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MINISTRIES

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The Apostolic Decree: An Introduction to Torah (Acts 15:20)

In Acts 15, the apostles address an important question: what is required of Gentile followers of the Messiah? Some believers from the Pharisees proposed that they should be immediately circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5). However, the apostles decided on a much more gracious approach. Instead of circumcision, the apostles decided that the Gentiles must start with four prohibitions from the Law of Moses—three pertaining to food, and one pertaining to sexual morality. And instead of being ordered to keep the entire Law right away, the apostles expected that the Gentiles would grow in their observance as they heard the Law of Moses proclaimed every Sabbath in the synagogues. This decision is known as the Apostolic Decree:

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.

So, what did the apostles require of Gentiles? As we see in verse 20, they were to start with following four prohibitions from the Law of Moses. They were to abstain from the things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from strangled things, and from blood. As we will discuss later, three of these four prohibitions are food laws—they are prohibitions against eating certain things. The passage goes on in verse 21 to imply that the Gentile believers will gradually learn and apply more commandments as they attend synagogue services each Sabbath. The four prohibitions in verse 20 serve as an introduction to the Torah. 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.

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

In this teaching, we will focus on the four prohibitions of Acts 15:20. While the extent to which Gentile believers were required to observe the Torah is a matter of ongoing debate—even among those who affirm that the Torah remains in effect—everyone agrees that they were to follow *at least* the four commandments mentioned in Acts 15:20. But what do these commandments actually involve?

Before we look at each of these four prohibitions from the Law of Moses in detail, we will first consider another question: do these four prohibitions still apply today?

Do the Four Prohibitions Still Apply Today?

It is clear that the Gentile believers being addressed in Acts 15 were required to obey *at least* these four prohibitions listed in Acts 15:20. As we have argued, these four prohibitions were an introduction to Torah observance, and the apostles expected the Gentiles to learn and follow more commandments over time. Again, see our teaching, "[Moses is proclaimed Every Sabbath in the Synagogues \(Acts 15:21\).](#)"

But were these four commandments given *only* to these first-century Gentile believers, or are they meant for all believers for all times? One prominent critic of contemporary Torah observance, R. L. Solberg, argues that three of these four laws were *not* given to all Gentile believers for all times. He writes the following:

“How do you think the church, in general, is doing with regard to observing the four prohibitions given by the Jerusalem Council?” It’s an interesting question. The unspoken assumption is that the four restrictions were biblical commands given to all Gentile Christians for all times. But I’m not convinced that is what this passage teaches. For one thing, the three food restrictions are not repeated anywhere elsewhere in the New Testament...The fourth restriction regarding sexual immorality is repeated elsewhere and obviously applies to all Christians.

—R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?* 2nd ed. (Franklin, TN: Williamson College Press, 2022), 124

So, Solberg believes—rightly—that the prohibition against sexual immorality still applies to all Christians today. And indeed, the New Testament authors repeatedly condemn sexual immorality (Matthew 15:19; Romans 1:26-27; 13:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, 18; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; Jude 1:7; Revelation 21:8).

However, Solberg does not believe that the other three prohibitions apply today. Why? Because he says they “are not repeated anywhere elsewhere in the New Testament.” This is a bad argument for two reasons. First, assuming that Solberg is right and that these laws are not repeated, why does something need to be repeated for it to be valid? The command against cross-dressing (Deuteronomy 22:5) is nowhere explicitly repeated in the Old or New Testaments, but Christians generally agree that men and women shouldn’t cross-dress. Solberg’s standard for determining what applies today seems arbitrary.

The second problem with Solberg’s argument is that it is demonstrably false. These prohibitions *are*

repeated two other times in Acts alone. For instance, later in Acts 15, the apostles send a letter to the believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, insisting they observe all four prohibitions—including the three food laws that Solberg says aren't repeated (Acts 15:29). The apostles even state explicitly that the Holy Spirit endorsed imposing these requirements upon the believers (Acts 15:28). Paul and Barnabas then carried the letter beyond Syria and Cilicia (Acts 16:4), proving that the application of the Apostolic Decree was not limited to one region. Additionally, when Paul meets with James in Jerusalem several years later to refute rumors that he taught against the Law of Moses, the four prohibitions are repeated yet again (Acts 21:25). James applies all four prohibitions to “the Gentiles who have believed,” indicating that he saw them as binding on every Gentile believer.

