



Book of Acts

Chapter 15

The council at Jerusalem

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First Apostolic Council

Council held in Jerusalem about 52 A.D., 20 years after the Ascension. Not an authoritative, “governing” body: Paul was probably prepared to defy all 12 apostles and the whole Church of Jerusalem if they had disagreed with him! Probably quite a spirited discussion.

McGee Introduction: Now that the first missionary journey of Paul and Barnabas has been completed and the churches which they established in the Galatian country are 100 percent gentile, the church faces its first great crisis.

In Judea many of the Hebrew converts are Pharisees who have no intention of giving up the Mosaic system. They assert that the Gentiles must also come into the church through the Mosaic system. In fact, they believe that Gentiles are not saved until they are circumcised.

The news of this contention reaches the church in Jerusalem. The apostles must now face up to the question. What course is the church to take? So in Jerusalem the first church council convenes to resolve the matter.

Down through history you will find that there have been other church councils that have decided other great issues, such as the validity and the inerrancy of the Scriptures. Another council decided upon the deity of Christ and the fact that He is both God and man. And there have been other important councils when differences arose in the church. Some folk may think that we need a council in our day. We certainly do. However, I am afraid there could never be an agreement because too many churches are far removed from the person of Christ. A council that cannot meet around the person of Christ is not actually a *church* council because the Lord Jesus Christ is the very center of the church. The issue is not one of ritual, or of membership, or of ceremony. The central issue is that of one’s personal relationship to Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, people who are personally far removed from Christ and who do not experience fellowship with Him want to argue about ritual. Oh, they may carry a big Bible under their arms, go to church on Sunday and sing the hymns lustily, but on Monday the Lord Jesus is far removed from them.

Friend, the Lord Jesus should occupy the very center of our lives. We should think of Him constantly. We should not see a sunset without thinking of the One who made it. He should be brought into our daily living, into all situations of life, our tensions and our anxieties.

Now let’s turn our attention to this council at Jerusalem. It is an outstanding group which has come together here. These men have convened in order to consider this great issue: law versus grace, or law versus liberty.¹

JNTC: Certain New Testament chapters are uniquely important for Messianic Jews because they bear directly on the central issue of Messianic Judaism, which is: What does it mean to be at the same time both Jewish and a believer in Yeshua, and how does one go about doing justice to both? This is one of those chapters, along with Acts 21; Romans 7, 9–11; Galatians 2–4; Ephesians 2; Messianic Jews 7–10; Ya’akov 2; and others.²

¹McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:574). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

²Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 15:1). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Acts 15:1

And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

[certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren] Disavowed by the apostles (Acts 14:24).

Barnes: And certain men. These were men undoubtedly who had been Jews, but who were now converted to Christianity. The fact that they were willing to refer the matter in dispute to the apostles and elders, Acts 15:2, shows that they had professedly embraced the Christian religion. The account which follows is a record of the first internal dissension which occurred in the Christian church. Hitherto they had been struggling against external foes. Violent persecutions had raged, and had fully occupied the attention of Christians. But now the churches were at peace. They enjoyed great external prosperity in Antioch. And the great enemy of souls took occasion then, as he has often done in similar circumstances since, to excite contentions in the church itself; so that when external violence could not destroy it, an effort was made to secure the same object by internal dissension and strife. The history, therefore, is particularly important, as it is the record of the first unhappy debate which arose in the bosom of the church. It is further important, as it shows the manner in which such controversies were settled in apostolic times; and as it established some very important principles respecting the perpetuity of the religious rites of the Jews.³

Barnes: Except ye be circumcised. This was the leading or principal rite of the Jewish religion. It was indispensable to the name and privileges of a Jew. Proselytes to their religion were circumcised as well as native-born Jews, and they held it to be indispensable to salvation. It is evident, from this, that Paul and Barnabas had dispensed with this rite in regard to the Gentile converts, and that they intended to found the Christian church on the principle that the Jewish ceremonies were to cease. When, however, it was necessary to conciliate the minds of the Jews and to prevent contention, Paul did not hesitate to practise circumcision, Acts 16:3.

BKC: 1-2. The **men who came down from Judea to Antioch** may well be the same ones referred to in Galatians 2:12. They insisted circumcision was essential for justification. Perhaps they based their theology on such passages as Genesis 17:14 and Exodus 12:48-49.

At any rate, they were sure to cause a severe schism in the church, so their teaching **brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them.**

The men from Judea were dogmatic in their doctrine in spite of the fact they had no authority from the church in Jerusalem. How they explained the case of Cornelius (Acts 10) or the work of Barnabas (11:22-24) is left unstated. Perhaps they felt Cornelius' case was unique and the believers in Antioch in chapter 11 were too insignificant to use as examples. Now the movement was becoming overwhelming and this was their way of protesting.

³ Barnes' Commentary on The New Testament

The church at Antioch felt it was wise to discuss the matter with **the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. So** they commissioned **Paul and Barnabas** for the task and wisely sent **some other believers** along as witnesses. These witnesses would protect Paul and Barnabas against being accused of distorting the facts.⁴

The Core Issue at the Jerusalem Council – Hegg:

The opening verses of Acts 15 give us a clear picture of the core issue around which the Jerusalem Council convened:

The "issue" at hand was whether or not someone who was not a Jew could be saved. To put it another way, how could a Gentile become a covenant member with Israel and share in the blessings of the covenant? The prevailing belief of the Judaisms in Paul's day was that only Jews had a place in the world to come since God had made the covenant of blessing with Israel and no other nation.⁵

Acts 15:2

When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

They decide to send a leadership - Paul and Barnabas and "certain others" = Titus, an uncircumcised Greek (Gal 2:4-6).

[they] The disciples at Antioch (Acts 15:3).

[determined] Greek: *tasso* (GSN-5021), appointed (Acts 13:48).

Clarke: No small dissension and disputation—Paul and Barnabas were fully satisfied that God did not design to bring the converted Gentiles under the yoke of circumcision: they knew that Jesus Christ was the end of the law for righteousness (justification) to everyone that believed, and therefore they opposed the Judaizing teachers. This was one of the first controversies in the Christian Church; but, though the difference of sentiment was considerable, it led to no breach of Christian charity nor fellowship among themselves.⁶

Barnes: Certain other of them. Of the brethren; probably of each party. They did not go to debate; or to give their opinion; or to vote in the case themselves; but to lay the question fairly before the apostles and elders.

Barnes: Unto the apostles. The authority of the apostles in such a case would be acknowledged by all. They had been immediately instructed by the Saviour, and had the

⁴Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:393). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁵Tim Hegg, Torah Resource, Acts 15 and the Jerusalem council

⁶Adam Clarke's Commentary on the New Testament

promise of infallible guidance in the organization of the church. Matthew 16:19; Matthew 18:18.

LAN: It is helpful to see how the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem resolved their conflict: (1) the church in Antioch sent a delegation to help seek a solution; (2) the delegates met with the church leaders to give their reports and set another date to continue the discussion; (3) Paul and Barnabas gave their report; (4) James summarized the reports and drew up the decision; (5) everyone agreed to abide by the decision; (6) the council sent a letter with delegates back to Antioch to report the decision.

This is a wise way to handle conflicts within the church. Problems must be confronted, and all sides of the argument must be given a fair hearing. The discussion should be held in the presence of leaders who are spiritually mature and trustworthy to make wise decisions. Everyone should then abide by the decisions.⁷

JNTC: Discord and dispute with Sha’ul and Bar-Nabba arose because their mission in life was to bring the Gospel to as many Gentiles as possible, and they were altogether unwilling to have needless barriers put in their way.

Some non-Messianic Jews side with the “men from Y’hudah” in this matter. They take the view that Christianity has been made an “easy” religion that requires “mere faith,” whereas Judaism is a meaty and tough religion that demands action. But the objection misses the point altogether. The point is, what has God required? God has required Jews to be Jews, and he has made Gentiles Gentiles, but he has required both Jews and Gentiles to trust him, obey him and follow him through his Messiah Yeshua. Such obedience and trust and day-by-day following are not easy; such faith is not “mere.” It too demands action (Mt 3:8, Ep 2:10, Ya 2:19–20). Gentiles entering the New Covenant have plenty to do without also having to convert to Judaism.⁸

Nowhere in God's word is there a ceremony outlined for a Gentile to become a proselyte. In fact, the Torah is quite specific that the resident non-Jew was to be received as just that a non Jewish person who had attached himself to Israel and to her God. If God expected the believing Gentile to become a Jew through some ritual of conversion, there would be no reason for a verse like Numbers 15:16

There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you.

