

Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council: Did They Conclude the Torah was Not for Gentiles?

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“Even the Apostles admitted the Torah was a burden no one could bear!” Such a statement characterizes a common sentiment about the Torah—one based upon an equally common interpretation of Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council.

But let us look again at Acts 15 and the decision of the Apostolic Council convened in Jerusalem. What was the issue at hand? What had brought about the need for the Council in the first place? And how should the decision of the Apostles be interpreted? What does all of this tell us about the place of the Torah among the early followers of Yeshua?

The Core Issue at the Jerusalem Council

The opening verses of Acts 15 give us a clear picture of the core issue around which the Jerusalem Council convened:

And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.^[1]

The “issue” at hand was whether or not someone who was not a Jew could be saved. To put it another way, how could a Gentile become a covenant member with Israel and share in the blessings of the covenant? The prevailing belief of the Judaism in Paul’s day was that only Jews had a place in the world to come since God had made the covenant of blessing with Israel and no other nation.

All Israel have a place in the world to come.^[2]

This central theological axiom shows that from the perspective of the Rabbis, a Gentile could secure a place in the world to come only by becoming a Jew. This, the Rabbis taught, was possible through becoming a proselyte, a ritual based entirely upon their rules but without any foundation in the Torah itself. In fact, the added phrase “according to the custom of Moses”^[3] in the opening verse of Acts 15 may point to the fact that the disagreement taking place between Paul and Barnabas was not over what the written Torah prescribed for Gentiles, but whether or not the additional teachings of the Sages were binding upon them.

Thus, when men from Judea taught that “unless you are circumcised (undergo the ritual of a proselyte) according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved,” they were simply applying the standard theology of their day. This is what the Council was dealing with—did all Israel have a place in the world to come, and did Gentiles therefore need to submit to the man-made ritual of the proselyte so that in accordance with the prevailing theology they too could secure eternal life, that is, be saved?

Nowhere in God’s word is there a ceremony outlined for a Gentile to become a proselyte. In fact, the Torah is quite specific that the resident non-Jew was to be received as just that—a non-Jewish person who had attached himself to Israel and to her God. If God expected the believing Gentile to become a Jew through some ritual of conversion, there would be no reason for a verse like [Numbers 15:16](#).

There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you.^[4]

The fact that God does not prescribe a method for becoming a proselyte in the sacred text of the Scriptures shows us that the rabbinic matter of proselytization was entirely man-made.

Yet the Torah does command that males be circumcised as a sign of the covenant made between God and Abraham’s descendants. But here is where the waters become muddied. Circumcision had become the central

element in the rabbinic ceremony for the proselyte, and Gentiles were undergoing circumcision not to fulfill the requirements of the Torah, but to comply with the rabbinic insistence upon proselytization. As Gentiles were taught that they could only enter the covenant by “becoming Jews” through the man-made ritual, they were likewise vulnerable to believing that their status as Jews was the grounds of their salvation rather than faith in God and His Messiah.

The issue was one of status. What status qualified a person to be assured of a place in the world to come—ethnic status or faith? What was essential for salvation: the status of Jewishness or the status of being “in Messiah”? Paul and the other apostles at the Jerusalem Council unanimously agreed that one’s ethnic status had no bearing whatsoever on one’s salvation. The crux was faith, not ethnicity.

Is the Torah a Burden No One Can Bear?

The predominant interpretations of Acts 15, however, center not on this main issue of how Gentiles would be received into the body of Messiah, but on whether or not the Torah had any relevance to their life of faith. Such an emphasis not only misses the opening words of the chapter, but also telegraphs the anti-Torah theology latent in the historical Christian church. What is given to us by Luke as an historical description of how the Apostles dealt with the rabbinic theology of their day has been turned into one of the primary texts used to disparage the Torah.

Yet not only do the opening words of the chapter tell us what the real issue was. The language of the Apostles themselves also indicates that they were dealing with the dominant theology of their day, and particularly the manner in which the man-made rules of the Oral Torah had been so interwoven with the interpretation and application of the Written Torah that in many cases the two had become indistinguishable.

Peter, in the first of the speeches recorded in our chapter, uses language that signals an important key to the interpretation of this passage. Having reminded his audience that he had been the Apostle first sent to the Gentiles and that he had witnessed the evidence of the Ruach upon them while they were still Gentiles, he issues this strong rebuke:

“Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”^[5]

Here Peter makes several very important assertions that are key for understanding his words. First, note that he puts at odds the “yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” with salvation through faith. The Gentiles had been saved and graced by God’s presence (evidenced by the Ruach) as a matter of their faith, not because they had changed status from Gentile to Jew. The “yoke” that the Pharisaic teachers desired to place upon them was, in Peter’s mind, contrary to salvation based upon God’s grace.

But here is a crux for the proper interpretation of the passage. Would Peter have referred to the written Torah as a yoke that “neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” The common answer of Christian interpreters is a resounding “yes!” Taking the position that the Jews of his day believed their salvation was gained through obedience to the Torah, Peter’s statement is interpreted as a ringing declaration against salvation by works.

But the Council was not debating whether or not salvation was gained by works. No one, including the “men from Judea” who were insisting that the Gentiles become proselytes, believed that anyone gained a place in the world to come by a complete keeping of Torah. As I have already noted, the prevailing view was that a place in the world to come was the gracious gift of God to every Israelite.

