New Testament is crucial also for the historical reconstruction of the role of Peter and Paul in the formative period of Christianity. Yet, with regard to the oldest sources of the Christian movement we face several methodological problems that are difficult to solve. First, we do not have at hand any evidence contemporary with the apostles that emerged and has been transmitted independent of the Christian faith. All sources already evidently display the convictions and confessions of the members of the early Christian movement. Whereas in his letters Paul expresses his particular views on select actions and events he had experienced during his personal ministry as an apostle, the book of Acts describes Peter and Paul's apostolic work in retrospect and in an encompassing way. Yet, both authors adapt their descriptions of the events to their own overarching convictions and interpretations that emerge from their understanding of the gospel of Christ and its proclamation in the Jewish and Hellenistic-Roman world. Even Paul, as an eyewitness, is not free from imposing his personal views on his presentation of these events. Likewise, the author of Acts, whether or not he is identified with Luke, the co-worker of Paul and companion during his travels, shows his own specific interests and displays a particular focus by shaping his narration.

A second challenge we must face if we wish to evaluate the earliest evidence from a historical perspective is to date the sources precisely and to critically assess their authenticity. With regard to Paul's letters, there are strong concerns in modern scholarship about the authenticity of the Pastoral Epistles (or at least 1 Timothy), Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians.²⁵ We can leave aside here the debates on the so-called Deutero-Pauline letters, because Peter does not appear in those letters. More important for our topic is the question of authenticity regarding the Petrine letters. Today, a vast majority of critical scholars judges both epistles to be

²⁵ Cf. recent textbooks on the introduction to the New Testament, such as Carl HOLLADAY, *Introduction to the New Testament. Reference Edition*, Waco 2020; Udo SCHNELLE, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Göttingen ⁹2017. For recent research on pseudepigraphy in the New Testament see Jörg FREY/Jens HERZER/Martina JANSSEN/Clare K. ROTHSCILD (ed.), *Pseudepigraphie und Verfasserfiktion in frühchristlichen Briefen. Pseudepigraphy and Author Fiction in Early Christian Letters*, WUNT 246, Tübingen 2009; Wolfgang GRÜNSTÄUDL/ Karl Matthias SCHMIDT (ed.), *Die Datierung neutestamentlicher Pseudepigraphen. Herausforderungen und neuere Lösungsansätze*, WUNT 470, Tübingen 2012. For a cautious discussion of the problem of pseudepigraphy from an orthodox perspective see Konstantinos NIKOLAKOPOULOS, *Das Neue Testament in der Orthodoxen Kirche. Grundlegende Fragen einer Einführung in das Neue Testament*, Lehr- und Studienbücher Orthodoxe Theologie 1, Münster 2011, 218-220.238-241.254-256.259.266-269.273-275.278-280.291f.

pseudo-epigraphical.²⁶ Moreover, there is almost a consensus among scholars that the two Petrine letters originate from different authors and were addressed to two different audiences. Furthermore, only 2 Peter explicitly refers to Paul (2 Petr 3:14–16). The author presupposes that in his lifetime Paul's letters already form a collection that his addressees can and should read. Yet, nothing justifies the assumption that the readers of 2 Peter belonged to one of the communities Paul originally addressed. Therefore, it is rather hazardous to read 2 Peter as a reliable source for the historical Paul. The relationship between 1 Peter and the Pauline letters is much more veiled and implicit, if present at all.²⁷ Thus, to gain a historically reliable picture of the course of events regarding Peter and Paul in the earliest era of the Christian movement, we must limit ourselves to the evidence in Acts and in Paul's genuine letters.

2.1 Peter and Paul according to the Book of Acts

In the book of Acts, Peter and Paul are the most important figures in the initial era of Christianity. Both hold particular functions in the literary concept of the author. Peter appears as a leading authority among the apostles in Jerusalem. The author applies the term in the sense he defines as follows: "those who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21–22). After consolidating the circle of the apostles, Peter takes the initiative, together with the remaining eleven, to complete the circle of twelve apostles by electing Matthias (1:15–26). Peter then is the first to proclaim the gospel in Jerusalem at Pentecost, and a bit later in the temple (2:14–41; 3:12–26). Accompanied by John, the Zebedee, Peter heals a paralyzed man (3:1–8; cf. 5:15) and stands up at the high court to defend himself and his message (4:1–20; cf. 5:29–33). Yet, Peter's sphere of action is not limited to Jerusalem. As the first among the apostles, he roves around meeting believers in the region, in Samaria (8:14–25), or Lydda and Joppa (9:32–43). More importantly, according to Acts Peter is also the first to proclaim the gospel to non-Jews, as is illustrated by the extensively retold story of the conversion of the Roman *centurio* Cornelius (Acts 11–12).

