

Acts 15

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Review of Acts 14

Paul and Barnabas in Iconium where they were eventually rejected by the Jewish leadership who planned to stone them

They fled to *Lystra* where Paul heals the cripple and the towns people declare them to be gods

Paul argues from natural revelation that they were just men like the people of *Lystra* but had a new message about Jesus

Jewish leaders again incite the people who stone Paul

The two missionaries flee to *Derbe* where they remain for some time (perhaps a year)

Review of Acts 14 (Cont)

They return to *Antioch in Syria* via *Lystra*, *Iconium*, *Antioch of Pisidia*

They remain a time in *Antioch in Syria* describing their successes among the Gentiles

Early Christian Time Line

0-6 AD Birth of Jesus the Christ

1-5 Saul's birth

30-33 Christ is crucified, raised and ascends into Heaven

33 Pentecost

33 Stephen is martyred

33-34 Saul's conversion on the Road to Damascus

34-36 Saul's sojourn in Arabia

36-37 Saul's return journey to Jerusalem

37-42 Saul in Tarsus

Early Christian Time Line (Cont)

41-44 Herod Agrippa I reigns

42 Paul in Antioch

44 Famine in Jerusalem

45-49 Paul's 1st missionary journey

Spring of 45 they sail for Cyprus

Fall of 45 they sail for Asia Minor and arrive at Antioch of Pisidia

Fall of 46 they arrive at Iconian

They may have remained 1 year in Derbe

48 was their triumphal journey to Jerusalem

49 was the Council of Jerusalem

50 Council of Jerusalem

49-52 Paul's 2nd missionary journey

Acts 15

Acts 15:1-4 "But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved....and they declared all that "'

These guys came down from the Church in Jerusalem and began telling the Christians in the Church in *Antioch* that unless they were circumcised (kept Kosher and all of the Law of Moses) they could not be saved, go to heaven and were still damned!

Can you imagine how this impacted the Gentile Christians in Antioch?

The authorities in the Church of Antioch appointed Paul and Barnabas to go back (up) to Jerusalem to discuss this matter with the Apostles and elders in the Church of Jerusalem

Acts 15 (Cont)

On their way they passed through the Churches in *Phoenicia* and *Samaria* telling them about the acceptance of the Gentiles on their missionary journey

When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem they were welcomed by the leadership and reported all that God had done for them

Most members of the Church in Jerusalem were happy with this news

Remember when speaking of circumcision that includes all of the Law of Moses (including all aspects of what was deemed clean or unclean) this issue is very important in Paul's Epistles to the Galatians and Romans

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:5 *“But some believers who belonged to the **party of the Pharisees** rose up and said, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them and to charge them to keep the law of Moses’”*

The party of the Pharisees condemned Paul and Barnabas for their actions

At this point Pharisees were converting to the “New Way” (Church) in droves, but they continued to see themselves as Pharisees

They believed what God said in **Gn 17:10-14,*** that unless you are circumcised you were cut off from the people of Israel

They also believed that unless one complied with the Kosher laws of **Lv 11*** you were cut off from the people of Israel

Further, they understood **Gn 12:1-3*** to mean that from the seed of Abraham all the generations shall be blessed

Acts 15 (Cont)

*Acts 15:6 -7 “The apostles and the **elders** were gathered together to **consider** this matter. And after there had been **much debate**, Peter rose and said to them,”*

Clergy would be a better word here than elders

Bishops and most likely deacons were present

The word “consider” and “much debate” indicate that a very **hot debate** was going on at this point

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:7-8 *“Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us;”*

This is the story of Cornelius

Remember that Peter had asked in **Acts 10:47** ‘Can anyone forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?’

Again, these were uncircumcised men who had been baptized

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15: 9 *“and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith.”*

This is another illusion right back to Peter’s words when he was talking about the circumcision party when he came to Jerusalem as seen in **Acts 11:4-17** when he defended his actions to the Church in Jerusalem

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15: 10-11 *“Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”*

The Pharisee Christians might have suggested that Peter was obviously having trouble with these Kosher issues

This will come up again in the Letter to the Galatians

Although Peter still carried a great deal of authority his actions in the house of Cornelius did not address the issues concerning the Promises to Abraham or the Laws of Leviticus

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:12 *“And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.”*

After Peter had spoken, the council listened to Barnabas and Paul who were basically saying the same thing

They indicated that even though they did not know why the Holy Spirit descended upon the Gentiles and allowed them to speak in tongues, they could see no justification in denying them Baptism, making them Christians

