

Acts 15:1–16:3, The Jerusalem Council

Many understand the Jerusalem Council as a turning point in the book of Acts. It is a unique and important event in the history of the Church, for at no other time does the entire leadership convene, discuss and decree Church policy. Clearly the topic of discussion at the historic council was freedom from the Law. What is not so clear is what kind of freedom was discussed, total or near total, and to whom the results applied, Gentiles alone or everyone? We will attempt to answer these critical questions by investigating the Apostolic council from the perspectives of: (1) occasion, (15:1-5); (2) the discussion, particularly the speeches of Peter and James, (15:6-18); (3) the decree, (15:19-29); and (4) what we understand as a practical demonstration of the decree, the circumcision of Timothy, (16:1-3).

The Occasion 15:1-5

The People Involved

One important clarification of the occasion is the determination of the subjects of the decree, i.e., for whose benefit was the decision crafted? Was the concern in this meeting directed only toward Gentiles or to Jews as well? Some see in Peter's use of the term *disciples* (15:10) a reference to both Jews and Gentiles, implying that the topic of discussion involves the relationship of all believers to the Law.¹ While the semantic range of μαθητῆς would certainly allow for a reference to Jews and Gentiles, it is more likely that Peter's choice of words is intended as an endorsement of the group under discussion rather than a description of the makeup of that group. That is, he is giving his opinion that these people are already full members of the church apart from their keeping of the Law, rather than discussing the parameters of the group.²

Actually, the membership of the group under discussion is made clear throughout the chapter. It is the relationship of the Law to Gentiles which is being discussed. First, the very fact that circumcision is being urged on these people defines the group as Gentile (15:1, 5)! Second, Peter's

¹"In discussing the question Peter referred not only to Gentiles but also to all believers coming under the Law. The term 'disciples' was used of both Jews and Gentiles," Toussaint, "Acts," 393. Other do not state, but simply imply, that the reference is to Jews and Gentiles alike. Cf. Bruce, *Acts*, 311.

²Haenchen, quoting Loisy, argues, "'To style Gentile converts thus as 'disciples' is tantamount to prejudging the observances as useless,' (Loisy, 579)," Haenchen, *Acts*, 446, n. 2.

speech refers back to the precedent set by the Holy Spirit in the salvation of Cornelius (15:7-11).

Third, the testimony of Paul (15:12) and the speech of James (15:13-18) clearly concern Gentiles rather than Jews. Fourth, the wording of the decree as it is first formulated by James (15:19) and the letter as it is formally written (15:23) are only addressed to Gentiles. Finally, Luke clarifies the aim of the letter when he repeats it for the reader through the mouth of James (21:21-25). As James asks Paul to demonstrate his fidelity toward the Law for the benefit of zealous Jewish believers in Jerusalem, he does so with the disclaimer, “But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote that they should abstain . . .” (15:25), repeating the essence of the decree of chapter fifteen. Therefore, the discussion of this chapter involves only the relationship of Gentiles to the Law.³ To apply the discussion and decision of the council to Jewish believers can only be done in denial of the clear signals from the author.

The Issue Involved

This is an enormously important issue to discuss, but its importance is only eclipsed by our questions about it. Wilson puts his finger on the issue when he says “It is one of the oddities of Luke’s narrative that he does not tell us precisely what the decree was for nor what it meant.”⁴ Conzelmann argues that the issue of the decree was basically one of social compromise hammered out to promote commensality.

The intention of the decree is not to retain the Law as valid, not even symbolically or “in principle.” The fundamental prescription of circumcision is not imposed. The decree is conceived rather as a concession to the Gentile Christians, which would enable Jewish Christians to live with them, and particularly to have table fellowship.⁵

This view, however, involves several difficulties, the first of which is the goal of table fellowship.

While one result of the decree would surely be to *encourage* the goal of table fellowship, the terms of the decree would certainly not in themselves guarantee it. The decree, for example, would allow a

³“ . . . Paul concluded his agreement with the Jerusalem Jewish Christians—that is, with those who after all continued to circumcise their newborn sons in loyal obedience to the Torah, and who were proud of their own circumcision. . . . there is no mistaking that Paul negotiated freedom from the Law only for the Gentile mission,” Hans Hübner, *Law in Paul’s Thought*, 60.

⁴Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 81. For example, the decree calls the four elements “essentials” (15:28). Exactly why they are essential, for fellowship, to avoid offense or simply because Moses requires them, must be determined from the context.

⁵Conzellman, *Acts*, 118.

Gentile to eat properly slaughtered pork—a menu item inappropriate for the communion table.⁶ More importantly, however, the concept of table-fellowship is not mentioned in the extended account of the council. While the results of the decree might well encourage social interaction between Jew and Gentile, the text points toward a different occasion.

Lake agrees that the problem involved social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles, but makes the following admission:

Reading Acts xv. as a connected narrative, and merely looking for the general meaning of the decrees, it is clear that the meaning of Luke was that they represent the minimum of the Law which was to be required from Gentile Christians in lieu of circumcision.⁷

He then rejects the view because “it seems so inconsistent with Paul’s position, as stated in Galatians and Romans, that it is almost incredible that he would have accepted such a compromise.”⁸ If, however we allow Luke to interpret Luke, rather than alleged Pauline theology, we find that Lake was correct in his initial admission rather than his disclaimer. Luke states that “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,’” (15:1), and in verse 5, “certain ones of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, ‘It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses’” (15:5). Luke clearly states that Paul and Barnabas are dispatched to speak to the elders “concerning *this issue*” (περὶ τοῦ ζητήματος τούτου, 15:2) and that the council convenes “to look into *this matter*” (περὶ τοῦ λόγου τούτου, 15:6). Based upon the usage of σοζω in Acts,⁹ the theology which precipitated the event (15:1) demanded that Gentiles keep the Law (i. e., become Jewish) for salvation. The statements made later in Jerusalem, seem to apply to their continuing obligation to the Law after salvation.¹⁰ While these may not be identical and are handled separately in the speeches of Peter and James, Luke and the

⁶Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, 188-89.

