

## COLLECTION FOR THE SAINTS

The specific campaign which Paul led to collect funds to relieve the poverty of the Jerusalem church is commonly called “the collection for the saints.” While on the surface the general notion of the collection is quite simple, the question of Paul’s purpose leads to some complex issues. Paul calls the collection a “fellowship” (*koinōnia*, Rom 15:26; see Hainz), “service” (*diakonia*, Rom 15:25, 31; 2 Cor 8:20; 9:1, 12, 13), “gift” (*charis*, 1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 8:6, 7, 19), “generous gift” (*eulogia*, 2 Cor 9:5), “collection” (*logeia*, 1 Cor 16:1), “liberal gift” (*adrotēs*, 2 Cor 8:20) and “service that you perform” (*hē diakonia tēs leitourgias*, 2 Cor 9:12). 2 Corinthians 8:4 uses three terms at once: “they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege (*charis*) of sharing in this service to the saints” (on the terms, see Dahl, 37–38).

1. The Data for the Collection
2. The Historical Context for the Collection
3. The Purpose of the Collection
4. The Results of the Collection

### 1. The Data for the Collection

Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem, recorded in Galatians 2:1–10 (and probably Acts 11:27–30; 12:25), resulted in a sort of peace accord that sought to demonstrate the unity of the gospel alongside a diversity of audience. Paul, it was decided, would work among the Gentiles while Peter carried on his ministry among the Jews. The Jerusalem “pillars” asked Paul only that he would continue to remember the “poor” (Gal 2:10). Paul assured them that he was most willing to do so. This exhortation reflects the Jerusalem leaders’ perception of the need for the Diaspora communities to help with the economic problems in Jerusalem, and, indeed, the occasion of Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem (which may correspond with the occasion of his receiving this exhortation) was to help in the relief of the “saints” (cf. Acts 11:27–30). Little did the Jerusalem leaders know that their suggestion would become Paul’s obsession for nearly two decades. Some scholars have also detected an allusion to the collection in Galatians 6:6–10 (Hurtado).

Evidently, as soon as Paul left Jerusalem and began his second missionary journey throughout the northern Mediterranean, he started a campaign for funds to relieve the poverty of the Jerusalem community (“saints” is Paul’s reference to Jewish Christians). (A traditional view of Pauline chronology is assumed here; for another view, see Luedemann.) The next trace we find of his concern comes in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4, where we learn that Paul had been encouraging others among his churches to set aside funds weekly in an orderly fashion so when he arrived there would be a full allotment for the saints. There we also learn that official representatives from each church would accompany the funds to Jerusalem.

Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians contains two chapters that are largely devoted to the collection for the saints (2 Cor 8–9). Included in these directions are such things as the need for generosity (2 Cor 8:12; 9:5–11), the goal of equality (2 Cor 8:13–15) and the need for careful administration of the funds (2 Cor 8:18–21). Finally, Paul mentions the collection in his letter to the Romans. At Romans 15:27 he speaks to the ultimate socio-theological purpose of the campaign: “If Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (NIV). But Paul may have worried over its reception, for he says, “Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem [*hē diakonia mou hē eis Ierousalēm*] may be acceptable to the saints there” (Rom 15:31). Paul apparently saw the collection as his sacrificial offering to the Jerusalem community (see Hill, 177–78).

The evidence in Acts complements these data. There we learn that Paul was most eager to arrive in Jerusalem before Pentecost (Acts 20:16), although he was unsure of what would happen (Acts 20:22). This latter comment by Luke may well reflect Paul’s concern about the response of the Jerusalem church, for Paul thought the credibility of his mission and the unity of the church were at stake. Later, before Felix, Paul says that he had come to Jerusalem “to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings” (Acts 24:17; perhaps Felix thought that Paul still had the money and hoped for a bribe from Paul; cf. Acts 24:26).

