

119

MINISTRIES

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Acts 15 Explained: Did the Apostles Reject the Torah for Gentiles?

Is the Torah, or Law of Moses, relevant to Gentile followers of the Messiah? One passage that speaks to this question is Acts 15, which recounts the events of the Jerusalem Council. This council was convened to settle a dispute that directly relates to this very issue. In contrast to a group of Pharisees, who said that it is necessary to circumcise the Gentiles and order them to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5), the apostles decide that the Gentile believers must follow four prohibitions: abstain from things polluted by idols, sexual immorality, strangled things, and blood (Acts 15:20).

How should we understand this passage? The common antinomian—that is, anti-law—interpretation holds that Acts 15 represents the apostles’ rejection of the Torah, at least for Gentile believers. According to this view, this passage proves that the Torah has nothing to say to Gentile believers, who are instead expected to follow a different set of commandments—namely, the four prohibitions mentioned in verse 20. This comment from R. L. Solberg is representative of this perspective:

Rather than the Law of Moses, [James] offered four things from which they were to abstain. The rest of the elders and apostles agreed, and together they drafted a letter informing Gentile believers of this decision...How can Torah-keepers teach that the Law of Moses is binding on all believers when Scripture says it isn’t?

—R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 117-118

So, according to Solberg, the apostles taught that the Law of Moses does not apply to Gentile believers; instead, they are expected to follow these four prohibitions. And Solberg is certainly not alone in reading Acts 15 this way.

However, in this teaching, we will challenge this common interpretation. We will go through Acts 15 to understand the nature of the dispute, the decision made by the apostles, and what that decision means for the Gentile believer’s relationship to the Torah. We will argue that the apostles’ decision does *not* imply that the Torah is irrelevant to Gentile believers. Actually, it implies precisely the opposite. We will argue that the Jerusalem Council provided Gentile believers a starting point for Torah observance, with the intention that they would continue to grow in their Torah observance over time.

Problems with the Antinomian Interpretation of Acts 15

If you've never considered a pro-Torah perspective on this chapter before, you might be thinking to yourself, "Give me a break! Acts 15 *clearly* shows that the Law of Moses doesn't apply to Gentiles!" When one interpretation has been popular for so long, it can be hard to even consider an alternative perspective. That's why, before we begin our verse-by-verse study of Acts 15, we want to take a moment to point out some key problems with the antinomian view. We hope that highlighting these issues at the outset will give us pause before jumping to conclusions and will invite a more careful reading of the text.

The first problem is that Acts 15:20 directly contradicts the antinomian interpretation. As we mentioned, it is often assumed that in Acts 15, the apostles gave Gentile believers a set of four rules to obey *instead of* the Torah. This has led many to conclude that the Torah is not binding on Gentiles. This view was illustrated earlier in the quote from R. L. Solberg, who stated, "*Rather than the Law of Moses, [James] offered four things from which they were to abstain.*"

However, the apostles did not pull these four commandments out of thin air as a replacement for the Torah. In fact, we find these exact commandments in places like Leviticus 17-18. As we would expect, the apostles turned to the Scriptures to determine what the Gentile believers should do. They derived these four commandments for Gentile believers *directly from the Law of Moses*. Why is this significant? Because this fact directly refutes the antinomian claim that the Law of Moses is not binding on Gentile believers. Acts 15:20 proves that the apostles *did* require Gentile believers to obey the Law of Moses; they explicitly imposed four Torah commandments upon the Gentile believers, three of them pertaining to food.

Second, Acts 15:21 implies that Gentile believers were expected to attend synagogue services on the Sabbath, where they would hear the Law of Moses being proclaimed. The four prohibitions mentioned in verse 20 appear to serve as a starting point, with the expectation that Gentile believers would continue to grow in Torah observance through ongoing instruction and discipleship in the synagogue. We will explore and defend this point more fully later in this teaching. But verse 21 presents another problem for the antinomian view.

Third, beyond Acts 15, there is evidence that both the Messiah and the apostles expected Gentiles to obey the Law of Moses. For instance, in Matthew 28:20, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—told his disciples to teach the Gentiles to obey all that he commanded. In light of Matthew 5:17-20, where he affirms the Torah's ongoing authority and urges his followers to obey even the least of its commandments, it becomes apparent that Yeshua expected his future Gentile disciples to keep the Torah as well. As the scholar Oliver Marjot writes:

[T]he commands of Jesus referred to at [Matthew] 28:20 are intimately related to the Torah, such that the latter is neither abrogated nor replaced, but rather remains in force. It is simplest, then, to accept that Matthew means precisely what he has Jesus say in these verses: that would-be disciples of Jesus should observe the Torah.