⁷Lake, *Beginnings*, vol. 5, 204.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Cf. for example, 4:12; 11:14; 16:30, 31 and in the immediate context, 15:11. Barrett notes that “Salvation (except where *sōzein*, *sōteria*, are used in a non-religious sense, 4:9; 7:25; 14:9; 27:20, 31, 34) regularly appears in Acts as the result of the Christian proclamation. The Gospel message is the word of this salvation (13:26),” C. K. Barrett, “Apostles in Council and Conflict,” *Australian Biblical Review* 31 (1983): 16.

¹⁰The statement in 15:5 (“It is necessary to circumcise *them*”) refers in the context to Gentiles who are previously described as “brethren” (15:1) and “converted” (15:3).

council consider them as one basic issue (“this matter,” 15:6) because of the common denominator in both charges of the Gentiles’ relationship to circumcision and the Law. Thus, the question which gives rise to the council may be formulated, “What is the necessary relationship of Gentiles to the Law of Moses?”

The Discussion 15:6-18

In the discussion of the council two men, Peter and James figure prominently. Paul is only briefly mentioned, and not allowed to “speak” in the record (15:12). The speeches of Peter (15:7-11) and James (15:13-18) are the focal points of the discussion. It is the thesis of this section that these two speeches answer the two aspects of the Gentiles’ relationship to the Law already mentioned, namely, salvation and continuing obligation to the Law.¹¹

The Place of the Law in Gentile Salvation 15:7-11

Peter begins his argumentation by referring to the salvation experience of Cornelius (15:7-9). He recalls the basis of their salvation as “hearing and believing” (15:7) and of God’s response of giving them the Holy Spirit¹² and “cleansing their hearts by faith” (15:8-9). The import of these verses is fairly clear, that God has set the precedent through Cornelius that Gentiles are blessed with salvation apart from the Law. What is not so clear, however, is the flow of thought from 15:7-9 to 15:10. As Nolland asks, “Is v. 10 a new argument addressed to the disputed matter or does it lack independent status and depend on what has already been established in the preceding verses?”¹³

If the point in verse ten is independent from the flow of thought in the speech then it may be an argument from the impossibility of the keeping of the law. The logic would run, “We have found through experience that the Law is an oppressive, impossible burden and we can not therefore force it upon the Gentiles.” Thus since the law is impossible to fulfill, it is not necessary to keep. This view has several problems, however. If impossibility of fulfillment leads to abrogation then why was the Law not

¹¹“Peter’s discourse tackles the issue of the salvation of the Gentiles in fundamental terms, while the discourse of James wrestles with this problem from the perspective of the Gentiles’ relationship to Israel, which inherently includes their relationship to the Mosaic Law,” Royce Dickinson Jr. “The Theology of the Jerusalem Conference: Acts 15:1-35,” *Restoration Quarterly* 32 (1990): 68.

¹²In the Cornelius incident (10:47; 11:17) and in Paul’s argument in Galatians (3:2), this is the clearest evidence of salvation.

¹³John Nolland, “A Fresh Look at Acts 15.10,” *New Testament Studies* 27 (October 1980): 106.

cancelled long before the council? Further, this understanding hardly harmonizes with Luke's view elsewhere where he sees the Jewish people gladly keeping the Law? Nolland asks:

Can this be true of Luke, who is not only aware that Jewish Christians kept the Mosaic law, but is able to portray with considerable perceptiveness a positive Jewish experience of the law (cf. especially the infancy narratives)? As a hellenistic Christian his own feelings about the Jewish law may well be negative, but he is too aware of a different experience of the law to consider it *a priori* inconceivable that the keeping of the Mosaic law could be required of anybody. The awareness of this other experience of the law is too pervasive in his work to argue that for the moment he forgot that it was possible.¹⁴

Furthermore, the grammar of verses 10 and 11 indicate that verse 10 is not an independent statement but relates closely to its context. Verse 10 begins with the words, "Now therefore" (νῦν οὖν) indicating a deduction based upon the previous verses. Verse 11 begins with the strong adversative ἀλλὰ, indicating once again that 15:10 is not an aside but is in the mainstream of the argument. The essence of 15:11 clearly involves the salvation of Jewish believers by grace rather than the Law. It would seem, therefore, that if a precipitating question of the whole conference concerned the salvific importance of the law (15:1), and the contribution of the Cornelius' episode (15:7-9) is that Gentiles are saved by faith, and Peter's final statement (15:11) also involves how one may be saved, then it would be likely that verse 10 would also speak to the place of the Law in salvation.

If Peter's reference is to the Law being an unbearable yoke *as* an instrument of salvation this would explain a number of things. First, the normal Jewish usage of the term "yoke" is not a negative one.¹⁵

When a Jewish writer spoke of the law as "the yoke of the kingdom of heaven", he spoke of an obligation to which one gladly committed oneself. No sense of oppressiveness adhered to the term ζυγός (לַיִד). Yet the Rabbinic sense of the national failure to come up to the standards of the law is reflected clearly in the views of some Rabbis that Israel's failure to repent even for one day, or to keep even one sabbath exactly as it was meant to be, was delaying the beginning of the messianic age. We can then speak of "failure to carry the yoke", without speaking of "oppressive burdens". Indeed the function which we have argued for v. 10 in the development of thought is far better served by a reference here to failure than by a reference to oppression.¹⁶

Thus, Peter is not complaining that the Law was necessarily oppressive but that as a means of salvation it was impossible to fulfill. This would make Peter's evaluation equivalent to Paul's statement in Acts

¹⁴Nolland, "A Fresh Look at Acts 15.10," 107.