Furthermore, if Peter is describing the written Torah by calling it a “yoke neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear,” then he is putting the

Scriptures and the true gospel message at odds. But we know Peter did not do this. His message of the gospel given at that historic Shavuot (Acts 2) is the pure gospel. In his message there, after proving Yeshua to be the promised Messiah, Peter concludes with

“Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Yeshua HaMashiach for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Ruach HaKodesh. “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as Adonai Eloheinu shall call to Himself.”^[6]

But note well that Peter’s complete message is based upon the Tanach. He shows from the Scriptures (Psalms) that the Messiah would suffer and raise from the dead, and that it was by this work of Messiah that the promise of salvation to Israel as well as to the nations (given in the Abrahamic covenant found in Genesis) would be realized. Far from pitting the Torah against the message of salvation by faith, Peter bases his gospel upon Torah.

Peter is not alone in affirming that the Torah teaches salvation by faith. Paul instructs us that when the Torah is read via the illuminating work of the Ruach, Yeshua is inevitably seen.^[7] And according to [Galatians 3:8](#) he considers the Abrahamic promise to be the gospel.^[8] Moreover, the Apostolic message of the gospel is everywhere grounded in the Tanach, for the Tanach was the only divinely inspired Scriptures they had in which this message of salvation was given.^[9]

So if Peter cannot be referring to the written Torah by the descriptive phrase “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear,” to what was he referring? James uses similar language:

For it seemed good to the Ruach HaKodesh and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials...^[10]

Would James have characterized the Torah as a burden? In his epistle, written before the Jerusalem Council, James refers to the Torah as “the perfect Torah,”^[11] “the Torah of liberty,”^[12] and the “royal Torah.”^[13] Far from being a “burden,” James himself tells us he considered the Torah an extreme

blessing. Apparently both James and Peter had something other than God's Torah in mind when they spoke of the unbearable "yoke" and a "burden."

“Yoke” and “Burden” in the Sayings of Yeshua

The teachings of Yeshua had no doubt remained part of the on-going dialog among the Apostles. Like *talmidim* of any prominent teacher, the students of Yeshua surely rehearsed His teachings orally before they were written down. It seems certain the oral tradition of His teachings formed the basis for what later become the synoptic Gospels.

Yeshua refers to the man-made laws of the Sages via the metaphor of a “burden”:

And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. [Matthew 23:4](#)

Furthermore, He characterizes His own teachings with the familiar term “yoke”:

“Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. “For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.” [Matthew 11:29-30](#)

The use of the term “yoke” in the Rabbinic literature is well attested. The Midrashim speak of the “yoke of Torah”^[14] as well as the “yoke of God”^[15] and “yoke of the kingdom of heaven”^[16] while *Sifra* and the Mishnah include “yoke of the commandments.”^[17] For the Sages, the metaphor of the “yoke” was one of willful submission to the Torah and thus ultimately to the rule of God.

But when the rulings of men became so intertwined with the written Torah that for all practical purposes the two were one, to neglect the traditions of the Sages was viewed as a neglect of Torah. One of the Sayings of the Fathers warns that if interpretations of the Torah contrary to received

halachah are accepted, this could render a person unfit for the world to come.^[18] The implication is obvious: to throw off the traditions was to cast away the “yoke of the commandments” and to mark oneself as a heretic.

Illustrative of how the metaphor of a “yoke” was used to describe received traditions, the reasoning given for the order of prayers describes why one recites the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6 before the section “and it shall be if you hearken” of [Deuteronomy 11:13ff](#):

In order that one should first receive upon himself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and then receive upon himself the yoke of the commandments.^[19]

As far as the rabbis were concerned, one was not keeping the commandments as they should unless they kept them as prescribed by the ruling authorities—according to the accepted *halakah*. The “yoke of the commandments” was something additional to the “yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.” Indeed, the “yoke of the commandments” had effectively become the “yoke of the rabbis’ interpretations of the commandments,” and this yoke was often a burden.

Another example of the “yoke” is found in the Talmudic reference describing sins that are atoned for on Yom Kippur:

For all transgressions of the Torah, whether he repented or not, the Day of Atonement brings atonement, except in the case of one who throws off the yoke, perverts the teachings of the Torah, and rejects the covenant in the flesh.^[20]

In this case, “throwing off the yoke” most likely refers to a denial of God’s existence, but is also linked to perverting the teachings of Torah and failure to be circumcised. Note carefully how these three are joined in this Talmudic passage: throwing off the yoke, teaching Torah contrary to the prevailing interpretation, and not being circumcised. It is not hard to envision that Paul’s opponents could have thought this described his teaching. For in not requiring Gentiles to become Jews, it appeared as

though he disregarded both the ruling of the Sages as well as the Torah commandment of circumcision.

In fact, in Acts 21 we read there were believing Jews who were upset at Paul because a rumor had circulated that he was teaching the people to forsake Moses and the customs. So sure were they that he had forsaken God's way they were willing to attempt a mob lynching.

Yet Paul was unwilling to require the Gentiles to submit to the many man-made laws of the rabbis in order to be received into the community of believers. And his decision to move in this direction was considered by some to be worthy of death. The "yoke" of tradition had been cast across the neck of Israel for so long that it was impossible for many ever to envision a genuine faith in God without it.

