

# The Case for Torah

A Study of Acts Chapter 15

Authors  
Eric Muhly  
Amy Muhly

# Acts 15 Part 1

## Introduction

Acts 15 is a highly-debated and crucial text on the place of the Mosaic Law in the believer's life. In this pivotal text, the early church leaders wrestle with the question of whether Gentile believers should be circumcised and follow the Torah, at what is commonly referred to as the Jerusalem Council. Many have used this passage to claim that believers, and especially Gentile converts, do not need to follow the law that was given to the Israelites. In this paper, we will consider the following questions:

- What was the primary issue being addressed at the Jerusalem Council?
- How is a Gentile believer (or any believer) saved?
- What is required for salvation/conversion?
- What role do works play in salvation, if any?
- Should believers, whether Jewish or Gentile, follow the Torah?

Let's examine Acts 15, focusing on the text and its context, to bring clarity to these questions.

## Background on Acts

To understand the Jerusalem Council, we need to build a backdrop of the book as a whole. In the book of Acts, Luke depicts the spread of the gospel message after the ascension of Christ. Jesus' words in Acts 1:8 read as a thesis statement or outline for the entire book: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Starting at Pentecost in Acts 2, the disciples share the gospel in Jerusalem, and it quickly spreads to all of Judea, to Samaria (Acts 8), and throughout the Roman Empire (Acts 9ff).

In Acts 10, God makes clear to Peter that the gospel message is not just for Jews, but also for Gentiles, and the God-fearing Gentile Cornelius and his entire household receive the Holy Spirit, just as believing Jews have (10:44-47). Immediately after, Peter visits Jerusalem, and Luke records the opposition Peter receives (11:1-2). The reader is introduced to the "circumcision party," presumably Jewish believers who criticize Peter for fellowshiping and eating with uncircumcised men. But Peter quickly puts their criticism to rest by sharing his story of how God led him to Cornelius' house, where Cornelius and his household were saved and received the Holy Spirit. Clearly, we cannot call any person common or unclean that God has made clean (10:15,28; 11:8).

God was not only working through Peter, but also through Saul (later called Paul in 13:9), the former persecutor of the church who was miraculously saved on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). God tells Saul that he will have a special role of carrying the gospel to the Gentiles: "But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel'" (9:15). In Acts 13, the Holy Spirit sets apart Saul and Barnabas for going "to the ends of the

earth” (1:8) on what is typically called Paul’s first missionary journey. They depart from Antioch and share the gospel wherever they go, beginning at synagogues and then witnessing to Gentiles (Acts 13 and 14). Upon returning to Antioch, Paul and Barnabas “... declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27).

## **Circumcision and The Jerusalem Council**

With this backdrop, we can begin to unpack Acts 15, often called “The Jerusalem Council.” New Testament scholar FF Bruce writes,

The Council of Jerusalem is an event to which Luke attaches the highest importance; it is an epoch-making, in his eyes, as the conversion of Paul or the preaching of the gospel to Cornelius and his household. As he reports it, the Council was a meeting of the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church convened to consider, primarily, the terms on which Gentile believers might be admitted to church membership (with special attention to the question whether they should be circumcised or not); in the second place, the means by which social intercourse, and especially table fellowship, might be promoted between Jewish and Gentile believers (282).

As Bruce comments, the issue at hand was how Gentiles can become part of the church and covenant members of the body of believers. In other words, how are they saved? How are they brought into the family of God? Specifically, did the Gentiles have to be circumcised? An important clarification must be made here: The root issue was not if the Gentiles should follow the Torah, but rather, if keeping the commandments, and specifically circumcision, was a requirement for salvation and acceptance among the body of Christ.

## **Relationship to Galatians**

In Galatians 2:1-10, Paul describes a conference that he and Barnabas had with the leaders of the Jerusalem church, namely James, Peter, and John (2:9). A majority of scholars have suggested that the Jerusalem council detailed by Luke in Acts 15 is the same event as Paul discusses in Galatians 2. However, others question their relationship. Whether or not Luke and Paul are describing the same event, we can note some key similarities between them. In both, the question of how Gentiles are to be brought into the body of Christ is of primary concern, with a particular focus on whether they must be circumcised to be included. In Galatians 2, Paul stresses that circumcision is not necessary for salvation and should not be forced on anyone, using Titus as an example (2:3). He warns against false brothers who are compromising the truth of the gospel message (2:4-5), which is that salvation is through faith in the work of Christ and not by our own works. In Acts 15, the root issue is the same: how Gentiles are saved and become a part of the people of God. While we may not have certainty that the events in Acts and Galatians were the same, their parallels help us understand the nature of the issue being addressed at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: Do Gentiles need to be circumcised as part of conversion? The

answer in both Acts and Galatians is a resounding “no.”