—Oliver Marjot, "Israel, Torah and Christ in Matthew and Romans: A Conversation 'within Judaism'" (Ph.D. diss., St Catharine's College, 2022), 82

Additionally, the apostle Paul repeatedly instructs his Gentile readers to obey various commandments from the Torah. In Ephesians 6:1-3, he explicitly tells them to obey the Fifth Commandment, quoting it

directly. In Romans 13:8-10, he requires them to “fulfill the law,” directly quoting Leviticus 19:18—“love your neighbor as yourself”—along with four of the Ten Commandments. He then adds, “and any other commandment,” so he expected them to obey more than just the ones he specifically mentions. In Romans 8:4 and 7, he taught that Spirit-led believers, whether Jew or Gentile, will fulfill the Torah’s righteous requirements, whereas flesh-led believers refuse to submit to the Torah. And finally, in 1 Corinthians 5:8, he even instructs his Jewish and Gentile readers to “celebrate the festival” of Passover. As J. Brian Tucker writes:

The fact that he explicitly mentions a festival suggests that he expects the Corinthian Christ-group to engage in a real Passover celebration, even if it is now imbued with new meaning considering Christ’s sacrifice.

—J. Brian Tucker, *1 Corinthians: A social identity commentary* (New York: T&T Clark, 2024), 130n9

So, both the immediate context of Acts 15 and the broader biblical context indicate that the apostles did not regard the Torah as irrelevant to Gentiles. Quite the opposite! As we’ve seen, even within Acts 15 itself, the apostles directly applied commandments from the Torah to Gentile believers. These facts ought to give us pause before assuming that Acts 15 teaches that the apostles rejected the Torah. But if Acts 15 is *not* saying that the Torah doesn’t apply to Gentile believers, what *is* it saying? Let’s take a fresh look at this important passage.

The Dispute

In the lead-up to the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the early Messianic movement was experiencing rapid growth. Originally made up primarily of Jewish followers of Yeshua, it soon began to include many Gentile believers as well. This was largely due to the missionary work of Paul and Barnabas. However, when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch after preaching the gospel throughout Asia minor, certain men from Judea arrived and began teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation:

Acts 15:1

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

Obviously, the teaching brought by these men from Judea had a significant impact on the Gentile believers that Paul and Barnabas were ministering to. Unlike Jews, who were typically circumcised on the eighth day after birth as commanded in the Torah (Leviticus 12:3), Gentiles were uncircumcised. Therefore, requiring circumcision for salvation placed a considerable burden on the growing number of Gentiles coming to faith.

This issue sparked intense debate between these men from Judea and Paul and Barnabas. To resolve the matter, Paul and Barnabas were appointed to go to Jerusalem and consult with the apostles and elders. Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they were warmly welcomed by the apostles, elders, and believers in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2-4). However, at the council, another group put forward a viewpoint similar to that of the men from Judea mentioned in verse 1:

Acts 15:5

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, “It is necessary

to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

So, both the men from Judea who debated Paul and Barnabas in Antioch, and this group of Pharisees who were present at the council in Jerusalem, insisted that Gentile believers must get circumcised. It is important to understand that verse 1 and verse 5 are describing two different groups because, as we will see later, the apostles counter the positions of both groups separately. James’s ruling in verses 19-21 is countering the Pharisees mentioned in verse 5, and the letter that is sent to the believers in Antioch in verses 24-29 is countering the men from Judea mentioned in verse 1.

Also, note that in verse 5, the Pharisees insisted not only that Gentiles be circumcised but also that they be ordered to keep the Law of Moses. For these Pharisees, circumcision and Torah observance are inseparable. However, as we saw earlier, the apostles expected uncircumcised Gentiles to keep various commandments from the Law of Moses. The real point of disagreement, then, appears to be whether circumcision is necessary for these Gentile believers. As we’ll see, the apostles ultimately decide that circumcision is not necessary, but that does not mean that Gentiles were exempt from keeping the Law of Moses. That is to say, the apostles disagreed with the Pharisees that circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses are inseparable. From the apostles’ perspective, an uncircumcised Gentile who joins the people of God can and should obey the commandments from the Torah that apply to him.

So, before we go further, we should take a moment to look at the role of circumcision.

The Role of Circumcision

Many might be surprised to learn that this dispute between the apostles and Pharisees in Acts 15 is not unique in early Judaism. The first-century Jewish historian Josephus describes a similar situation involving two Jews with differing views on circumcision for Gentiles.

In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus recounts a story—set during the apostles’ lifetime—about a king named Izates. According to Josephus, a Jew named Ananias convinced King Izates, a Gentile, to worship the God of Israel (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.34-35). King Izates became a devoted follower of Judaism and expressed a desire to be circumcised (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.38). However, Ananias advised the king that circumcision was unnecessary, so long as he was fully committed to worshiping God and following the Torah, which Ananias considered more important than circumcision. Here is what Josephus writes:

[Ananias] said, the king could worship God even without circumcision, if he had fully decided to be zealous for the ancestral laws of the Jews, for this is more decisive than being circumcised.

—Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.41 (Quoted in Asha K. Moorthy, *A Seal of Faith: Rereading Paul on Circumcision, Torah, and the Gentiles* [Ph.D. Diss, Columbia University, 2014], 85).