¹⁵"The concept of the Law as an unbearable burden is neither the common Jewish view (the Jewish expression, 'the yoke,' does not imply something unbearable and impossible to fulfill) nor is it Pauline," Conzelmann, *Acts*, 117. Str-B 1.608-10.

¹⁶Nolland, "A Fresh Look at Acts 15.10," 111-12.

13:38-39¹⁷ that the Law could not save. This would agree with Stephen's description of the law as "living oracles" (7:38) but which the nation had continually disobeyed (7:53). Peter does not by his statement degrade the Law nor does he address its continuing validity; rather, he simply points out its insufficiency as a means of salvation.¹⁸

This understanding also explains the emphasis upon the close connection which Peter has made between Jews and Gentiles. He first states that God gave them the Holy Spirit "just as He also did to us" (15:8) and "He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (15:9). Finally he summarizes that Jews are saved by God's grace "in the same way as they also are" (15:11). As Paul also says in Galatians 3:28,¹⁹ while distinctions may obtain elsewhere, when it comes to salvation, both Jew and Gentile are saved by grace apart from the Law.

In summary, Peter argues that the Law of Moses is not salvific. Specifically he states that its absence did not prevent Cornelius from being saved (15:7-9). Secondly, its presence did not bring salvation to the Jews (15:10) and finally, Jew and Gentile alike receive salvation by grace through believing (15:11).²⁰ Thus Peter answers the first aspect relating to the Gentile's obligation to Moses: the Law plays no part in the salvation of Gentiles.

The Place of the Law after Gentile Salvation 15:13-18

James' speech consists of a relatively short statement (15:14) which is supported and explained by an involved quotation of Scripture (15:15-18). He acknowledges Peter's testimony concerning the salvation of Gentiles (15:14) and endorses it by attaching the prized and significant term *people* to the Gentiles, "taking from among the Gentiles a people for his name" (ἐξ ἔθνῶν λαὸν τῷ

¹⁷"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."

¹⁸Dickinson, "The Theology of the Jerusalem Conference: Acts 15:1-35," 71.

¹⁹Though often interpreted much too widely, in Paul's discussion the statement is a reference to the irrelevance of distinctions in salvation. Paul takes seriously the realities of these distinctions elsewhere but says that in the singular matter of justification, they do not matter.

²⁰Nolland, "A Fresh Look at Acts 15.10," 111.

ὄνοματι αὐτοῦ).²¹ Thus, believing Gentiles now enjoy along with Israel a close relationship with God which previously was solely the possession of Israel. James' justifies his statement based on the prophets, "and with this the words of the prophets agree" (15:15).

The text of James' quotation

James' use of Scripture has caused interpreters questions for several reasons. First, his quotation agrees with the LXX rather than the MT which some reject as unthinkable for a Jewish leader in Jerusalem.²² The LXX does differ from the Hebrew²³ text, but what is more critical is how James' quotation differs from the Septuagintal version of Amos 9:11-12. James' words "after these things I will return" (μετὰ ταῦτα ἀναστρέψω, cf. Jer 12:15) replace "in that day" (ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκεῖνῃ); "who makes these things known from of old" (ποιῶν ταῦτα γνωστὰ ἀπ' αἰῶνος, cf. Isa 45:21) replaces "who does all these things," (ὁ ποιῶν πάντα ταῦτα), while the phrase "as in the ancient

²¹In the LXX λαός is used "for a specific people, namely, Israel, and it serves to emphasise the special privileged religious position of this people as the people of God," H. Strathmann, "λαός," *TDNT*, 4: 32. "The paradox inherent in the contrast between 'Gentiles' (or 'nations') and 'people' is striking, since the latter term was often used of the Jews as the people of God in contrast to the Gentiles. Now it is being urged that God's people includes the Gentiles," Marshall, *Acts*, 251.

²²"Nearly every expositor concedes that the Jewish Christian James would not in Jerusalem have used a Septuagint text, differing from the Hebrew original, as scriptural proof. It is not James but Luke who is speaking here," Haenchen, *Acts*, 448. Cf. also Lake, *Beginnings*, 4:176 for the same sentiment.

²³According to the MT Amos said "'In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess (יִרְשׁוּ) the remnant of Edom (אֶדוֹם) and all the nations who are called by my name,' says the LORD who does this" (9:11-12), but the LXX has apparently read יִרְשׁוּ (possess) as יִרְשׁוּ, translating it as ἐκζητήσωσιν (seek) and read אֶדוֹם (Edom) as אָדָם (mankind). In reference to the first change, Braun notes that to harmonize "they shall possess" with "they shall seek" only "one minor consonantal change is all that is necessary. . . . In the history of the transmission of the OT there was a time when *d* and *y* were virtually indistinguishable," Michael Braun, "James' Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (June 1977): 117. Of course the second discrepancy regarding "Edom" and "mankind," would only involve a vowel change which means there would have been no difference at all in the non-vocalized texts from which the LXX was translated. Braun concludes, "we have ample warrant to emend the MT—and such an emendation need not be too severe," *Ibid.* Toussaint notes that, "The text James used may well represent the original," *Acts*, 394. Interestingly, Kaiser takes the MT as original and understands Israel's "possession" of the remnant of Edom not as a retaliatory move but as blessing. "'Edom' along with the other nations would be brought under that reign of the Davidic King who is to come—the Messiah. This 'remnant' must also share in the covenant promise to David," Walter C. Kaiser, "The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9-15 and Acts 15:13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems," 20 (July 1977): 101-2. This understanding flows well in the context in which the next phrase is "And all the nations who are called by my name," (Amos 9:12b) which surely does not indicate punishment for a godly remnant from among non-Edomite Gentiles.

