

The Acts and Torah of the Apostles Study Guide

Chapter 15

15:1-5

- v. 1 – Believing Judeans made their way to Antioch and began teaching a message that had not been taught before—that circumcision according to the Torah was required for anyone to be saved. And since all Jewish believers had already been circumcised, the issue was over the salvation of Gentiles. These men did not have any authority. They simply showed up because they had some convictions that they wanted to see upheld. But they did not have the endorsement of the leadership of the Apostles or even those who had been appointed as elders.

The circumcision requirement advocated by these men was not just a medical procedure. It meant doing the same thing that proselytes to Judaism had to do—taking on the entire Torah and, for all intents and purposes, becoming Jews. Moreover, these teachers were advocating not just Torah observance, but adopting the tradition of the elders, which later became the Oral Law. This is evidenced by their demand that the circumcision be done according to the “custom” (KJV – “manner”) of Moses. But Moses did not describe any “custom” or “manner” when performing circumcision. That is only found in the *Mishnah* portion of the Talmud and the *Mishnah* is the written form of the Oral Law. So, this is an indication that these Messianic believers were still being influenced by rabbinic authority, in the same way that Peter and the other apostles were influenced by the belief that Gentiles were ritually unclean (Acts 10-11).

- v. 2 – We are told that the actions of these teachers led to dissension and debate with Paul and Barnabas, who then decided they had to return to Jerusalem in order to consult with the Apostles and elders there.
- v. 5 – When Paul and Barnabas made their report, a group of Messianic believers who were former Pharisees chimed in by stating their agreement with the advocates of circumcision and Torah observance as requirements for salvation.

15:6-12

- v. 6 – It had become obvious that this was a serious matter and required a determination by the Apostles and Elders. This meeting became known as the Jerusalem Council.
- v. 7-11 – Peter, who was a direct witness of God’s saving work among the Gentiles, then gave his testimony on the matter. He used the imagery of a yoke being placed on the Gentiles. In Hebraic thought a yoke represented a particular way of interpreting Scripture. Rabbis with the authority to interpret Scripture had disciples who were yoked or obligated to their specific interpretations. In this case, Peter was referring to the Pharisaic interpretations of Torah that were very burdensome because they piled on additional requirements to the purity of Torah. And, as he brings out, it became impossible for anyone to bear. This is exactly the same point Yeshua made in Mat 11:30 when He said “My yoke is easy and My load is light” And we know that Yeshua consistently upheld the virtue of the Torah itself while criticizing those who heaped on additional burdens. So, this is not about keeping God’s commandments, but the impossibility of complying with legalistic legalistic and burdensome additions.

v. 12 – Barnabas and Paul then gave their testimony about the legitimacy of God’s work among the Gentiles, which, as we know, did not require adopting any Jewish practices.

When considering the complete context of Scripture, the teaching that circumcision and observing the Torah were required for salvation was clearly in error. > At no place in the *Tanakh* (Old Testament) is salvation contingent on circumcision and observance of Torah. The same is true in the message of Yeshua and the Apostles. Peter, for example, declared that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:21). This teaching further contradicts the salvation of Cornelius in Acts 10, which was based entirely on his belief in the gospel message by faith. Even Judaism teaches that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised in order to inherit the World to Come. And here in v. 11 Peter states that the ultimate message of the Bible that parallels Paul’s declaration in the book of Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works.”

So, while all acts of righteousness, including observing the commandments of the Torah, are commendable for godly living, they cannot save people from their sin. That only comes by grace through faith in Yeshua. Also, the language of the book of Acts up to this point indicates that God was blessing the efforts of those who were taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. If these false teachers were correct, that would mean Paul and Barnabas would have to retrace their steps to the various cities where Gentiles had previously professed faith and then circumcise them and teach them how to obey the Law of Moses, which they had never known in their lives. That would lead to tremendous confusion and contradiction, and that is not God’s way. Of course, the same is true today. Salvation is always by grace through faith alone.

Understanding the Ruling of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13-29)

By the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, James, the brother of Yeshua, had been transformed from a skeptic to a great leader of the believing community of Jerusalem. After hearing the charge by some believers in Yeshua that Gentiles had to become circumcised in order to be saved, and then hearing the testimony of Peter, Barnabas and Paul that it was unnecessary, James then gave his opinion, which would have been considered to be authoritative.

He began in verse 16 by quoting from Amos 9:11-12, a passage that indicates God’s desire for the inclusion of the Gentiles among the people of God, while at the same time, it does not mention any requirement by God that Gentiles adopt the Law of Moses in order to be saved. On the other hand, James was faced with the need to maintain harmony and fellowship within the believing community between Gentiles and their Jewish brothers and sisters who were still Torah observant. So, James had to make a ruling that accommodated both the Gentiles who knew nothing of the Torah and the Jews who had lived it all their lives.

His judgment in verse 19 was not to require Gentiles to adopt the Torah completely. But in the next verse he did call upon them to abstain from four things:

- Things contaminated by idols, which, in the letter to Antioch (v. 29) is described as “things sacrificed to idols,” so it refers to things that are edible.
- Fornication
- Meat that is strangled
- Consuming blood

Several explanations have been proposed for those four requirements:

1. They are derived from the Noahide laws.

That term refers to a rabbinical teaching in the Talmud that says there were seven commandments given to the sons of Noah, and therefore all of humanity:

- Practicing justice
- Abstaining from blasphemy, idolatry, adultery, bloodshed, robbery, and eating the flesh that had been torn from a live animal (*Sanhedrin 56a*).