## **To Jerusalem**

Acts 15 opens with a description of some men from Judea who had come to Antioch and began teaching the necessity of circumcision:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (1).

These are likely the same men described later in verse 5: “But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.’” Thus, the teachers of verse 1 are misguided believers with a wrong understanding of Gentile inclusion, teaching that Gentile believers must first be circumcised. The true gospel does not leave room for a works-based or blood-line based salvation.

Luke records in verse 2 that Paul and Barnabas disagreed and debated with the men from Judea, and ultimately decided to travel to Jerusalem to bring the issue before the apostles and elders. Upon arrival, Paul, Barnabas, and those with them shared all that God had been doing among them, likely sharing stories of the work God did among the Gentiles on the first missionary journey. At this point, some believers from the party of the Pharisees (mentioned above) rose up and argued that Gentile believers must be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses. Contextually, the argument is not whether they should ever be circumcised or follow the law, but rather, if it was necessary for salvation. Did the Gentiles who had accepted the gospel message and received the Holy Spirit need to do something more to become full members of the body of Christ? This is the question put before the apostles and elders.

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, “Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith (15:6–10).

After considerable discussion, Peter stands up and recounts his story from Acts 10, where he was directed by God to preach the gospel to the God-fearing Gentile Cornelius and his household. They heard the gospel and believed, and God bore witness to the validity of their salvation and their acceptance into the family of God by giving them the Holy Spirit. Circumcision was not the guarantee of their salvation, nor was their obedience to any other commandment. Rather, the gift of the Holy Spirit demonstrated their salvation. Moreover, Peter argues that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles because both are given the Holy Spirit, indicating their hearts have been cleansed by faith.

## **An Unbearable Yoke**

Peter then implores his Jewish brothers,

“Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (10)

What is this yoke that for generations the Jews have not been able to bear and therefore should not be put on the new Gentile converts? Many assume it is the Torah, the law given to Moses. In his commentary on Acts, David Peterson writes,

Peter implies that the divine command for foreigners to be circumcised, and thus become members of the covenant community (Gn. 17:12-14), has now been superseded by God’s action in bringing Gentiles to faith through the preaching of the gospel and giving them his Holy Spirit. God has moved on in his dealings with humanity and it is sinful to demand obedience to the old way (cf. Gal. 2:18). Peter also insists that the old way was unbearable (a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear) (426).

Peterson states that at one time, God had required foreigners to be circumcised, but now God has “moved on” and initiated a new way whereby all people, Gentiles included, are saved through belief in the gospel. The problem with this view, however, is it is inconsistent with what the Torah actually teaches. God has always taught that justification is by faith and not works. Paul argues in both Romans and Galatians that Abraham is our example of justification by faith. In Genesis 15, God makes a covenant with Abraham, and Abraham believes God and is justified. It is not until Genesis 17 that God teaches Abraham to practice circumcision as a sign of the promise. The promise precedes the sign. In Romans 4, Paul uses Abraham’s story to demonstrate that salvation is by faith and that circumcision is not necessary for salvation:

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Romans 4:9–12).

From the beginning, God has taught justification by faith, not works. It is not after but before Abraham’s circumcision that he was justified. Paul also argues that God preached the gospel to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, well before the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17:

Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith (Galatians 3:7–9).

God has not moved on in his dealings with mankind. His gospel message has not changed. He is consistent. As the writer of Hebrews encourages, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8).

We must also ask, does the Bible teach that the law of God is a burden? In Deuteronomy, Moses gives his last words to the Israelites, before he dies and they enter the promise land. In Deuteronomy 30, after Moses has reminded the Israelites of all the Torah, he says, “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you” (Deuteronomy 30:11). In Psalm 119, the great psalm expressing the goodness of God’s law, the psalmist says he delights in God’s law as in all riches (14); he beholds wondrous things in God’s law (18); he is consumed with longing for God’s law at all times (20); God’s testimonies are his delight and his counselors (24); he walks in a wide place because he has sought God’s precepts (45); he will never forget God’s precepts because they have brought him life (93); God’s commandment is exceedingly broad (96), and brings wisdom (98) and understanding (99); God’s words are sweeter than honey (103); they bring light to his path (105); they are the joy of his heart (111); he pants in longing for God’s commandments (131); and on and on! The psalmist’s description of the Torah sounds nothing like bondage because he knows, “the sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (160). The Bible consistently teaches that’s God’s law is good and that his people should walk in it. How can we say that the Torah is a burden in one breath and yet life and blessing in the next? And if the Torah is not a burden, what is Peter talking about in Acts 15:10?