days” (καθὼς αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ αἰῶνος) is omitted. It is unlikely that James would simply alter the text to suit his own needs but rather that he has conflated several scriptures. His use of the plural “with this the words of the *prophets* (τῶν προφητῶν) agree,” indicates that he is likely drawing upon several sources. The passages from which James most likely draws are Jeremiah 12:15 and Isaiah 45:21. Both passages deal specifically with the nations coming to the God of Israel. In the context of Jeremiah Yahweh speaks of the destruction which Israel’s enemies have executed on her and of his vengeance upon them. Yet in the end the offer and prophecy is made that they will return to God and to Israel. In the Jeremiah passage²⁴ the prophet envisions the nations coming to the LORD with Israel as the channel. If the nations “learn the ways of my people . . . then shall they be built in the midst of my people.” Isaiah sees a similar scenario in which Israel is saved by the Lord (45:17) who then extends his offer of salvation to the nations.²⁵ These references also harmonize and support the thrust of James’ words.

The meaning of James’ quotation

James’ point in his quotation is twofold. First he acknowledges Peter’s point that God is now calling Gentiles to salvation and buttresses it with references to Scripture. This conversion of Gentiles was announced and approved by God beforehand in the Old Testament. The context of Amos (chapters 7–9) involves five visions of judgment which climax with the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile (9:1-7). God promised to sift Israel in the sieve of the nations but that not a kernel of the remnant would be lost. Then afterwards during Messianic times²⁶ God would turn again to re-establish the house of David. The promise to rebuild the tent of David in Amos is a brief and direct reference to the promises of God in the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7. The covenant in its entirety involves God’s

²⁴Jeremiah 12:15-16 And it shall come to pass, **after that** I have plucked them out **I will return**, and have compassion on them, and will bring them again, every man to his heritage, and every man to his land. 16 And it shall come to pass, if they will diligently learn the ways of my people, to swear by my name, The LORD liveth; as they taught my people to swear by Baal; then shall they be **built** in the midst of my people. (KJV)

²⁵20 Assemble yourselves and come together, draw near, you survivors of the nations! . . . 21 Declare and present your case; let them take counsel together! Who told this long ago? Who declared it of old? Was it not I, the LORD? There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me. 22 Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.

²⁶Amos’ time frame conforms to Jewish eschatology with two periods: the present age and the Messianic age. Chapter nine describes both of those stages: (1) the present and ‘near’ future involving destruction and exile (9:1-10) and (2) the Messianic age in which political fortunes are restored (9:11-12) and physical prosperity once again becomes Edenic (9:13-15).

particularistic promises to the nation of Israel through king David.²⁷ Second, he teaches by his quotation that a restoration of Israel (15:16) precedes the influx of Gentiles (15:17).²⁸ God first restores Israel and this leads to the salvation of Gentiles. Munck summarizes the second point:

Here the mission to the Gentiles is regarded as a consequence of the conversion of Israel. . . . According to the quotation, God will first rebuild the fallen dwelling of David (i.e., Israel), and when that has been done, it will have an effect on the Gentiles.²⁹

While the first of James' points is clearly acknowledged the second one may not seem as clear at first. Verses sixteen and seventeen are connected by the conjunction ὅπως ἄν with the subjunctive ἐκζητήσωσιν ("in order that they may seek") indicating purpose.³⁰ Clearly the one is related to the other and the connection is telic; the former happens so that the latter may happen.³¹

The theology of James' quotation

James' quotation has often been seen as a test passage for various theological systems.³²

The goal of this section is to understand the theology of James' use of Amos and its contribution to the question of Gentile circumcision.

²⁷The promise to David (2 Sam 7:8-16) not only involves a son who will be king but also a kingdom of Israelites over which he will rule. Wilson rebukes Haenchen's interpretation of 15:16 as the resurrection as "scarcely warranted either by the content or context of the verse," Wilson, *Gentiles and Gentile Mission*, 224-25. Wilson is correct that the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David can not be reduced to the resurrection, but surely the resurrection is an essential component of the fulfillment of the entire promise concerning David's son.

²⁸Dickinson, "The Theology of the Jerusalem Conference," 76-77.

²⁹Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Richmond: John Knox, 1959), 112, 234-35.

³⁰*BDF*, 186-88. This conjunction accurately reflects the Hebrew לְמַעַן, "in order that." "לְמַעַן is always *in order that*, never merely *so that*," Francis A. Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (BDB), s. v. "לְמַעַן" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976).

³¹Cf. Dickinson, "The Theology of the Jerusalem Council," 76. Braun makes an interesting point that the terminology and concept of a remnant (οἱ κατάλοιποι) were only applied to faithful Israel so that Amos' reference in 9:12 (and James' in Acts 15:17) is to Jewish believers first and also to Gentiles as well. Braun, "James' Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council," 119-21. If he is correct then 15:17 would refer to Israel and Gentiles rather than 15:16 referring to Israel and 15:17 to Gentiles. This would not materially affect the understanding of this paper.

³²Cf. Walter C. Kaiser, "The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles (Amos 9:9-15 and Acts 15:13-18): A Test Passage for Theological Systems," 20 (July 1977): 97-111.