After this, Josephus then introduces another Jewish advisor, Eleazar, who sharply rebuked Izates for not being circumcised and urged him to do so immediately (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.43-45). As a result, Izates sent for a surgeon and got circumcised (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20.46).

What do we learn from this account? This account shows that while some early Jews, like Eleazar, considered circumcision immediately necessary for adult Gentiles, others did not. Some Jews, like Ananias, believed that a Gentile who comes to faith as an adult could worship the God of Israel and keep

the Law of Moses while remaining uncircumcised. In other words, they believed circumcision and Torah observance are not inseparable; that is, Gentile believers could follow the Torah without being circumcised (See Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briarcrest Seminary, 2021), 49-51). In Acts 15, it appears that the Pharisees aligned more closely with Eleazer’s position, whereas the apostles took a position resembling that of Ananias—namely, that circumcision and Torah observance are not inseparable.

But what about the Torah itself? Does the Law of Moses teach that it is necessary for adult Gentiles to get circumcised, or can they be part of the believing community and keep the commandments while uncircumcised? There are three passages in the Torah that provide instructions for circumcision: Genesis 17:10-14, Leviticus 12:3, and Exodus 12:43-49. Let’s briefly go through them, starting with Leviticus 12:3:

Leviticus 12:3

And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.

Here, we see that the commandment for circumcision specifically pertains to infants who are eight days old. That is, the commandment emphasizes the duty of Israelite parents to circumcise their male infants on the eighth day. This verse says nothing about whether adult Gentiles must get circumcised. So, this verse is not relevant to Acts 15. The law says to circumcise your son on the eighth day, not to circumcise adult Gentiles.

Leviticus 12:3 reiterates the command of circumcision given earlier to Abraham in Genesis 17:10-14. Here, again, the law applies specifically to eight-day-old sons of Abraham and thus focuses on the obligation of *the parents* to circumcise their infant sons:

Genesis 17:10-14

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

Here, we see that the commandment of circumcision was given to Abraham and his “offspring” as a sign of the everlasting covenant between God and the children of Abraham. The law also requires that Abraham’s household circumcise their slaves, yet there is no commandment in the text for adult Gentiles who might join the community to undergo circumcision. While it is possible to interpret the mention of “every male among you” as implying an expectation that any male who joins the community must get circumcised, this interpretation is not necessary. In fact, as we will see later, the Torah goes on to *assume* that uncircumcised Gentiles who follow the God of Israel should be welcomed without being circumcised. In any case, the focus of the text is to teach that circumcision is a sign of the covenant for Abraham and his offspring, starting with Isaac (Genesis 17:19; 21:4), and is to be carried out by the parents on the 8th day.

The last passage we will consider is Exodus 12:43-49. Unlike the first two commandments, this passage

does address the matter of circumcision for adults who are *not* physical sons of Abraham. These commandments occur within the context of eating the Passover lamb:

Exodus 12:43-49

And the LORD [YHWH] said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the statute of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him. No foreigner or hired worker may eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones. All the congregation of Israel shall keep it. If a stranger shall sojourn with you and would keep the Passover to the LORD [YHWH], let all his males be circumcised. Then he may come near and keep it; he shall be as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it. There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.”

This passage uses two words that are very important. In verse 43, it says that no “foreigner” is to eat the Passover. But, in verse 48, we are told that a “stranger” can eat the Passover if he and his house become circumcised. What is the difference between the “foreigner” and the “stranger”? In this context, these “foreigners” specifically refer to people who don’t follow the God of Israel. The fact that these foreigners are unbelievers is evident from the fact that the text goes on to distinguish them from the non-Israelite slaves and strangers who are given permission to eat the Passover lamb, provided they get circumcised first. The instruction to circumcise one’s slaves hearkens back to Genesis 17, where sons of Abraham are instructed to circumcise their slaves. But the instruction for strangers is new. *This is the only time when the Torah gives instructions regarding circumcision for adult males.* The “stranger” in this passage refers to a non-native Israelite who follows the God of Israel and wishes to fully partake of the sacrificial meat of the Passover meal—enough that he is willing to undergo circumcision in order to do so.

So, what exactly does this commandment in Exodus 12 require? Does it require an adult Gentile to get circumcised? Yes and no. He does need to get circumcised *if he wishes to be allowed to eat the Passover lamb.*

Remember, Genesis 17 calls circumcision the everlasting covenant sign between Abraham and his descendants. As we will see in a moment, while the Torah does not require adult strangers to get circumcised to belong to the congregation of Israel, it does require them to do so to be allowed to eat the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:48) and expects covenant households to circumcise sons on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3). We expect that, in due season, strangers who join the congregation of Israel would probably *want* to get circumcised to fully participate in Passover and eat the lamb. But again, it is not required to belong to the community or to keep any of the other commandments.

As an analogy, we might compare this to the requirement to go through ritual washing before being allowed to participate in worship at the tabernacle. There is a proper protocol one must observe before being able to participate in certain sacred acts, and eating the Passover sacrifice is along those same lines. However, it is important to notice that this passage is *not a general commandment* for adult Gentiles to get circumcised. This does not diminish circumcision’s covenant significance—it remains the everlasting sign given to Abraham’s household (Genesis 17). However, again, the Torah does not require adult circumcision to join the congregation of Israel.

