The modern biblical scholarship on the letters of Paul tends to regard Paul as a politician, whose struggle with Peter and James led to a schism in the early Church that would shape the Church history for the next one thousand years. Paul is frequently portrayed as power mongering, one who concerns primarily with maintaining control over his followers and anxious about others taking over. Paul sounds very polemic in many of his letters when he perceives dissention to his theological view and potential threat to his own position in the community. At his best, Paul even says outright that to his followers, who are disturbed by Paul’s “opponents”, that “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves” (Gal 5:12). These negative portrayals of Paul seem to assume that his thinking had been preoccupied with the matter of assuming the leadership of the emergent Christian movement. However, a closer reading of Paul’s letters, especially of Galatians chapter 2: 6-14, in relation to the alternative account found in Acts, reveals that Paul is of a completely different character, that is, instead of being obsessed with the politics in the Church, Paul stood aloft and was not willing to participate in the intensifying political struggle within the Church that made Peter and James compromise.

It is true that in his letter to the Galatians Churches he does seem to be obsessed with
politics. Paul begins his letter trying to reassert his power as divine-given. It is worth noticing that his language is filled with political terms. He was not sent by human “commission” or from human “authorities” (Gal 1:1), and he does not seek “human approval” (Gal 1:10). Paul continues his account with his brief autobiography, and with an even stronger political overtone. He claims to have been a fanatic in Judaism, and he “advanced in Judaism” beyond many of his peers, and after he had become a Christian, he did not “confer with” anyone, and consciously chose to not to go to Jerusalem. The words “commission”, “authority”, “approval”, “confer with” are all political languages associated with power, status within a community, and, potentially, the struggle that comes with it.

From there, Paul starts to sound a little sarcastic, continuing with the language of power that he started with. In chapter 2 verse 2, he had a private conversation with the “acknowledged” (dokousin) leaders of the Church, where he “laid before” them the gospel that he proclaimed to the Gentiles. From what we learn from chapter 15 of the Book of Acts, among these “acknowledged” leaders were certainly James the brother of Jesus and Simon Peter. He went on to mention that there had been some “false believers” who “spy on the freedom [they] have in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:4), and the potential “enslavement” were they to succeed. Up until here there does not seem to be a huge problem among the leaders of the earliest Christian Church. However, Paul used the word “acknowledged” again in an potentially sarcastic tone when he referred

\[^1\] Text from \[http://www.greeknewtestament.com/B48C002.htm\], and I transcribed the Greek to their Roman corresponding letters. In particular, I render both eta and epsilon as e, both omega and omicron as o, and upsilon as u in -ou- and as y when occurring on its own.
to James, Cephas and John as “the acknowledged pillars” (Gal 2:9, oi dokountes styloi einai). In this sense, Paul is hinting at the fact that Peter and James were attending the private meeting in Jerusalem. The sarcasm immediately becomes clear when we recall the in line 6 of the same chapter, Paul says, “and from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me²; God shows no partiality)- those leaders contributed nothing to me.” It is important that Paul used the word dokountes/dokounton twice in this line (seemed to be/ acknowledged), and both in negative light. In a sense, Paul uses the word “acknowledged” not to authorize the triumvirate, but to discredit. In a word, Paul is not happy about James and Paul, especially about their “acknowledged” positions as leaders/pillars/styli of the Church.

We do not hear from Paul what he actually said in the private meeting, and what kind of response he got from there. We hear from Acts that the meeting concerns the appropriateness of circumcising the Gentiles according to the Jewish law, and Peter and then James were positive about Paul’s plan. In fact, in Acts, it was Peter who actually gave the speech to call for not “placing on the neck of the [Gentiles] a yoke that neither our ancestors nor [they] have been able to bear” (Act 15:10), while Paul did not give Peter and James such favorable lines in his letter. It is widely acknowledged that there is a huge discrepancy in the portrayal of this “Antioch event” between the two books, but the two accounts agree on a few things. First of all, there

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is some party that wanted to do something that Paul disagreed. In Acts, they are the “sect of the Pharisees” (Act 15:5), and they argue that it is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles. Paul’s account is more general, he simply states that they try to take away the “freedom” and “enslave” the believers. Secondly, the “acknowledged leaders” do not seem to be involved in this opposition. Acts states that Peter and James are against circumcision, while Paul seems to suggest that the “false believers” are “brought in” and that they do not belong to the “acknowledged leaders.”

