

The Epistle of the Jerusalem Apostles to the Gentiles

A very fascinating and instructive drama in the history of the Early Church is recorded in the fifteenth chapter of the book of Acts. A special council of the Jerusalem church leaders was held to decide how to respond to the issue of certain Jews who were Judaizing new Gentile converts who were being added to the church.

Luke's narrative is both clear and concise and worthy of our close attention.

Acts 15

1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

3 And being brought on their way by the church, they passed through Phenice and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them.

*5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, **and to command them to keep the law of Moses.***

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Notice: not only was the issue about binding the rite of circumcision on the Gentile believers, but it was about commanding them to “keep the **law of Moses**” [i.e., the TORAH].

6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us, that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the gospel, and believe.

8 And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as he did unto us;

9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

*10 Now therefore why tempt ye God, to put **a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?***

*11 But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ **we shall be saved, even as they.***

Two points that should be noted here:

1. Peter described the TORAH as “a **yoke** (i.e., bondage) ... which neither we nor our fathers were able to bear.”
2. Peter unequivocally declared that the Jews would be saved

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“through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ”, “even as they” (i.e., the Gentiles) were saved—NOT BY OBSERVANCE OF THE TORAH!

12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

13 And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me:

14 Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name.

15 And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

16 After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

17 That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

18 Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world.

19 Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God:

20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.

21 For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every sabbath day.

22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and

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Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

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23 And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.

*24 Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and **keep the law**: to whom **we gave no such commandment**:*

25 It seemed good unto us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men unto you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,

26 Men that have hazarded their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

27 We have sent therefore Judas and Silas, who shall also tell you the same things by mouth.

*28 For **it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things**;*

29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

This is the studied and deliberate response of James, the brother of Jesus, and the other leaders of the Jerusalem church—the brightest

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minds, the deepest thinkers, the most Spirit-filled and Spirit-led men among all the thousands of Jews who had believed. This is the complete epistle. It does not contain any command to the Gentile believers to “**keep the Law/Torah**”; rather, it clearly states that they “**gave no such commandment**”!

In very simple and straightforward terms these spiritual giants wrote to the Gentiles that “***it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things***”:

Abstain from:

- *meats offered to idols,*
- *and from blood,*
- *and from things strangled,*
- *and from fornication.*

There is no mention of keeping a Sabbath Day; no mention of keeping the Feast of the Passover—or any other of the Feasts of the Jews, for that matter; no mention of circumcision; and no mention of the dietary restrictions of clean and unclean animals.

Conclusion....

Those who are admonishing us to “keep the Torah” are apparently quite ignorant of this epistle in Acts 15. The question was settled once and for all by these apostles at this time. Those who want to quibble

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about the distinction between the MORAL LAW and the CEREMONIAL LAW should be careful to observe that the Founding Apostles of the church did not feel the need to make such a distinction.

In the words of the Apostle Peter,

*“... why tempt ye God, to put **a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?**”*

Pastor Tim D. Cormier

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AFTERWORD

The following should be kept clearly in focus when considering Acts 15:

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The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 occurred at least **20 years** after the Birth of the Church at Pentecost in Acts 2, and at least **17 years** after the conversion of Saul (the apostle Paul) in Acts 9.

There is nobody alive today who could possibly have a better understanding of the Torah and all its complex variants and subtle nuances than did Peter, the chief apostle to whom Jesus gave the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and James, the bishop of Jerusalem, and Paul, who wrote of his own eminent qualifications in Philippians 3:

4 Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more:
5 Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee;
6 Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

There is nothing anyone could possibly say about what happened 1,967 years after it happened that would in any way be more precise and insightful than what was said by those who were actually there when it happened.

The bottom line analysis: the outcome of Acts 15 is the actual epistle that was written by James and the apostles and elders and brethren of the Jerusalem Council! To say MORE or LESS is to violate the very principle of "ADDING to or SUBTRACTING from" the Word of God.

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29 That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well.

If a distinction between the WRITTEN TORAH and the ORAL TORAH was needed to fully grasp the significance of what was intended when referencing the TORAH, surely these FOUNDING APOSTLES, full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, would have had the sense to make such a

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distinction, and if not, we know that the Holy Ghost would have inspired them to say the right and necessary things.

It should also be noted here that the apostle Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatian churches at this time. There is no stronger sacred writing condemning the binding of the Torah on the Gentile believers than the epistle of Paul to the Galatians!

Notice the force of Paul's inspired words at the beginning of the epistle:

Galatians 1

*6 I marvel that ye are so soon **removed from** him that called you into the **grace** of Christ unto another [**heteros**, different] gospel:*

*7 Which is not another [**allos**, same]; but there be some that trouble you, and would **pervert the gospel of Christ**.*

*8 But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach **any other gospel** unto you **than that which we have preached** unto you, **let him be accursed**.*

*9 As we said before, so say I now again, **if any man preach any other gospel** unto you **than that ye have received**, **let him be accursed**.*

Who are we, some 1,967 years after the fact, to say that when the apostles used the word TORAH [i.e., LAW], they really meant this or that instead of what they actually said? Who are we, as Gentiles living nearly 2000 years later, to superimpose our “superior knowledge and understanding of Jewish culture and traditions” on what the anointed and inspired Jewish Apostles said and wrote contemporaneously with the raging spiritual conflict of their day?

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Speaking from personal experience, those who are caught up in the Hebraic Roots movement use this very “logic” (?) to undermine the Truth of the plainly written God-breathed Scripture and fritter away its obvious meaning. It is a source of alarm and concern when someone states “I have just looked beneath the obvious in this chapter” to refute what was clearly and obviously stated.

I am willing and prepared to face God with the Acts 15 epistle to the Gentiles just as it is contained in Scripture—without anything ADDED TO it or SUBTRACTED FROM it.

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