The amillennial answer. A common understanding of the passage by the amillennialist is that “The Church has inherited the role of old Israel, and the promises made to Israel are now being fulfilled in the life and experience of the Church.”³³ It is particularly difficult to see how the Church has replaced Israel because of the important relationship between Israel and Gentiles in this passage. Understanding the mention of “Gentiles” in verse 17 as a reference to the church is especially suspect simply because the vast majority of the church at the time of the council was Jewish. Even if that were true, James is hardly teaching that the church is a replacement of Israel because Israel’s role is pivotal in the salvation of the Gentiles. Israel is restored (15:16) “in order that” the Gentiles may seek the Lord (15:17). If the fallen tent of David is understood as the church which then leads to the salvation of Gentiles then James’ quotation has no relationship to the Old Testament meaning of the Davidic Covenant. In short, the amillennial view does not correspond to the meaning of either James or the prophets he quotes.

In addition to the textual clues that Israel was not replaced by Gentiles, the history of the occasion would also argue against it. Though it is certainly true that not all of Israel repented at Pentecost or in the subsequent decades of the first century, at the time of the council everyone knew where the mother church was located. The centripetal force of the church in Jerusalem was strong not only because of its numbers and leadership but also because of its historical importance in the history of the nation. That Israel had been replaced by the church would be a hard message to sell in Jerusalem in the autumn of A.D. 49 with Jesus’ brother, James, presiding over the assembly of the Twelve.

Finally, the amillennial view does not answer the occasion of the conference of the Gentiles’ relationship to the Law of Moses. Perhaps it would be better to say that it answers the question too much. The question was not simply can Gentiles be saved, but more importantly, should Gentiles become Jews in order to share in the blessings of Israel. The amillennial answer has James giving an answer to a different question, “Jews should become Gentiles.” The logic would run, “If the Church (which is law-free) has replaced Israel, then all Jews are also free from the Law.” If this were

³³Neil, *Acts*, 173. Marshall speculates, “Probably the rebuilding of the tabernacle is to be understood as a reference to the raising up of the church as the new place of divine worship which replaced the temple The church is then the means by which the Gentiles may come to know the Lord,” Marshall, *Acts*, 252.

the case then the decision and letter would not have been addressed to Gentiles, but to Jews saying “abandon the Law.”³⁴

A dispensational premillennial answer. At the other end of the pole is the dispensational answer which seeks to preserve the meaning of the Old Testament quotation and to answer the original question posed to the Council. Toussaint understands James’ interest in the Amos passage to be its value as an analogy to his own time. “If Gentiles will be saved in the Kingdom Age (the Millennium), why should they become Jewish proselytes by circumcision in the Church Age?”³⁵ The futurist time frame of the millennium is determined by the utopian context of Amos’ words and of James’ addition of “after these things I will return” which are understood as a reference to the second coming of Christ.³⁶ The strengths of this are that it honors the meaning of the Old Testament prophets by looking forward to the Davidic kingdom, and it provides an answer for the present situation. Its only weaknesses are that the quotation is connected somewhat peripherally to the current situation (by the understanding of an analogy) and the understanding of “I will return” seem to be pressed.³⁷ Additionally, although this interpretation makes good sense of verse seventeen which speaks of the coming of Gentiles, it does not

³⁴Dahl speaks to the issue, “Salvation of Gentiles was from the beginning envisaged by God and included as part of his promises to Israel. Luke does not claim that the church has replaced Israel as the people of God, nor does he call Gentile believers Abraham’s children. Gentiles are saved as Gentiles. Luke takes care to adduce prophecies that really spoke of them This “proof-from-prophecy” has a double function: to prove the legitimacy of Gentile mission and Gentile churches, and to prove that Jesus is the Anointed One of whom the prophets spoke,” Nils A. Dahl, “The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts,” in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 151.

³⁵Toussaint, “Acts,” 394.

³⁶“The verb *return* (*anastrepsō*) used in Acts 15:16 means an actual return. Luke used it only in 5:22 (‘went back’) and here (he did not use it in his Gospel); in both occurrences it describes a literal, bodily return. Since God’s Son has not yet returned bodily, this rebuilding has not taken place.” Ibid. Cf. also W. M. Aldrich, “The Interpretation of Acts 15:13-18,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 111 (1954): 322.

³⁷The words “After these things I will return” are understood to mean “after the Church age Jesus will return.” They, of course, are spoken by James but do not come from the Amos passage which begins simply “In that day I will raise up” (9:11). Although James could simply be adding his own words (“I will return”) to clarify that the promises refer only to that time after the second coming, his introductory formula suggests otherwise. James begins his quotation with “the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, ‘After these things I will return’” (καθὼς γέγραπται, Μετὰ ταῦτα ἀναστρέψω). The indication is that he is drawing upon the words of the prophets not his own. If his quotation is from Jeremiah 12:15, the promise of “after these things I will return” is a reference to the change in God’s attitude from one of vengeance to favor towards the nations after the exile, not a reference to the second coming of Christ. If he is simply paraphrasing the thought of Amos (which seems less likely) then the reference to the Church age and Jesus’ second coming is again too specific for the prophet. While some theological systems may allow for references to the Church in the Old Testament, dispensationalism does not.

address the purpose of verse sixteen which focuses upon the restoration of Israel. If James' point was simply the Old Testament witness to the salvation of Gentiles a host of other passages come more readily to mind.³⁸

The epangelical answer. Kaiser has coined the term "promise theology" (epangelical) which he affirms is a mediating position between covenant and dispensational theology.³⁹ In contrast to amillennial theology he does not view the Church as a replacement of Israel and in this way honors the intent of the Amos passage. In contrast to dispensational theology he sees the passage as more germane to James' point than simply an analogy based upon the kingdom. He understands the words "after these things" to refer in the context of Amos to the exile and "falling down" of David's dynasty. The return then to rebuild the fallen house of David is seen as a reference to the coming of Messiah and the salvation of Israel which leads directly to the salvation of Gentiles.⁴⁰ In this way (1) Israel remains Israel, (2) the text has direct reference to the time period after the coming of Christ and (3) answers the original question of "should Gentiles become Jews." Clearly God's work among Israel leads to the salvation of the Gentiles as Gentiles.