The fact that God does not prescribe a method for becoming a proselyte in the sacred text of the Scriptures shows us that the rabbinic matter of proselytization was entirely man-made.⁹

⁷ Life Application Notes

⁸ Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 15:2). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

⁹ Tim Hegg, Torah Resource, Acts 15 and the Jerusalem council

Acts 15:3

And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

[And being brought on their way by the church] The church paid their way as delegates.

[declaring the conversion of the Gentiles] Relating the conversion of Gentiles on their first missionary journey.

[conversion] Greek: *epistrophe* (GSN-1995), conversion. Only here.

Clarke: Being brought on their way by the Church—That is; the members of the Church provided them with all necessities for their journey; for it does not appear that they had any property of their own.

Clarke: Declaring the conversion of the Gentiles—Much stress is laid on this: it was a miracle of God's mercy that the Gentiles should be received into the Church of God; and they had now the fullest proof that the thing was likely to become general, by the conversion of Cornelius, the conversion of the people of Antioch, of Cyprus, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Lycaonia, etc., etc.

Acts 15:4

And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

[with them] God being with one guarantees success (Acts 7:9; Acts 10:38; John 3:2).

Clarke: They declared—To this council they gave a succinct account of the great work which God had wrought by them among the Gentiles. This was St. Paul's third journey to Jerusalem after his conversion. See an account of his first journey, Acts 9:26, and of his second in Acts 11:30.

Barnes: And they declared. Paul and Barnabas, and those with them. That is, they stated the case; the remarkable conversion of the Gentiles, the evidence of their piety, and the origin of the present dispute.

Acts 15:5

But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses.

The issue was not just circumcision, it is only the representative issue. Unlike today where circumcision is done for health as well as other reasons, then the idea was to be under the covenant of Abraham.

Clarke: But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees—This verse appears to be part of the declaration made by Paul and Barnabas to this council: for, having stated how God blessed their ministry among the Gentiles, they proceed to declare how all the good work was likely to be destroyed by certain Pharisees, who, having received the Christian faith, came down to Antioch, and began to teach the necessity of circumcision, etc., and thus filled the minds of the young converted Gentiles with doubtful disputations.

McGee: They wanted to add something to the gospel. Friend, whenever you add something to the gospel, you no longer have the gospel but you have a religion. You no longer have the gospel of Jesus Christ. The only approach that you can make to Jesus Christ is by faith. We must all come to Him by faith. He won't let us come any other way. Jesus said, "... I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). He's bottled the whole world into this. There is only one question God asks the lost world: "What do you do with My Son who died for you?" God doesn't give us some little Sunday school lesson by saying, "I want you to be a good boy. I want you to join a church. I want you to go through this and that ritual." That kind of teaching is only for an insipid *religion*. It does not come from God. God is saying, "My Son died for you. What will you do with Him?" The answer to that question will determine your eternal destiny. This is the issue being discussed at the council in Jerusalem. This is really exciting.¹⁰

JNTC: Some of those who had come to trust were from the party of the *P.rushim* (on which see Mt 3:7&N). Many Jews are offended at the commonly held Christian view of the Pharisees as invariably stubborn and prideful hypocrites who substituted legalism and outward appearances for true worship and service to the living God. But there were in fact some Pharisees who believed in Yeshua. They were not "former Pharisees" but Messianic Jewish Pharisees, just like Sha'ul (23:6, Pp 3:5).

"But," some may object, "these *P.rushim* were wrong. Their Judaizing view was roundly defeated." Yes, but they were still believers; not every believer is right about everything! Further, the text does not tell us that all the Pharisees who were believers took this position; but, on the contrary, it does tell us that Sha'ul, who was a Pharisee, took the opposite stand.¹¹

¹⁰McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:575). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

¹¹Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 15:5). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Acts 15:6

And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

[**elders came together**] See Acts 14:23. This was the first general conference of the church and the third time Paul visited Jerusalem (Acts 9:26; Acts 11:30).

Clarke: The apostles and elders came together—This was the first council ever held in the Christian Church; and we find that it was composed of the apostles and elders simply.

Barnes: For to consider this matter. Not to decide it arbitrarily, or even by authority, without deliberation; but to compare their views, and to express the result of the whole to the church at Antioch. It was a grave and difficult question, deeply affecting the entire constitution of the Christian church, and they therefore solemnly engaged in deliberation on the subject.

BBC: The apostles do not rule without the elders, and both engage in vigorous debate, as Jewish teachers did in their schools. In later rabbinic schools, rabbis often had to agree to disagree; this assembly seeks to achieve consensus (Acts 15:22).¹²

Acts 15:7

And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

“A good while ago”: about 13 years before.

[**that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe**] This may show that Gentiles before Acts 10 had not been given the gospel (Acts 10:6,22,32-33; Acts 11:13-14).

Clarke: When there had been much disputing—By those of the sect of the believing Pharisees; for they strongly contended for circumcision, and at the head of these, tradition tells us, was Cerinthus, a name famous in the primitive Church, as one who labored to unite the law and the Gospel, and to make the salvation promised by the latter dependent on the performance of the rites and ceremonies prescribed by the former. Though the apostles and elders were under the inspiration of the Almighty, and could by this inspiration have immediately determined the question, yet it was highly necessary that the objecting party should be permitted to come forward and allege their reasons for the doctrines they preached, and that these reasons should be fairly met by argument, and the thing proved to be useless in itself, inexpedient in the present case, and unsupported by any express authority from God, and serving no purpose to the Gentiles, who in their

¹² Bible Background Commentary: New Testament

uncircumcised state, by believing in Christ Jesus, had been made partakers of the Holy Ghost.

Peter rose up, and said—This was after the matters in dispute had been fully debated; and now the apostles, like judges, after hearing counsel on both sides, proceed to give judgment on the case.

Clarke: A good while ago— From the days of old: a phrase which simply signifies some years ago; and, if he here refers to the conversion of Cornelius, (see Acts 10:1-48), he must mean about ten years before this time; but it is more likely that he refers to that time when Christ gave him the keys of the kingdom of heaven, that he might open the door of faith to the Gentiles.

Barnes: Peter rose up, and said. Peter was probably the most aged, and was most accustomed to speak, Acts 2:14, 3:6,12. Besides, there was a particular reason for his speaking here, as he had been engaged in similar scenes, and understood the case, and had had evidence that God had converted sinners without the Mosaic rites, and knew that it would have been inexpedient to have imposed these rites on those who had thus been converted.

ESV: and after there had been much debate. This important theological issue in the early history of the church was not decided by a sudden decree spoken by a prophet but by careful reasoning and thoughtful argumentation based on Scripture. Peter's reference to the Gentiles hearing the **gospel . . . by my mouth . . . in the early days** refers to his witness at the house of Cornelius (10:34–43), c. a.d. 38, as many as 10 years before the Jerusalem council.¹³

Acts 15:8

And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as *he did* unto us;

[knoweth the hearts] God the heart-searcher (Jeremiah 17:10).

[bare them witness] God is the one who considered the Gentiles fit to be saved. For God to bear witness is simply approving and setting His seal upon a thing. In this case, God gave the Gentiles the same Spirit baptism that He gave at Pentecost and made no difference between Jews and Gentiles in Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Col. 3:11). He did this without the Gentiles being circumcised or without keeping the law or sabbath.

Barnes: And God, which knoweth the hearts, Acts 1:24. God thus knew whether they were *true* converts or not, and gave a demonstration that he acknowledged them as his.

¹³ <http://www.esvstudybible.org/search?q=Acts+15>

Acts 15:9

And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

[purifying their hearts by faith] This purifying the heart was immediate and took place "while Peter yet spake these words" (Acts 10:44-48). It always takes place at the new birth (2 Cor. 5:17-18; 2 Thes. 2:13; 1 John 1:9; 1 John 2:29; 1 John 3:5-10; 1 John 5:1-4,18). There can be no such thing as becoming a new creature without heart purifying. The disciples had heart purity long before receiving the Spirit baptism at Pentecost (see John 13:11; John 15:3; John 17:14-16). This is done by faith (Romans 10:9-10; Ephes. 2:8-9).