In fact, this passage in Exodus proves that uncircumcised strangers were included among the people of Israel. Notice that the text assumes that this “stranger” (גֵּר, *ger*) is uncircumcised, hence the command *to get* circumcised before he can eat the sacrificial meat. Why is this significant? Because the Torah itself

repeatedly identifies the stranger as a member of the believing community and requires him to obey the commandments. Even though an uncircumcised stranger is prohibited from eating the Passover lamb, earlier in the same chapter, he is still expected to observe other aspects of the Passover festival, such as removing leaven from his dwelling, eating unleavened bread, and abstaining from leavened foods during the seven-day festival (Exodus 12:18-20). In fact, if either the uncircumcised stranger or the native Israelite refuses to obey these laws, both are subject to the threat of being “[cut off from the congregation of Israel](#)” (Exodus 12:19). If an uncircumcised stranger can be cut off from Israel, that means that, even though he is uncircumcised, he is still already included in the congregation of Israel! These strangers who joined Israel to worship their God were also expected to keep the Sabbath and other festivals (Exodus 20:10; 23:10; Leviticus 16:29; Deuteronomy 16:11-14) and are explicitly regarded as covenant members of the community (Deuteronomy 29:1, 10-14; Joshua 8:30-35). For more on this, see our teaching, “[Is the Torah for Gentiles, Too?](#)”

The Law of Moses does not address the circumcision of Gentiles anywhere else, nor does it state that circumcision is necessary for joining the congregation of Israel or keeping any of the other commandments. Again, the only restriction placed upon uncircumcised strangers is the privilege of being allowed to eat the Passover sacrifice. It’s quite possible that adult uncircumcised strangers could remain uncircumcised their whole lives and participate in all other aspects of Torah life besides eating the Passover lamb.

Now, before we conclude this section, some might suggest that this restriction in Exodus 12 implies a double standard between native Israelites and strangers. But that does not seem to be the point of the passage in Exodus 12 since uncircumcised physical descendants of Abraham are not allowed to eat the Passover lamb either: “[no uncircumcised person shall eat of it](#).” We see this, for example, in Joshua 5. The second-generation Israelites had to be circumcised prior to observing the Passover (Joshua 5:2-12). So, both native Israelites and strangers are subject to the same restriction. Or as Exodus 12:49 puts it: “[There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you](#).” There is no double standard. Exodus 12 is written with the assumption that native Israelites would have already been circumcised on the eighth day, while strangers are assumed to be uncircumcised.

In summary, we looked at the three passages in the Torah that give instructions concerning circumcision. Genesis 17 and Leviticus 12 specifically focus on the obligation of Israelite parents to circumcise their sons on the eighth day. In Exodus 12, circumcision is required of an adult male if he wants to be able to eat the Passover lamb. None of these passages give a *general* commandment for adult Gentiles to get circumcised, nor do they indicate that circumcision is required to join the believing community. The Torah assumes that uncircumcised strangers who join the people of Israel are required to observe the same commandments given to native Israelites—they just can’t eat the Passover lamb. Circumcision is **still** the covenant sign between Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 17). Although adult circumcision is not required to belong to the congregation of Israel, uncircumcised adult strangers would probably eventually get circumcised to fully partake in Passover.

Peter’s Speech

In the previous section, we saw that the Torah does not issue a general command for adult Gentiles to be circumcised, and we also saw that uncircumcised Gentiles can join the community and observe the commandments. What are some implications of these facts as we return to Acts 15? Two key points stand out. First, the apostles were not rejecting the Torah by advocating for the full inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles into the believing community. Rather, their position aligns perfectly with the Torah’s expectations for the uncircumcised stranger who joins Israel. Second, the Pharisees who taught

that it was necessary for adult Gentiles to get circumcised before being accepted as members of the believing community were *going beyond* the Torah's requirements. Such a teaching *contradicts* what the Torah itself says regarding uncircumcised followers of the God of Israel. This is important because too many people mistakenly assume that the apostles' opponents were applying the Torah more accurately than the apostles! In reality, the apostles' opponents were *adding to the Torah*. When it came to the question of circumcision for adult Gentiles, *the apostles were interpreting and applying the Torah correctly!*

So, with that in mind, let's continue in Acts 15. We left off in verse 5, where the Pharisees insisted that the Gentile believers must get circumcised and be ordered to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). After much debate, Peter speaks, recalling how God chose him to bring the gospel to the Gentiles, who received the Holy Spirit just as the Jews did. He argues that God makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, cleansing their hearts by faith, and warns against placing a burden on Gentile believers that even Jews could not bear. Peter emphasizes that salvation comes through the grace of Yeshua for all. Following his speech, Paul and Barnabas share signs and wonders that God had done among the Gentiles through them (Acts 15:6-12).