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:13-18 *“After they finished speaking, **James replied**,...says the Lord, who made these things known from of old”*

Thank God that **James** (the lesser, Bishop of Jerusalem, author of the Epistle of James) was there, as he was a very influential guy, with power and influence (Peter had left him in charge when he fled Jerusalem in **Acts 12:17**)

James states that the coming of the Gentiles into the covenant was proclaimed by all the prophets

*To prove this he quotes from **Amos 9:11-12***

Acts 15 (Cont)

Amos was one of the early prophets who predicted:

The restoration of the Kingdom of God

The return of the Messiah

The restoration of the Temple

The entrance of Gentiles into the kingdom

Followed by the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham

He says that what is happening right now in the Church is what the prophets had spoken of from the beginning

But the debate is still going on and the matter of this very important topic is not resolved

Acts 15 (Cont)

In fact all of the prophets said that the Gentiles would come into the Kingdom of God

Some in the audience may have said that they understood all that, but no where does it imply in the prophets that when the Gentiles come in **they will not be circumcised**

But as we shall see, James has another solution!

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:19-20 *“Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,...to abstain from ...blood”*

Here James states that the God-fearers should not be required to be circumcised or keep kosher but, they must abstain from:

The pollution of idols

Pornea (unchastity)

What is strangled

Blood

What is going on, and what is he talking about?

Acts 15 (Cont)

Here we see **James** agreeing with **Peter, Paul** and **Barnabas**

He does not want to trouble those who turn to God with the complications of circumcision and Kosher

If at this moment these leaders had walked out of the council with this decision the debate would not have been resolved

There had to be a **theological answer** to the question

In every subsequent **Church Council** you will see that there is:

A debate or debates,

The Council arriving at a theological answer to the question(s) being debated

A written document summarizing the council 's decision(s)

Acts 15 (Cont)

The debate at this the **Council of Jerusalem** is based on the fact that there were two groups of Christians in the Council

The traditional Jewish Christians wanting the Gentile converts to accept circumcision and the Kosher laws

The liberal Christians did not want to burden the Gentile converts with the Law and only wanted them to be baptized

Both groups were arguing over how to understand the **Law of Moses**

James is saying that the Mosaic Law does not require the position of the traditionalist, and in fact it says that they do not have to be circumcised or keep Kosher!

Why is he saying this?

Acts 15 (Cont)

Suddenly, James quotes from Mosaic Law to prove his argument

Once his message is understood there is acceptance, and an end to the debate, followed by silence!

James reminds his listeners that at the “heart of the Mosaic Law” one can see that the “Gentiles” were only required to abstain from:

- The pollution of idols

- Pornea*

- Strangled animals

- Blood

So what is the basis from James statement?

He is quoting from is the “*Holiness Code*” found at the center of the **Book of Leviticus** *

The Book of Leviticus

The Four Parts of Leviticus

Ritual of sacrifice - Lv 1-7

The investiture of priests - Lv 8-10

Rules concerning the clean and unclean Lv 11-16

The Law of Holiness – Lv 17-27

Rules Concerning the Clean and Unclean (Cont) Lv 11-16*

The great Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)

A sacrifice for sin of the people required two goats

One is offered as a holocaust and its blood is sprinkled on the tabernacle

The other is prayed over by the priest who lists all the sins of the people and then it is taken into the wilderness where it is offered to Azazel

may have been a devil who lived in the desert

Hebrew word meant a departing

Septuagint used *emissario* - sending

The Law of Holiness – Lv 17-27

Also known as **the “Holiness Code”**

Is located at the center of the Book of Leviticus and at the center of the Torah

Serves as a summary of Leviticus

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Immolation and sacrifices – Lv 17

Established to prevent a man from killing an animal out in the field and offering a prayer of thanks to one of the pagan gods

Forbids consuming animal blood (its life force) as did the pagans to gain the life of the animal

Rules for conjugal relationships – Lv 18

Identifies who one may marry

Became the basis for what we use today in Cannon Law

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Worship - Lv 19

Defines the “Holiness of God”

Declares that His people are a “holy people”

Holy means “to be set apart” or “not for common use”

Jesus will call Israel to not only be “holy” but also to be “perfect as God is perfect”

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Jesus command to love your enemies as yourself is from the Holiness Code

Acts 15 presents the 4 regulations for gentiles

Strangers shall be treated properly since Israel was a stranger in Egypt

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Penalties – Lv 20

- Offenses against true worship

- Offenses against the family

The holiness of the priesthood – Lv 21

- The priests

- The high priest

- Impediments to the priesthood

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Holiness in consuming the sacred meal – Lv 22