Clarke: Put no difference between us and them—Giving them the Holy Spirit, though uncircumcised, just as he had given it to us who were circumcised: an evident proof that, in the judgment of God, circumcision was no preparation to receive the Gospel of Christ. And as the purification of the heart by the Holy Spirit was the grand object of the religion of God, and that alone by which the soul could be prepared for a blessed immortality, and the Gentiles had received that without circumcision, consequently, the shadow could not be considered of any worth, now the substance was communicated.

Barnes: And put no difference, etc. Though they had not been circumcised, and though they did not conform to the law of Moses. Thus God showed that the observance of these rites was not necessary in order to the true conversion of men, and to acceptance with him. He did not give us, who are Jews, any advantage over them, but justified and purified all in the same manner.

McGee: Does Peter say that God purified their hearts by keeping the Law? No! By going through a ceremony? No! By joining a church? No! By *faith*. Peter said, "I went into the home of Cornelius. I gave them the facts of the gospel. They believed and were saved—the Holy Ghost came upon them just as He had come to us in Jerusalem."

My friend, this is always the only way of salvation. It is by faith. You don't have to do anything to merit your salvation. Jesus Christ did it all for you nineteen hundred years ago. All God asks you to do is to accept His Son who died for you.¹⁴

Acts 15:10

Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

This is question 47 in the book of Acts. The next question is in Acts 16:30.

[tempt] Greek: *peirazo* (GSN-3985), try, put to the test. Translated "tempt" 27 times (Matthew 4:1; Matthew 16:1; Matthew 19:3; Matthew 22:18,35; Mark 1:13; Mark 8:11; Mark 10:2; Mark 12:15; Luke 4:2; Luke 11:16; Luke 22:23; John 8:6; Acts 5:9;

¹⁴McGee, J. V. (1997, c1981). *Thru the Bible commentary*. Based on the Thru the Bible radio program. (electronic ed.) (4:576). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Acts 15:10; 1 Cor. 7:5; 1 Cor. 10:9,13; Galatians 6:1; 1 Thes. 3:5; Hebrews 2:18; Hebrews 3:9; Hebrews 4:15; Hebrews 11:37; James 1:13-14); "tempter" (Matthew 4:3; 1 Thes. 3:5); try (Hebrews 11:17; Rev. 2:2,10; Rev. 3:10); "assay" (Acts 16:7); "go about" (Acts 24:6); "examine" (2 Cor. 13:5); and "prove" (John 6:6). Since God is the one who saved and baptized the Gentiles with the Spirit without demanding of them to be circumcised and keep the law, then it is evident that He does not plan this for them—making them debtors to do the whole law (Galatians 5:3). Why will you insult God and provoke Him to judge you for resisting His will, ignoring His work, and denying the salvation of the Gentiles whom He has already saved without keeping the law?¹⁵

Barnes: Why tempt ye God? Why provoke him to displeasure? Why, since he has shown his determination to accept them without such rites, do you provoke him by attempting to impose on his own people rites without his authority, and against his manifest will? The argument is, that God had already accepted them. To attempt to impose these rites would be to provoke him to anger; to introduce observances which he had shown it was his purpose should now be abolished.

Hegg: Is the Torah a Burden No One Can Bear?

The predominant interpretations of Acts 15, center not on this main issue of how Gentiles would be received into the body of Messiah, but on whether or not the Torah had any relevance to their life of faith. Such an emphasis not only misses the opening words of the chapter, but also telegraphs the anti-Torah theology latent in the historical Christian church. What is given to us by Luke as an historical description of how the Apostles dealt with the rabbinic theology of their day has been turned into one of the primary texts used to disparage the Torah.

Yet not only do the opening words of the chapter tell us what the real issue was. The language of the Apostles themselves also indicates that they were dealing with the dominant theology of their day, and particularly the manner in which the man-made rules of the Oral Torah had been so interwoven with the interpretation and application of the Written Torah that in many cases the two had become indistinguishable.

Peter, in the first of the speeches recorded in our chapter, uses language that signals an important key to the interpretation of this passage. Having reminded his audience that he had been the Apostle first sent to the Gentiles and that he had witnessed the evidence of the Ruach upon them while they were still Gentiles, he says:

"Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? "But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are."

Here Peter makes several very important assertions that are key for understanding his words. First note that he puts at odds the "yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear" with salvation through faith. The Gentiles had been saved and graced by God's presence (evidenced by the Ruach) as a matter of their faith, not because they

¹⁵ Dake Study Notes, Dake's Study Bible

had changed status from Gentile to Jew. The "yoke" that the Pharisaic teachers desired to place upon them was, in Peter's mind, contrary to salvation based upon God's grace.

But here is a crux for the proper interpretation of the passage. Would Peter have referred to the written Torah as a yoke that "neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" The common answer of Christian interpreters is a resounding "yes!" Taking the position that the Jews of his day believed their salvation was gained through obedience to the Torah, Peter's statement is interpreted as a ringing declaration against salvation by works.

But the Council was not debating whether or not salvation was gained by works. No one, including the "men from Judea" who were insisting that the Gentiles become proselytes, believed that anyone gained a place in the world to come by a complete keeping of Torah. As I have already noted, the prevailing view was that a place in the world to come was the gracious gift of God to every Israelite.¹⁶

JNTC: A yoke ... which neither our fathers nor we have had the strength to bear.

Much Christian teaching contrasts the supposedly onerous and oppressive "yoke of the Law" with the words of Yeshua, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Mt 11:30&N). This is a mistake, on two counts. First, observant and knowledgeable Jews do not consider the *Torah* a burden but a joy. If a person regards something as pleasant, you will not be able to convince him that it is unpleasant! (An entirely different question: how many observant and knowledgeable non-Messianic Jews actually experience and exhibit God's joy?) Second, and much more importantly here, such teaching misidentifies the yoke which Kefa says has proved so unbearable.

The term "yoke" in this context is certainly Jewish enough. For example, the Mishna explains with these words why Deuteronomy 6:4–9 precedes Deuteronomy 11:13–21 in the *Sh·ma Israel* portion of the synagogue liturgy:

"For what reason does the [paragraph beginning with the word] '*Sh·ma*' precede the [paragraph beginning with] '*V·hayah im shamo*'? So that one should first accept upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and [only] after that accept upon oneself the yoke of the *mitzvot*." (B'rakhot 2:2; the phrase "yoke of the *mitzvot*" also occurs in Sifra 57b).

In this *mishna* the term "yoke" does not imply an oppressive burden any more than Yeshua's yoke does. Accepting the "yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven" means acknowledging God's sovereignty and his right to direct our lives. Once one acknowledges his right to direct our lives, it is obvious that if he has given commandments we should obey them. The same is true of Yeshua, who put it this way (Yn 14:15): "If you love me" (compare the first paragraph of the *Sh·ma*), "you will keep my commands" (compare the second).

So then, if the "yoke of the commandments" is not burdensome, what is Kefa talking about? He is speaking here of the detailed mechanical rule-keeping, regardless of heart attitude, that some (but not all!) *P·rushim*, including, apparently, the ones mentioned in v. 5, held to be the essence of Judaism. This was not the "yoke of the *mitzvot*" prescribed by God, but a yoke of legalism prescribed by men! The yoke of legalism is indeed

¹⁶ Tim Hegg, Torah Resource, Acts 15 and the Jerusalem council

unbearable, but the yoke of the *mitzvot* has always required, first of all (Mk 12:28–34), love of God and neighbor; and it now implies love toward Yeshua the Messiah. But love can *never* be legalistic! Sha’ul too spoke of legalism as a “yoke of slavery” (Ga 5:1&N); see his detailed exposition of the subject in Romans 1–11, and see Ga 2:16bN.¹⁷

Acts 15:11

But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

Peter is magnificent: “We shall be saved, even as they” (last recorded words of Peter recorded in Acts).

Note change since being filled with the Spirit; in the Gospels, he only opened his mouth to change feet...

One of the biggest arguments is implied here. These Gentiles were saved, they weren’t circumcised, and this had been happening for years. The Gentiles were already saved—why would they have to be circumcised?