This view is problematic, however. While Kaiser is correct in seeing "after these things" as a reference to some time after the events of the exile it also defined in the context of Amos as the Messianic age. Amos 9:11-15 is a definable literary unit which speaks of future blessing for Israel and the nations. Verses 11-12 and 13-15 are further sub-units which are defined by similar introductory phrases and conclusions.⁴¹ The second unit (13-15) describes a time of edenic physical prosperity clearly placing it in the promised kingdom age. It is unlikely that the first unit (11-12) refers, as Kaiser insists, to a different age, the Church age. Beyond this, if Amos refers directly to the Church, then the church would not have been a mystery to Paul (Eph 3).

³⁸Braun lists for example, Gen 12:3; Psa 68:31-32; Isa 18:1-7; 19:19-25; Jer 48:47; 49:39; *et al.*, Braun, "James' Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council," 119-21.

³⁹Walter C. Kaiser, "The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles," 111.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 106-8.

⁴¹The introductory phrases are "In that day," and "Behold days are coming" respectively. Both units are concluded by "Declares the Lord who does this," and "Says the LORD your God."

Another dispensational premillennial answer. Though we have found fault with the epangelical view that found the Church in the Old Testament, this does not mean that the passage is not particularly relevant to the situation of the Church. While it is true that Amos referred to the Messianic age it is also true that the Old Testament only saw two stages of history: “this age” and “the age to come” when Messiah would come. That Messiah would come and not at the same time establish the kingdom was unthinkable to the Old Testament saint. Although Jesus understood that he would come twice⁴² the prophets and his disciples did not.⁴³ Peter, Paul and the writer of Hebrews correctly describe the New Testament age as the “last days,”⁴⁴ but conditions of physical prosperity do not yet exist. This is because in the New Testament age the Messiah has come once but not yet twice. Some of the promised blessings of the kingdom age were given by Messiah during the New Testament era but certainly not all. For example, the promises of the Davidic covenant referred to by Amos do not yet realize Jesus reigning on a throne.⁴⁵ The seed of David has come, however, as was promised to David and he has redeemed mankind. Though Abraham has not been resurrected, the hope of the resurrection which Paul describes as the hope of Israel (Acts 26:6-9; 2:22-32) has been assured by the resurrection of Jesus. The promise of the Spirit has been poured on Israel (Acts 2:16-20) and upon Gentiles (Acts 10:47) and the New Covenant is enjoyed by the Church as well (Heb 8). One problem which the early believers experienced in coming to terms within an interim age between Messiah’s first and second comings was knowing which blessings He had dispensed at his first coming and which ones were yet to be given. The promise of the Spirit was not as difficult to identify since Jesus specifically encouraged the disciples to be waiting for it just before his ascension (Acts 1:4). How, though, did James know that the Gentiles were now acceptable to God. It is the contention of this paper that he could not simply have looked at the passage in Amos and known which blessings would be realized now and which would be realized only in the coming kingdom. Rather, based upon the miraculous precedent of God’s

⁴²Cf. his careful and limited quotation of Isaiah 61:1-2a in Luke 4:18-21.

⁴³Cf. especially 1 Peter 1:10-12 which emphasizes the confusion of the time element in the minds of the prophets.

⁴⁴Cf. Acts 2:17; 2 Pet 3:3; 2 Tim 3:1; and Heb 1:2

⁴⁵“Christ’s present ministry in heaven is not associated with the Davidic throne elsewhere in the New Testament. He is now seated at the right hand of God When he returns He will sit on David’s throne” Toussaint, “Acts,” 394.

working through Peter in the salvation of Cornelius, James could then deduce that the significant parts of the Old Testament promise had now come to fruition. This could account for the wording of James' speech when he says in essence, "We are convinced by Peter's testimony that God is now saving Gentiles as Gentiles (15:14), and based upon this precedent the prophets agree (15:15)." James could see that the promises of David had been partially fulfilled by Messiah. Jesus was not sitting on David's throne, but he had come, been crucified and resurrected. As Peter had preached this message to Cornelius he had become one of God's people. Surely God's partial fulfillment of the Davidic promise had led to the salvation of many Israelites (Acts 15:16) who had taken the message to Gentiles who are now "called by my Name" (15:17). We are not suggesting, of course, that James thought the promise to David had been completely fulfilled. Of all people, James, would be aware that he was *not* the son of Mary who would be presiding over a theological question in Jerusalem if the Davidic covenant had been fulfilled. He knew that one day Messiah would reign on David's throne, all of Israel would be saved (15:16) and many Gentiles would call upon the God of Israel (15:17). Until that time, however, adequate evidence had been presented to conclude that God had sufficiently fulfilled this promise to call upon it as the basis for a decision on the matter at hand.

The advantages of this view are first, contrary to the amillennial view, James would be using the same type of meaning as that of Amos. Thus, Israel remains Israel, rather than becoming the Church. Yet it would give a more direct relationship between the Amos reference and the situation of the council than the dispensational view which is based on an analogy. It also recognizes the importance of 15:16 as well which deals with the important role of God's dealings with Israel. Contrary to the epangelical approach, it does not necessitate an Old Testament reference to the Church age. Finally, it provides a relevant answer to the question which precipitated the conference.