²⁶ For discussion on pseudepigraphy and the dating of the Petrine letters see most recently Travis B. WILLIAMS, "Pseudonymity, Persecution, and the Date of 1 Peter. Some Methodological Reflections", in: GRÜNSTÄUDL/SCHMIDT, *Datierung neutestamentlicher Pseudepigraphen*, 245-268; Wolfgang GRÜNSTÄUDL, „Die ‚Neue Perspektive‘ auf den Zweiten Petrusbrief. Interpretatorische und methodologische Impulse einer veränderten Datierung“, in: ID./SCHMIDT, *Datierung neutestamentlicher Pseudepigraphen*, 269-296.

²⁷ Cf. Jens HERZER, *Petrus oder Paulus? Studien über das Verhältnis des Ersten Petrusbriefes zur paulinischen Tradition*, WUNT 103, Tübingen 1998.

Paul appears only second in Acts, initially almost hidden by his code-name “Saul” and strangely passive at his first appearance (7:54–8:1).²⁸ Although the author extensively retells Paul’s conversion (9:3–19), his role in Jerusalem appears rather limited, like a kind of cameo (9:1–2, 26–30). This conforms to Paul’s own account about his biography given twice in Acts later (chs. 22; 26), when he calls himself a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia (21:39; 22:3). The rest of the book after chapter 12, however, mainly consists of a broad report on Paul’s ministry outside the land of Israel as a missionary and church leader of several Christian communities in the Mediterranean. In the end, Paul’s many journeys lead him to Rome, the capital of the Empire, where he arrives, though, as a prisoner. Nevertheless, even in prison Paul is free enough to proclaim the gospel “without hindrance” (28:31).

Although the portraits of Peter and Paul in the book of Acts correspond to the intentions of its author, who writes from a later perspective probably around the end of the 1st century, we can identify several important biographical and historical aspects to reconstruct their activities and the circumstances of their ministry during the first decades of the church. Peter was the first among the circle of the twelve during the earthly ministry of Jesus and acted as the undisputed leading figure of the church of Jerusalem, together with James, the brother of the Lord. Moreover, Peter also took over the task of interaction and communication between the different groups of Christ-believers in and outside Jerusalem. According to the depiction of him in Acts, Peter was not in opposition to Paul’s aims to disseminate the gospel to the gentiles. On the contrary, he himself was the first to proclaim the gospel to an outstanding gentile character and succeeded in converting him to faith in Christ. Even if the story in Acts 10–11 reveals many legendary traits, one should not exclude from the outset the historical value of the portrait of Peter in Acts, who therein appears to have been at least open to a broader perspective that included a gentile audience for the gospel.

This conforms to the portrait of Paul according to Acts. There, he appears to be a Law observing Jew, even a Pharisee (as Paul also portrays himself in Phil 3:5), who although originating from the diaspora had spent time in Jerusalem during his childhood and most of his lifetime before his conversion (Acts 22:3). On the other hand, Paul is *the* exemplary proclaimer of the gospel to the gentiles and advocate of their concerns against anyone who wished to challenge their rights as full members of the church. To achieve this aim, according to Acts, Paul never forgot or disdained the origins of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem. He cultivated the communion of his mainly gentile congregations of Christ-believers with the original church still living in Jerusalem. Paul returned to Jerusalem several times in

²⁸ For the picture of Paul in Acts see Jens SCHRÖTER, „Die Paulusdarstellung der Apostelgeschichte“, in: Friedrich W. HORN (ed.), *Paulus Handbuch*, Tübingen 2013, 542-551.

his career as apostle to the gentiles by travelling long distances in his commitment to the project of promoting communion between the different branches of the growing church.

This image of apostolic encounter and communion emerges most impressively in the middle of Acts when it is said that both Peter and Paul met in Jerusalem, together with James and the other apostles, to discuss and resolve a conflict that had arisen in Antioch where gentiles had become members of the church for the first time (15:1–35). The picture we receive of the events as told in Acts looks like an official meeting of two delegations, almost a “synod” convened by the apostles to solve this matter by consensus.²⁹ After the church of Jerusalem had received the delegation from Antioch headed by Paul and Barnabas, they listened to their reports about God’s blessings in the beginnings of the church of Antioch. Then, a group of nameless opponents, identified as Pharisees who belonged to the group of Christ-believers, stand up to oppose the practice of the Antiochian congregation to include gentiles in their communion without circumcision. After controversial debates, Peter stands up and takes the side of the Antiochian party. James also supports this view and, in the end, “the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided” to accept the Antiochian solution, along with several addendums. They write an official letter sent and conveyed by reliable men to the churches in Antioch and the whole of Syria and Cilicia. As a result, Paul and Barnabas, after delivering the letter to the church of Antioch, set out on their new mission to the gentiles with the backing of the united church (15:30–41).