“We believe that through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they are.” Notice the inversion, “we Jews can be saved even as the Gentiles are...”

[grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved] This is why salvation cannot be of works (Romans 3:23-31; Romans 4:2,6; Romans 9:11; Romans 11:6; Galatians 2:16; Galatians 3:2-14; Ephes. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). This does not, however, mean that grace will remit sins without repentance and faith (Luke 13:1-5; Ephes. 2:8-9), or keep one automatically justified without walking and living in the Spirit (Romans 6:14-23; Romans 8:1-13; Galatians 5:16-26; Col. 1:6-7; Col. 3:5-10; 1 John 1:7). Neither does this mean that Jews are saved by the law and Gentiles by grace (Acts 15:11; Romans 10:9-17; 1 Cor. 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Col. 3:11).

These are the last words of Peter in Acts. See them used against him in Galatians 2:14-21.

Clarke: Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved—This seems to be an answer to an objection, “Has not God designed to save us, the Jews, by an observance of the law; and them, the Gentiles, by the faith of the Gospel?” No: for we Jews can be saved no other way than through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ; and this is the way in which the Gentiles in question have been saved. There is but one way of salvation for Jews and Gentiles, the grace, mercy, or favor coming by and through the Lord Jesus, the Christ; this is now fully opened to the Gentiles; and we believe we shall be saved in the same way.

¹⁷ Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 15:10). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

Acts 15:12

Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

Notice that it is here stated: “Barnabas and Paul,” why, when Paul is usually noted first? Barnabas is better known to this group.

[multitude kept silence] Peter’s arguments were unanswerable because they were so simple, clear, and God-confirmed.

[gave audience to Barnabas and Paul] These apostles came forward as the next speakers to corroborate what Peter had said, by showing what God did for Gentiles without keeping the law.

Clarke: Gave audience to Barnabas and Paul—These apostles came forward next, to corroborate what Peter had said, by showing the miracles and wonders which God had by them wrought among the Gentiles. Peter stated facts: Paul and Barnabas confirmed the statement.

Acts 15:13

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men *and* brethren, hearken unto me:

[James] The next speaker was James—the Lord’s brother, chairman of the conference—who gave the final sentence (Acts 15:19). (There are four different Jameses.)

Barnes: Hearken unto me. This whole transaction shows that Peter had no such authority in the church as the Papists pretend, for otherwise his opinion would have been followed without debate. James had an authority not less than that of Peter. It is possible that he might have been next in age, (comp. 1 Corinthians 15:7;) and it seems morally certain that he remained for a considerable part of his life in Jerusalem, Acts 12:17, 21:18 Galatians 1:19, 2:9,12.

Acts 15:14

Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.

fullness of Gentiles (Rom 11:1...25-27).

[Simeon hath declared] James did not even address Peter by the name the Lord gave at the time he was supposed to be made head of the church and vicar of Christ (Matthew 16:18). Thus, James did not understand the Lord to have given Peter this preeminence, so did not call him Peter, but Simeon.

Acts 15:15

And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

[**And to this agree the words of the prophets**] The prophets predicted the salvation of the Gentiles (Isaiah 11:10; Isaiah 42:1,6; Isaiah 49:6,22; Isaiah 60:3; Isaiah 66:19; Romans 9:25-33; Malachi 1:11; Amos 9:10-11).

Clarke: And to this agree the words of the prophets—Peter had asserted the fact of the conversion of the Gentiles; and James shows that that fact was the fulfillment of declarations made by the prophets.

Barnes: The words of the prophets. Amos 9:11,12. It was a very material point with them, as Jews, to inquire whether this was in accordance with the predictions of the Scriptures. The most powerful revivals of religion, and the most striking demonstrations of the Divine Presence, will be in accordance with the Bible, and should be tested by it. This habit was always manifested by the apostles and early Christians, and should be followed by Christians at all times. Unless a supposed work of grace accords with the Bible, and can be defended by it, it must be false, and should be opposed. Comp. Isaiah 8:20.

BKC: 15-18. Quite properly the council desired more than the testimony of experience. They wanted to know how it corresponded with the witness of the Scriptures. This was the ultimate test.

To prove that Gentile salvation apart from circumcision was an Old Testament doctrine, James quoted from Amos 9:11-12. Several problems are involved in this quotation.

One problem involves the text. James here quoted a text similar to the Septuagint (the Gr. OT) that differs from the Hebrew text. The Hebrew of Amos 9:12 may be translated, “That they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations who are called by My name.” But James used the noun **of men** (or “of mankind”), not “Edom,” and the verb **seek**, not “possess.”

The Hebrew consonants for “Edom” and for “Adam” are identical (’ dm). The confusion in the vowels (added much later) is easy to understand. The only distinction in the Hebrew between “possess” (yāraš) and “seek” (dāraš) is in one consonant. The text James used may well represent the original.

Another problem, the major one, involves interpretation. What did Amos mean when he wrote these verses, and how did James use the passage? Several observations need to be noted before the passage is interpreted: (1) James did not say Amos 9:11-12 was *fulfilled* in the church; he simply asserted that what was happening in the church was **in full agreement** with the Old Testament **prophets**. (2) The word “prophets” is plural, implying that the quotation from Amos was representative of what the prophets in general affirmed. (3) James’ main point is clear: Gentile salvation apart from the Law does not contradict the Old Testament prophets. (4) The words **After this** are neither in

Gr. Greek
OT Old Testament

the Masoretic text nor the Septuagint; both have “in that day.” Any interpretation of the passage must consider these factors.

Bible students interpret these verses in one of three ways. Those who hold to amillennial theology say the rebuilt house (*skēnēn*, “tent”) of David is the church which God is using to preach to the Gentiles. While this view at first appears plausible, several factors oppose it. (1) The verb **return** (*anastrepsō*) used in Acts 15:16 means an actual return. Luke used it only in 5:22 (“went back”) and here (he did not use it in his Gospel); in both occurrences it describes a literal, bodily return. Since God’s Son has not yet returned bodily, this rebuilding has not taken place. (2) Christ’s present ministry in heaven is not associated with the Davidic throne elsewhere in the New Testament. He is now seated at the right hand of God (Ps. 110:1; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). When He returns He will sit on David’s throne (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:4; Matt. 19:28; 25:31). (3) The church was a mystery, a truth not revealed to Old Testament saints (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:5-6; Col. 1:24-27); so the church would not be referred to in Amos.

A second view of the passage is commonly held by premillenarians. According to this view there are four chronological movements in this passage: the present Church Age (“taking from the Gentiles a people for Himself,” Acts 15:14), the return of Christ to Israel (v. 16a), the establishing of the Davidic kingdom (v. 16b), and the turning of Gentiles to God (v. 17). While this does interpret these verses in a logical fashion, this approach has some difficulties. (1) The quotation begins with the words “After this.” Premillenarians assert James used this phrase to suit his interpretation of the passage. But since the quotation begins with “after this” James must be quoting the sense of Amos 9:11. Therefore this phrase looks back, not to Acts 15:14, but to Amos 9:8-10, which describes the Tribulation (“a time of trouble for Jacob,” Jer. 30:7). (2) If the temporal phrase “after this” refers to the present Age in Amos 9:11, Amos would then have predicted the church in the Old Testament.

A third view, also premillennial, may be more plausible. James simply asserted that Gentiles will be saved in the Millennium when Christ will return **and rebuild David’s fallen tent**, that is, restore the nation Israel. Amos said nothing about Gentiles needing to be circumcised. Several factors support this interpretation: (1) This fits the purpose of the council. If Gentiles will be saved in the Kingdom Age (the Millennium), why should they become Jewish proselytes by circumcision in the Church Age? (2) This approach suits the meaning of “in that day” in Amos 9:11. After the Tribulation (Amos 9:8-10) God will establish the messianic kingdom (Amos 9:11-12). James (Acts 15:16) interpreted “in that day” to mean that “at the time when” God does one (the Tribulation) He will then do the other. In that sense James could say “After this.” (3) This interpretation gives significance to the word “first” in verse 14. Cornelius and his household were among the first Gentiles to become members of Christ’s body, the church. Gentile salvation will culminate in great blessing for them in the Millennium (cf. Rom. 11:12). (4) A number of prophets predicted Gentile salvation in the Millennium, as James stated in Acts 15:15 (e.g., Isa. 42:6; 60:3; Mal. 1:11).¹⁸

v. verse

cf. *confer*, compare

e.g. *exempli gratia*, for example

Acts 15:16

After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

“After this I will return...” Quoting Amos 9:11, 12.