- The priests

- Lay people

- Animal sacrificed

The ritual for the annual feasts – Lv 23

- Sabbath

- The Passover and the feast of Unleavened bread

- The feast of sheaf

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

The feast of weeks

The first day of the seventh month

The Day of Atonement

The feast of Tabernacles

Complementary ritual prescriptions – Lv 24

The perpetual flame

The bread of the golden table

A case of blasphemy, the law or retaliation

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

The Holy years – Lv 25

The Sabbatical year

The year of Jubilee

The divine guarantee

Consequence of the holiness of land and people

The land – redemption of landed property

The people – loan and enfranchisements

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Summary: conclusions – Lv 26

Blessings

Curses

Note the parallels between Leviticus and Deuteronomy 28

The structure of the Book of Revelation is based on Lv 26

Later Israel will become like their neighbors and worship false gods resulting in the curses found here and in Du 28

The Law of Holiness (Cont)

Lv 17-27

Tariffs and estimates – Lv 27

Particular ruled for the redemption

Of firstborns

Of things not under the ban

Of tithes

Acts 15 (Cont)

Once again we see a passage in the Bible that demonstrates its authenticity because the Elder James is reciting something from memory and thus presents the list out of the order it appears in the Scriptures

This discrepancy will be corrected when the Council incorporates the list into its written document (**Acts 15:29**)

The correct order as found in Leviticus is that one should abstain from what has been:

- Sacrificed to idols (Lv 17:1-9)

- Blood (Lv 17:10-16)

- What is strangled (Lv 19:26)

- Pornea* (unchastity) (Lv 18:1-18)

The Holiness Code

The **Pentateuch** (First 5 books of the Bible attributed to Moses) is structured with **Genesis** and **Exodus** at the beginning, then **Leviticus** in the center, followed by **Numbers** and **Deuteronomy**

At the center of **Leviticus** is the **Holiness Code (Lv 17-21)**

At the center of the **Holiness Code** is **Lv 19:2** which states:
*“Say to all the congregation of the people of Israel, You shall **be holy** for I the Lord your **God am holy**”*

This is why Jesus said that your righteousness goes beyond that of the Pharisees and you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48)

The Holiness Code (Cont)

According to the Law, to be *Holy* (*Kadosh* in Hebrew) means to be “**set apart**, to be different, not profane or common”

The issue that makes Israel “set apart” or different from the other nations is this “Holiness Code”

Most nations accepted Natural Law to include most of the 10 Commandments

But it was the Holiness Code that set Israel apart from the rest of the nations

The Holiness Code (Cont)

When Israel came out of Egypt (**Ex 12:37***) it consisted of:

600,000 men on foot (that would be over 1 million counting women and children)

But there was also a *mixed multitude* who went up with them (these were the “sojourners” or God-fearers)

Thus, the Exodus was an Israeli and a Gentile event

The Israelites who left Egypt were polytheists who had been worshiping the Egyptian gods for the previous 450 years

The Holiness Code (Cont)

So the God of Israel exhorted them to become **monotheists** and only worship Him, the one true God of Abraham (1st Commandment)

While Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years God gave them the **Book of Leviticus** to help them to be careful on their way to the Promised Land

The pollution of idols Lv 17:1-9

A pollution to idols sounds like it is dealing with idolatry

As good polytheists the Israelites were used to worshipping and sacrificing to almost anything

So, if a man left the camp and killed an animal, or if one of his animals died he might be tempted to offer it as a sacrifice to one of the local pagan gods

Thus, the Israelites were required by (**Lv 17:1-9**) to bring all animals to the door of the tent of meeting so the priest could kill it

But look this requirement also applied to the sojourners (**Lv 17:8**)

The pollution of idols Lv 17:1-9 (Cont)

But there was another side to this problem

Almost all meat that was available to people at that time had been offered in sacrifice to one of the gods

The best place to eat meat or buy meat outside your house was at the local temple

So if a God-fearer ate any meat that had been sacrificed to a god he was in fact participating in that sacrifice and therefore was participating in the worship of that god

Most likely after his conversion Cornelius probably ate at the temple of Zeus or Venus

Thus, James is stating that this practice must be stopped

Pornea Lv 18:1-18

Next, James addressed the issue of *Pornea* (**Lv 18**)

Unfortunately the RSV translates *pornea* as “unchastity”