So, Peter rejects the Pharisees' proposal. He saw with his own eyes that Gentile believers received the Spirit and were saved without being circumcised. Since God already accepted them as they were, Peter argues that the church should accept them too. By rejecting the Pharisees' proposal, Peter was not contradicting the Torah; he was *agreeing with* the Torah. Just like ancient Israel was to receive uncircumcised strangers who professed faith in Israel's God, Peter argued that the church must receive uncircumcised Gentiles who professed faith in Israel's Messiah.

Before we continue, we should briefly comment on Peter's remark about placing an unbearable yoke upon the Gentiles since this statement has led to some confusion:

Acts 15:10

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

So, Peter says that the Pharisees in verse 5 are putting a yoke on the Gentiles that even the Jews have not been able to bear. How should we understand this statement from Peter? The antinomian view holds that this "unbearable yoke" refers to the supposedly arduous demands of Torah observance. According to this perspective, Peter claims that the Law of Moses is an oppressive burden that not even Jews were able to uphold. Therefore, as the argument goes, if Torah observance is too grievous for Jews, it should certainly not be expected of Gentiles. However, the problem with this interpretation is that it contradicts many Scriptures that claim that the Torah is a source of blessing and "not too hard" (Deuteronomy 30:11; Psalm 19:7-10; 119:97; James 1:25).

If Peter is not calling Torah observance an unbearable yoke, what is his point in Acts 15:10? The key to understanding Peter's point is actually in the very next verse:

Acts 15:11

But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus [Yeshua], just as they will."

So, the context of Peter's statement in verse 10 relates to the question of how God saves people. This fits the whole discussion at the Jerusalem Council, which was focused on what was necessary for Gentiles to

be saved (Acts 15:1). Peter argues that salvation comes through “[the grace of the Lord Yeshua](#),” not through circumcision or the Law of Moses (Acts 15:11). In light of this context, when Peter refers to the yoke that even the Jews could not bear in verse 10, he is not criticizing the Law of Moses itself. Instead, he’s pointing out that Israel has not consistently kept the Law of Moses. As the scholar Jacob Jervell writes:

The idea is obviously not that it is in principle impossible to keep the law, which would make all other Lukan statements inconceivable, but that we, that is, Jews and Christian Jews, have so far not kept the law, something which the history of Israel demonstrates (Acts 7:53).

—Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 151n55

This leads into verse 11 of Acts 15, where Israel’s failure to fully carry the yoke of the Torah points to the need for “[the grace of the Lord Yeshua](#).” Peter’s objection is not to Torah observance as a way of life for saved Jews and Gentiles; his objection is to making circumcision and Torah observance *a requirement for salvation*. Requiring circumcision and Torah observance *for salvation* is a yoke that nobody can bear. Even Jews, though circumcised and entrusted with the Torah, have repeatedly failed to keep the Torah. This reveals that salvation cannot come through circumcision or Torah observance—it must come through “[the grace of the Lord Yeshua](#)” (cf. Ephesians 2:8-10).

If you’d like to learn more, we go into much more detail on this verse in our teaching, “[Is the Torah an Unbearable Yoke? \(Acts 15:10\)](#)”

James’s Ruling

Following Peter’s speech, James presents a biblical argument affirming that God has already accepted the Gentile believers apart from circumcision (Acts 15:12-18). He claims that “[the words of the prophets agree](#)” with Peter’s testimony and cites Amos 9:11-12, which James sees as a prophecy predicting that the nations would turn to the God of Israel. This leads James to reject the Pharisees’ proposal. Instead of requiring circumcision, James declared that the Gentile believers should follow four prohibitions. This decision became known as the Apostolic Decree:

Acts 15:19-20

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

So, instead of getting circumcised, the Gentiles are required to obey these four prohibitions—three food laws and a prohibition against sexual immorality. But where did these prohibitions come from, and what was their purpose?

As we discussed at the beginning, all four of these prohibitions come straight from the Law of Moses. According to James, Gentile believers are to avoid things polluted by idols, which refers to the Torah’s prohibition against eating food sacrificed to idols (Leviticus 17:3-9; cf. Exodus 34:15). They are to abstain from “sexual immorality,” a general category that encompasses the many specific commandments found in Leviticus 18 and 20, which spell out unacceptable sexual practices. They are to avoid eating “blood,” which comes from the Torah’s commandments against eating blood (Leviticus 17:10-14). And finally, they are to avoid strangled things, which refers to meat that was improperly

slaughtered and therefore still containing blood (m.Chullin 1.2; Philo, *Special Laws* 4.122). This prohibition comes from Leviticus 17:13, which requires pouring out the blood of animals that are killed for food.

So, contrary to modern antinomian claims, the apostles were not rejecting the Torah in Acts 15. In fact, they explicitly imposed four commandments from the Law of Moses onto the Gentile believers, three of them food laws. These prohibitions are repeated elsewhere in the New Testament and were widely affirmed in the first few centuries of Christianity. To learn more about the significance of these four commandments, see our teaching “[The Apostolic Decree: An Introduction to Torah \(Acts 15:20\)](#).”