But if this was the basis that James used, it seems unreasonable for him to leave out practicing justice and abstaining from blasphemy, bloodshed and robbery, while including a prohibition against drinking blood, which is not a Noahide law.¹ So the four requirements of James do not match the Noahide laws. It is also important to note that the Noahide laws did not become established until long after the day described in Acts 15. They are found in the *Gemara* section of the Talmud, is where you find the opinions of rabbis who lived long after the writing of the New Testament, between the third and fifth centuries.² Therefore we can conclude that the Noahide laws had not been determined when the Jerusalem Council took place and were not part of the thinking of James when he gave his judgment.

2. They are based on the provisions within the Torah for the *gerim* (Gentiles who believed in Adonai).³

The four requirements given by James can be found in one section of the book of Leviticus that are specifically given to *gerim*:

- Leviticus 17:8-9
“Any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, and does not bring it to the doorway of the tent of meeting to offer it to Adonai, that man also shall be cut off from his people.”

This commandment calls for offerings to be made to Adonai alone, not to false gods or idols, and that would be consistent with the requirement by James that Gentile believers abstain from things offered to idols.

- Leviticus 17:10-11
“Any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.”

This is consistent with the requirement by James that Gentile believers abstain from

¹ One Talmudic rabbi did give his opinion that all people are called not to drink blood (*Sanhedrin 56b*), but it was an isolated opinion and was not officially included in the Noahide laws.

² The Talmud is comprised of two sections—*Mishnah* and *Gemara*. The *Mishnah* is said to be the Oral Tradition that was known in second temple times, so James would be familiar with those teachings, even if they were not authoritative. But the *Mishnah* makes no reference to any Noahide laws.

³ A *ger* (גֵר) is typically translated into English as “alien, stranger or sojourner,” depending on the translation, and is often identified in contrast to “native-born Israelites.” But the Torah also stipulates that there was to be one law for the native-born and the *ger* (e.g. Ex 12:49).

eating blood. Notice the universal aspect regarding blood in Leviticus 17:11 – it is about the life of all people, not just Jews, so all people not eating blood respects the very nature of life.

- Leviticus 17:13,15 contrast² the appropriateness of eating meat that has been slaughtered, which is the most merciful way, with the inappropriateness of eating meat from an animal that has been torn apart. So, this is consistent with the requirement by James regarding Gentile believers abstaining from eating meat from strangled animals.
- Leviticus 18 describes all of the illicit relationships that are forbidden, such as between blood relatives, animals and same sexes. And once again, these restrictions applied not just to native-born Jews, but to believing Gentiles in the midst of Israel (v. 26). So, this is consistent with the requirement that Gentile believers abstain from similar fornication.

It is reasonable to conclude that James based his ruling on principles that were already established in the Torah and were specifically addressed to believing Gentiles. Altogether, this explanation is rather convincing because it is consistent in regard to all four of the requirements that were established by the Jerusalem Council.

3. The four requirements were intended as a way of allowing Gentiles to fellowship with Jews, and in particular, to share meals with them.

All four of the requirements were common practices within the Jewish community, and violating them would make you, at best, ritually unclean, and at worst, cut off from the community. As a result, eating with Gentiles who violated those prohibitions would make the observant Jews unclean, and James did not want that to happen. By teaching believing Gentiles how to respect the convictions of believing Jews, they could live in harmony.

Regardless of the reason behind this decision, it is important to recognize that none of these requirements deal with the issue of salvation. That issue had been settled, namely that keeping no law or commandment determines your salvation. This was all about maintaining harmony and fellowship in the body.

It is also important to note that the Jerusalem Council did not rule that Torah observance was invalid for Jews. Messianic Jews had remained faithful to the commandments for nearly twenty years after the death and resurrection of Yeshua, which is an indication that the Torah had not been abolished by the Apostles, just as Yeshua did not abolish it (Mat 5:17). Moreover, no prohibition was made by the Jerusalem Council against Gentiles living a Torah observant lifestyle just like their Jewish brothers and sisters in the Lord. What they did establish was complete Torah observance was not *binding* on Gentiles. Only four elements of the Torah, with universal implications and which promoted fellowship within the body, were required.

v. 21 – This verse indicates that this issue will be encountered throughout that part of the world, not just in Antioch, because there were synagogues in virtually every city, even if it had a Gentile majority.

v. 22 – Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas and Silas, brought the letter from the Jerusalem Council to Antioch

v. 23-29 shows the text of the letter sent to Antioch with the determination of the council.

15:30-41

The letter was well received in Antioch. Paul and Barnabas, like they had done previously, remained for a time and continued teaching the body of Messiah there. Then they decided to revisit the congregations they planted on their first missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them, but Paul disagreed because John Mark had abandoned them the first time shortly after getting started. So, they went their separate ways—Barnabas and John Mark traveled to Cyprus by ship, and Paul was accompanied by Silas on an overland route through the part of Syria that reaches the Mediterranean coast, and then to Cilicia, which is eastern Asia Minor. Although the text doesn't state it, the route would naturally take them through Paul's home town of Tarsus. In the next chapter, their route would eventually bring them to the same destinations of their last journey, but from a different direction.