The contribution of James' quotation

James' quotation of Amos forms a fitting answer to the question of "must Gentiles become Jewish to be accepted as God's people?" Based upon the precedent of God's miraculous opening of the door to the Gentiles, James concludes that the promises of God in calling out from the Gentiles a people for his name have been fulfilled. While acknowledging the decisive role of Israel as a channel he does not insist that Gentiles become Jewish; rather, Gentiles are called a "people" *as* Gentiles. Israel, as God's chosen nation, has not been bypassed; indeed, the fulfillment of God's promises to

Israel in the Davidic covenant were pre-requisite to the Gentiles coming to Him.⁴⁶ “For Luke the church’s existence is proof that God has kept his promises to his people.”⁴⁷ This is James’ theological answer to the matter at hand. His practical admonitions flow directly from this conclusion.

The Decree 15:19-29

Verse nineteen begins with the word διὸ (therefore) indicating that James’ decree is based upon his quotation. Any interpretation of the decree must therefore flow from theological conclusions just reached in the text. The precipitating question, once again, was “should Gentiles be required to be circumcised and follow whole Law of Moses?” James’ response in 15:19 is in the negative, they should not be troubled by being circumcised. The next verse (15:20) involves a concession to the Gentiles, beginning with the adversative ἀλλὰ. Gentiles should not be circumcised but only be required to do four things. Exactly what those four requirements involve is a matter of some debate.⁴⁸

Although some textual problems do exist in the wording of the decree (15:20) they are not difficult to explain. The Alexandrian text has four phrases, “things contaminated by idols,” “fornication,” “what is strangled” and “blood,” while the Western text omits “what is strangled” (πνικτόν), substituting instead the negative form of the golden rule. The omission of πορνείας from the Chester Beatty Papyrus ⁴⁵, “is an accidental error rather than a deliberate variant.”⁴⁹

⁴⁶“When Gentiles are saved they are free from the law but not from all association with Israel, God’s people,” Stan Stowers, “The Synagogue in the Theology of Acts,” *Restoration Quarterly* 17 (1974): 139.

⁴⁷J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 93.

⁴⁸We find ourselves in agreement with the sentiments of Wilson when he speaks of the interpretation of the decree as “a task which we can approach only with a certain diffidence. It raises notoriously complex problems of both text and interpretation and it is as unlikely that any solution will gain universal approval as it is that any individual will be fully convinced that his own views are correct,” S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 76.

⁴⁹Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission*, 188. Wilson is probably correct in his hypothesis because ⁴⁵ is the only manuscript which omits the word. The only other question involving πορνείας concerns its order among the other three regulations, not its existence.

The reading of the Western text would favor the “ethical”⁵⁰ rather than the “ceremonial”⁵¹ interpretation of the text, but the Alexandrian text is preferred not only because of the sheer numbers which favor it but also because the development from the cultic to the ethical is easier to understand on the grounds of the more difficult reading.⁵² Wilson argues as well that the demands of the Western text are so widely accepted as to be superfluous.⁵³ This does not mean, however, that some who favor the Alexandrian reading do not prefer the ethical understanding of the text.

The Ethical Understanding

Bruce attempts to describe the occasion of the council (and thus the decree) as a concern on the part of Jews about the ethics and morality of prospective Gentile converts. “The Jewish Christians feared that the influx of so many Gentile believers would bring about a weakening of Christian moral standards How was this new situation to be controlled?”⁵⁴ Although his explanation sounds reasonable, it is not found in the text of Acts and in fact is contrary to the record. The only concern which is stated in the text (besides keeping the entire Law of Moses) is circumcision, which is purely ceremonial. If the occasion as described by Luke suggests anything about the outcome, one would expect a ceremonial rather than an ethical decision.

⁵⁰While εἰδωλόθυτα, πορνεία and αἷμα could be considered in either an ethical or cultic sense, πνικτός is the term which forces the more “cultic” reading. With regard to the tendencies of the Western text type, “Eldon Jay Epp . . . studied the D texts of Acts without reference to questions of origin and originality and concluded that D in Acts shows a decidedly heightened anti-Judaic attitude” Charles H. Talbert, “Luke-Acts,” in *The New Testament and its Modern Interpreters*, eds. Eldon Jay Epp and George W. MacRae, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 300.

⁵¹These terms are used as convenient categories to distinguish between the two views, although the two concepts were intimately related in early Judaism and Christianity. By “ethical” we mean basically those regulations which are inherently incumbent upon all people rather than “ceremonial” or “cultic” which are incumbent because they are decreed by religious law (in this context Mosaic legislation).

⁵²Wilson says, “Despite manuscript variations, modern scholars are unanimous in their acceptance of the so-called ‘neutral’ text of the decree,” Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission*, 188.

⁵³Ibid. In a later work, *Luke and the Law*, Wilson opts for the Western text as a viable alternative to the Alexandrian text, S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 88-97.

⁵⁴Bruce, *Acts*, 301.

A consistently ethical view understands εἰδωλόθυτα as a reference to idolatry, πορνεία as sexual immorality and αἷμα as bloodshed or murder.⁵⁵ Wilson bases his view partly on a dissatisfaction with other alternatives and partly on some evidence in rabbinic literature that considered idolatry, immorality and murder as the three chief sins of Gentiles.⁵⁶ The problems with this view are that it requires εἰδωλόθυτα “things sacrificed to idols”⁵⁷ to be equivalent to the more general term εἰδωλολατρία. Likewise, the use of αἷμα as a reference to murder without an accompanying verb is at best rare,⁵⁸ and would be much clearer if the simple φόνοϛ were used. Finally, Wilson insists that “A fully ethical interpretation of the decree requires the omission of πνικτός,” which requires the acceptance of the textually suspect Western text.