So, the four commandments come from the Torah. But out of all the commandments in the Torah, why did the apostles choose these specific ones for Gentiles? It appears they chose them because the Torah explicitly states that each of these commandments applies not only to Israel but also to the stranger living among them (Leviticus 17:8, 10, 12-13; 18:26). In other words, the apostles selected commandments that the Torah explicitly applies to uncircumcised Gentiles. As the scholar William Willimon observes:

Leviticus 17-18 applies these rules to both Jews and to aliens who reside within Israel. James seems to regard these gentiles as analogous to “strangers” in the Hebrew Scriptures...Nowhere does Luke suggest that Jesus abrogates the Torah. Even gentiles are to keep that part of the Torah which applies to them as non-Jews.

—William H. Willimon, *Acts*, IBC (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), 130-131

But what was the purpose of these four commandments in the context of the Jerusalem council? Before we answer that, we can confidently state what their purpose was *not*. These commandments were not intended to be a comprehensive set of rules for Gentile believers. In other words, there is no reason to think that the apostles believed that Gentiles needed to obey *only* these four commandments. This should be obvious since nobody thinks that Gentile believers are permitted to murder, steal, or lie, despite those things not being mentioned in Acts 15:20. As we discussed earlier, elsewhere in the New Testament Gentile believers are instructed to obey many other commandments from the Torah beyond these four commandments (e.g., Romans 13:9), including so-called “ceremonial” commands like festival of Unleavened Bread (1 Corinthians 5:8). Additionally, in the Torah itself, there are many other laws that apply to the stranger besides these four commandments.

For instance, the Torah explicitly includes the stranger in commandments such as resting on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; 23:12; Deuteronomy 5:14) and celebrating the biblical festivals (Exodus 12:19; Leviticus 16:29; Deuteronomy 16:11, 14; 31:10-12). Moreover, the stranger is explicitly included in commandments related to various offerings (Leviticus 22:18-25; Numbers 15:14-16), purity regulations (Leviticus 17:15-16; Numbers 19:10), and laws concerning justice (Leviticus 24:17-22; Numbers 35:15). And there are numerous other examples (See Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercrest Seminary, 2021), 9-16).

So, if these four commandments are not meant as a comprehensive set of rules, then what *is* their purpose? The simplest explanation is that they provide a *starting point* for fellowship in place of *circumcision*. That is, in agreement with the Law of Moses, which does not command adult Gentiles to get circumcised to be received among God’s people, the apostles concluded that circumcision was not a requirement for Gentiles to be received in the Christian community. As Benjamin Frostad writes:

The four prohibitions thus serve as a point of entry for Gentiles in lieu of circumcision, assuming that they will grow in their observance as they learn.

—Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercrest Seminary, 2021), 121

The four prohibitions are not a comprehensive set of commandments but rather the minimum starting point for fellowship. They are not a substitute for Torah observance but rather *an introduction* to Torah observance.

As we mentioned earlier, the apostles’ decree in verses 20-21 was addressing the Pharisees’ demands from verse 5. The Pharisees demanded, “**It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses**” (Acts 15:5). Verse 20 of Acts 15 addresses the first demand of the Pharisees—that Gentiles must be circumcised—while verse 21 addresses their second demand—that Gentiles be ordered to keep the Law of Moses. In verse 20, the apostles determined that, rather than circumcision, the Gentiles should observe the four commandments as the minimum level of Torah observance necessary to be part of the community. As we’ll see in verse 21, instead of requiring immediate adherence to the whole Law of Moses, the apostles expected that Gentile believers would naturally learn and grow in their obedience to the Torah by hearing it taught each Sabbath in the synagogues.

With that, let’s now turn to Acts 15:21.

Acts 15:21

For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.

So, the first thing to notice is that this verse starts with the word “for.” In Greek, this word is γάρ, which is an explanatory conjunction. Basically, this means that verse 21 is intended to offer further clarification or justification for what James just said in verse 20; he is explaining *why* the four prohibitions are given to the Gentile believers. We would argue that James views the weekly proclamation of Moses in the synagogues as a resource for discipleship after they’ve begun to apply the minimum four requirements. As the scholar Eyal Regev writes:

The implications are that since the Torah is proclaimed and studied in the synagogue on a regular basis, the God-fearing Christians would gain further knowledge and adhere to Jewish law after being accepted into the (Jewish-) Christian community. The legal obligations of the Apostolic Decree may have been an invitation to observe Jewish law.

—Eyal Regev, “The Gradual Conversion of Gentiles in Acts and Luke’s Paradox of the Gentile Mission,” in *Law and Narrative in the Bible and in Neighbouring Ancient Cultures*, ed. F. Avemarie and K. P. Adams (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 361

This understanding of verse 21 fits perfectly within the broader context of the book of Acts. Luke repeatedly depicts the earliest Christians—both Jews and Gentiles—as attending synagogue services on the Sabbath to learn from the Torah. For instance, Luke repeatedly mentions that Paul prioritized attending synagogue services on the Sabbath to minister to those present and often mentions that Gentiles are included among the attendees (Acts 13:14-15, 42-44; 17:1-4; 18:4). So, these uncircumcised Gentiles are meeting in the synagogues on the Sabbath alongside Jews.

