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MINISTRIES

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Moses is Proclaimed Every Sabbath in the Synagogues (Acts 15:21)

The New Testament is clear that Jewish followers of the Messiah are expected to keep the Law of Moses or Torah. For instance, in Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—said that the whole Law of Moses will endure as long as heaven and earth exist and urged his Jewish followers to obey and teach its commandments.

But what about Gentile believers? Are they expected to obey the Torah too? The extent to which Gentile believers are required to observe the Torah is a matter of ongoing debate, even among those who affirm that the Torah remains valid and authoritative. We have argued that Gentile believers should obey the commandments of the Torah that apply to them. As the Torah itself indicates, this would include things like observing the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws. For more on this, see our teaching [“Is the Torah for Gentiles, Too?”](#)

In this teaching, we want to focus on a particular verse that relates to this question—that is Acts 15:21, which is part of James’s speech at the Jerusalem Council. This verse is often overlooked, but it offers significant insight into the question of whether the apostles expected Gentile believers to obey the Law of Moses. Here is what it says:

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.

How does this statement from James shed light on the question of Torah observance for Gentile believers? As we will argue, this statement reflects the apostles’ expectation that Gentile followers of Yeshua would learn and grow in their obedience to the Torah by hearing it proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogues. In other words, the apostles took it for granted that Gentile believers would regularly attend synagogue services on the Sabbath and learn from the Torah.

Before we defend this interpretation in detail, let’s provide some context for this statement from James.

The Jerusalem Council

According to Acts 15, the apostles and elders gathered in Jerusalem to address an important question: must Gentile followers of Yeshua get circumcised to be saved (Acts 15:1)? During the meeting, some believers from the Pharisees argued that the Gentiles had to be circumcised and fully observe the Torah in order to be included in the community (Acts 15:5). However, the council ultimately rejected this view. Their rejection was based on Peter's testimony about the work of the Spirit among Gentile believers (Acts 15:7-11) as well as the testimony of Paul and Barnabas regarding the signs and wonders that God performed among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12). It was abundantly clear that God had already saved and accepted the Gentile believers in Yeshua, even though they were uncircumcised. James then offered biblical support for this position, explaining that "[the words of the prophets agree](#)" with Peter's testimony (Acts 15:13-15). As James points out, the prophets foretold that Gentiles would seek the Lord (Acts 15:13-18; cf. Amos 9:11-12). Thus, on the basis of both the Spirit's work among the Gentiles and the biblical prophecies about Gentiles turning to God, the apostles concluded that Gentiles should be welcomed into the believing community without undergoing circumcision. Instead of requiring circumcision, James declared that the Gentile believers should follow four prohibitions (Acts 15:20). This decision is known as the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20). After issuing these four prohibitions, James made his remark about Moses being proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogues (Acts 15:21).

Before we examine verse 21 in detail, it is important to examine the purpose of the four prohibitions. How we understand the purpose of the four prohibitions in verse 20 will have an impact on how we read verse 21.

The Purpose of the Four Prohibitions

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.](#)

As we mentioned earlier, instead of requiring the Gentile believers to undergo circumcision, James issued these four prohibitions—three food laws and a prohibition against sexual immorality. But where did these prohibitions come from? And what was their purpose?

Regarding the first question, some interpreters view the issuing of these four prohibitions as evidence that the apostles did not require Gentile believers to obey the Torah. R. L. Solberg makes that argument:

Rather than the Law of Moses, [James] offered four things from which they were to abstain...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

However, the apostles did not pull these prohibitions out of thin air as a replacement for the Torah. In fact, we find these exact prohibitions in places like Exodus 34:15 and 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 prohibitions for Gentile believers *directly from the Law of Moses*. Why is this significant? Because this verse directly contradicts Solberg's argument that the apostles did not require Gentile believers to obey the Torah. Acts 15:20 proves that the apostles *did* require them to obey at least four commandments from the Torah, three of them food laws.

So, these four prohibitions come from the Law of Moses, but what was their purpose in the context of the Jerusalem council? Before we answer that, we can confidently state what their purpose was *not*. These prohibitions were not intended to be a comprehensive set of commandments 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. Additionally, Paul explicitly commands his Gentile readers to obey many other commandments from the Torah beyond these four prohibitions (e.g., Romans 13:9).

So, if these four prohibitions are not meant as a comprehensive set of commandments, then what *is* their purpose? The simplest explanation is that they provide *a starting point* for fellowship in place of circumcision. 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

So, 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.

The apostles' decree in verses 20-21 was addressing the Pharisees' demands from verse 5. Remember, 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 prohibitions 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.

Moses is Proclaimed Every Sabbath

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 synagogues as a vital resource for Gentile believers to learn and mature in their faith 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

Many might be surprised to learn that this interpretation is not new. In the eighth century AD, Saint Bede proposed a similar interpretation. Here is what he writes:

Although they are not now weighed down by us with the full rigor of the precepts, nevertheless, as time goes on, in coming together very often for the reading of the law and the prophets, little by little they will receive the principles of life and the rules requiring the keeping of mutual love. For it is very certain that the primitive church, still practicing Jewish ways, continued to use these [readings] in their sabbath celebrations.