## **Acts 15 Part 2**

### **Circumcision in the Bible**

The commandment focused on in the Jerusalem Council is that of circumcision. As mentioned above, God first commands circumcision in Genesis 17:

And God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring, both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money, shall surely be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant” (9–14).

In Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham, promising that he would have a son (4), that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in heaven (5), and that God would give Abraham’s offspring the land of Canaan (18-20). Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as

righteousness (6). Later, in Genesis 17, God commands circumcision as the sign of those in covenant with him. The timing of these events is crucial. God declared Abraham righteous before he commanded him to be circumcised. Paul implores us to remember this pattern in Romans 4:9-12, as discussed above. God never intended circumcision to be a requirement to enter into relationship with him, but rather a response to relationship with him.

The same pattern continues when a new generation of Israelites is about to enter the land of Canaan. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses calls this generation to enter into covenant with God:

“You are standing today, all of you, before the LORD your God: the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, from the one who chops your wood to the one who draws your water, so that you may enter into the sworn covenant of the LORD your God, which the LORD your God is making with you today, that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you, and as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the LORD our God, and with whoever is not here with us today” (10–15).

The Israelites have been wandering in the desert for forty years, and the first generation has died off. Here in Deuteronomy, God calls this new generation to enter into covenant with him. However, we learn in Joshua that these same men were not circumcised:

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.” So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised. For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD; the LORD swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the LORD had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey. So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised. For they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way (Joshua 5:2–7).

Again, the timing of these two events is crucial. God invites the Israelites into covenant with him before they have been circumcised. It is not until after they have crossed over the Jordan that they receive circumcision. Circumcision, once again, is not a prerequisite to covenant relationship with God. Like all God’s commands, it is an important act of obedience but not an entrance requirement as a member of the people of God.

## **A Manmade Yoke**

If obeying the Torah, and specifically circumcision, is not a burden placed upon believers, then what is the unbearable yoke to which Peter refers in 15:10? Remember, the men from Judea were teaching that only the circumcised can be saved (15:1). The unbearable yoke, then, is the teaching that circumcision or following the Torah is a requirement for salvation. A salvation-by-works doctrine is placed heavy on the shoulders of those who want to respond to the gospel and become a part of the family of God. The origin of such a teaching is not of God but of man.

This stands in stark contrast to what the Bible teaches about salvation: that all people, Jew and Gentile alike, are “saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (15:11). The gospel message is not:

- follow the ten commandments first ... then you can be saved
- wear tassels on your cloak ... then you can be part of God’s people
- go to church every week ... then God will accept you.

Rather, we believe in the truth of the gospel and are saved, and then God begins to teach us how to follow him. When God called his people out of Egypt, he did not require them to obey all his commandments before he would deliver them. Rather, the only entrance requirement was that they apply the blood of the Passover lamb over their doors. God brought them out of slavery and then gave them the Torah. God’s model for salvation is consistent throughout the Bible: God saves us, then teaches us how to walk with him. Paul remarks similarly in his letter to the Galatians,

Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? (Galatians 3:2–6)

From the beginning with Abraham, with the Israelites, and with the early church in Acts, God’s method of salvation is consistent. We are saved through faith and not works.

Peter finishes his testimony that even the Gentiles are saved through faith, and all the assembly falls silent (12). Paul and Barnabas then share the many signs and wonders that they witnessed God do among the Gentiles (12), similar to Peter’s experience with Cornelius’ household. Finally, James confirms their testimony with Scripture, citing Amos 9:11-12:

“After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things known from of old” (Acts 15:16–18).

At this point, there are three separate witnesses to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God: Peter, Paul/Barnabas, and now the Word of God. This is consistent with the Torah which states that a charge must be established by two to three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15). There can be no doubt in the council's mind on God's acceptance of the Gentiles. Now, the men must make some practical decisions about how this will play out.

### **The Four Requirements**

After quoting Amos and confirming the testimonies of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas, James sets forth four requirements for Gentile believers:

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood (19–20).

Most understand this to mean that believing Gentiles must abstain from:

- things polluted by idols (i.e. eating meat sacrificed to idols),
- sexual immorality,
- (eating) strangled animals, and
- (eating/drinking) blood.