This interpretation not only accounts for the biblical evidence but also follows simple common sense. Acts 15:21 addresses the practical question of how Gentile believers would grow in their knowledge and obedience to the Scriptures. In the first-century, copies of the Scriptures were rare and expensive, and most people did not have their own personal copies of the Scriptures. Consequently, a Gentile believer who came to faith in the God of Israel and Israel's Messiah would naturally turn to the synagogue services to hear the Law of Moses read. In this cultural context, the proclamation of Moses in Acts 15:21 is a practical solution to the question of how Gentile believers would be disciplined in their new faith.

One natural consequence of James's expectation for Gentiles to hear Moses read in the synagogues is that Gentile believers would automatically begin to align their lives with the biblical calendar, including observing the weekly Sabbath. Frostad puts it well:

James's proposal assumes that Gentile believers will have an ongoing relationship with the (believing) Jewish community, that their lives will be structured around the biblical calendar, and that they will grow in their knowledge and observance of Scripture.

—Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercrest Seminary, 2021), 112

To sum up, in Acts 15:20-21, the apostles explain how Gentile believers should relate to the Law of Moses, offering an alternative to the Pharisees' proposal in Acts 15:5. Instead of requiring circumcision, the four prohibitions listed in verse 20 serve as the “starting point” for Gentile believers to be welcomed into the Christian community. Moreover, instead of requiring immediate adherence to the whole Torah, the expectation of weekly synagogue attendance expressed in verse 21 provides the means for Gentile believers to gradually learn and grow in their obedience to the Law of Moses. Far from prohibiting or exempting Gentile believers from following the Torah, the apostles expected that they would actively learn and obey it more fully over time.

To learn more about the implications of Acts 15:21, see our teaching, “[Moses is Proclaimed Every Sabbath in the Synagogue \(Acts 15:21\).](#)”

The Apostles' Letter

After the council concluded, the Jerusalem church sent Paul, Barnabas, and others to Antioch with a letter outlining their decision. The letter confirmed that Gentile believers did not need to be circumcised but must follow the four prohibitions (Acts 15:22-29). When the letter was delivered in Antioch, the believers were encouraged to hear that God had already accepted them without requiring circumcision (Acts 15:30-35).

Now, some may point out that the letter sent by the Jerusalem council to the Gentile believers in Antioch makes no mention of the expectation for them to learn Torah in the synagogues. It only includes the four prohibitions given in Acts 15:20, restated in verse 29. Based on this, some might argue that if the apostles truly expected Gentile believers to attend synagogue and learn the Torah each Sabbath, they would have explicitly said so in the letter. Therefore, the absence of such a mention could be taken to mean that the apostles expected Gentiles to follow only the four specified prohibitions and nothing more.

However, this assumption misunderstands the purpose of the letter. In Acts 15:20-21, James is addressing the Pharisees' proposal presented to the council in verse 5. In contrast, the council's letter

addressed to the community in Antioch was responding to the proposal of the teachers in Antioch mentioned in verse 1. The Pharisees in verse 5 demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised *and* ordered to observe the Torah. As we mentioned earlier, James's ruling in verses 20-21 addresses both those points: the four prohibitions serve as a substitute for circumcision, while the ongoing teaching of Torah in synagogues offers a path for Gentiles to learn the Law of Moses over time. The letter sent to Antioch, however, focuses only on circumcision since that was the specific controversy raised by the men from Judea (Acts 15:1). This explains why the letter includes the four prohibitions but makes no mention of hearing Torah proclaimed in the synagogues, as it is addressing only the concern raised in verse 1. Therefore, this passage should not be taken as evidence that the apostles had no expectation for Gentile believers to learn more of the Torah every Sabbath in the synagogues.

Again, for more on this, see ["Moses is Proclaimed Every Sabbath in the Synagogue \(Acts 15:21\)."](#)

But What About Circumcision?

Our study of Acts 15 raises some questions about the relevance of circumcision, particularly for Gentile believers. Before we bring this teaching to a close, we will consider some of these questions.

First, we determined that the law of circumcision applies specifically to sons of Abraham, and it is to be carried out on the eighth day of birth. The apostles in Acts clearly uphold this commandment. When Paul hears of a rumor that he is teaching Jewish believers to abandon the Torah and not to circumcise their sons, he takes deliberate action to debunk that rumor and show that he fully affirms the Torah, including the command to circumcise your sons (Acts 21:17-26). For more on this, see our teaching ["Setting the Record Straight: Paul and the Law of Moses \(Acts 21:17-26\)."](#)

So, the apostles affirm the command for parents to circumcise their sons on the eighth day. The Torah gives no *general* commandment for adult Gentiles (or adult Israelites for that matter) to get circumcised. This is why, as we have seen, the apostles are not contradicting the Torah by not requiring adult Gentiles to get circumcised. Does this mean that the commandment of circumcision is entirely irrelevant to adult Gentiles?

