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MINISTRIES

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Is the Torah an Unbearable Yoke? (Acts 15:10)

Is the Torah—the Law of Moses—an unbearable yoke? Is it too difficult and burdensome to follow the Torah’s commandments?

Some people say yes, citing Peter’s speech in Acts 15:7-11 as proof. Peter gave this speech at the Jerusalem Council, which was convened to address the question of whether Gentile believers needed to get circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1). At this council, some believers from the Pharisee party insisted that it was “necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). In response to the Pharisees’ proposal, Peter argues that God has already graciously accepted the Gentile believers on the basis of their faith, without requiring them to get circumcised first; therefore, the Christian community should also accept them (Acts 15:7-9, 11). During this speech, Peter includes the following statement:

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 these Pharisees are placing 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.

But does the antinomian view of this verse actually make sense? Is Torah observance really an unbearable yoke? The problem with this interpretation is that it explicitly contradicts many Scriptures that say the opposite. Here are just a few examples from the Hebrew Scriptures or “Old Testament”:

Deuteronomy 30:11

For this commandment that I command you today is **not too hard for you**, neither is it far off.

Psalm 19:7-10

The law of the LORD [YHWH] is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD [YHWH] is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD [YHWH] are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD [YHWH] is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD [YHWH] is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD [YHWH] are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Psalm 119:97

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

Numerous other passages could be cited where the biblical authors praise the Torah, calling it a delight and a source of blessing. If Peter is saying that the Torah is actually an oppressive yoke, this would put him in direct conflict with the Hebrew Scriptures. It also would put Peter in direct conflict with the New Testament. James, who was also part of the Jerusalem Council, has this to say about the Torah:

James 1:25

But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

After Peter concludes his speech in Acts 15, James affirms Peter's words (Acts 15:14-15). But if Peter were describing the Torah as a grievous burden, wouldn't James be contradicting his own positive view of the Torah by agreeing with him? The antinomian interpretation of Acts 15:10 results in Peter contradicting the Hebrew Scriptures, Peter contradicting James, and James contradicting himself.

But wait! There's more! The antinomian interpretation of Peter's speech in Acts 15 also causes *Luke* to contradict himself. Luke is the author of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts, and he is the one who records Peter describing this unbearable yoke. But elsewhere in his writings, Luke makes it clear that Torah observance is *not* an unbearable yoke and that it is quite possible to live in obedience to the commandments:

Luke 1:5-6

In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. **And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord.**

If Zechariah and Elizabeth could walk blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord, then Torah observance was not an unbearable yoke for them. Why should we think it is an unbearable yoke for other Jews, or for that matter, Gentiles? Given these contradictions, we should reject the antinomian interpretation of Acts 15:10. But how, then, should we understand this statement from Peter?

Acts 15:10 — An Alternative Interpretation

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 15:1-2

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.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

These “men from Judea” were teaching that the Gentiles could not be saved unless they got circumcised. This controversy prompted the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. During this council, Peter recalls his experience witnessing the Gentiles being saved without undergoing circumcision. He says that God made no distinction between Gentiles and Jews, having cleansed their hearts by faith (Acts 15:9). Thus, Peter argues that salvation comes through “the grace of the Lord Yeshua,” not through circumcision (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

Jervell cites Acts 7:53, which is part of Stephen’s speech before the council of elders prior to being unjustly executed. This passage provides an interesting parallel to our passage:

Acts 7:51-53

You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.

In this passage, Stephen references both the Jews of his time as well as their fathers, who received the law but failed to keep it. This parallels Peter’s statement in Acts 15:10 about the yoke that neither his generation nor their fathers were able to bear. In both passages, the emphasis is on the fact that, despite being circumcised and having the Torah, the Jews did not consistently obey it.