Yeshua made a most significant point when He asked His disciples to take upon themselves His yoke, not the yoke His contemporaries. In contrast to the yoke that the rabbis were laying upon people's shoulders without any intention to help them lighten the load, Yeshua identifies His yoke as "easy" (*χρηστὸς, chrestos*), that is, "kind" and His burden as "light" (*ελαφρον, elaphros*), that is, "not a burden." His yoke was "kind" in that it gave "mercy" and "love" equal significance with "righteousness" and "justice." His burden was "light" because He had unwrapped the teaching of God, the Torah, from all of the man-made extras, and it therefore was able to penetrate the heart with *chesed v'emet*, "lovingkindness and truth." Yoked together with Him the Torah was as sweet as honey and the joy of one's heart. It was under this kind and gentle yoke that Yeshua intended even the smallest stroke of the Torah and Prophets to be fulfilled in the lives of His followers.^[21]

This yoke of the Torah as Yeshua taught cannot be the "burden" and "yoke" referred to by Peter and James. The yoke they describe is unbearable, and even the minimal aspects of it (the four things required of the Gentiles) are a burden. Rather, the yoke they are unwilling to place upon the backs of the

Gentile believers is the yoke of man-made rules and laws. Indeed, the layer upon layer of rabbinic additions to the Torah had made the whole matter a burden, and had even at times clouded the very purpose of the Torah. It was this burden the Apostles were unwilling to place upon the shoulders of the Gentiles, a burden every proselyte would have been expected to bear.

The Four Requirements

Yet there was no way around the fact that the Gentiles would need to conform to some of the man-made laws that for so long had been attached to the Torah. The Apostles decreed that an essential group of traditions should be received by the Gentile believers in order to give them a genuine, working membership within the synagogue community.

“For it seemed good to the Ruach HaKodesh and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.” ([Acts 15:28-29](#))

Why these four? Is there some commonality that binds them together?

Were the Four Requirements Really the Noachide Laws?^[22]

It is not uncommon for scholars to reference the Noachide Laws when discussing the edict drawn up by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.^[23] Various authors have indicated their belief that the four things required of the Gentiles were a “short list” of the Noachide Laws.

The Noachide Laws were considered by the Sages to be the foundational commandments given to the generation before the flood and exemplified in the life of Noah. As such, the rabbis accepted these to be the commandments necessary for a Gentile to follow in order to be considered righteous and have a place in the world to come. According to the Rabbis, the Torah was given to Israel and the Noachide Laws to the Gentiles.

The Babylonian Talmud lists the Noachide Laws as seven:^[24] 1) prohibition of idolatry, 2) prohibition of blasphemy, 3) prohibition of bloodshed, 4) prohibition of sexual sins, 5) prohibition of theft, 6) prohibition of eating flesh from a live animal, and 7) requirement to establish a legal system. But to derive these seven from Genesis 1-11 requires reading between the lines.

It should be noted that nothing even remotely akin to such a formulation is found in the earlier Mishnah. Never does the Mishnah mention a body of laws that, if followed, would render a Gentile righteous and therefore fit for the world to come. What is more, it is not until the era of the Babylonian Talmud (400-600 CE) that these laws were categorized under the name of Noah and prescribed as a requirement for righteous Gentiles. In the Mishnah a place in the world to come is reserved only for Israel, meaning that the only hope for Gentiles was to become proselytes.^[25]

Appeal is often made to Jubilees as indicating an early date for the Noachide Laws.^[26] But a reading of the wider context shows conclusively that in this text the laws given to Noah are for Israel, not for the nations. Indeed, for the author of Jubilees the laws given to Noah are foundational for all of the yearly Mo'edim (Festivals).

Furthermore, it seems apparent that the Noachide Laws were formulated at a time when the synagogue was taking a rather anti-Gentile position. The tide had changed. Rather than attempting to bring Gentiles into the faith of Israel as the Pharisees were apparently doing in Yeshua's time,^[27] the Noachide Laws were formulated at a time when Gentiles were considered more of a threat than a mission field. The formulation of the Noachide Laws thus made a second way for the Gentiles—a way that gave them a place in the world to come without bringing into the Torah community the myriad of problems of a large Gentile population.

This in itself makes the Noachide Law interpretation unworkable for Acts 15. It is exactly opposite of the council's conclusion. The Jerusalem Council's decision was that the believing Gentiles were to be received as members of

the covenant *in exactly the same way as Jews were received—by their faith*. Even Jews were not received on the basis of their ethnic status nor their outward observance of *halakah*. For the Apostles, faith was the issue.

But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Yeshua, in the same way as they also are.^[28]

To have given the Gentiles a different set of laws by which they would be received into the fellowship of the Messianic community would have undermined the very message of the Apostolic Gospel. And what we know of Paul's Gospel from his epistles, it is certain he would have never acquiesced to a message that prescribed one way for the Jew and another way for the Gentile.

Finally, had the Council actually prescribed the Noachide Laws for the Gentile believers they would have been disobeying Torah. For the Torah itself plainly states that there is one Torah for Israel and the Gentile who dwells with her. Therefore, the notion that the four stipulations given to the Gentiles in Acts 15 are actually an early formulation of the Noachide Laws simply does not work. It presumes that a theology formulated some two or three hundred years later was the norm in the 1st Century and it ascribes to the Apostles a theological decision that is contrary to Torah and diametrically opposed to their clear statement of salvation by faith. We must seek a better explanation for the four requirements given to the Gentile believers.