He is answering the implied question: If a Gentile does not have to come under the Law, what is the future of Israel?

“After this” refers to the calling out of the Gentiles. After that he will return. Who? Jesus.

Romans 9, 10, 11 - Paul deals with the future role of Israel.

Romans 11:25 - “until” implies that the blindness will be lifted.

Fullness of the Gentiles is that group of people that God, in his foreknowledge, has predestinated to be in the Body of Christ.

Postponement of the Kingdom and the calling out of the church: “a mystery” (Eph 3:3-6).

Thus, “after this” is after the fullness of the Gentiles. After this, two things happen:

- 1) Blindness is relieved from Israel;
- 2) The return of Jesus Christ.

Bible does not promise a conversion of the world in this age: only a remnant (always, only a remnant).

Tabernacle of David? (1 Chr 15:1). “Ruins” = things dug down.

[After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is falled down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up] The 19th Old Testament prophecy fulfilled in Acts (Acts 15:16-17; Amos 9:11-12). Next, Acts 26:23. After this, that is, after the completion of the church age and after the rapture of the church, God will begin to rebuild the nation of Israel getting it ready for the eternal reign of the Messiah (Hosea 3:4-5; Isaiah 9:6-7; Daniel 7:13-14; Luke 1:32-33; Rev. 11:15; Rev. 20:1-10; Rev. 22:4-5). The actual return of the Messiah and setting up the kingdom of David again will be when Christ returns (Matthew 24:29-31; Matthew 25:31-46; 2 Thes. 1:7-10; Rev. 19:11-21; Zech. 14).¹⁹

[tabernacle] Greek: *skene* (GSN-4633), tent, signifying the lowliness of its condition when He comes to raise it up. It will be in ruins when He comes (Zech. 14:1-5,14).

¹⁸Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:394). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁹ Dake Study Notes, Dake's Study Bible

Barnes: After this. This quotation is not made literally either from the Hebrew or the Septuagint, which differs also from the Hebrew. The 17th verse is quoted literally from the Septuagint; but in the 16th the general sense only of the passage is retained. The *main point* of the quotation, as made by James, was to show that, according to the prophets, it was contemplated that the Gentiles should be introduced to the privileges of the children of God; and on this point the passage has a direct bearing. The prophet Amos Amos 9:8-10 had described the calamities that should come upon the nation of the Jews, by their being scattered and driven away. This implied that the city of Jerusalem, and the temple, and the walls of the city, should be destroyed. But *after that* (Heb. "on that day," Amos 9:11; that is, the day when he should revisit them, and recover them) he would restore them to their former privileges; would rebuild their temple, their city, and their walls, Amos 9:11. And not only so-not only should the blessing descend on the Jews, but it should also be extended to others. The "remnant of Edom," "the heathen upon whom" his "name would be called," (Amos 9:12,) should also partake of the mercy of God, and be subject to the Jewish people; and the time of general prosperity and of permanent blessings should follow, Amos 9:13-15. James understands this as referring to the times of the Messiah, and to the introduction of the gospel to the Gentiles. And so the passage (Amos 9:12) is rendered in the Septuagint. See Acts 15:17.

BBC: James refers to "the Prophets" (plural) in this case because he is speaking of the scroll containing the twelve smaller books of the prophets, including Amos.

"Tabernacle of David" (Amos 9:11) probably means the "house [line] of David," fallen into such pitiable disrepair that it is called merely a tabernacle (KJV, NASB), or tent (NIV). Rebuilding David's house would mean raising up a Messiah after the Davidic line's rule had been cut off. The Dead Sea Scrolls also cited this text as messianic, along with 2 Samuel 7:10b-14. (Since the Old Testament rarely explicitly associates the tabernacle with the prophetic worship David instituted in 1 Chron. 25, the interpretation that reads this passage as a restoration of Davidic worship is less likely. Amos and Acts refer to the restoration of the splendor of David's kingdom, and the charismatic worship of 1 Chron. 25 presumably was already occurring around the time of Acts 15; cf. 1 Cor. 14.)

Acts 15:17

That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

[**residue of men**] The remnant of Israel (Isaiah 1:9), and the Gentiles who will seek after the Lord and call upon His name.

Barnes: That the residue of men. This verse is quoted literally from the Septuagint, and differs in some respects from the Hebrew. The phrase, "the residue of men," here is evidently understood, both by the Seventy and by James, as referring to others than the Jews- to the Gentiles. The *rest* of the world-implying that many of them would be admitted to the friendship and favour of God. The Hebrew is, "that they may possess the remnant of Edom." This change is made in the Septuagint by a slight difference in the

reading of two Hebrew words. The Seventy, instead of the Hebrew shall *inherit*, read , *shall seek of thee*; and instead of *Edom* they read , *Man*, or *mankind*, i.e. men. Why this variation occurred, cannot be explained; but the sense is not materially different. In the Hebrew, the word *Edom* has undoubted reference to another nation than the Jewish; and the expression means, that in the great prosperity of the Jews, after their return, they should extend the influence of their religion to other nations; that is, as James applies it, the *Gentiles* might be brought to the privileges of the children of God.

Acts 15:18

Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

[**Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world**] God has a plan and it is known to Him from the beginning of the ages. The Bible is the revelation of that plan.

Acts 15:19

Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

[**Wherefore my sentence is**] Proof that James, not Peter, was president of the council and gave the final sentence of the conference.

JNTC: The *Goyim* who are turning. Or: “the *Goyim*, while they are turning.” Joseph Shulam expounds the second alternative thusly: Do not put obstacles in the way of the Gentiles while they are going through the process of turning from idolatry to God. Instead, let them use their spiritual energy in repentance. There will be plenty of opportunities later for them to absorb what Moses has to say (v. 21&N).²⁰

Acts 15:20

But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

Idolatry and fornication: two chief sins of the Gentiles. Things strangled and from blood are two things which would be particularly offensive to a Jew, because they deal with pagan worship.

Barnes: Pollutions of idols. The word rendered *pollutions* means any kind of defilement. But here it is evidently used to denote the flesh of those animals that were offered in sacrifice to idols. See Acts 15:29. That flesh, after being offered in sacrifice, was often exposed for sale in the markets, or was served up at feasts, 1 Corinthians 10:25-29. It

²⁰Stern, D. H. (1996, c1992). *Jewish New Testament Commentary : A companion volume to the Jewish New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Ac 15:19). Clarksville: Jewish New Testament Publications.

became a very important question whether it was *right* for Christians to partake of it. The Jews would contend that it was, in fact, partaking of idolatry. The Gentile converts would allege that they did not eat it *as a sacrifice* to idols, or lend their countenance in any way to the idolatrous worship where it had been offered. See this subject discussed at length in 1 Corinthians 8:4-13. As idolatry was forbidden to the Jews in every form, and as partaking even of the sacrifices to idols, in their feasts, might seem to countenance idolatry, the Jews would be utterly opposed to it; and for the sake of peace, James advised that they be recommended to abstain from this. To partake of that food might not be morally wrong, (1 Corinthians 8:4,) but it would give occasion for scandal and offence; and, therefore, as a matter of expediency, it was advised that they should abstain from it.

Barnes: And from fornication, The word used here-πορνείας- is applicable to all illicit intercourse; and may refer to adultery, incest, and licentiousness in any form. There has been much diversity of opinion in regard to this expression. Interpreters have been greatly perplexed to understand why this violation of the *moral* law has been introduced amidst the violations of the *ceremonial* law; and the question is naturally asked, whether this was a sin about which there could be any debate between the Jewish and Gentile converts? Were there any who would practise it, or plead that it was lawful? If not, why is it prohibited here? Various interpretations have been proposed. Some have supposed that James refers here to the *offerings* which harlots would make of their gains to the service of religion, and that James would prohibit the reception of it.

Barnes: And from things strangled. That is, from animals or birds that were killed without shedding their blood. The reason why these were considered by the Jews unlawful to be eaten was, that thus they would be under a necessity of eating blood, which was positively forbidden by the law. Hence it was commanded in the law, that when any beast or fowl was taken in a snare, the blood should be poured out before it was lawful to be eaten, Leviticus 17:13.

