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Codex Bezae at Acts 15

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General Introduction to the Ms

In 1582 Theodore de Beze presented the bi-lingual Ms, Codex Bezae, to the University of Cambridge. The symbol for the Greek side of this ms. is D, and d represents the Latin parallel side.

Although Codex Bezae has been the subject of a vast amount of research, its exact date and place of origin have not yet been established beyond question. It has traditionally been placed in the fifth and sixth centuries AD, yet H.J. Frede could recently suggest a fourth century dating. /2/

There have been almost twenty correctors of this manuscript. As all but one of these correctors were concerned with the Greek side, a location of origin in the Greek world seems probable. Such a location would have to be one where Latin was also known. Contemporary scholarly opinion looks to Southern Italy or Sicily as the place of Codex Bezae's origin. In Sicily during the period 4th-6th centuries, the official language was Latin while the popular language remained Greek. The theory that Codex Bezae originated in Lyons where Theodore de Beze found it, clearly does not commend itself, as Lyons was well removed from the Greek world.

The concentration of research on Codex Bezae has naturally tended to be with its text in Acts, for here it is highly distinctive. Professor E.J. Epp was able to conclude that in the Bezan Acts the Jews and their leaders are portrayed as more hostile to both Jesus and the apostles than elsewhere. /3/ At Acts 13.29, for example, D adds the Jews' specific request that Jesus should be crucified:

RSV

13.28. Though they could charge him with nothing deserving death, yet they asked Pilate to have him killed.

D

And finding not one cause of death in him, judging him, they delivered him to Pilate to be killed.

13.29. And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they asked Pilate that he should be crucified. And when they had again obtained this, and having taken him down from the tree, they laid him in a tomb.

These verses in D imply that, before they had delivered him to Pilate, the Jews had already decided that Jesus should be crucified. Implicit here is also a certain removal of guilt from Pilate; it had been the Jews' decision, not his. Pilate's innocence is thus given a particular emphasis in D.

Acts 15 - The Council of Jerusalem

There are over thirty distinctive readings in Codex Bezae at Acts 15. Some which display the particular spirit of D are set out below:

RSV

15.2. And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles about this question.

D

And Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, for Paul spoke confidently affirming that they should remain so, as when they believed: but those who had come from Jerusalem charged Paul and Barnabas and certain others to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders, so that they might be judged before them about this question.

The dissension and debate concerned the issue of circumcision. The D-text is particularly sympathetic to Paul and Barnabas, and stresses its point by describing Paul as "confidently affirming" that Gentile converts should remain uncircumcised.

It is generally accepted that there were at least two judaizing parties: those who had come from Judea (15.1f), and believers in Jerusalem (15.5). In D there is only one judaizing party; those who came from Judea (15.1) are identified in D (15.2) as the judaizing party from Jerusalem. Further, in D the Judaizers charge Paul and Barnabas and certain others to go to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for judgment. The subsequent judgment in Jerusalem is thus emphasized as a defeat of the Judaizers. In D it is they who ask for the judgment in the first place.

The D text has thus given extra emphasis to Paul's position in the debate, and has also minimized the judaizing party, exposing their folly.

RSV

15.4. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders.....

D

And when they came to Jerusalem, they were received in great fashion by the church and the apostles and elders.....

The variant here appears to be innocuous. Yet its simplicity conceals an important implication. We have already noted that at D 15.2 it is the judaizing party from Jerusalem which demands and charges that judgment be made by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. The assertion that those who came to Jerusalem were welcomed "in great fashion" implies that the judaizing party was not of significant strength in the Jerusalem church. Moreover in D this is the only judaizing party. The warmth of the welcome extended by the Jerusalem church thus minimizes the importance of the judaizing party.

RSV

15.7. And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them.....

D

And when there had been much debate, Peter rose up in the Spirit and said to them.....

The speech of Peter is introduced by D in a way which accords it pneumatic authority. Peter's words are not his own, but those of the Spirit. Peter's point of view is identical to that of Paul and thus, indirectly, D asserts that Paul's view had been consonant with the will of God while the Judaizers had been at variance with God. The phrase "in the Spirit" has a significance, not only for Peter, but for Paul also. Moreover Professor Epp has noted /4/ that the insertion of this phrase in D serves to contrast Peter's speech with that of James which represents a 'compromising' position. Once again, an apparently innocent variant in D conceals important implications.

RSV

15.12 And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul.....

D

And the elders agreed to what had been spoken by Peter, and all the multitude kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul.

Verse 11 concludes Peter's speech; the variant in D thus provides immediately the reaction of the elders. They agreed to what Peter had said in his speech. Without this addition, no specific reaction to Peter's speech is given in the text of Ch.15. James's speech follows immediately and the conclusion of the debate is

the adoption of the suggestion which he makes, that a letter should be sent. As we have noted under 15.7, Peter's speech expresses the mind of Paul while the speech of James is more qualified. The addition of this clause in D thus completely vindicates Paul over against the Judaizers while without the addition it might appear that the Judaizers had partly won their case.

RSV

15.20and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.

D

... and from unchastity _____ and from blood, and that whatsoever they would not should be done to them, do not to others.

The omission of "that which is strangled" in D lessens the Jewish tone of the instructions. This lessening is then followed by an emphasis on the negative Golden Rule.

Although the Golden Rule is to be found in the Talmud, here it serves to contrast the Spirit and the Law. D thus alters the sense of the letter which James recommended, so that it is characterized by an appeal to that which is intended to set the Christian Gospel over against the Law, viz., the Spirit. The same variant occurs again at 15.29. Again, any hint that the Judaizers may have found any justification at Jerusalem is definitely weakened in D.

This addition is also found in certain minuscules, Irenaeus, the Sahidic and Codex Ardmachanus, the Book of Armagh.

RSV

15.32. And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them.

D

And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, full of the Holy Spirit, exhorted the brethren by _____ words and strengthened them.

The Spirit has been introduced into the text of Acts in D at various points: at 15.7 where special authority is given to the speech of Peter; at 15.29 where the Law is set in the context of the church, the Spirit-filled community; again here at 15.32 the Spirit is mentioned, not to give authority to Judas or Silas but to emphasize the pneumatic essence of prophecy and the presence of the Spirit in the church, which makes it the New Israel.

Conclusions

The alterations to the text of Acts in Codex Bezae form a consistent pattern which betrays particular emphases. They are intentional and polemical. We can summarize the aims of the distinctive Bezan readings which have been set out above:

- (1) To emphasize Paul's position over against the Judaizers
- (2) To minimize the size and influence of the Judaizing party
- (3) To give pneumatic authority to Peter's speech and, indirectly, to Paul's position
- (4) To emphasize that Peter's speech was agreed upon
- (5) To set the letter from Jerusalem in the context of the community of the Spirit, the church
- (6) To show that the church is to be distinguished from Judaism by the presence of the Spirit.

NOTES

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2. H.J. Frede, *Altlateinische Paulus-Handschriften*, Freiburg, 1964, p.18, Anm.4, as in Metzger, Text, Oxford, 1968, p.264.
3. E.J. Epp, Theological Tendency of Codex Bezae in Acts, Cambridge, 1966.
4. *ibid.* pp.103f.