The Four Requirements as Fences Against Idol Worship

One thing is clear: the four requirements given to the Gentile believers were viewed by the Apostles as essential. But grouped as they are they comprise a specific message to the Gentiles about a specific issue. Obviously the Apostles were not suggesting to the Gentile believers that all morality and ethical guidelines were summed up in these four! No, a major issue—an essential one, is described by these four, one that the Apostles knew was a

“make-or-break” matter. I would like to suggest that the four things prohibited find a commonality in idol worship in the pagan temples.

From a Jewish perspective, nothing characterized the Gentiles more than idolatry. And nothing was more abhorrent. The issue was taken care of with the proselyte, for in submitting to the rabbinic ritual of circumcision, the Gentile essentially left his family and social relations and became a member of the Jewish community. As a consequence he distanced himself from the pagan community and the idolatry it promoted. What is more, in taking on the full burden of the rabbinic laws, the proselyte was forever separated from his own culture by the many fences of the rabbis. Indeed, there was no “short list” for the proselyte.

But if Gentiles were allowed into the congregation and community without the requirement of becoming a proselyte, how was the community to be assured that they had made a final break with idolatry? Without the many prohibitions involving touching, handling, eating, etc., how could one be certain the Gentiles, living within the pagan culture, were not participating in the idolatry of their upbringing?

Here is where the Jerusalem Council saw the need for Gentiles to submit to some of the manmade laws. The Jewish community needed to be satisfied that the Gentiles were no longer idolators, and that they had forever turned their backs on this capital crime. In order to make such assurances, the Apostles required the Gentile believers to take on the “yoke” and “burden” of manmade laws in the area of idolatry. The Oral Torah contained “fences” to protect from idolatry—fences not found in Scripture. Yet in the realm of idol worship these fences were considered essential to maintain a clear separation from the idolatry that was the warp and woof of Greek and Roman culture.

The four stipulations are listed twice in Acts 15, one that seems to be a kind of preliminary “rough draft,” and a second that is the “final edition” and committed to writing for distribution to the congregations.

[Acts 15:20](#)

1. abstain from things contaminated by idols and
2. from fornication and
3. from what is strangled and
4. from blood

[Acts 15:29](#)

1. that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and
2. from blood and
3. from things strangled and
4. from fornication

There are some apparent differences: fornication and blood are switched in the order of the lists, and the matter of idolatry is identified first as things “contaminated” (τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων) but secondly as food “sacrificed” to idols (εἰδωλοθύτων). But there is also a difference not seen in the English translation. In the first list each of the four prohibitions contains the article “the”—“*the* things contaminated by idols, *the* fornication, *the* (things) strangled, and *the* blood.” In the second list the article (“the”) before each item is missing. Since the second list leaves out the articles (“the”), it consists of only four words connected by the word “and.” As we would expect, the reiteration of the council’s decision in [Acts 21:25](#) conforms word for word to the written edition of the edict.^[29]

What might we glean from these comparisons? First, it seems quite possible that the first list given in Acts 15 is more spontaneous and less formal—a kind of “rough draft” or communication in progress. Having the opportunity to “hear” how the final edict was arrived at gives us additional insight into the interpretation of the Apostolic decree. In fact, the change from “things contaminated by idols” to “food offered to idols” helps us see that the setting the Apostles had in mind was the pagan temple.

In the phrase “things contaminated by idols,” the Greek word used for “contaminated” refers to “pollutions resulting from contact with idol worship.”^[30] Thus, the subsequent “things sacrificed to idols” in the final draft shows us that participation within the pagan temples is the issue at hand.

Participation by Gentiles in feasts connected to the pagan temples was often more cultural than religious, though from a Jewish standpoint it was surely

still idolatry. That Paul had to admonish the Corinthians not to participate in the “table (altar) of demons” and the “table (altar) of the Lord”^[31] shows that some Gentiles were obviously doing both.

Secondly, the use of the articles (“the”) before each item in the initial listing suggests that they represented well-known entities. Each of the four must have been things that both the Jewish community as well as the Gentiles were aware of and which could be identified by single terms.

Thirdly, the fact that the final list consists of just four words (joined by “and”) shows that in the end the Apostles formulated the edict to be succinct and therefore easily remembered and implemented. That they were successful in this may be seen by the fact that the reiteration of the edict in a subsequent setting (Acts 21) matches the final draft word-for-word.

But what can be said about switching the order of fornication and blood in the lists? The best explanation is that originally the Apostles listed the two most obvious aspects of idolatry: “things contaminated by idols” and “fornication.” (This is exactly how John characterizes idolatry).^[32] Then to these were added the more specific categories, “blood” and “things strangled.” In the final draft, however, the two items that primarily identified the idol worship of the pagan temples (eating in honor of the god and acts of fornication) became the “bookends” to envelop the entire list with the sub-categories (blood and things strangled) in the middle.