The laws discussed here deal with Israel’s prohibition of marriages based on consanguinity (blood lines or incest)

Many of the Gentiles had multiple wives and often they married close relatives (sister, cousin, father’s second wife, niece)

All of **Lv 18** dictates who one may or may not marry

These are the basis for our modern Canon Laws concerning incest

Again, these laws applied to the sojourner (**Lv 18:26**)

Pornea Lv 18:1-18 (Cont)

An interesting synonym for sexual relationship is the phrase to “uncover the nakedness of” (Noah and Ham)

These laws are the basis for our modern Canon Laws concerning invalid, illicit marriage or incest

Jesus refers to pornea as the only exception for the permanence of marriage in **Mt 19:9**

Blood (Lv 17: 10-16)

The next two issues dealt with drinking blood and strangulation

All men saw **blood** as the **life force** of a living being

The pagans believed that if they killed an animal and drank its blood they would receive its life force

But God created man in His image and likeness and not in the image and likeness of an animal (**Gn 2**)

So if the Israelite or sojourner did this, they might revert back to polytheism

Blood (Lv 17: 10-16 Cont)

Thus acceding to **Lv 17:10-14**

Animals had to be slaughtered by cutting their throats and letting all of the blood drain from the body

In fact Israelites were forbidden even to touch blood as this was part of the “clean” vs “unclean” issue

This is all about the pagan superstition of the life force and their fertility rituals

What is strangled (Lv 19:26)

Although this prohibition is implied in Lv 17, it is clarified here

“You shall not eat any flesh with the blood in it” (Lv 19:26)

If the pagan did not slaughter the animal and drink its blood, they would strangle the animal and let its blood coagulate in its veins. Thus one ate the blood along with the flesh of the animal

The prohibition was designed to prevent the Israelite from reverting back to paganism by eating the blood of an animal

More Kosher (Ex 23:19, 34:21; Du 14:21)

Another of the Kosher prohibitions related to these issues is that one must not eat meat and dairy product together (Cheese on the burger)

This will come into play in a big way when we get to the letter to the Galatians

Thus, a Jewish household had two sets of eating utensils in their kitchens

Typically they would have separate pots and silverware for vegetarian foods, dairy foods, meat

This came from the Mosaic Law where it said that one could not boil a kid (goat) in its mother's milk which was a common gentile practice

More Kosher (Cont)

This was seen as a way to get a double portion of fertility as some would come from the goat and even more from the fertile mother's milk

Almost all pagan cultures were centered on fertility, thus many had fertility orgies

The Jewish Law did not say that you could not have meat and cheese together (unless the cheese came from the mother's milk)– but the Jewish leaders added this practice as a hedge around the Law

Thus, today most Jews have multiple sets of dishes and silverware and believe that a cheeseburger is not Kosher

Acts 15 (Cont)

James has just pointed out that:

Only these four laws in the Holiness Code **were applicable to the sojourner** (God-fearer)

Moses had **not required** the sojourners to be circumcised or to live by all of the kosher laws

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:21 *“For from every generation Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues.”*

Next James tells his listeners why they must accept this understanding of the law

If they kept the Gentile Christians from abstaining from these four things there would be peace in the church

This solves the problem because at the heart of the question is the Mosaic Law and in the Holiness Code these four things were the only requirements that the Sojourners (God fearers) who came out of Egypt had to comply with

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:22-28 *“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, with the following letter: The brethren.... For it has seemed **good to the Holy Spirit** and to us to lay upon you...then these necessary things.”*

Notice this decision was blest by the Holy Spirit

What makes this so authentic was that James seems to have been quoting from memory and got them slightly out of sequence

This was corrected when they wrote them down in the council document (letter to the churches)

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:29 *“that you should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”*

This is a very critical text impacting on the rest of Acts and the Pauline epistles (particularly Galatians and Romans)

Acts 15 (Cont)

A summary of Acts 15

There was a debate

They clarified the issue

They declared on the issue

They wrote a declaration (Acts 15:28)

“No greater burden than these” This will also appear in the Book of Revelation

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15: 30-35 “ *So they were sent off, they went down to Antioch;... teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.*”

The response to the Council letter by the Church of *Antioch* was positive

See how the missionaries were sent off with a message of peace

Notice and Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch teaching and preaching before they begin their Second Missionary journey

Acts 15 (Cont)

Acts 15:36 *“And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.’”*

This important section as it tells the purpose of Paul’s Second Missionary journey which was to visit the brethren in all the communities from the 1st journey