Beyond the book of Acts, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul explicitly forbids knowingly eating food that was offered to an idol (1 Corinthians 10:18-22). Similarly, in the book of Revelation, Jesus himself—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—also condemns eating food offered to idols (Revelation 2:14, 20). Solberg says that this prohibition is “not repeated anywhere elsewhere in the New Testament,” and yet we see it repeated twice in Acts as well as in 1 Corinthians and Revelation.

But wait! There's more! Historical evidence shows that later generations of Christians still treated the Apostolic Decree—including its three food laws—as obligatory. For instance, the early-second-century Christian document known as the Didache instructs its readers to “Keep strictly away from meat sacrificed to idols, for it involves the worship of dead gods” (*Didache* 6:3). At the end of the second century, Tertullian wrote that Christians “have not even the blood of animals at their meals” and that they “abstain from things strangled” and that they consider transgressing these rules to be “unlawful” (Tertullian, *Apology* 9:13). The fourth-century Apostolic Constitutions likewise affirms all four prohibitions of the Decree (*Apostolic Constitutions* 6:12), a position also upheld by fifth-century Church historian Socrates Scholasticus (*Church History* 5:22). Fourth-century theologian Cyril of Jerusalem calls the decree “universal from the Holy Ghost” (*Catechetical Lecture* 17:29) and condemns those who “lap up blood” and “devour things strangled” (*Catechetical Lecture* 4:28).

Later church councils and canons similarly affirmed the Apostolic Decree as binding, and many Gentile believers continued following its prohibitions even as some later Church Fathers began to question them. As Karin Zetterholm observes:

The decree was confirmed by the Synod of Gangra in the fourth century, reconfirmed by the Second Council of Constantinople in the sixth century and the Council of Trullo at the end of the seventh century. Even from the writings of church fathers who try to de-emphasize parts of the decree, such as Chrysostom and Augustine, it is evident that many Gentile Jesus-followers in their time adhered to its rules.

—Karin H. Zetterholm, “Jewishly-Behaving Gentiles and the Emergence of a Jewish Rabbinic Identity,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 25 (2018), 323n6

So, the Apostolic Decree is not only explicitly repeated in the New Testament despite Solberg's claim that it isn't, but also, it is consistently upheld by Christians throughout history. The evidence suggests that the four prohibitions, including the three food laws, are given to all Gentile believers for all times.

Let's turn our attention back to the four prohibitions themselves. All four of these commandments come directly from the Law of Moses (Exodus 34:15; Leviticus 17-18). But what exactly do they involve? While these commandments seem straightforward, their implications reach much further. Each prohibition serves as a broad category of sorts that contains many other related commandments. Let's

begin with the prohibition against sexual immorality, which most clearly illustrates this idea.

Sexual Immorality

The Apostolic Decree requires Gentile believers to abstain from sexual immorality. But what exactly counts as “sexual immorality”? The term functions as a general category that includes the many specific commandments listed in places like Leviticus 18 and 20, which spell out unacceptable sexual behavior in detail. Thus, abstaining from sexual immorality involves obeying *all* the Torah’s prohibitions against practices such as homosexual acts, adultery, incest, marital intercourse during menstruation, and so forth. In order to know what it means to abstain from sexual immorality, the Gentile believers had to look at how the Law of Moses defines sexual immorality.

For more on how the Bible defines “sexual immorality,” see Part 1 of our One Flesh series. ([**One Flesh: Biblical Chastity, Marriage & Divorce - Part 1 - What is Sexual Immorality?**](#))

So, it’s clear that this one commandment has far-reaching implications. Obeying the New Testament prohibition against sexual immortality requires going to the Old Testament to learn what that means. Suddenly, this one prohibition opens the door to many of the Torah’s other related commandments. The same can be said for the other prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree. Let’s take a look.

Things Polluted by Idols

The Apostolic Decree instructs Gentile believers to avoid things polluted by idols, which refers to the Torah’s prohibition against eating food sacrificed to idols (Exodus 34:15). Elsewhere, the Torah associates the eating of such foods with idolatry itself (Exodus 32:6; Numbers 25:1-2). But does this prohibition stop at the eating of idolatrous sacrifices? Surely the apostles weren’t suggesting that Gentile believers could carve and bow to idols (Exodus 20:4-6) so long as they skipped the idol meat. It stands to reason that this prohibition encompasses abstaining from *any* form of idolatry, from graven images to adopting pagan worship customs (Leviticus 18:3). Once again, the prohibition against “things polluted by idols” serves as a gateway to many other related commandments.