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. As Benjamin Frostad writes:

If Torah observance were the criterion for salvation, then Israel's election would long have been forfeited. Peter thus responds directly to the soteriological claim made by the circumcisers. In other words, the “unbearable yoke” is the demand for circumcision and Torah observance as the means of salvation...Torah is not the means of salvation. Yet, this fact does not mean that the Torah has ceased to have any relevance in shaping the lives of believers. Luke continues to highlight the Torah piety of his characters right up to the end of Acts. Rather, the point of these passages is that only Jesus is the source of salvation, and this is true for both Jews and Gentiles.

—Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercrest Seminary, 2021), 103-104

The notion that the Torah is unable to save people appears earlier in the Book of Acts. While teaching in the synagogue in Acts 15, Luke records Paul expressing the same idea:

Acts 13:38-39

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.

Paul is not disparaging the Law of Moses in this passage. He is simply highlighting the fact the Law of Moses is powerless to “free” people. Forgiveness of sins is available only through Yeshua the Messiah. This is the same thing Peter is saying in Acts 15:10-11.

To sum up, when Peter speaks in Acts 15:10 about not putting an unbearable yoke upon the Gentiles, he isn't speaking negatively about the Torah or rejecting Torah observance as a way of life. Instead, he is addressing the error of misusing the Torah as the means of salvation. Requiring circumcision and Torah observance *for salvation* is a yoke that nobody can bear. Indeed, even Jews, though circumcised and entrusted with the Torah, have repeatedly failed to keep the Torah. This reveals that salvation does not come through circumcision or Torah observance—it comes through “the grace of the Lord Yeshua.”

We can understand this principle in our modern context as well. Most churches have some sort of code of conduct for their members, but the expectation for members is that they adhere to that code *after* they join the church, not before. Most churches, for example, would not turn someone away who had been a prostitute before coming to the Messiah. Even though they would expect that person to renounce that lifestyle after joining the church, they would never say that only people who have never been prostitutes can be saved. We could say the same about the apostles' position concerning the Gentile believers in Acts 15. Yes, there are things they expect of the Gentiles moving forward, as we will see. But the fact that the Gentile believers have not perfectly kept the Torah does not mean they cannot be saved and are not allowed into the congregation. That is a yoke that neither the apostles nor their Jewish forefathers could bear.

What does all this mean? It means that Act 15:10 cannot be used to argue that the apostles were against Gentile followers of Yeshua observing the Law of Moses. They were against imposing circumcision and Torah observance *for salvation* and inclusion in the Christian community. But they did not oppose Gentiles keeping Torah as an expression of their faith in the Messiah. This becomes clear several verses later when James decrees that Gentile believers should begin by observing four commands from the Torah, implying they will continue to grow in Torah observance as they hear it taught each Sabbath in the synagogues:

Acts 15:19-21

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

If the apostles thought that the Torah should not be imposed upon Gentiles, they would not have immediately imposed four commandments from the Torah upon the Gentiles, and they would not have expected them to continue learning the Torah each Sabbath. But they did. The antinomian interpretation of Acts 15:10 directly contradicts the decree from the apostles.

For more on Acts 15:21 and the apostles' expectation that the Gentile believers grow in Torah observance, see our teaching, "[Moses is Proclaimed Every Sabbath in the Synagogues \(Acts 15:21\)](#)."

In conclusion, Acts 15:10 has often been misunderstood to claim that the apostles viewed the Torah as an oppressive burden that should not be imposed upon Gentile believers. However, a closer examination of the passage shows that this interpretation does not hold up. The Hebrew Scriptures, James, and Luke all affirm that the Torah is a blessing and not impossible to live out. Peter's objection in Acts 15:10 was not to Torah observance itself, but to the idea that circumcision and Torah observance were required for salvation. Peter teaches that salvation comes solely through the grace of the Lord Yeshua. Far from rejecting the Torah as a way for life, the apostles expected Gentile believers to begin their journey of discipleship with four commandments from the Torah and to continue learning and growing in obedience as they heard Moses proclaimed every Sabbath.

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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