If this is the case, then the four items given to the Gentiles are a unified whole identifying idol worship in pagan temples, and as such reveal the Apostles’ demand that believing Gentiles separate themselves from any contact with the temples that could be construed by the Jewish community as participation in idolatry. In asking the Gentiles to divorce themselves from even the cultural aspects of the pagan temples, the Apostles were requiring the Gentiles to see idolatry from the Jewish perspective, and even

to conform to some of the additional laws formulated by the Sanhedrin against it. As Wirtherington writes,

They must not give Jews in the Diaspora the opportunity to complain that Gentile Christians were still practicing idolatry and immorality by going to pagan feasts even after beginning to follow Christ.^[33]

Thus, rather than listing four separate categories of prohibited practices for the Gentiles, the four requirements describe a single category—the pagan temples and their rituals. And though idolatry would naturally be considered outside the scope of a believer’s life, what the Apostles are calling for was conformity to the additional rabbinic *halakah* that pertained to idolatry—the “fences” not found in Scripture but necessary in this realm for inclusion into the Jewish community.

If the Mishnah gives us a picture of the 1st Century rabbinic viewpoint, then we can see that fences had been built to guarantee a clear separation between the synagogal community and the idolatry of the Hellenistic culture in which it existed.^[34] The Apostles were willing to lay this “burden” upon the believing Gentiles in order to preserve them from any accusations of idolatry, something that could have never been tolerated in the wider Jewish community.

But when we speak of pagan temples and their rituals, we must remember that in great measure these were seen as cultural and social institutions and not merely as religious ones. For instance, the local pagan temple often served as the bank for individuals as well as the state, and were the locations for all manner of political issues.^[35] Gentiles who had been born and raised in the idolatrous culture of Greece and Rome had a great many aspects of family and community tied together with the local temples. Could the believing Gentile continue to participate at these temples and even join in political, family, and community events without actually participating in idolatry? Could they eat there without giving their allegiance to the god or goddess to whom the meal was dedicated?

From a cultural standpoint there were doubtlessly believing Gentiles who thought they could,^[36] especially since meals were eaten in the courtyard and not in the temple itself. Since the idol was housed in the temple, participation in the courtyard events could have been viewed as separated from idol worship and therefore permissible. But how “close” could one get in one’s participation without actually being involved in idolatry? Here was a question that must have concerned the Jewish community as they welcomed more and more Gentiles in.

And it was this very issue that Paul addresses when he makes it clear that one cannot eat at the table of demons and the table of the Lord.^[37] In making this comment Paul is simply implementing the Jerusalem Council’s edict. It was not as though Gentiles could escape contact with idol worshipers and even with pagan temples. But how could they continue to live in the Gentile society while at the same time demonstrating to the Jewish community that they were not participating in the idol worship of their culture?

That much of the general, day-to-day activities within the Roman and Greek society involved the local temple meant that the Gentile believers needed to commit themselves to extra precautions to assure their Jewish brothers that they had forsaken all aspects of idolatry. The four prohibitions listed by the Council were given to do just that.

The Four Prohibitions as Aspects of the Pagan Temple

(1) abstain from meat offered to idols

The words “meat offered to idols” translate only one word in the Greek. This word, εἰδωλόθυτος(*eidolothutos*) is used nine times in the Apostolic Scriptures,^[38] and always is in the context of eating food at a pagan temple. This fact is strengthened by the phrase used in the initial listing in [Acts 15:20](#). There “things contaminated by idols” clearly refers to the pollution of food used in rituals of the pagan temple. Likewise, the same word is similarly used in [4 Maccabees 5:2](#). By using this word the Apostles were not

prohibiting food from the common market, but specifically food at a meal in connection with an idolatrous ceremony.

Indeed, the Mishnah tractate *Avodah Zarah* does not prohibit the use of things belonging to idolators nor even entering a temple building or precinct that contained an idol. In general categories, the Sages strictly forbade three things (with many rulings for each): 1) aiding idolators in their idolatry, 2) deriving any benefit from idols or idolatrous practices, and 3) participating in any manner in the worship of idols. There is nothing that directly prohibits entering a pagan temple or eating in the courtyard. But the purposes for entering and the manner in which activities were done within the temple complex made all the difference. The Gentile believers would need to learn carefully what they could and could not do in connection with all matters pertaining to the pagan temple. And since the Jewish community generally suspected Gentiles of continuing in their former idolatry,^[39] it was necessary for the Apostles to make clear rulings on the matter and to negate all suspicions.

Thus Gentile believers could not eat a meal in connection with the pagan temples if in any way the food prepared was dedicated to the god or goddess. Of course there were meals and activities in the temple precinct that had nothing to do with the idol housed inside. Presumably these were allowed.

(2) (abstain from) blood

This does not refer to eating meat with blood (which is taken up in the next prohibition), but to ingesting of blood itself, something not uncommon in idol rituals. Whether or not the common person drank the blood of the sacrificial victim is not certain, but there is evidence that the priests did.^[40] From a Jewish perspective, to participate in a ritual in which the representative priest drinks the blood of the sacrifice is to participate in the same abominable act. Of course, the Torah itself prohibits eating blood,^[41] but the Apostles required the Gentiles to distance themselves from

any ritual in which blood was ingested and/or improperly used. Such a thing was simply too abhorrent for the Jewish community.