From both the book of Acts and Paul's letters we can discern the magnitude of Paul's campaign, for it appears that Paul was able to derive both funds and sponsors from all his churches. Thus he had the following funds and/or people representing his missionary efforts: from the Galatian region (1 Cor 16:1) we hear of Derbe (Acts 20:4) and Lystra (Acts 20:4); from Macedonia (2 Cor 8:1–5; 9:2, 4) we hear of Berea (Acts 20:4), Thessalonica (20:4) and Philippi (cf. Acts 16:16 and 20:6; an inference about the "we" sections of Acts; see Nickle, 68); from Achaia we hear of Corinth (Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:1–4); from Mysia and Lydia we hear of Ephesus (Acts 20:4) and perhaps Troas (Acts 20:5–6); it is possible that funds came from Tyre (Acts 21:3–4), Ptolemais (Acts 21:7), and from both Cyprus and Caesarea (Acts 21:16). It is even possible that funds were collected from Rome (cf. Rom 12:13; 15:26 with 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; and Rom 1:13 with 2 Cor 9:6–10). It is hard to imagine any campaign more embracing of the northern Mediterranean and any project that occupied Paul's attention more than this collection for the saints.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the evidence from Acts is its almost total silence regarding the collection campaign (cf. Acts 24:17). Luke's silence, no doubt, is to be explained by recourse to Luke's designs; he obviously did not think descriptions of it were necessary for his purposes. M. Hengel wryly notes that "Luke does not always say everything that he knows, and when he does, he can mention facts which are important—to us—only in passing" (Hengel, 119). Some have suggested that Luke did not bring it up because it ended in failure or because the collection led to charges that Paul was taking money from the Temple tax itself. The absence of any reference to it in Acts 15 shows that the collection was largely stimulated by Paul and not by the Jerusalem authorities. They did not seek the Gentile funds; the collection was Paul's attempt to show the unity of the church. It is indeed probable that many Jerusalem leaders did not even see the generous funds as something that demonstrated the unity of the church.

The complexity of the evidence is apparent. Involved in Paul's collection were the credibility of his apostolic mission and the legitimacy of the Gentile mission (Gal 2:1–10), the recognition of the priority of Israel in God's redemptive plan (Rom 15:27), the goodwill of Christian communities (2 Cor 8–9), as well as the need for individual Christians to trust in God to supply their needs if they were to give generously (2 Cor 9). It is likely that the collection itself gained different theological arguments as Paul's ministry developed and as his relationship to Jerusalem shifted back and forth.

## 2. The Historical Context for the Collection

2.1. Conditions in the Jerusalem Church. The historical occasion for the collection of Paul was the poverty of the Jerusalem church. Scholars have traced several possible causes of this poverty (Martin, 256): (1) the relief of more and more widows (Acts 6:1–7); (2) the pilgrimages to Jerusalem of both the elderly and Galileans, who burdened the communities; (3) the potential problems arising from Jerusalem's early experimentation with communal life (Acts 4:32–5:11); (4) the economic hardships caused by famine (Acts 11:27–30); and (5) the personal stresses due to economic persecutions (cf. Jas 1:9; 2:6–7; 5:1–6). Whatever the underlying reasons, one thing remains sure: the churches in Jerusalem were poor and in need of relief (see Jeremias, 87–144; Goppelt, 25–60). Paul assumed the task of demonstrating his commitment to the founding community in Jerusalem by campaigning for relief funds (see Riches and Poverty).

2.2. Administration of the Collection. The precise mode of administering funds to the mother church seems to have been similar to the procedures of the Jewish Temple tax and its attendant gifts that were annually offered at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles (see Nickle, 74–99). We now know that Diaspora Jews regularly helped support the Jerusalem Temple by sending in the annual two-drachma tax. Along with this, Jews seemed regularly to have added some supplementary gifts (*aparchai*; see Sanders, 49–51, 283–308). The Temple tax, so it seems, was carefully monitored and protected by Roman authorities (Josephus Ant. 14.10.2–8 §§190–216) and we can only surmise that the funds Paul was collecting were related somehow to this Temple tax payment. Thus, it is possible that Paul encouraged the Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean to set aside gifts for the Christian community in Jerusalem along with their Temple tax. He, along with sponsors from each church, would accompany the funds and hand them over to the Temple and to the Jerusalem community so as to ensure that each was given to the proper authority.

Paul's evident concern for the administration of the collection may have had two fronts: (1) his concern that the Jerusalem authorities should know for whom the funds were intended and (2) his concern that the Roman authorities might question the legitimacy of such gifts. (We assume that Roman authorities would have been nervous about too much money leaving individual districts.) In a classic essay K. Holl went so far as to argue that the Jerusalem Church exercised its prerogative and right to tax the Diaspora Gentile churches, although his view is seen today as an exaggeration of the situation.

### 3. The Purpose of the Collection

Scholars have debated vigorously the precise purpose of Paul's campaign to collect funds for the saints in Jerusalem. Of the various proposals, four can be mentioned.