Barnes: And from blood. The eating of blood was strictly forbidden to the Jews. The reason of this was that it contained *the life*, Leviticus 17:11,14. Romans 3:25. The use of blood was common among the Gentiles. They *drank* it often at their sacrifices, and in making covenants or compacts. To separate the Jews from them in this respect was one design of the prohibition.

LAN: James' judgment was that Gentile believers did not have to be circumcised, but they should stay away from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality (a common part of idol worship), and from eating meat of strangled animals and from consuming blood (reflecting the Biblical teaching that the life is in the blood—Leviticus 17:14). If Gentile Christians would abstain from these practices, they would please God and get along better with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. Of course, there were other actions inappropriate for believers, but the Jews were especially concerned about these four. This compromise helped the church grow unhindered by the cultural differences of Jews and Gentiles. When we share our message across cultural and economic boundaries, we must be sure that the requirements for faith we set up are God's, not people's.

Acts 15:21

For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.

[**him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day**] Preach his law every sabbath.

Acts 15:22

Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; *namely*, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

Not to be confused with Judas the brother of James, etc. (Nothing more known than here.)

[**Silas**] Called Silvanus (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1; 1 Peter 5:12). A chief man in the church at Jerusalem. Became Paul's companion (Acts 15:40-41; Acts 16:19-29; Acts 17:4-15; Acts 18:5). A prophet (Acts 15:27,32-34). Took Peter's letter to Asia Minor (1 Peter 5:12).

Silas (= Silvanus in the epistles): Paul's close companion on his Second Missionary journey.

Clarke: Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole Church—James determined what ought to be done; and the whole assembly resolved how that should be done.

it pleased the apostles and elders: It is interesting to note the process the council followed in resolving this conflict. First, the problem was clearly stated: Each side was presented in a debate. Second, the facts were presented by those who were acquainted with them. Third, the counsel was given by a person who was trusted for his objectivity and wisdom. Fourth, unanimity was sought in the decision. Fifth, the attitude of preserving the unity of the Spirit remained utmost on the council's mind. This same formula would be helpful in resolving conflicts found within the church today. **chosen men of their own company:** The **apostles and elders** sent a representative from both sides of the dispute—a Judean (**Judas**) and a Hellenist (**Silas**)—along with Paul and Barnabas to bolster and confirm the ruling of the council.²¹

²¹ The Nelson Study Bible

Acts 15:23

And they wrote *letters* by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren *send* greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:

And they wrote ... by them—This is the first mention in the New Testament history of *writing* as an element in its development. And the combination here of written and oral transmission of an important decision reminds us of the first occasion of writing mentioned in the Old Testament, where a similar combination occurs (Ex 17:14). But whereas *there* it is the deep *difference* between Israel and the Gentiles which is proclaimed, here it is the *obliteration of that difference* through faith in the Lord Jesus [BAUMGARTEN].²²

Acts 15:24

Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, *Ye must* be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no *such* commandment:

Rom 2:28, 29; Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4; Deut 9:24-26 (Circumcision is of the heart, far beyond the symbol of the circumcision of the flesh.)

John 8:12-44; Luke 10:49-59. Note: Sincerity not enough: they were sincere...

Acts 15:25

It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

Acts 15:26

Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Clarke: Men that have hazarded their lives—This was a high character of Paul and Barnabas: they had already suffered much in the cause of Christ, and exposed their lives to the most imminent danger, and were intent on the same work, notwithstanding the increasing dangers in the way.

Barnes: Men that have hazarded their lives, etc. See Acts 14. This was a noble testimony to the character of Barnabas and Paul. It was a commendation of them to the confidence of the churches, and an implied expression that they wished their authority to be regarded in the establishment and organization of the church.

²²Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A commentary, critical and explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments*. On spine: Critical and explanatory commentary. (Ac 15:23). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Acts 15:27

We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell *you* the same things by mouth.

[**who shall also tell you the same things by mouth**] They would confirm the fact that the letters were not forged.

Clarke: Judas and Silas—shall—tell you the same things—These were proofs that the testimony of Paul and Barnabas was true; and that the letter was not forged, as they could witness the same things which the letter contained.

Acts 15:28

For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things;

Barnes: For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost. This is a strong and undoubted claim to inspiration. It was with special reference to the organization of the church that the Holy Spirit had been promised to them by the Lord Jesus, Matthew 18:18-20, John 14:26.

Acts 15:29

That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

LAN: This letter answered their questions and brought great joy to the Gentile Christians in Antioch (Acts 15:31). Beautifully written, it appeals to the Holy Spirit's guidance and explains what is to be done as though the readers already knew it. It is helpful when believers learn to be careful not only in what they say, but also in how they say it. We may be correct in our content, but we can lose our audience by our tone of voice or by our attitude.

Hegg: The Four Requirements

Why these four? Is there some commonality that binds them together?

Were the Four Requirements Really the Noachide Laws?!

It is not uncommon for scholars to reference the Noachide Laws when discussing the edict drawn up by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. Various authors have indicated their belief that the four things required of the Gentiles were a "short list" of the Noachide Laws.

The Noachide Laws were considered by the Sages to be the foundational commandments given to the generation before the flood and exemplified in the life of Noah. As such, the rabbis accepted these to be the commandments necessary for a Gentile to follow in order to be considered righteous and have a place in the world to come. According to the Rabbis, the Torah was given to Israel and the Noachide Laws to the Gentiles.

The Babylonian Talmud lists the Noachide Laws as seven: 1) prohibition of idolatry, 2) prohibition of blasphemy, 3) prohibition of bloodshed, 4) prohibition of sexual sins, 5) prohibition of theft, 6) prohibition of eating flesh from a live animal, and 7) requirement to establish a legal system. But to derive these seven from Genesis I-II requires reading between the lines.

It should be noted that nothing even remotely akin to such a formulation is found in the earlier Mishnah. Never does the Mishnah mention a body of laws that, if followed, would render a Gentile righteous and therefore fit for the world to come. What is more, it is not until the era of the Babylonian Talmud (400-600 CE) that these laws were categorized under the name of Noah and prescribed as a requirement for righteous Gentiles. In the Mishnah a place in the world to come is reserved only for Israel, meaning that the only hope for Gentiles was to become proselytes.

To have given the Gentiles a different set of laws by which they would be received into the fellowship of the Messianic community was to have undermined the very message of the Apostolic Gospel. And what we know of Paul's Gospel from his epistles, it is certain he would have never acquiesced to a message that prescribed one way for the Jew and another way for the Gentile.

Hegg: The Four Requirements as Fences Against Idol Worship

One thing is clear: the four requirements given to the Gentile believers were viewed by the Apostles as essential. But grouped as they are they comprise a specific message to the Gentiles about a specific issue. Obviously the Apostles were not suggesting to the Gentile believers that all morality and ethical guidelines were summed up in these four! No, a major issue—an essential one, is described by these four, one that the Apostles knew was a "make-or-break" matter. I would like to suggest that the four things prohibited find a commonality in idol worship in the pagan temples.

From a Jewish perspective, nothing characterized the Gentiles more than idolatry. And nothing was more abhorrent. The issue was taken care of with the proselyte, for in submitting to the rabbinic ritual of circumcision, the Gentile essentially left his family and social relations and became a member of the Jewish community. As a consequence he distanced himself from the pagan community and idolatry it promoted. What is more, in taking on the full burden of the rabbinic laws, the proselyte was forever separated from his own culture by the many fences of the rabbis. Indeed, there was no "short list" for the proselyte.

But if Gentiles were allowed into the congregation and community without the requirement of becoming a proselyte, how was the community to be assured that they had made a final break with idolatry? Without the many prohibitions involving touching, handling, eating, etc., how could one be certain the Gentiles, living within the pagan culture, were not participating in the idolatry of their upbringing?

Here is where the Jerusalem Council saw the need for Gentiles to submit to some of the manmade laws. The Jewish community needed to be satisfied that the Gentiles were no longer idolators, and that they had forever turned their backs on this capital crime. In order to make such assurances, the Apostles required the Gentile believers to take on the "yoke" and "burden" of manmade laws in the area of idolatry. The Oral Torah contained "fences" to protect from idolatry fences not found in Scripture. Yet in the realm of idol

worship these fences were considered essential to maintain a clear separation from the idolatry that was the warp and woof of Greek and Roman culture.