At first glance, this seems a rather odd list. Perhaps abstaining from sexual immorality resonates with modern day believers, but the other three requirements are foreign to most. So why does James set forth these four commands as crucial for new converts? Commentators have arrived at varied explanations for the inclusion of these four requirements. There are five common positions regarding the commands:

1. They are moral prohibitions.
2. They are related to the Noahide laws.
3. They are based on laws in the Torah for the strangers dwelling in Israel.
4. They help to maintain table fellowship among Jews and Gentiles.
5. They are related to pagan temple worship.

We will examine these five positions, considering the strengths and weaknesses of each, in an attempt to determine which is the best explanation.

### **Moral Prohibitions**

Some argue the four requirements are moral prohibitions. Those who find the prohibitions to be moral in nature generally follow the reading of some Western Greek manuscripts, which omit strangled

things. This leaves things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, and blood. The first is taken to mean refraining from idolatry and the last is interpreted as murder, or bloodshed. Thus all three prohibitions are moral. However, this view is quite weak since the stronger textual evidence includes four prohibitions, not three. When all four are considered together, it seems that only the second is moral and the other three are related to diet. As Acts scholar Craig Keener notes,

The textual evidence, however, strongly favors reading all four elements here rather than three, and the moment we admit the food prohibition of things strangled alongside idol food, “blood” becomes likely a food prohibition rather than a prohibition of murder (2260).

Also, the moral category is unhelpful in that it is culturally-based. Again, Keener notes:

The “moral” approach also may impose a modern category on an era that defined its categories differently. Meat with blood in it may not offend modern “moral” sensibilities, but it offended keepers of Torah. In listing sins inviting the destruction of Judah (Ezek 33:27–29), Ezekiel lists eating meat with blood in it (33:25) alongside idolatry, bloodshed (33:25–26), and adultery (33:26) (2261).

Modern day readers of Acts might not understand how diet and morality can be connected, but the Bible has much to say about what we should and should not eat. Still, a “moral prohibition” understanding of the four requirements is not helpful because it leaves out many important “moral” commandments such as honor your parents, do not steal, and do not covet. Weren’t Gentiles to abide by these things too?

### **Noahide Laws**

Others have offered the explanation that the four prohibitions are an abbreviated version or pre-conception of the rabbinic Noahide laws. These constitute a rabbinic understanding of what God required of Gentiles, who were descended from Noah but not of Abraham. In other words, they were laws that God wanted all of humanity to follow. The Jewish writing called the Tosefta, which is a fourth century AD commentary on the Mishnah, is the earliest reference to the Noahide laws, and includes prohibitions against idolatry, incest, shedding blood, profaning God’s name, robbery, injustice, and eating live animals (Tosefta *Avodah Zarah* 8.4). Perhaps James was applying an abbreviated form of these to the new Gentile converts. However, there are significant problems with this explanation. First, there are several prohibitions in the Noahide laws that are not included in Acts 15, such as robbery and injustice. Why wouldn’t James include these? Second, many scholars have pointed out that it is anachronistic to interpret the Acts 15 requirements as abbreviated Noahide laws since the latter do not appear in any written form until several centuries later (Witherington 464; Hegg 20). We are left seeking a better explanation.

### **Strangers in the Land**

A third explanation is that the four requirements were based on the laws in Torah for strangers residing

in the land of Israel, and specifically those found in Leviticus 17 and 18. In these passages, laws are given concerning:

- where a person can make a sacrifice to the Lord
- the eating of blood (prohibited)
- the eating of dead animals (prohibited)
- and various sexual sins (prohibited)

When God gives these commands, he repeats for each of them that they are for “any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them” (Lev 17:8; cf 17:10,13-15;18:24-26). There are certainly some connections between these passages and Acts 15 such as the eating of blood and sexual immorality. However, Acts scholar David Peterson points out some problems with this interpretation. For example, the laws in Leviticus 17 and 18 are for strangers in the land of Israel, but the Gentile converts in Acts 15 were not in the land but were living in the Diaspora (434-435). Furthermore, Peterson continues:

It is difficult to align the command to avoid ‘the defilements caused by idols’ with Leviticus 17:8-9 and hard to explain why other laws binding on resident aliens are not included in Acts 15:20 (e.g. Lv. 16:29; 17:15-16; 20:2; 22:18; 24:22; 25:47) (435).