3.1. Help for the Poor. The traditional viewpoint has been that Paul wanted to help the poor Christians in Jerusalem (cf. Gal 6:10) as a demonstration of the love of God that the Gentiles had found in Christ (2 Cor 8:8–9, 19; 9:12–15). In general, the collection was charity in that it might create "equality." As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, the collection was so that "at the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. Then there will be equality" (2 Cor 8:13–14).

Paul teaches elsewhere that love of Christ and others ought to motivate believers to show compassion (Gal 5:6, 14; 6:10; 1 Cor 13; 2 Cor 5:14; Rom 12:13). Thus Paul's motivation is love for the churches of Christ, and in this he follows in a long line of deeds of mercy so typical of ancient Judaism (Ex 23:10–11; Deut 14:28–29; 24:19–22; m. Pe'a 1:2, 4; see Str-B 4.1.536–610; Nickle, 93–95), the teaching of Jesus (Lk 6:20–21; Mt 6:2–4; 11:2–6) and the early church (Acts 2:43–47; 4:32–37; 6:1–7). Paul's campaign could well have been motivated by little more than his Jewish piety and his desire to see the economic stress in Jerusalem alleviated (Nickle, 100–111). Yet other motives are also feasible.

3.2. Unity of the Church. Scholars have recognized that Paul's collection was motivated by more than providing aid for the poor (though that would have been motivation enough). Hand in hand with providing aid, Paul was motivated to demonstrate to Jerusalem that, just as there was one Lord and one gospel, so there was one church. That church was comprised of both Gentiles in the Diaspora and Jews in Judea. Paul wanted to show that his gospel was in harmony with the Jerusalem churches, and so a gift from his churches would demonstrate their thanksgiving to God for the covenant he had made with Israel. This perspective on the collection is explicitly stated in Romans 15:27: "For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings."

This motivation, no doubt, greatly influenced Paul. Many interpreters have detected some nervousness on the part of Paul, and it was his concern for Jerusalem's acceptance of the collection as a demonstration of their acceptance of his "Law-free" gospel that caused the anxiety (Rom 15:31; see Dunn 1988, 2.879–80). The tension between Paul and Jerusalem, whether or not it was only between Paul and factions in Jerusalem, is well known and well documented and need not be enlarged upon here (cf. Gal; Acts 15; 21:28–29; see Nickle, 112–15; Dunn 1991; see Opponents). On Paul's part, there was a battle going on over the proper definition of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Galatians). Contrary to Peter's actions at Antioch (Gal 2:11–14) and the message of the Judaizers (cf. Gal 3:1–5), there was but one gospel that was to be accepted by faith (not by works of the Law) and this gospel of Christ did not need supplementation from the Law of Moses. Further, there was a continual emphasis upon the internal unity of the church, which is achieved in the Spirit who creates the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:4–31; Eph 2:11–22). This unity owed its origins, of course, to the Jewish nation (Rom 9:1–5; 10:1–4; 11:1–6, 17–24) and to the Jerusalem community (Rom 15:27; Acts). For these three reasons—the singularity of the gospel, the organic unity of the church, and the temporal priority of the Jewish people in God's redemptive plan—the church should act as a unity. This gave Paul a theological foundation for his collection.

Accordingly, Paul urged his churches to give voluntarily (1 Cor 16:1; 2 Cor 8:3, 8, 11–12; 9:1–5) and generously (2 Cor 8:2–4; 9:6–15) as a demonstration to the Jerusalem churches that the Gentile

Christians of the Diaspora wanted to be involved in the relief efforts and, in so doing, to show to the mother church (Acts 24:17) their thanksgiving for their spiritual heritage (Rom 15:27; Dahl). Thus the presented collection would be “proof of your love” (2 Cor 8:24).

In fact, several have observed that the collection was the culminating act of Paul’s apostolic ministry in the East (Bartsch). Paul describes the collection as the “fruit” and “seal” of his ministry as he now prepares for a wider ministry to Spain (Rom 15:23–24, 28). We may infer from this that the collection and its successful presentation in Jerusalem were together to be the crowning jewel of the first phase of his apostolic ministry (the only phase he actually completed).

It ought to be observed that Paul’s perception(s) of his collection may not have been identical to those of the Jerusalem churches. The Jerusalem believers may well have seen the gifts and funds as obligations on the part of the Gentile churches and as the Gentiles’ expression of their dependence upon the founding churches. They may have argued that, since they had salvation-historical priority, they also had rights to support from the newer areas (cf. Rom 15:27; see Holmberg).