The conflict among the leadership becomes explicit immediately after Paul’s mentioning of the acknowledged pillars. Having returned from Jerusalem to Antioch, Paul found Peter there and had a huge dispute with him:

I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy (Gal 2:11-13).

It is unfortunate but not surprising that the account of this “table event” only comes from Paul. Acts does not mention anything about what Paul had done when he reached Antioch in detail. It does not even mention that Peter had been there. Obviously, this table event does not seem to be a huge event in the early Church
history to the author of Acts who wrote perhaps forty years after Paul’s letter, not knowing that this event left in Paul’s mind an indelible mark. However, Acts does confirm the dispute between Paul and Barnabas but concerning a different event. Acts also seems to suggest that there had been some turning point of the early Church history after the Jerusalem Conference, as the Book of Acts simply stops mentioning James and Peter and any other first generation Christians after it. In fact, the author of Acts\(^3\) seems to have deliberately set up the scene to let Peter and James give their final speech. James’s speech especially resembles a farewell speech, quoting Isaiah in length\(^4\). To the author of Acts, Peter and the first generation Christians were the leading force of the Christian movement before the Jerusalem event, and Paul after it. If we consider what Paul had related to us in Galatians, it makes sense to regard the Antioch event as an integral part of the Jerusalem event, and, to Paul, that also demarcates his career, where he became certain of his career and theological point of view.

However, it is not easy to understand what kind of thought Paul actually had, and what kind of relationship Paul had with the Jerusalem Church and with Peter and James after this event. There had been many scholarly attempts at solving this problem. Many of these take the conflict between Paul and Peter for granted and are apologetic in making Paul not an offender of Peter, the most prominent disciple of Jesus. They often try to reconcile the two, such that the most important figure we

\(^3\) Hereafter, Luke, even though we do not really know who the author was.

\(^4\) Cf. Moses also ended his final speech with long traditional poetic blessings, see Deut chapter 34.
know about in the Early Church history and the most prominent follower of Jesus do not fight with one another. One example of such argument argues that Peter and Cephas are actually not the same person and that Peter was one of the twelve and Cephas one of the seventies sent by Christ\(^5\). The author argues:

It is perfectly clear from what Paul tells us that Cephas was in Antioch associating with Christians who had been converted from paganism... in any case it seems to be an unusual thing to do for someone who was dedicated to evangelizing non-Christian Jews. Why is he not in the Jewish mission field rather than among Gentile churches? And why would it require a delegation from Jerusalem to inform him- him, the Palestinian Jew trying to win Jewish converts- that eating with Gentiles might compromise his mission? Would a Jew seeking Jewish converts “live like a Gentile and not like a Jew” while doing so?\(^6\)

The author then argues that in virtually every instance, Paul’s references to Cephas contain something that is difficult to explain if in fact he meant “Peter”. With other arguments that I refrain from a complete listing, the author concludes that it is reasonable to assume that Cephas and Peter are not the same person. It is true that what Peter is doing is dubious in Galatians. In fact, Acts tells us that only Paul,

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\(^5\) See Ehrman, Bart D.. 1990. “Cephas and Peter”. Journal of Biblical Literature 109 (3). Society of Biblical Literature. But the majority of the scholarship regard Cephas as Peter, as do most of the Christian tradition. For example, see Perkins, Pheme. 2001. Abraham’s divided children: Galatians and the politics of faith. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International. But it is worth noticing that most of these author thinks it worthwhile to take at least a few lines to explain why Cephas has to be Peter, suggesting that it is not obviously clear whether the identification is valid. For example, see Sanders, E. P.. 2015. “Paul the Apostle of Christ to the Gentiles”. In Paul: The Apostle’s Life, Letters, and Thought, 83–124. Augsburg Fortress, Publishers.