In other words, there is not a clear parallel of Acts 15’s command to avoid idolatry found in Leviticus 17 and 18, and there are many more commands given to strangers in the land in Leviticus that are not included in the Acts 15 requirements. Additionally, there are other laws in the Torah for Gentiles living in the land such as keeping the Sabbath (Exodus 23:12), and participating in the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29), the Feast of Weeks (Deuteronomy 16:11), and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:14). If these special days were for Gentiles living in the land of Israel, and that is the criteria James uses for his list here in Acts 15, then why are these not included? It is an unsatisfactory explanation.

### **Maintaining Table Fellowship**

A very common analysis of the four prohibitions is that they helped maintain table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers. At least three of the four seem to be related to food (that which was polluted by idols, was strangled, and contained blood). Because Jews followed the Torah, they would not eat any meat that fell into these categories. How then would they be able to eat with Gentile believers, who might be partaking in these things? Acts scholar John B. Polhill supports this when he says, “The Gentiles were to be asked to follow the four proscribed areas of the “apostolic decree” —not as a law, but as a basis for fellowship” (335). Keener further explains the position:

But as a compromise solution, Gentiles can be asked to follow some basic, minimal expectations for table fellowship to maintain unity with the Jewish believers (15:20). Not each of the expectations is moral, but all are necessary qualifications for Jews (both believers and nonbelievers in Jesus) to regard these believers as righteous, trustworthy

Gentiles, with whom table fellowship might appear less problematic for Jewish believers (2258).

Keener says the four requirements are necessary for Gentiles to be regarded as righteous and trustworthy. However, there is a blaring issue with this: what about the food laws in Leviticus 11? Certainly having pork or shellfish on the table would offend a Jew, but nothing in Acts 15 mentions which specific animals could or could not be eaten. Also, consider the one prohibition in Acts that seems moral in nature: avoiding sexual immorality. Eating with the sexually immoral might certainly have been offensive to the Jews, but would not eating with a murderer be equally offensive? The four requirements in Acts 15 cannot be explained as a means to maintain table fellowship.

### **Pagan Temple Worship**

A final explanation of the four prohibitions is their relationship to pagan temple practices. Acts commentator Ben Witherington suggests this view when he says,

Furthermore, the issue is not just where one might find one or another of the four elements in the decree in isolation, but in what social setting one might find them together. Here the answer is again likely to be in a temple, not in a home, and in particular at a temple feast. That Jews regularly thought such a combination of activities was likely by pagans in a temple can be seen from a text like 2 Maccabees 6:4-5, which in recording the suppression of Judaism and the defiling of the Jerusalem temple by the forces of Antiochus tells us the following transpired: “For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws.” Here we see the very same sort of combination of idol meat and sexual activity in the temple venue as in Acts 15 with an emphasis that it is Gentiles who undertake such abominations (461-462).

Witherington argues that all four activities prohibited by James were commonly found in first century idol worship. The worshipers engaged in temple prostitution and offered meat to idols, then ate it. They also strangled their sacrifices and drank the blood of the animals as part of the worship (464).

Some might wonder if eating unclean meats such as pork would also be a part of these practices, and if so, why didn't James include them in the Acts 15 prohibitions? James, however, does not have to break down specific kinds of meats to avoid if the context is idolatry – all meats sacrificed to idols are to be avoided, clean and unclean. Learning about the food laws in the Torah can come later, but avoiding idolatry must be immediately addressed among converts.

## **Acts 15 Part 3**

### **Sexual Immorality and Idolatry**

What about sexual immorality, which is included in the list of prohibitions? Isn't this more moral in nature and perhaps not about pagan temple worship? Does the Bible support the idea that sexual immorality and idolatry are connected? Moses, Paul, and Jesus all agree that the two are connected.

In Numbers 25, the Israelites commit the sin of idolatry, which included sexual immorality:

While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel (Numbers 25:1–3).

They had intercourse with pagan woman, sacrificed to their gods, ate the meat, and committed idolatry, yoking themselves, Moses points out, not to the women (though they did), but moreover to their god, Baal of Peor. Numbers scholar Timothy R. Ashley comments on the phrase “began to whore”:

In addition to its literal meaning of “to commit fornication” (e.g., Gen. 38:24; Lev. 21:9; Deut. 22:21; Hos. 4:13–14; Amos 7:17), the verb *zānâ* can mean “to engage in idolatrous worship” (e.g., Isa. 57:3; Jer. 2:20; Ezek. 16:15; Hos. 2:7). It is not necessary to choose which meaning is relevant here, since, in this introductory sentence, the meaning is purposely vague. The first acts may have been physical, but they quickly led to cultic and spiritual acts (516).