What Has Been Strangled and Blood

The last two prohibitions are closely connected. The prohibition against “blood” derives from the Torah’s commandments against eating blood (Leviticus 17:10-14). Eating blood is condemned whether it is ingested directly or indirectly by eating an animal that was not properly bled out. This relates to the prohibition against “what has been strangled.” Most scholars understand this to refer to meat that was improperly slaughtered and therefore still containing blood. As the scholar John Polhill writes:

“Strangled meat” referred to animals that had been slaughtered in a manner that left the blood in it. Blood was considered sacred to Jews, and all meat was to be drained of blood before consuming it. The prohibition of “blood” came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form. These three requirements [that is, abstention from things polluted by idols, what has been strangled, and blood] were thus all ritual, dealing with matters of clean and unclean food.”

—John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2001), 330

In the Mishnah, a collection of early Jewish commentary on the Torah, the word “strangled” is applied to animals that are improperly slaughtered with a dull blade:

[O]ne may slaughter with any item that cutes, except for the serrated side of the harvest sickle, a saw, the teeth of an animal when attached to its jawbone, and a fingernail, because they are serrated and they consequently **strangle** the animal and do not cut its windpipe and gullet as required.

—m.*Chullin* 1:2 (Translated by William Davidson, sefaria.org)

Similarly, the first-century Jewish teacher Philo condemns those who eat meat from animals they have “strangled,” noting that this practice “buries the blood in the body” instead of allowing one to “enjoy the flesh by itself” (Philo, *Special Laws* 4:122).

These sources indicate that the Apostolic Decree forbids Gentile believers from eating meat that still contains blood due to improper slaughter. The apostles expected the Gentile believers to diligently avoid “strangled” meat—that is, animals that were not fully bled out. But does this prohibition stop there? Would the apostles be fine with someone showing up at a fellowship meal with a pig roast as long as it were free of blood? Hardly. Once again, like the other parts of the Decree, this prohibition brings the Gentile believers under the broader umbrella of the Torah’s food laws, including its prohibitions against eating unclean animals (Leviticus 11).

In fact, the passage in the Law of Moses where this prohibition comes from already presupposes obedience to the laws against eating unclean animals. This prohibition comes from Leviticus 17:13, which requires pouring out the blood of animals that are killed for food. How does the law against strangled things relate to this commandment? As the scholar Richard Bauckham explains, the prohibition in Acts 15:20 is the “negative corollary” to the commandment in Leviticus:

“Things strangled” (πνικτων) are prohibited in Leviticus 17:13. The difficulty with this term in the apostolic decree has arisen simply because Leviticus 17:13 is a positive prescription: that animals killed for eating must be slaughtered in such a way that their blood drains out. Abstention from πνικτων is the negative corollary, for an animal killed in such a way that the blood remains “choked.”

—Richard Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting, Vol. 4: Palestinian Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 459

Why is this significant? Because the command in Leviticus 17:13 to pour out the blood applies only to animals “that may be eaten,” and therefore unclean animals are excluded by definition:

Leviticus 17:13

Any one also of the people of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who takes in hunting any beast or bird **that may be eaten** shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth.

Since the apostles’ prohibition against “strangled” meat is based on Leviticus 17:13, which concerns only animals “that may be eaten,” this implies that Gentile believers were also expected to observe the Torah’s prohibitions against eating unclean animals together with the rule against strangled meat. As Benjamin Frostad observes:

While the apostles never explicitly prohibit the consumption of unclean animals to Gentiles, the dietary laws of the Decree are certainly suggestive of further observance in that respect.

—Benjamin Frostad, “He Made No Distinction: Gentiles and the Role of Torah in Acts 15” (MA Thesis, Briercrest Seminary, 2021), 117

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15:20 serves as an introduction to the Law of Moses for Gentile followers of Yeshua. Contrary to those who claim that it was not binding on all Gentile believers for all times, the four prohibitions of the Decree are repeated elsewhere in the New Testament and were still affirmed and practiced by Christians centuries after the time of the apostles. Each prohibition functions as an umbrella, containing other related commands and opening the door for 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.

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