\(^6\) Ehrman. 472.
Barnabas, Judas, and Silas were sent to Antioch, and that the believers from Antioch rejoiced at their “exhortation” (Act 15:22), and thus it seems sensible to argue that the reason why the Antioch event was not mentioned in Acts was that the Cephas Paul had argued with was not the Great Peter, one of the twelve and second of the pillars. While this view can be valid, it has some problems when viewed in larger context concerning other letters of Paul and the synoptic gospels.

The author seems to be not aware of the politics at working behind the scene of the Antioch event. In fact, a “table event” were not supposed to be a huge event to anyone besides Peter and Paul themselves, and it is very unlikely that such event would be recorded by anyone besides the two who are directly involved. Moreover, it does not require the making of a separate identity, Cephas, to solve the problem of the earliest recorded dispute between the leaders of the Church.

A closer reading at the texts would reveal that the portrayal of Cephas by Paul was not that far away from images of Peter from other sources, say, the synoptic gospels. One good example would be the portrayal of Cephas during the table event. Cephas is portrayed as hypocritical, at least someone who seems to have some problem with integrity or consistency when he switched sides between the eating with the Gentiles and the Jews. In fact, Shillington has noticed that the word “drew back” (ypostello) signifies something of a military retreat out of fear that the enemy army will get the

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7 As I have quoted above.
upper hand\textsuperscript{8}. In this sense, Cephas is almost portrayed as a pragmatic strategist, one who compromises, or seeks alternative solution, when his position is threatened. This impression of Cephas is exactly the same as what we have seen in the gospels. This choice of Cephas to save himself almost reminds us of Peter’s thrice denial of Christ in, for example, Luke chapter 22, when Paul cried that he would “go with [Jesus] to prison and to death” (Luke 22:33), but ended up denying him three times without realizing it. In a way, in Galatians, Cephas was acting as Peter would have been. On the other hand, Paul’s general attitude toward Peter is conciliatory, from what we learn from his first letter to Corinthians.

The letter to Corinthians can be seen as Paul’s manifesto of unity, in which he directly addresses the problem of factionalism and the potential danger of following different leaders. In this letter, Paul finds out that believers in Corinth had been claiming allegiance to different leaders. As Paul quotes it, “‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ ‘I belong to Cephas’” (1 Cor 1:11), says the believers. It is interesting that Paul deemphasizes difference in this letter but calls for unity. Considering how indignant he had become in the Galatian letters when his theological stance is challenged, he sounds surprisingly calm in this letter. He says, “now I appeal to you… that all of you be in agreement and that that be no division among you” (1 Cor 1:10). This language of supplication continues throughout the letter. While Paul does not comment too much on Cephas, his supposed rival in the Galatians, his attitude

\textsuperscript{8} Shillington. 236.
towards Apollos is majorly conciliatory: “what then is Apollos? What is Paul? … I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth… For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building” (1 Cor 3:5-9). From Paul’s juxtaposition of Apollos, Cephas, and himself, it is reasonable to assert that he applies the same attitude towards Cephas, that of a conciliatory one. In this sense, on the Antioch event, we are safe to conclude that Paul’s blame is not really on Cephas, but actually on “someone from James” (Gal 2:12). The target of Paul’s accusation is not the “Judaizers’s” power struggle with him over the control of the Church and Peter’s being influenced by them, but the separationistic agenda of the “circumcision faction” as Paul perceived it. It was not Paul who was the power mongering politician, but the ones came to Peter.