The four stipulations are listed twice in Acts 15, one that seems to be a kind of preliminary "rough draft," and a second that is the "final edition" and committed to writing for distribution to the congregations.

Acts 15:20	Acts 15:29
1. abstain from things contaminated by idols and 2. from fornication and 3. from what is strangled and 4. from blood	1. that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and 2. from blood and 3. from things strangled and 4. from fornication

There are some apparent differences: fornication and blood are switched in the order of the lists, and the matter of idolatry is identified first as things "contaminated" but secondly as food "sacrificed" to idols. But there is also a difference not seen in the English translation. In the first list each of the four prohibitions contains the article "the"- "*the* things contaminated by idols, *the* fornication, *the* (things) strangled, and *the* blood." [n the second list the article ("the") before each item is missing. Since the second list leaves out the articles ("the"), it consists of only four words connected by the word "and." As we would expect, the reiteration of the council's decision in Acts 21 :25 conforms word for word to the written edition of the edict.

Acts 15:30

So when they were dismissed, they came to Antioch: and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle:

Acts 15:31

Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation.

Rejoicing as a division of the church was avoided!

Clarke: They rejoiced for the consolation—It was not a matter of small moment to have a question on which such stress was laid decided by an apostolic council, over which the Spirit of God presided.

Acts 15:32

And Judas and Silas, being prophets also themselves, exhorted the brethren with many words, and confirmed *them*.

Barnes: Being prophets. Acts 11:27. This evidently implies that they had been preachers before they went to Antioch. What was the precise nature of the office of a *prophet* in the Christian church, it is not easy to ascertain. Possibly it may imply that they were *teachers* of unusual or remarkable ability.

Acts 15:33

And after they had tarried *there* a space, they were let go in peace from the brethren unto the apostles.

[apostles] Greek: *apostolos* (GSN-652), a delegate, one sent with full power of attorney to act in the place of another, the sender remaining behind to back up the one sent. In the case of Christians it means God sends them to do what He, Himself would do if He went. It is found 81 times and translated apostle 78 times; messenger twice (2 Cor. 8:23; Phil 2:25); and once he that is sent (John 13:16).

Twenty-four Apostles Recorded (Dake):

1. Simon Peter and his brother—
2. Andrew (Matthew 10:2)
3. James, son of Zebedee and
4. John his brother (Matthew 10:2)
5. Philip and his brother—
6. Bartholomew (Matthew 10:3)
7. James, son of Alphaeus and
8. Judas his brother (Luke 6:16) and
9. Matthew, son of Alphaeus, perhaps brother of James and Judas (Mark 2:14; Luke 6:15)
10. Thomas (Matthew 10:3)
11. Simon Zelotes, brother of James and Judas, according to tradition (Luke 6:15)
12. Judas Iscariot (Matthew 10:4)
13. Matthias (Acts 1:26)
14. Barnabas (1 Cor. 9:5-6; Acts 13:1-3; Acts 14:4,14; Galatians 2:9)
15. Andronicus (Romans 16:7)
16. Junia (Romans 16:7)
17. Apollos (1 Cor. 4:6-9)
18. James, the Lord's brother (Galatians 1:19; Galatians 2:6; James 1:1)
19. Silas (1 Thes. 1:1; 1 Thes. 2:6)
20. Timothy (1 Thes. 1:1; 1 Thes. 2:6)
21. Titus (2 Cor. 8:23)
22. Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25)
23. Paul (Galatians 1:1; Galatians 2:8)
24. Jesus Christ (Hebrews 3:1)

Acts 15:34

Notwithstanding it pleased Silas to abide there still.

Acts 15:35

Paul also and Barnabas continued in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

Time is summarized. A substantial amount of time goes by before v. 36.

Acts 15:36

And some days after Paul said unto Barnabas, Let us go again and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they do.

Paul “mothers” the churches, he prays for them, writes them, keeps in touch with them, counsels them...

[**where we have preached**] Referring to the churches they had founded on the first missionary journey

Clarke: Let us go—and visit our brethren in every city—This heavenly man projected a journey to Cyprus, Pamphylia, Pisidia, Lycaonia, Salamis, Paphos, Perga, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Antioch in Pisidia, and elsewhere; for in all these places he had preached and founded Churches in the preceding year. He saw it was necessary to water the seed he had planted; for these were young converts, surrounded with impiety, opposition, and superstition, and had few advantages among themselves.

BKC: 36-41. Later when **Paul** proposed to **Barnabas** a return trip to confirm the churches established on their first journey, **Barnabas wanted to take . . . Mark with them.** Paul disagreed with this suggestion because Mark **had deserted them** earlier, in **Pamphylia** (cf. 13:13). The argument became **such a sharp disagreement** (*paroxysmos*, “provoking, stirring up, arousing,” the root of the Eng. “paroxysm”) **that they parted company.** The Lord overruled in this dissension for through it two missionary journeys instead of one were formed—one to **Cyprus** with **Barnabas** and **Mark**, and the other to **Syria and Cilicia** and ultimately Europe with **Paul** and **Silas**. Probably both Paul and Barnabas were right in their assessments of Mark. It may have been too soon for Mark to venture out with such a pro-Gentile apostle as Paul, but Barnabas certainly and correctly saw good raw material in his cousin Mark (cf. Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phile. 24; 1 Peter 5:13). Paul later spoke of Barnabas in positive terms (1 Cor. 9:6; Col. 4:10). The Apostle Paul owed much to Barnabas and it appears they remained friends despite their contention over Mark.

Neither Mark nor Barnabas are seen again in the Book of Acts; the same is true of Peter following the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

Paul’s choice of Silas, whose Roman name (in Gr.) was Sylvanus (2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:1; 1 Peter 5:12), was a wise one: (1) He was an official representative of the Jerusalem church in taking to Antioch the decree of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22). (2) He was a Roman citizen (16:37). (3) He was a prophet (15:32). (4) The church at Antioch knew him well, so both Paul and Silas were **commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord.** (5) Because Silas served as Peter’s amanuensis, it may be concluded he was skilled in the Greek language (cf. 1 Peter 5:12). The ministry of Paul and Silas involved their **strengthening the churches** (cf. Acts 14:22; 15:32).²³

cf. *confer*, compare
Eng. English
Gr. Greek

²³Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:396). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Acts 15:37

And Barnabas determined to take with them John, whose surname was Mark.

John Mark, Barnabas was his uncle and he had left earlier.

[determined] Greek: *bouleuo* (GSN-1011), deliberate determination, whether in accordance with, or contrary to the original wish or impulse (Mark 15:15; Acts 5:28,33; Acts 12:4; Acts 15:37; Acts 18:27; Acts 19:30; Acts 22:30; Acts 23:28; Acts 28:18).

[John] Mark had left them on the first missionary journey and gone home, so Paul did not think it best to take him on the second trip (Acts 12:12).

Clarke: Barnabas determined to take with them John—John Mark was his sister’s son; and natural affection might have led him to the partiality here mentioned.

37-40 Apparently John Mark was a kinsman of Barnabas who had encouraged Mark’s participation in the first missionary tour (Acts 13:5), during which Mark probably served as a helper (*hazzan*, Heb.) in the Bible readings. After the second or third stop on the tour, Mark left and “returned” to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). The reason was not recorded. Modern speculations have ranged from bad health, weakness, fear of persecution, or Gentile prejudice, to an inner conviction that he was not called to foreign missionary service. After the Jerusalem Conference and just prior to the second missionary tour, “Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark” (Acts 15:37). Paul did not think well of the idea of taking with him again a man who had earlier left them (v. 38). The two missionary warriors disagreed, and “the contention became so sharp” that it broke up the team (v. 39). They, nonetheless, agreed on the most important factor, that the missionary endeavor should continue. The net result of this disagreement was a doubling of the personnel in foreign missionary service. Understandably, Barnabas took his cousin Mark with him and “sailed to Cyprus,” possibly because Barnabas had many relatives in Cyprus. They continued in missions, not allowing their differences to divert them from their primary task. Silas went with Paul (v. 40), and the work of the gospel went forward. That Barnabas and Mark are not mentioned again in Acts is not a rejection of their ministry. Indeed a survey of the N.T. points to both being used further by God (1 Cor 9:6; Col 4:10; Philem. 24). By the end of his life Paul commends Mark as “useful to me for ministry” (2 Tim 4:11). Luke’s literary and theological interests take him in the direction of Paul. He is interested in the ministry of Paul, and it is Paul’s ministry that he will follow all the way to Rome. By this strategy Luke (1) parallels the ministries of Peter and Paul and (2) successfully records the fulfillment of the prophetic commission of Acts 1:8.²⁴

²⁴ Believer’s Study Bible

Acts 15:38

But Paul thought not good to take him with them, who departed from them from Pamphylia, and went not with them to the work.