Thus there was a very clear connection between fornication and idolatry in Numbers, but what about the New Testament?

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he addresses a variety of issues related to sexual immorality, idolatry, and meat sacrificed to idols. In 6:13-20, Paul urges believers to flee from sexual immorality and never be joined to a prostitute. We are to be joined to the Lord, and our very body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Later in chapter 10, referring to stories of the Israelites in the Torah, Paul states:

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.” We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day (1 Corinthians 10:6–8).

Here he references two separate events in the Old Testament: the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the Numbers 25 incident mentioned above, in which thousands of people died due to their unfaithfulness. Both are incidents of idolatry, and the latter clearly had a sexual nature. Yet even the first has sexual connotations with the word “to play.” In Hebrew, the word for “play” literally means “to laugh,” and has a wide semantic range that includes meanings such as caress, fondle, or engage in lewd behavior. Thus the NASB translates Exodus 32:6 as “So the next day they got up early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and got up to engage in lewd behavior.” This translation expresses the idea of sexual sin, which, if the NASB understanding is correct, was part of the golden calf incident.

Paul continues in chapter 10, saying that believers cannot participate in the food of idol worship:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Corinthians 10:14–22).

Similar to chapter 6 where we must not join the temple of the Holy Spirit with a prostitute, here we cannot participate in the body of Christ and eat at the table of idols, which Paul points out is actually the table of demons. These things are wholly inconsistent. They cannot coexist. We must not provoke the Lord to jealousy as the Israelites did (Numbers 25:3,11). While 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 does not mention sexual immorality, we have already seen that Paul connects the two earlier in the chapter. Here, he stresses the importance of avoiding food sacrificed to idols.

Finally, Jesus himself connects sexual immorality with eating meat sacrificed to idols twice in the book of Revelation:

“But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality” (Revelation 2:14).

“But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:20).

Interestingly, in verse 14 Jesus also references the Numbers 25 incident by mentioning Balaam, who we learn in Numbers 31:16 advised Balak to cause the Israelites to stumble through sexual immorality and idol worship described in Numbers 25. Here in Revelation Jesus warns the churches of Pergamum and Thyatira to avoid sexual immorality and idolatry, which are connected throughout the Bible.

With these various passages in mind, we see that all four prohibitions given in Acts 15, including sexual immorality, are best explained by their relationship to idolatry and pagan temple worship practices.

### **A Works-Based Salvation?**

Why do James and the rest of the council stress avoidance of idolatry as the requirements for

conversion? They rule that circumcision and following the law is not necessary for salvation, but then stress the necessity of avoiding idolatry. Isn't that also a type of works-based salvation? Essentially, the apostles' ruling in the council is that if you want to follow the one true God, you must turn away from other gods when you accept Jesus. There can be no dabbling in both, no syncretistic practices or mixing of worship. This idea is consistent throughout Scripture.

In Joshua 24:15, Joshua stresses that the Israelites must choose whom they will serve, either the one true God or the false gods of their fathers, but not both: "And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." During the time of the Judges, Samuel urges the Israelites to make the same choice:

And Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the LORD with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroath from among you and direct your heart to the LORD and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." So the people of Israel put away the Baals and the Ashtaroath, and they served the LORD only" (1 Samuel 7:3–4).

God never allows us to serve him alongside other gods; we must serve him only. Jesus speaks similarly in Matthew 6:24 (cf. Luke 16:13): "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money." We have already discussed Paul's urging to the Corinthians to avoid eating idol meat: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" (1 Corinthians 10:21–22). Likewise, Paul says in 2 Corinthians:

What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty" (6:15–18).

There is simply no room to worship both God and idols. When we turn to God at salvation, we must concurrently turn away from idols. James and the apostles knew this, and so ruled for the believing Gentiles to have no greater burden (15:19) than to reject all forms of idol worship. We are uncomfortable with the idea of any work required for salvation because we know that we are saved by grace through faith, solely through what Christ did for us. But there is something we must do as we receive this salvation: we must turn from all false gods and turn to the one true God. The very act of

accepting the gospel is a rejection of all other gods. As Peter declared earlier in Acts 4: “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

### **Isn't Moses Read?**

What about the rest of the Torah? Are Gentile believers off the hook from obeying all other commands, save avoiding idolatry? The next verse helps give the answer: “For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” (21). Many have struggled over what this verse means, calling it obscure (Polhill, 332) and cryptic (Witherington, 463), and give suggestions to its meaning, though not firmly.