To prove this, we should be further convinced that Paul’s blame was not even on James. Paul certainly regarded James as the most prominent among the three pillars according to his ordering of them, and if he thinks Peter was wrong in retreating from eating with the Gentiles, it would be reasonable for him to also blame James for sending the delegation and for being the primary causer of Peter’s wronging, but Paul did not comment on anything about James. He did not even make it clear that it was James who had sent the delegation, but only that “certain people from James” as if they were only claiming to have the authority of James but it was really not so sure who actually sent them. Acts confirms the existence of such faction but does not
portray them as having huge significance\textsuperscript{9} by calling them the sect of Pharisees, not giving any specific name; this accords with Paul’s own reluctance to identify them when referring to them as “some people from James”, “false believes” and “circumcision faction.” It becomes all the more revealing when we notice that this deliberate de-identification of the “Judaizers\textsuperscript{10}” is in direct contrast with both authors’ straightforward reference to Peter and James. This suggests that they were not a part of this faction. The reluctance might also reflect the faction’s influential position at the time- at least powerful enough to convince James\textsuperscript{11} to send a delegation to Antioch and to succeed in winning Peter over (from Galatians), despite the fact that not long ago both Peter and James were supportive of Paul’s more universal and gentile-oriented evangelical plan (from Acts).

Although we could never be certain about what actually happened since Paul did not give any information about the actual message the delegation brought, I think Esler has given a reasonable and educated speculation of what actually happened:

After Peter had left Jerusalem, those favouring circumcision had intensified their campaign on James, who, with Peter out of Jerusalem succumbed to the pressure, decided to resile from the agreement and sent word to Peter of the new position… the Jewish Christians, having lost the first round when Paul and Barnabas were in

\textsuperscript{9} For the reason I would not discuss in detail. In general, I think it is because by the time the Book of Acts were written, the Pauline tradition have already emerged victorious and factionalism stopped being a huge challenge to the Christian movement.

\textsuperscript{10} Many scholars use this word but I do not like it, see Shillington.

\textsuperscript{11} If we regard both Acts and Galatians as accurate.
Jerusalem, found an effective way of restoring this slight to their honour by bringing to bear on James and Peter some kind of threat significant enough to have them renege on the agreement they had reached with Paul.12

In this sense, the actions of James and Peter were out of a kind of political expediency and it was against this political expediency that Paul was fighting. It was this fear of politicization of the Church that Paul was fighting, and this is why Paul had filled his Galatian letter with political languages. He perceived a potential power struggle that the “circumcision faction” was planning at and he believed that the separationistic agenda of the faction was political in nature, and this is what he thinks is not working “consistently with the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14), and this is why he had to stand up against Cephas and “oppose him to his face,” saying, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to like the Jews?”

In fact, Ehrman is correct to notice that there is something not consistent if we apply it to Peter: If Peter was trying to make the Gentiles Jewish, how could he be like the Gentiles? The answer to this key question lies in the understanding of what Paul actually meant by being “like the Gentiles.” It is certainly not the ideology or the behavior of Peter that was like the Gentiles, but the succumbing to politics, or, to the political and power struggle within the Church. In fact, Paul’s fear of losing “freedom,” of “enslavement”, and of the “faction” all points to his fear of the politicization of the community. Paul’s obsession with politics in the letter to the Galatians stems from his

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fear of it, but not from his mongering of it. In fact, in Paul’s more friendly letters, he replaced this style of political language with a familial language. A language that emphasizes mutual connection, fraternity, unity and equality of the believers. It is not surprising why Galatians had been Luther’s favorite letter, because Paul is a gospel of faith and of love, not of politics. As he exhorts his followers, “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor 16:13).

\[^{13}\] In fact, this paper is limited in many ways, and I regret the most my limited ability to read archaic Greek. I believe there are much more to this topic, but I would leave it to future scholarship for the limited scope of this paper.