(3) (abstain from) things strangled

That the sacrifices in pagan temples were usually killed by cutting the throat is well attested. But strangulation is also known to have been used.^[42] This inhumane killing of animals was contrary to the spirit of Torah. But while the Torah prohibited eating blood, there is nothing in the written Scriptures describing exactly how an animal was to be slaughtered. The Sages therefore felt the necessity to make such rulings in order to fully comply with the Torah commandments against ingesting blood. Meat from animals that had been strangled was therefore prohibited because of the high probability that the meat was saturated with blood.

Gentile believers were to have no participation whatsoever in the cruel strangulation of animals nor in the rituals that included such practices. Nor were they to eat meat of animals that were strangled. As such, meat for sale at the local pagan temple was out of bounds for the Gentile believer. The chances that the meat had been strangled were too high. The Apostles therefore required the Gentiles to submit to the more stringent rulings of the Sages when it came to meat and the kosher slaughter rules they had developed.^[43] This was no doubt a burden, since meat from local temples could be more accessible and perhaps less expensive. But even beyond the issue of ingesting blood, being the product of pagan idol rituals this meat was not allowed.

Some might argue that the subsequent teaching of Paul in 1Corinthians 8-10 seems to overturn the Council's decision on meat offered to idols. There Paul argues that an "idol is nothing"^[44] and his subsequent words have been taken to mean that meat offered to it is allowed as long as no one is offended by it. But in the larger context it is clear that Paul maintains the Council's decision by emphasizing the need for believers not to participate in the meals served at pagan temples.

. . . but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons.^[45]

His admonition to “flee idolatry”^[46] is surely to be understood as a warning not to participate in the pagan temple rituals. But his willingness to allow meat to be eaten without questioning where it came from^[47] must be seen as an attempt to stop the uncontrolled piling up of halakah. For the meat he is specifically talking about is that purchased in the market, not the pagan temple.^[48] Perhaps people argued that some meat in the market was actually from the pagan temples. But Paul is not willing to make additional *halakah* over and above that sanctioned by the Jerusalem Council. Where would it end? How could one be sure whether the meat was from the pagan temple or not? To make a ruling on this would lead in only one direction: separation from the Gentiles much like what the Jewish community had experienced.

He therefore instructs his readers to eat the meat without questioning as long as their conscience allows it. In the end we can only conclude that Paul prohibits meat known to have been from the pagan temple but allows meat from the market place (even if its origins are not known). He clearly continues the Council’s prohibition against any participation in idolatrous rituals.

(4) (abstain) from fornication

The word translated “fornication” is *porneiva* (*porneia*), the root of our English word “pornography.” While some have suggested that *porneia* here describes prohibited marriages (i.e., too close to the bloodline),^[49] the fact is that in Leviticus 18 where prohibited unions are discussed, the Lxx never uses the word *porneia*. Granted, *porneia* is used in [1Corinthians 5:1](#) to describe incest, but that is hardly what the Apostles are talking about here.

The word *porneia*, however, is associated with the pagan temples where temple prostitutes were common.^[50] So notorious was temple prostitution

in Corinth that the coined phrase “play the Corinthian” meant to engage in sexual promiscuity.^[51]

It can hardly be the case, however, that the Apostles were speaking of sexual engagement with temple prostitutes when they prohibited “fornication.” This would be considered out of the question for all believers and therefore unnecessary to be singled out for Gentiles in particular. Rather, the prohibition is to any connection with the temple rituals that utilized temple prostitutes, including any kind of support or participation in any service that included temple prostitutes, seen or unseen.

In the end, the four prohibitions each attach to an aspect of the pagan temple, and require the believing Gentile to conform to the current halakah of the Jewish community with respect to all matters of idolatry. While it was both unpractical and even impossible to prohibit the Gentile believer from any contact at all with the local temple (since it was the bank and the place where certain legal transactions took place), the prohibitions given to the Gentile believers required them to submit to Jewish halakah as a way of demonstrating a complete break with their former idolatrous life. While they might have occasion to be in the temple precincts, they were to demonstrate by their exclusion from all idolatrous worship and ceremonies. There was to be no doubt that they had forsaken the gods of their fathers and turned to the One God of Israel.

Their entire separation from the actual idolatry of the pagan temple is emphasized in the final sentence of the edict:

if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well.^[52]

The term translated “keep free” is διατηρέω (*diatereo*), found only here and in [Luke 2:51](#) (describing how Mary treasured i.e., kept the message in her heart). But in [Sirach 1:26](#) *diatereo* describes “keeping the commandments.” The word itself may have an emphatic sense^[53] and may signal the intention of the Apostles that the *halakah* given to the Gentiles was to be kept in detail. Indeed, the rabbinic sanctions regarding idolatry went much further

than simple prohibitions against bowing to idols. Great pains were taken to distance oneself from every aspect of idolatrous pollution while at the same time living within the Hellenistic culture.

The Apostles knew that if the Gentile believers were willing to accept the strict rabbinic halakah regarding all matters of idolatry and particularly regarding the pagan temples, their acceptance within the Torah community would be much greater. Though this could be a “burden” and at least a part of the “yoke” of the Oral Torah laid upon them, it was essential for their inclusion into the Torah community where they could learn the Scriptures and grow in faith. Their willingness to submit to these additional rulings gave the Jewish community the necessary confidence to receive them as those who had completely forsaken idolatry and turned to the One God of Israel.