3.3. Substitute for Jewish Entry Rites. Although this view has not been held by many, K. Berger argues that the collection itself was seen as almsgiving on the part of the Diaspora Gentile church and, as such, was seen as a substitute action for their sacrifices and circumcision. Money gifts for Israel were seen as the act whereby the Gentile demonstrated his or her allegiance to the covenant of Abraham and to the people of Israel (Sir 29:12; 40:24; Tob 4:10–11; 12:9; 14:11; Acts 10:2, 35). According to Berger’s hypothesis, the collected funds and gifts were a symbol of the Gentile commitment to Israel and its Law, a visible sign of their recognition of the priority of the Jewish nation in salvation-history. Such would have been Paul’s argument if he had so regarded the collection.

3.4. Eschatological Provocation. The unbelief of Israel was problematic to Paul, and he looked and longed for the day when Israel would turn to its Messiah, Jesus Christ. Paul did not doubt that that day would come (Rom 11:25–26). Paul believed, furthermore, that the salvation of the Gentiles would turn out for the conversion of Israel (Rom 11:11–24; cf. 11:9–11 in general; see Restoration of Israel). Some have contended that the collection fits into this scheme (Munck; Nickle, 129–142; Bruce, 22–25): the presentation by Paul and his retinue of Gentile sponsors of the funds to the Jerusalem churches would provoke the nation of Israel to believe in the Messiah, for they would see in that act the fulfillment of the promise that the Gentiles would bring gifts to Zion (Is 2:2–4; 60:6–7, 11; Mic 4:13; see McKnight, 47–48). Thus the collection was for Paul an eschatological provocation of Israel; by it he hoped to convert Israel to faith in the Messiah. It is possible that this is the meaning of 2 Corinthians 9:10: borrowing language from Isaiah 55:10, Paul contends that the gifts of the Corinthians will actually turn out to enlarge their harvest (the conversion of Israel?). This view might also lie behind 2 Corinthians 9:11–12, where the increase of thanksgivings could refer to the conversion of Israelites (see Eschatology).

We are probably on firmest ground if we recognize that Paul might have had more than one purpose in conducting the collection for the saints. It may well be that what began as largely an adventure in charity became, as a result of growing tensions, an act of theological unity and eschatological provocation. We can hardly be certain about these matters.

#### 4. The Results of the Collection

Neither Luke nor Paul tell of the results of the offering of the collection. Paul never mentions it in any of his extant later correspondence. However, Luke records the trip and the period during which the collection was handed over to the leaders. His first few lines may reveal that the collection was received with profound gratitude. Acts 21:17–26 speaks of the church receiving them “warmly” (Acts 21:17). Paul and his retinue greeted the Christian leaders, especially James, in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18) and Paul then declared what God was doing in the Gentile world (Acts 21:19). Luke states that “when they heard this, they praised God” (Acts 21:20). Then they asked Paul to demonstrate his commitment to the Law and to the Jewish people by undertaking a vow of purification, which he did—perhaps gladly (Acts 21:21–26). We can probably infer from this that the collection was received with gratitude, with perhaps some residual suspicions regarding the Gentile Christians’ commitment to the Law (a suspicion which may have lingered for some time thereafter).

Some scholars, however, have argued that the collection did not accomplish its purposes. The saints remained poor, the act of charity notwithstanding; the tension between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians continued; and the conversion of Israel never took place. The presence of those Gentiles who aided in the collection led to the very occasion for Paul's arrest (Acts 21:29). While we must contend that Israel did not convert, we must also say that it is not entirely clear that Paul saw the conversion of Israel as a major motivation for his collection. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Paul thought all traces of poverty would be eliminated. Paul was realistic enough, we might suppose, to realize that his collection of funds, as large as it may have been, would not alter permanently the economic conditions of Christians. Finally, Paul's gospel may have continued to remain a sore spot for the Jerusalem Christians; but we have no traces in the concluding chapters of Acts that the Jerusalem Christians refused to stand behind him. Relations between Jewish and Gentile churches probably remained in tension, but we must also accept the implications of what such a gift might have communicated. There can be no doubt that the majority of Judean Christians would have been greatly impressed by the generosity of the Diaspora Christians and, therefore, would have drawn the conclusion that the church has one gospel, one Lord and one Spirit—even if that same church was characterized by a considerable amount of diversity.

See also CORINTHIANS, LETTERS TO THE; FELLOWSHIP, COMMUNION, SHARING; FINANCIAL SUPPORT; GENTILES; ISRAEL; JERUSALEM; LOVE; MISSION.

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