2.2 Paul on Peter in His Letters

This picture of an almost unanimous apostolic community between Paul and Peter, along with all the other apostles, the entire church in Jerusalem, and any additional churches that emerge consisting mainly of gentiles looks, at a first glance, strikingly different from what we read in Paul’s own report about his meetings with Peter in Jerusalem and Antioch (Gal 2:1–14).³⁰ The mood in which Paul writes his letter to the Galatians sounds rather nervous or even angry right from the start. When he turns to the event in Jerusalem, he first emphasizes that he had not accepted an invitation or even a directive by the apostles to appear in front of them, but that he “went up in response to a revelation.” He wanted to lay out

²⁹ On the Apostolic Council from the perspective of ecumenical dialogue between orthodox and “western” exegesis see Mircea BASARAB, „Die Ökumenischen Konzilien und die Katholizität der Kirche. Das Apostelkonzil (Apg 15) als Bezugspunkt konziliarer Entscheidungsfindung in der Kirche“, in: HELLER/SCHNEIDER, *Die Ökumenischen Konzilien und die Katholizität der Kirche*, 23-42; NIEBUHR, „Gemeinschaft der Apostel“, 46-69.

³⁰ On the discussion about the relationship between these two events in historical perspective see ÖHLER, *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, 90f., 195-198; Holger ZEIGAN, *Aposteltreffen in Jerusalem. Eine forschungsgeschichtliche Studie zu Galater 2,1-10 und den möglichen lukanischen Parallelen*, ABG 18, Leipzig 2005.

“before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain” (2:2). Later, Paul explicitly denies that any constraints had been placed on him by the Jerusalem apostles. Paul concedes that he in fact had pledged himself to support the “saints” in Jerusalem with a collection (2:10). Nevertheless, there had been no decisions on any other commitments with regard to the Torah, as is testified by the example of Titus, who was not forced to be circumcised (2:3). Moreover, in the next paragraph of his report in Galatians (Gal 2:11–14), Paul points to an incident in Antioch where he harshly confronted Peter by means of his own understanding of the gospel.³¹ Paul now accuses Peter of hypocrisy, because Peter had participated in table fellowship with the gentiles initially but later redrew after some people (claiming to have been?) sent by James opposed his conduct. As a result of heated debates, even Barnabas changed sides and Paul had to leave Antioch (2:13).

What can we learn from this evidence about the relationship between Peter and Paul from a historical perspective? First, both Acts and Paul testify to a constellation emerging in the earliest period of Christianity where the relationship between Jews and gentiles in the church was a concern. This is important to note, for it makes unmistakably clear that the church originated in a Jewish milieu. Moreover, the church took her first steps in history as one of many religious groups which regarded themselves as a part of the people of Israel and which would encounter conflicts from other contemporary Jewish groups which disagreed about their religious and communal life.

Second, one of the most important and most urgent matters to solve in the early Jesus movement after Easter was to clarify how Christ-believers who originated from different religious backgrounds would interact with each other without obscuring or even destroying their community. This was not only a matter of cultural diversity, because it also touched on and in the end overcame the sharp religious distinctions that separate Jews and gentiles, the people of Israel elected by God and the many peoples of the world. Obviously, these distinctions originating from Israel’s traditions as testified in the Scriptures were still determinative for all groups of the Jesus movement in their beginnings, including the Pauline churches. On the other hand, Paul in his missionary project had begun programmatically passing over the border to the gentiles to proclaim the gospel to every human being who might believe in Jesus Christ. This was the focus of Paul’s mission and his call to be an apostle, as we see from his brief reference to this event in Gal 1:15. It is

³¹ On the relationship between the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem and the incident at Antioch in chronological terms see ÖHLER, *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, 93f., 203-208; Matthias KONRADT, „Zur Datierung des sogenannten antiochenischen Zwischenfalls“, *ZNW* 102, 2011, 19-39.

reasonable to assume that this particular direction of Paul's mission had caused serious quarrels as can be derived from his letter to the Galatians.

Third, even if we read the Pauline testimony and the reports in the book of Acts about the events in Jerusalem and Antioch separately, we nevertheless get the impression that in both cases there was a split of opinion at the inception of the church on how to deal with the problem of Jews and gentiles. Eventually, however, the leaders came to an agreement on this matter. Moreover, in both accounts the major authorities in Jerusalem, namely Peter and the other apostles, in particular James and John, did not side with Paul's opponents, but represented one of the two parties who reached an agreement in the end. Yet, there had been others, a third party (or more) so to speak, who tried to destroy their communion and to force Paul and his churches to change their position regarding circumcision. Acts and Paul in his letters concur by clearly separating those "intruders" from the Jerusalem apostles, even though both sources call them by different names and describe them differently. This means that, from a historical perspective, neither Peter nor James nor the other apostles in Jerusalem took a position that strictly separated Jews and gentiles in the church, as opposed to Paul's position and the practice in the Antiochene church. Therefore, if we follow the testimony of the sources by historical critical analysis, the "dialectic" model of opposition between a Pauline and a Petrine party as it was popular in older, historical-critical scholarship following the Hegelian philosophy of history is wrong at the outset.