Summary

The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was dealing with a specific issue: was it necessary for Gentiles to become proselytes and thus take on the full weight of the man-made laws of the Sages in order to be accepted within the Jewish community? The Council voiced a unified “no” to this question. Using “circumcision” as a short-hand designation for “the ritual of becoming a proselyte,” the Council determined that the Gentiles would not need to be circumcised (i.e., become proselytes) in order to be received into the Torah community.

There was, however, the need to assure the Jewish community that those Gentiles who had confessed Yeshua as Messiah had genuinely forsaken any form of idolatry. Since the Greek and Roman cultures were centered around idol worship with local pagan temples, it was important that the Jewish community be able to receive the Gentile believers without any suspicion of remaining idolatry.

The Apostles therefore required the Gentiles to accept the extra-biblical, man-made laws regarding idolatry. These were: 1) they should not participate in any meal that was even remotely connected to idol worship, 2) they should not participate in any gathering or ceremony that involved the misuse of blood as a sacrificial element, 3) they should not involve themselves in any ritual or ceremony that involved the strangulation of animals, and they should be careful not to eat meat from animals killed by strangulation (something not uncommon in the pagan sacrificial rituals), and 4) they should distance themselves from any contact with or support of the temple prostitutes and the fornication they represented in the pagan temple precincts.

While the written Torah surely prohibited any worship of idols, the Sages had put a good number of “fences” in place to distance the people from any contact with idolatry. These “fences” were extra-biblical, yet the Apostles considered them essential in showing the clear break the Gentile believers had made with idolatry. But since they were man-made and not directly from Scripture, they were part of the “yoke” of Oral Torah, the “burden” that the Sages had laid upon the written Scriptures. While the Apostles were not willing to put the Gentiles under the full weight of the traditions (something not even the Jewish people had been able to bear), they did see the need to require the Gentiles to keep this rabbinic *halakah*. Only such a requirement could have fully satisfied the Jewish community that the Gentile believers had made a radical break from their former idol worship.

References

[1] [Acts 15:1-2](#).

[2] m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1.

[3] τῷ ἔθει τῷ Μωϋσέως, “according to the custom of Moses” is found only here in the Apostolic Writings but is paralleled by similar phrases in [Acts](#)

[6:14](#) (“customs which Moses handed down to us”) and [Acts 21:21](#) (“to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs”). The phrase “customs . . . among the Jews” is found in [Acts 26:3](#) and “the customs of our forefathers” in [Acts 28:3](#). Elsewhere in Acts the word “custom” (ἔθος) is used to denote culturally bound customs (Roman customs, [Acts 16:21](#); [25:16](#)) as well as personal customs (of Paul, [Acts 17:2](#)).

[4] Cf. also [Exodus 12:49](#) and [Numbers 15:29](#).

[5] [Acts 15:10-11](#).

[6] [Acts 2:38-39](#).

[7] [Romans 10:4](#) where “end” (τέλος) should be understood as “goal.” Cf. [2Corinthians 3:1-4:6](#).

[8] Cf. the parallel texts to [Genesis 12:3](#) as well: 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 27:29; 28:14.

[9] Cf. [Romans 10:6-8](#) where [Deuteronomy 30:12ff](#) is quoted, and where Paul considers this Torah passage to be “the word of faith which we are preaching.” In fact, for Paul [Genesis 15:6](#), “And Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness” showed beyond doubt that the message of salvation by grace through faith was the message Abraham believed (cf. [Romans 4:3](#)). Paul considers the Abrahamic promise to the Gospel ([Galatians 3:8](#)), the same Gospel he preached.

[10] [Acts 15:28](#).

[11] [James 1:25](#).

[12] [James 1:25](#); [2:12](#).

[13] [James 2:8](#).

[14] Mid. Rab. *Genesis* lxxvii:7; xcvi:12; xcix:10; Mid. Rab. *Exodus* xv:11, 13; Mid. Rab. *Numbers* xiii:15, 16; xviii: 21; xix:26; Mid. Rab. *Lamentations* iii:9; v:5.

[15] Mid. Rab. *Exodus* xxx:5.

[16] Mid. Rab. *Numbers* x:4; Mid. Rab. *Lamentations* l:43

[17] *Sifra* 57b; 99d; m.*B'rechet* 2:2.

[18] Consider *Avot* 3:11 (it is numbered 3:15 in R. Travers Herford, *Pirke Aboth: The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers* [Schoken, 196]) and Shlomo P. Topperoff, *Avot: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Ethics of the Fathers* [Aronson, 1997] while in Charles Taylor, *Sayings of the Fathers* [KTAV, 1969] it is numbered 3:17), “R. Eleazar the Modiite said: He who profanes holy things and despises the festivals, and shames his associate in public, and makes void the covenant of Abraham our father, and gives interpretations of Torah which are not according to Halachah, even though he possess Torah and good deeds he has no portion in the world to come.” The phrase “not according to halachah” is missing in some manuscripts but seems necessary to complete the phrase, since giving interpretations of Torah, something every Sage did, could not have been considered wrong. What this phrase would imply is that there came a time where a growing faction within Judaism was expressing halachah contrary to the rulings of the Sanhedrin and these were considered such a threat that they were marked as heretical. Parallel texts to this Saying are: *Sifre* on [Numbers 15:31](#) (2:169-70 in Neusner’s translation), b.*Sanhedrin* 99a-b, *Avot according to Rabbi Nathan*, ch. 26).

[19] m.*Berachot* 2:2.