The answer is no. The Torah requires descendants of Abraham who give birth to sons to circumcise their sons on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:3). This means that the commandment of circumcision also applies to Gentile believers who give birth to sons. Although Gentile believers are not children of Abraham by physical descent, according to Paul, they have become children of Abraham by virtue of their faith in the Messiah (Galatians 3:26-29). In 1 Corinthians 7:19, Paul urges his readers, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, to keep *"the commandments of God."* One of God's commandments is to circumcise your son on the eighth day. Therefore, the Torah's command regarding circumcision is *entirely relevant* to adult believers, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. Even though the Torah gives no general command for *adults* to get circumcised, all believers should nevertheless obey God's commandment to circumcise our sons on the eighth day.

Other questions arise when considering the command for strangers to get circumcised prior to being allowed to eat the Passover lamb (Exodus 12:43-49). How would this have applied to Gentile followers of the Messiah in the first century? How might it apply today?

Regarding the first question, as we have seen, the apostles rejected the notion that Gentile believers needed to get circumcised to become members of the believing community. In taking this position, they were agreeing with the Torah, which assumes the presence of uncircumcised strangers within the

community who worshiped Israel's God and kept the commandments. The only restriction placed upon these uncircumcised strangers was the privilege of eating the sacrificial lamb during Passover. While the New Testament does not directly speak to this issue, presumably, the apostles would have held to this law and would not have allowed uncircumcised Gentiles to eat the Passover lamb. These uncircumcised Gentiles still would have been expected to participate in the other aspects of the festival, just like the uncircumcised strangers in the Torah were expected to (Exodus 12:18-20). In fact, Paul explicitly instructed the Jews and Gentiles at the Church of Corinth to "[celebrate the festival](#)" (1 Corinthians 5:8).

Presumably, the apostles also would not have prevented any Gentile who wished to eat the Passover lamb from getting circumcised. The apostles seemed to discourage adult circumcision specifically when the motivation for doing so was unbiblical. That is, they discouraged it when the adult Gentile believers were being told that they had to undergo circumcision to be saved and granted full membership in the believing community. But a mature believer getting circumcised in order to partake in the Passover sacrifice is an entirely different scenario than what Acts 15 addresses. In fact, in the very next chapter of Acts, Paul circumcised Timothy, who was of mixed heritage since his father was a Gentile (Acts 16:3). Regardless of how one interprets this verse, it clearly shows that the apostles did not oppose adult circumcision in every circumstance. Again, although the New Testament does not directly address the issue, given the apostles' general endorsement of the Torah's authority, we have reason to believe they would have upheld the laws of Exodus 12.

How does the circumcision law of Exodus 12 apply to us today? Do uncircumcised adult males need to get circumcised before they can observe Passover? Well, first, the Passover lamb is only supposed to be slaughtered at the place where God chose to make his name dwell (Deuteronomy 16:1-2), which refers to the temple in Jerusalem. The Torah explicitly prohibits offering the Passover sacrifice anywhere else (Deuteronomy 16:5-6). So technically, since there is no temple in Jerusalem and no Levitical priesthood in operation, we can't even have a Passover sacrifice today. Even in the first century, when the temple still stood, most believers in the diaspora were not traveling to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and would not have had an opportunity to eat the sacrifice. Although speculative, this detail may partly explain why the apostles did not see circumcision as necessary for the Gentile believers, as most of them belonged to diaspora communities. For more on this, see our teaching, "[Celebrate the Festival \(1 Corinthians 5:7-8\)](#)."

In any case, even without a lamb, every believer can still obey the commands to commemorate the Exodus and eat bitter herbs and unleavened bread. They can still observe the command to remove leaven from their homes. Again, the only restriction the Torah places upon uncircumcised adults is the eating of the Passover lamb, a restriction that can't be applied today since we aren't able to even have a Passover sacrifice. Just like the strangers mentioned in the Torah, uncircumcised adult believers are not restricted from the other aspects of the festival. Practically speaking, the circumcision law of Exodus 12 does not impact an uncircumcised adult believer today.

Conclusion

Acts 15 addresses a major controversy in the early church: whether Gentile believers must be circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1). While some Pharisees insisted that it was necessary for Gentiles to be circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5), the apostles argued that salvation comes through the grace of Yeshua, not circumcision or Torah observance. Ultimately, the apostles decided that instead of circumcision, Gentile believers must follow four prohibitions from the Torah as a starting point for fellowship within the community (Acts 15:20, 29). James added that since the Torah is proclaimed every Sabbath in synagogues, Gentile believers would have the opportunity to continue

learning and growing in their obedience to God's commandments over time (Acts 15:21). Contrary to antinomian interpretations, the apostles did not reject the Torah but rather laid out a path of gradual discipleship beginning with the four prohibitions and leading to learning more Torah through regular synagogue teaching. Thus, Acts 15 does not undermine the Torah's ongoing relevance for Gentile followers of the Messiah.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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