Nevertheless, the reports about the same events from the perspectives of Paul on the one hand and the Acts on the other differ quite considerably. Whereas Paul explicitly denies any restrictions agreed on in Jerusalem (except the collection to support the "saints"), the Jerusalem council according to Acts issued an official letter to the churches to regulate their conduct with regard to particular precepts of the Jewish Law.³² Moreover, according to Acts, Paul and Barnabas initially continued with their common work in the church after their return to Antioch. Only later, after dissent arose about a co-worker in their mission, did they part company (15:36–41). In Acts, however, there is no trace of a conflict in Antioch between Paul and Peter or of a separation between Paul and Barnabas that resulted from conflict over table fellowship.³³

Therefore, it would be impossible to combine both reports to get a more complete view about the actual course of events in historical terms. Rather, one first must search separately and in detail both references by accounting for their respective shapes and intentions. However, to place both in opposition to each other and interpret the two pictures as evidence of two different and opposing movements in early Christianity represented by a Pauline church on the one side

³² For the so-called Apostolic Decree, see ÖHLER, *Geschichte des frühen Christentums*, 208-210.

³³ Both Öhler and Konradt deny a historical relationship between the conflict reported in Acts 15:36–41 and the incident at Antioch (see note 31).

and a Petrine church on the other would also be unhistorical. At any rate, we should not overlook that even Paul in his letters later refers to Peter without any concern (1 Cor 9:5). Most importantly, Paul assigns to Peter the outstanding place as the first of those who encountered the Christ risen (1 Cor 15:5).

3. Hermeneutical and Ecumenical Conclusions

(1) In contemporary academic biblical scholarship, historical and theological approaches are interrelated and work in concert with one another. To do justice to the peculiarity and the testimony of the biblical writings in the church and for the church, we have to acknowledge both their character as theological documents that are of foundational importance for the life of the church and as historical documents that are necessary to reconstruct the beginnings of Christianity.

(2) In biblical studies, historical and theological methods of interpretation should neither be mingled with nor isolated from each other. Historical analysis needs to be free from any prejudices, even theological ones. Yet, historical analysis has to become critical not only of the sources, but of its own methodological or philosophical prejudices and limitations.

(3) The beginnings of Christianity do not follow the principles of a Hegelian “dialectic” model of historical development. Paul with his gospel of freedom from the Law does not stand as a completely new thesis in the history of the Spirit, nor is Peter an antithesis thwarting the Spirit’s progress by strictly binding all Christ-believers to the restrictions of the Law. On the contrary, as the sources testify, both Peter and Paul had to struggle with different and sometimes overlapping problems arising from the origins of the Christian movement in a variegated Judaism of the Hellenistic-Roman period.

(4) In a canonical perspective, Peter and Paul are a model of apostolic community as is testified both in Acts and in Paul’s letters. Both apostles differ regarding their particular place and role in the developing church. Yet, both agree on the foundational and unifying faith in Jesus Christ that drives their mission. Moreover, both repeatedly came together to establish and to strengthen their communion in proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ to every human being, Jews and gentiles alike.

(5) Each of the apostles played their particular roles and gained importance in the origins of the early Christian movement. Peter captured an exclusive role as the first of the apostles during the ministry of Jesus, and as the rock established by his master to build and steer the church. Paul was the first to recognize and to proclaim the gospel programmatically to every human being in Israel as well as to the gentiles. Thus, Peter represents the foundational basis of the church, and Paul represents her universal missional identity.

(6) From a canonical as well as a historical point of view, the different roles and intentions of Peter and Paul did not lead to a split between different churches

relying on them but, on the contrary, formed the basis of their communion. Both Peter and Paul did not sever contact with one another after having determined their respective roles and functions in early Christianity. On the contrary, they maintained contact with one another as much as possible, and they continually tried to root their relationship in the communion of all believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

(7) It may be of importance to ecumenical discussions today to distinguish between union and communion. Efforts to establish a union of churches often have been susceptible to the temptation to diminish plurality and to succumb to power plays between different groups within the church or even different churches. In contrast, the search for communion may better conform to the pluralistic nature and character of the church, both in its nascent state as well as today.

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