—Saint Bede, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* 15.21 (Francis Martin, ed., *Acts*, ACCS 5 [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006], 187-188)

What is the biblical evidence that supports this interpretation? Well, R. L. Solberg argues that there is none. He writes:

The New Testament nowhere teaches, or even hints at, a gradual approach to the Law of Moses for Gentile believers in Yeshua. Indeed, we never see them taught or expected to learn the Torah, gradually or otherwise. And the idea that uncircumcised Gentile believers in Jesus would have been welcomed into non-believing Jewish synagogues where the Torah was taught is a bit problematic.

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

Despite Solberg’s baseless assertion, throughout 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—and there is no hint that this was somehow “problematic” (Acts 13:14-16, 26, 43-45, 48; 14:1; 17:1-4; 18:4). So, these uncircumcised Gentiles are meeting in the synagogues on the Sabbath alongside Jews. These Gentiles also make up a significant number of those who are described as coming to faith in Yeshua throughout the book of Acts. As Jacob Jervell writes:

The references to the conversion of Gentiles speak mainly of “God-fearing” Gentiles, who already are related to Israel and Judaism via the synagogue, though without being circumcised (13:43; 14:1; 17:4, 12). The passages show that Jewish and Gentile conversions have been so combined that both groups accept the gospel together.

—Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1972), 44

Additionally, in James’s own epistle, he identifies his readers as meeting in synagogues:

James 2:2

For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your **assembly**, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in...

In Greek, the word translated as “assembly” is συναγωγή. Everywhere else this word appears in the New Testament, it is translated as “synagogue.” So, James clearly identifies the synagogue as the natural meeting place for followers of Yeshua.

Based on the evidence from Acts and James’s epistle, it is natural to conclude that in Acts 15:21, James expects these Gentile believers in Yeshua—many of whom were already attending synagogue services on the Sabbath—to continue doing just that. For more on this, see our teaching [The Sabbath in Luke-Acts: The Practice of the Earliest Christians](#).

Why is this significant? Because, as the Book of Acts repeatedly makes clear, the synagogue services involved readings from the Law of Moses (Acts 13:14-15, 27). This fits what James says in Acts 15:21 about Moses being proclaimed in the synagogues every Sabbath. This also fits what we see in Paul’s first letter to Timothy, suggesting that the Gentile believers under Timothy’s leadership similarly continued to gather in the synagogue to hear the Scriptures being read:

1 Timothy 4:13

Until I come, **devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.**

When Paul mentions “Scripture” here, he of course refers to the Hebrew Scriptures or “Old Testament.” As Benjamin Frostad writes:

Since the only Scriptures these believers had were the Jewish Scriptures—the Torah, Prophets, and Writings (cf. Luke 24:44)—it is these Scriptures, supplemented by the teaching of the apostles (Acts 4:42), that were to shape the formation of new believers.

—Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercrest Seminary, 2021), 111

So, R. L. Solberg’s claim that we don’t see evidence in the New Testament of Gentile believers learning the Torah in the synagogues is demonstrably false. The idea that Acts 15:21 reflects the apostles’ expectation that Gentile believers would learn and grow in their Torah observance by attending synagogue services every Sabbath aligns perfectly with what we see throughout Acts and elsewhere.

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, Briercree 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.

Answering Objections

While this interpretation is the most straightforward reading of Acts 15 and best aligns with the overall portrait in Acts, there are still some potential objections that merit consideration. One objection is that the expectation for Gentile believers to learn Torah in the synagogues is not mentioned in the letter that the council sent to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (Acts 15:22-35). Only the four prohibitions declared in Acts 15:20 are mentioned (Acts 15:29). Some might argue that if the apostles really expected the Gentile believers to learn Torah in the synagogues every Sabbath, they would have mentioned it in the letter they sent. However, as Frostad notes, this assumption misunderstands the purpose of the letter. In Acts 15:20-21, James is addressing the Pharisees' proposal in verse 5, while the council's letter to the communities in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia was addressing only the proposal of the teachers in Antioch mentioned in verse 1. As Frostad writes:

It should be observed that the position the council's letter opposes is not that of the Pharisees [in Acts 15:5] but that of the Judean teachers in Antioch [in Acts 15:1]. The Pharisees presented their demands to the assembly in Jerusalem, not to the Gentiles in Antioch. As noted above, the Pharisees demanded two things: (1) to circumcise the Gentile believers and (2) to command them to observe Torah. James's proposal responds to each of these demands in turn: the four prohibitions stand in lieu of circumcision, and the learning of Torah in the synagogues stands in lieu of compelling the Gentiles to observe Torah. The letter to Antioch, however, only addresses the first of these two concerns, since the message of the Judean teachers in Antioch centered solely on circumcision (v. 1). This is why the letter mentions the four prohibitions—effectively rejecting the demand for circumcision—while omitting any reference to learning Torah in the

synagogues. The latter reference is not needed here because the letter is responding to the claims of verse 1, not those of verse 5.

—Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercreech Seminary, 2021), 113

The absence of the expectation mentioned in verse 21 from the council’s letter makes complete sense given the specific issue that the letter intended to address. Therefore, its omission should not be interpreted as evidence that the apostles did not really expect the Gentile believers to be learning the Law of Moses every Sabbath in the synagogues.

A similar objection is based on Acts 21:25, where James restates the four prohibitions of Acts 15:20. The context is Paul’s meeting with James during his trip to Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). According to James, decades after the Messiah’s resurrection, “many thousands” of Christian Jews in Jerusalem remained zealous for the Law of Moses (Acts 21:20). However, they heard a rumor that Paul was teaching Jewish believers not to circumcise their sons and to forsake the Law (Acts 21:21). Hence, James instructs Paul to join others in completing a Nazarite vow and to participate in public worship at the temple to demonstrate that the rumor was false and that Paul himself observed the Law (Acts 21:23-24). Paul then goes on to follow James’s instructions, demonstrating that the rumor was false and that he himself observed the Law (Acts 21:26). James’s instructions end with this:

Acts 21:25

[But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.](#)

Some might interpret this verse as evidence that while Jews are obligated to follow the whole Torah, Gentile believers are required to follow only the four prohibitions. However, this interpretation misses the point of the passage. The reference to the four prohibitions was intended to validate Paul’s ministry, not establish a distinct set of laws for Gentiles in contrast to a broader set for Jews. As seen in verse 21 of Acts 21, circumcision was one of the central issues, just as in Acts 15. The concern was that Jewish believers might misunderstand Paul’s message to Gentiles—that they are accepted in the community without the need for circumcision—as a suggestion that Jews themselves should no longer circumcise their children. As in Acts 15, James references the four prohibitions to affirm that while Gentile believers are welcomed without circumcision, they are still expected to uphold the minimum four requirements. However, there is no indication in this passage that Gentile believers are not expected to grow beyond the four prohibitions.

A final objection we will consider is the suggestion that the council’s ruling was not meant to introduce Gentile believers to Torah observance but merely to prevent them from offending “legalistic” Jews who stubbornly clung to the Torah. Once again, R. L. Solberg represents this point of view. Here is what he writes:

James explains that the four specific restrictions should be given because “from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21)...James is not linking the four restrictions to the Torah but to the widespread presence of Judaism at the time. The council recognized that the stage was set for a clash of cultures within the body of Christ and that is something they wanted to avoid.

— R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 120-121

Solberg goes on to paraphrase Acts 15:19-21 as follows:

Let us not make it difficult for the Gentiles turning to the God of Israel. Instead, let us offer a few instructions to help them keep the peace with their new Jewish brothers and sisters, who have been steeped in the Law of Moses for generations. Here are four guidelines that should be sufficient to keep relations agreeable between them. (Acts 15:19-21, author's paraphrase)

—R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 122-123

However, Solberg constructs this reading on the basis of his own imagination rather than what the text says. James does not say that there are Jews who might be offended in every city, but that Moses is proclaimed in every city. His emphasis is on the fact that *the Law of Moses* is proclaimed in the synagogues on the Sabbath. The text gives no indication that the concern was about “keeping the peace” or avoiding offending Torah observant Jews. It just isn't in the text—Solberg completely made it up.

Moreover, if the goal were simply to prevent the Gentile believers from offending Jews, how would observing only these four prohibitions accomplish that? If Gentiles were eating pork around Jews, but they were being diligent to drain the blood and not eat pigs that were strangled, would that really do anything to promote agreeable relations with the Jews? If the purpose of the four prohibitions was to prevent the Gentile believers from offending Jews, it seems obvious that much more than those four prohibitions would be necessary.

Thankfully, there is a better explanation that does not require us to fabricate a scenario in our minds and modify the text to make what we've imagined fit what James says. As we've argued, the most straightforward interpretation is that the four prohibitions functioned as a starting point for fellowship in place of circumcision, with the intent that Gentile believers would grow in their observance over time as they hear Moses proclaimed in the synagogues on the Sabbath.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Acts 15:20-21 gives us insight into how the apostles expected Gentile believers to relate to the Torah. Rather than requiring circumcision and immediate adherence to the entire Law of Moses, the apostles set forth four prohibitions as a starting point for fellowship, with the expectation that Gentile believers would continue to learn and grow in their obedience through regular synagogue attendance. This interpretation aligns with the broader portrait in Acts, which repeatedly depicts Gentile believers attending synagogue services and hearing the Torah proclaimed on the Sabbath. Far from dismissing the role of the Torah in the lives of Gentile followers of Yeshua, the Jerusalem Council provided a means for their immediate inclusion in the Christian community as well a path for their continued growth in Torah observance.

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.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

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