A common interpretation of verse 21 is that, because Moses is taught in every synagogue, Gentiles must follow these four requirements so that they do not offend Jews who attend synagogue and are well aware of the law. Polhill finds this to be a possibility, saying, “...there are Jews in every city who cherish the Torah. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel” (332; cf. Keener, 2279). Witherington also agrees, saying the Gentiles must give no cause to Jews to complain that Gentile believers might still be practicing idolatry (463). This interpretation, however, does not seem likely because there are many things a Gentile believer might do, beyond the four requirements, that would offend Jews. Acts 15, after all, is about the question of circumcision, and it appears that the men from Judea/Pharisees in verses 1 and 5 were indeed offended by the Gentile converts' lack of circumcision. Likewise, in Galatians 2:11-15, there were those who were offended by the uncircumcised Gentile believers, drawing away from them, refusing table fellowship, and referring to them as “Gentile sinners.” But, offensive as it was, circumcision is not one of the four requirements given to Gentile converts.

Peterson suggests a second interpretation: James is stressing the importance of the law for the Jews. He is recognizing that the law is still important and will be kept among the Jewish people (435). Keener proposes a similar understanding, saying that James is arguing the law is not under threat. The Torah lifestyle will not be endangered because there are Jews everywhere who will still follow it. After all, the Jews do not have to reject the Torah, even though the Gentiles are supposedly free from it, save the four prohibitions (2279). Yet James gives verse 22 as a reason for the four requirements. It explains why Gentile believers should follow these four commands. The Torah not being under threat because it will still be cherished by Jews does not give a reason why these four things were specifically singled out for Gentiles to follow. Bible Exposition scholar Charles Savelle notes that

...this view does not seem to fit well within the broader narrative. First, the issue in Acts 15:1-35 is not primarily about adherence to the Mosaic law for Jewish Christians.

The context of Acts 15 is about what Gentile (not Jewish) believers must do to be saved and what role, if any, the Mosaic law should have in their lives. We need to read verse 21 in light of that broader context: the relationship between the law and Gentile converts.

Peterson also offers a third understanding: because the law is preached everywhere in every synagogue, Gentile Christians will have background information to understand why the four requirements are important for them to follow. In response to verse 21, Peterson writes,

James implies that there are observant Jews everywhere and that Gentile Christians will know why the requirements of v. 20 are being suggested” (436)

In other words, the teaching of the law in synagogues will help Gentile believers understand the importance of the four prohibitions. Polhill agrees that this could be a possible interpretation of the verse:

...the law of Moses is read in every synagogue everywhere; so these requirements should come as no shock to the Gentiles. They are in the Old Testament and have been required of Gentiles associating with Jews from the earliest times” (332)

It is true that Moses being taught in the synagogue will give the Gentile believers more knowledge about the importance of the four prohibitions, and specifically, the dangers of idolatry. However, the weakness of this view is that it limits the synagogue to shed light only on the four prohibitions. If Gentiles come to learn in the synagogues, they will be taught the whole of Torah, not just these four commands.

These interpretations are all lacking for various reasons mentioned above. When we remember the context of Acts 15—that the early church was discussing whether circumcision of Gentiles was necessary for salvation, and if not, what were they required to do—a fourth understanding of verse 21 emerges. As argued above, the four prohibitions all had a singular theme—avoiding pagan temple worship practices. As part of salvation, believers must deny all other gods and follow only the one true God. There can be no syncretism, no “foot in both worlds.” Following Jesus includes a complete turning from idolatry and its practices. When we are saved, God does not insist that we learn all of his commands at once, but he does insist that we flee idolatry. From then on, we continue to learn and grow. In verse 21, James argues that Gentile believers will continue to learn God’s ways each Sabbath in the synagogues. They won’t stop at obeying the four prohibitions. Each week they will learn more and more of God’s holy and righteous and good law (Romans 7:21). Bruce agrees when he writes:

This policy, James urged, would not work to the detriment of Israel’s mission in the Gentile world; there was still ample opportunity for Gentiles to learn the law of Moses, for it was read publicly every sabbath in synagogues throughout the civilized world ... This observation was perhaps intended to calm the apprehensions of the believing Pharisees, in whose eyes it was specially important that the whole Torah should be taught among the Gentiles; this, said James, was being attended to already by the synagogues (298).