[20] b.*Shevuot* 13a.

[21] [Matthew 5:17-21](#).

[22] For a more indepth study on the origin and purpose of the Noachide Laws, see my paper, “Do the Seven, Go to Heaven? An Investigation into the Origins of the Noachide Laws”, delivered at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, and available at www.torahresource.com.

[23] Brad H. Young, *Paul the Jewish Theologian* (Hendrickson, 1997), 38f.; Marvin Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Eerdmans, 1989), 49; W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 3rd edition (SPCK, 1970), 118; Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Fortress, 1996), 169-70; Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert* (Yale, 1990), 194ff.

[24] b.*Sanhedrin* 56a-60a; b.*Avoda Zara* 64b, cf. t.*Avodah Zara* 8.4.

[25] m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1.

[26] Jubilees 7:20ff enumerates the sins which caused the flood and the destruction of the world.

[27] Cf. [Matthew 23:15](#).

[28] [Acts 15:11](#).

[29] The textual variants in each of these texts ([Acts 15:20](#), [29: 21:25](#)) is quite involved. The majority of scholars receive the readings that yield 1) things sacrificed to idols, 2) blood, 3) things strangled, and 4) fornication. One text (P45) has only two: 1) things sacrificed to idols, and 2) things strangled. Still other texts (D and various Western texts) have four, but leave out “things strangled” and add the Negative Golden Rule, “Do not do unto others” which is first attributed to Hillel (b.*Shabbat* 31a; cf. *Avot de R. Natan* ii.26; cp. *Didache* i.2). The positive form is also found in Jewish literature, *Mishneh Torah* ii:Hilekot Abel xiv.I). It seems apparent that the reason D and the Western texts have the list they do is to remove any sense of ritual requirements. By removing “things strangled” the abstaining from “blood” can be interpreted as “murder.” Thus “idolatry, murder, and fornication” are all moral, not ritual issues. On the other hand, the short list of P45 is not easily explained, unless there was simply a copyist error.

[30] F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans, 1952), 299f; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans, 1998), 462. Especially important in identifying this word (which occurs only here in the Apostolic Writings) as referring to food eaten in idolatrous worship is the Lxx of Malachai 1:7 where the same Greek word is used to identify polluted food offered on altars.

[31] [1Corinthians 10:21](#). Note footnote #36 below.

[32] [Revelation 2:14](#), [20](#). Note that [Revelation 2:13](#) most likely refers to the pagan temple built in Pergamum in 29 BCE to Augustus.

[33] Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 463.

[34] This is not to negate the obvious fact that syncretism was, to one extent or another, a reality in many Jewish communities of the 1st Century, including synagogues and what went on in them. But the Sages ruled against syncretism of idolatrous practices, and thus the *halakah* is established theoretically even if it was not always followed practically. It seems clear that the closer one gets to Jerusalem, the more strict are the *halakic* practices of the Jewish communities.

[35] J. R. C. Cousland, "Temples, Greco-Roman" in Evans and Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (IVP, 2000), 1186.

[36] [1Corinthians 8:10](#). Paul is not concerned with the actually eating of food as though the food itself is somehow contaminated by a pagan incantation. But he is concerned with any participation in idol ritual, and this is the issue he emphasizes.

[37] [1Corinthians 10:21](#) where "table" is used to refer to the "altar," cf. [Ezekiel 41:22](#); [44:16](#).

[38] [Acts 15:29](#); [21:25](#); [1Corinthians 8:1](#), [4](#), [7](#), [10](#); [10:19](#); [Revelation 2:14](#), [20](#).

[39] Note the perspective of the Jewish writer in [2Maccabees 6:4-5](#), “For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with prostitutes and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings that were forbidden by the laws.” This description no doubt was what Jews most likely thought went on in most pagan temples.

[40] R. M. Ogilvie, *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus* (New York, 1969), 49ff.

[41] [Leviticus 3:17](#); [17:12](#).

[42] See the magical papyri PGM XII.14-95, “Take also on the first day seven living creatures and strangle them; one cock, a partridge, a wren.... Do not make a burnt offering of any of these; instead, taking them in your hand strangle them, while holding them up to your Eros, until each of the creatures is suffocated and their breath enters him. After that place the strangled creatures on the altar together with aromatic plants of every variety.” Quoted from Witherington, *Acts*, 464 n.423. Interestingly, even Philo mentions that some were sacrificing animals by means of strangulation: Philo, *The Special Laws*, iv:xiii.122.

[43] Cf. Tractate *Chullin* in the Mishnah.

[44] [1Corinthians 8:1f](#).

[45] [1Corinthians 10:20](#).

[46] [1Corinthians 10:14](#).

[47] [1Corinthians 10:25f](#).

[48] [1Corinthians 10:25](#).

[49] Cf. W. K. Lowther Clarke, *New Testament Problems* (Macmillan, 1929), 59-60; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Eerdmans, 1951), 300.

[50] Hauch/Schultz, “porneiva” in *TDNT*, 6:581f, though with regard to porneiva in Acts 15 the authors come to the conclusion that it refers to prohibited marriages.

[51] C. S. Keener, “Adultery, Divorce” in Evans and Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (IVP, 2000), 12.

[52] [Acts 15:29](#).

[53] The compound with the preposition δια may have a perfective force, thus “fully keep.”