Paul won't give Mark a second chance.

“A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city” (Prov 18:19).

Aren't you glad that Barnabas gave Mark another chance? Mark became Peter's amanuensis and converted Peter's gospel from the Aramaic to the Greek which gave us the Gospel of Mark!



Acts 15:39

And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other: and so Barnabas took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus;

Barnabas disappears from the record...

[contention] Greek: *paroxusmos* (GSN-3948), an incitement; a stirring up. It does not necessarily imply anger or ill will, as proved by the only other place this word is used (Hebrews 10:24). They differed and were set in the plan each adopted. Paul was determined because of righteousness, thinking it best for the work of the Lord. John Mark had failed (Acts 13:13), and Paul thought he could not be trusted again. Barnabas was determined because of love for a relative. His love led him to hope for the best. Barnabas would not give up and Paul would not change, so they agreed to

disagree taking different parts of the work. Mark proved so faithful that even Paul later wrote for him (2 Tim. 4:11). In Christ two can differ and not manifest bad tempers. The way it worked out, two parties instead of one accomplished more work than would have been done otherwise.

[Barnabas, took Mark, and sailed unto Cyprus] Barnabas disappears from history here. He took the original route (Acts 13:4) and Paul went by land to Asia Minor.

the contention became so sharp that they parted: There was a heated argument between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark's usefulness to them. Note that Luke does not assign blame for the disagreement. There are times when Christians will not agree on certain aspects of ministry. Perhaps the best course of action in some of those situations is to work separately. Barnabas left with John Mark, refusing to make the disagreement an issue before the church at Antioch. Barnabas had led the church in its early days (11:22–25). He was the church's main representative at the Jerusalem council, but he did not use his prominence to seek a reprimand of Paul. Instead he accepted the situation and proceeded to faithfully serve the Lord.²⁵

Acts 15:40

And Paul chose Silas, and departed, being recommended by the brethren unto the grace of God.

Clarke: Being recommended—unto the grace of God—Much stress has been laid upon this, to show that Barnabas was in the wrong, and Paul in the right, because “the brethren recommended Paul and Silas to the grace of God; but they did not recommend Barnabas and John Mark: this proves that the Church condemned the conduct of Barnabas, but approved that of Paul.” Now, there is no proof that the Church did not recommend Barnabas to the grace of God, as well as Paul; but, as St. Luke had for the present dropped the story of Barnabas, and was now going on with that of Paul and Silas, he begins it at this point, viz. his being recommended by the brethren to the grace of God; and then goes on to tell of his progress in Syria, Derbe, Lystra, etc., etc. See the next chapter. And with this verse should the following chapter begin; and this is the division followed by the most correct copies of the Greek text.

LAN: Silas had been involved in the Jerusalem council and was one of the two men chosen to represent the Jerusalem church by taking the letter and decision back to Antioch (Acts 15:22). Paul, from the Antioch church, chose Silas, from the Jerusalem church, and they traveled together to many cities to spread the Good News. This teamwork demonstrated the church's unity after the decision at the Jerusalem council.

²⁵ The Nelson Study Bible

Paul's Second Missionary Journey

1. From Antioch, through Syria and Cilicia to Derbe, Lycaonia (Acts 15:41-16:1)
2. Lystra, Lycaonia (Acts 16:1)
3. Iconium, Lycaonia (Acts 16:2-4)
4. Through Phrygia, Galatia, and Mysia to Troas (Acts 16:6-8)
5. Across the Aegean Sea to Samothracia and Neapolis (Acts 16:11)
6. Philippi, Macedonia (Acts 16:12-40)
7. Through Amphipolis, Apollonia, to Thessalonica, Macedonia (Acts 17:1-9)
8. Berea, Macedonia (Acts 17:10-14)
9. Athens, Greece (Acts 17:15-34)
10. Corinth, Greece (Acts 18:1-17)
11. Cenchrea, Greece (Acts 18:18)
12. Back across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, Asia Minor (Acts 18:19-21)
13. Caesarea, Samaria (Acts 18:21-22)
14. Jerusalem (Acts 18:22)
15. Back to Antioch, Syria (Acts 18:22)

Acts 15:41

And he went through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches.

Clarke: Confirming the Churches—This was the object of his journey: they were young converts, and had need of establishment; and there is no doubt that, by showing them the decision made at the late council of Jerusalem, their faith was greatly strengthened, their hope confirmed, and their love increased. It was this consideration, no doubt, that led some ancient MSS. and some versions to add here, They delivered them the decrees of the apostles and elders to keep; which clause certainly was not an original part of the text, but seems to have been borrowed from the fourth verse of the following chapter. Some have thought that the fourth and fifth verses of the next chapter really belong to this place; or that the first, second, and third verses of it should be read in a parenthesis; but of this there does not appear to be any particular necessity.

Parallels in the Lives of Peter and Paul	
Peter	Paul
Heals a man lame from birth (3:1-11)	Heals a man lame from birth (14:8-18)
Heals people by his shadow (3:15, 16)	Heals people by handkerchiefs or aprons (19:11, 12)
Success a cause for Jewish jealousy (5:17)	Success a cause for Jewish jealousy (13:45)
Confronts Simon, a sorcerer (8:9-24)	Confronts Bar-Jesus, a sorcerer (13:6-11)
Raises Tabitha (Dorcas) to life (9:36-41)	Raises Eutychus to life (20:9-12)
Is jailed and freed miraculously by God (12:3-19)	Is jailed and freed miraculously by God (16:25-34)

Summary (Hegg)

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was dealing with a specific issue: was it necessary for Gentiles to become proselytes and thus take on the full weight of the man-made laws of the Sages in order to be accepted within the Jewish community. The Council voiced a unified "no" to this question. Using "circumcision" as a short-hand designation for "the ritual of becoming a proselyte," the Council determined that the Gentiles would not need to be circumcised (i.e., become proselytes) in order to be received into the Torah community.

There was, however, the need to assure the Jewish community that those Gentiles who had confessed Yeshua as Messiah had genuinely forsaken any form of idolatry. Since the Greek and Roman cultures were centered around idol worship with local pagan temples, it was important that the Jewish community be able to receive the Gentile believers without any suspicion of remaining idolatry.

The Apostles therefore required the Gentiles to accept the extra-biblical, man-made laws regarding idolatry. These were: 1) they should not participate in any meal that was even remotely connected to idol worship, 2) they should not participate in any gathering or ceremony that involved the misuse of blood as a sacrificial element, 3) they should not involve themselves in any ritual or ceremony that involved the strangulation of animals, and they should be careful not to eat meat from animals killed through strangulation (something not uncommon in the pagan sacrificial rituals), and 4) they should distance themselves from any contact with or support of the temple prostitutes and the fornication they represented in the pagan temple precincts.

While the written Torah surely prohibited any worship of idols, the Sages had put a good number of "fences" in place to distance the people from any contact with idolatry. These "fences" were extra-biblical, yet the Apostles considered them essential in showing the clear break the Gentile believers had made with idolatry. But since they were man-

made and not directly from Scripture, they were part of the "yoke" of Oral Torah, the "burden" that the Sages had laid upon the written Scriptures. While the Apostles were not willing to put the Gentiles under the full weight of the traditions (something not even the Jewish people had been able to bear), they did see the need to require the Gentiles to keep this rabbinic *halakah*. Only such a requirement could have fully satisfied the Jewish community that the Gentile believers had made a radical break from their former idol worship.

Mike: There appears to still be much confusion and much disagreement on Acts 15. The resolution to some of the arguments may never be understood in our lifetime; however it will be explained someday. Meanwhile let us live in Shalom!