The Council rules that Gentiles must avoid idolatry from the start, and from there, they can attend synagogue each week and learn the rest of what Moses taught. Thus, we have the answer to our question at the beginning of this section: Gentiles were not off the hook, so to speak, from obeying all

other commands save idolatry. They would learn, week by week, about how God wanted them to live and walk, just as we all do. As Peter would later write,

You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:17–18)

After all, the law is part of God’s perfect Word, and, as Paul writes,

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

## **No Greater Burden**

At this point, the Jerusalem Council agrees to send men along with a letter to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, telling them of the decision reached. The letter details the four requirements for Gentile believers to follow, prefacing them with the comment:

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:... (28)

The apostles did not make the decision alone but that the Holy Spirit guided them throughout the Council. Bruce comments,

So conscious were the church leaders of being possessed and controlled by the Spirit that he was given prior mention as chief author of their decision” (298)

The Holy Spirit is listed first, acknowledging him as the leader of the Council's decision.

It is interesting that James calls the four prohibitions a burden, perhaps referring back to 15:10, in which Peter says some were placing an unbearable yoke on new believers by demanding their circumcision and law-keeping, and 15:19, where James says we should not trouble Gentiles who turn to God. So here, a “burden” is placed upon Gentile converts, but it is not overbearing. Rather, it is a burden from God, whose yoke is easy and burden is light (Matthew 11:30). As we discussed earlier, commands from men weigh us down and overwhelm us, but God’s commands are not too hard (Deuteronomy 30:11) and bring blessing and freedom (Psalm 119).

What specifically is this burden? A burden implies it is something that must be done, must be obeyed. Above we discussed if it is then somehow a works-based salvation, if the Gentile converts must turn away from idols upon salvation. The very act of choosing to follow Christ is also by nature an act of choosing to reject all other gods. Therefore, as soon as we accept the gospel, this “burden” is placed upon us: to follow God and turn away from idolatry.

## **First Steps**

Let's return to the question, are Gentile believers only required to follow these four things (to avoid meat sacrificed to idols, blood, things strangled, and sexual immorality)? All believers agree we should love our neighbor as ourselves; love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and mind; honor our parents; not steal, kill, or commit adultery; and more. Yet none of these are included in the list for Gentiles in Acts 15. When we understand the context of the Jerusalem Council, that (a) the issue at hand was about salvation (verse 1 – can uncircumcised Gentiles be saved?) and (b) the common thread linking the four prohibitions is idolatry, then we see that James and the Council (and the Holy Spirit!) are setting forth the things Gentile believers must do upon conversion. New believers cannot say they will follow Jesus while still participating in idol worship. The four requirements for Gentile converts are not the only things Gentile believers must do for the rest of their lives, but rather, they are the initial first steps in our walk with the Messiah. As these new believers continue to learn the Word of God (at that time taught each week in the synagogues – verse 21), they will learn about how God calls his people to live. But turning their back on idols is a “day one” decision, consistent with the whole of Scripture. As John reminds his readers at the end of his first epistle, “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). Likewise, Paul tells the Corinthians, “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (1 Corinthians 10:14). The ruling of the apostles for the Gentiles is the same: there is no place for idolatry when we turn to Jesus. That is the message of the Jerusalem Council.

## Summary

In this paper, we have wrestled with the Jerusalem Council, seeking to answer several questions:

- The primary issue at the Jerusalem Council was what Gentile believers must do to be saved, and specifically, whether circumcision was necessary for salvation. At the Council, the apostles ruled that circumcision was not a burden to be placed on new Gentile converts, who are saved by grace, just as we all are. This was confirmed by the Holy Spirit, whom the Gentile believers received upon salvation, despite their lack of physical circumcision.
- Throughout the Bible, including the Old Testament, God has always taught justification by faith, not works. Acts 15 is not explaining a new way of salvation, but rather what has always been, as demonstrated through Abraham's relationship with God.
- The Torah is not a burden placed upon our necks. However, manmade rules, such as those requiring circumcision for conversion, are an unbearable burden.
- The Jerusalem Council was not addressing whether Gentile believers should ever become circumcised or obey the law. It was addressing what was necessary as the first steps of a new believer.
- The first step that newly converted Gentile believers must take in their walk is to leave behind idolatry; the four requirements James and the Council list have a common theme and application of leaving behind practices associated with pagan idolatry.

- After fleeing idolatrous practices, Gentile believers should learn how to walk in God’s ways, over time. Each week they can learn about the Torah and all of God’s Word, and grow in their understanding and application of his commands for their lives.

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