An alternative to the purely ethical understanding is a modified ethical view which interprets the elements of the decree more naturally but avoids direct Mosaic legislation as its support. That is, εἰδωλονθυτα is understood normally as eating food offered to idols and πορνεία as sexual immorality. The more cultic terms of πνικτός and αἷμα are understood naturally as prohibitions against eating blood and meat which was strangled, not on the basis of Leviticus 17 but because of Genesis 9:3-4.⁵⁹ This command given to Noah and thus to both Jew and Gentile is considered binding upon all men regardless of their relationship to the Mosaic covenant.⁶⁰ This view honors the wording of the prohibitions, finding support in the generally accepted morality of the Old Testament and provides a basis other than specific Mosaic legislation for the decree. It also, however, harmonizes better with the view that the Law was declared obsolete by the Cornelius incident. Though this view is not preferred by this writer it does seem to be a viable interpretation of the decrees. An important question which is

⁵⁵Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 99-101.

⁵⁶“Indeed it is these three categories which Strack and Billerbeck use to categorize the evidence they collect in connection with the Jewish view of the non-Jewish world,” Ibid., 99-100. He cites Strack-Billerbeck, vol. IV, 353ff.

⁵⁷“It denotes the meat which derives from heathen sacrifices” F. Büchsel, “Εἰδωλον,” *TDNT*, 2:378-79. Based on this word, Büchsel interestingly concludes that “In the apostolic decree of Ac. 15:29; 21:25 . . . we do not have full freedom from legalism,” Ibid.

⁵⁸This is the unsubstantiated claim of Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 100.

⁵⁹Toussaint, “Acts,” 395-96.

⁶⁰Ibid.

left unanswered by this view, however, is why only these four prohibitions are included. If James' point were simply ethical why could he have not cited the decalogue and more importantly why would James almost apologize with the words, it seemed good to lay upon you "no *greater* burden than these essentials." Would more "ethical" demands such as "do not lie" and "do not steal" really have been considered burdensome?

The Ceremonial Understanding

The ceremonial view sees the four elements of the decree as a "condensed code of levitical purity, based mainly on chapters xvi, xvii and xviii of Leviticus."⁶¹ The reason why this view has become the *opinio communis*⁶² in recent years is probably because these are the four requirements imposed by the Law on Gentiles ("strangers who sojourned") who chose to live among Israel.

Haenchen emphatically notes:

What links these four prohibitions together, and at the same time distinguishes them from all other "ritual" requirements of "Moses", is that they—and they only—are given not only to Israel but also to strangers dwelling among the Jews. Whereas in other respects the law applies solely to the Jews, it imposes these four prohibitions on *Gentiles also*.⁶³

The wording of the "official" record of the decree (15:29; 21:25) even lists the four prohibitions in the same order as they are found in Leviticus.⁶⁴ The rule concerning "things offered to idols" comes from Leviticus 17:1-9; "blood and things strangled," Leviticus 17:10-16; and "immorality," Leviticus 18:1-30. Once in each of the three sections in Leviticus the admonition is given that these particular laws apply to the native Israelite *and* "the alien who sojourns among you," (Lev 17:8, 10; 18:26). Thus, the entire passage from 17:1–18:30 was incumbent upon Israel and those Gentiles who chose to live among them.

⁶¹Marcel Simon, "The Apostolic Decree and Its Setting in the Ancient Church," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library* 52 (1969–70): 450.

⁶²This is by far the most common understanding of the decree—so much so that it has in recent years become an *opinio communis*," Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 76. The judgment is given by Catchpole, "Paul, James and the Apostolic Decree," 428 and David R. Schwartz, "The Futility of Preaching Moses (Acts 15:21)," *Biblica* 67 (1986): 277-78.

⁶³Haenchen, *Acts*, 469 (emphasis his). Marshall adds, "There was thus Old Testament authority for applying such rules to Gentiles, and they appear to have been accepted by Gentile proselytes and God-fearers," Marshall, *Acts*, 246.

⁶⁴Conzellman, *Acts*, 118.

Although the letter of the decree employs the specific εἰδωλονθυτα, James' original description is τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων, "things contaminated by idols." Lake responds that "The substantive ἀλίσημα seems a *hapax legomenon*, but the verb is in the LXX and is used of food . . . a context where ritual dietary defilement is suitable. This implies ritual rather than moral pollution."⁶⁵ The prohibitions against "blood" and "things strangled" derive from the relationship between life and blood which was so important in the sacrificial system.⁶⁶ Finally, the prohibitions concerning πορνεία involve a wide range of meaning from incest, consanguinity, homosexuality and even bestiality.⁶⁷

This view recommends itself for several reasons. It harmonizes with the well defined subject of the council of "What is the relationship of Gentiles to Moses?" It thus answers the question that circumcision is necessary for neither Jew nor Gentile for salvation and certainly unnecessary for Gentiles after salvation as an expression of obedience. It does, however, require of Gentiles only what the Law had always explicitly required of them. This view also corresponds well to James' quotation from the Old Testament which not only cited the salvation of Gentiles but recognized that salvation came through the nation of Israel. If then, God was still working through the believing remnant of Israel and the abrogation of the Law had not been made clear in this very specific and limited time period (@A.D. 40–65), so that it still seemed to be a viable part of God's program (15:16-18) it would make sense that Gentiles would find their identity in relationship to Israel and her law (15:19-20).

Several objections to this view exist, however. Perhaps the first which comes to mind is the alleged conflict with the theology of Paul. Many who hold to this view feel forced to deny the historicity of the conference, specifically the parts which speak of Paul's presence.

⁶⁵Lake, *Beginnings*, vol. 4, 177. Wilson agrees that this is the predominant usage but not the only meaning of the word in the LXX, that sometimes it refers to moral impurity. Cf. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 82. This is true, but the more specific word of εἰδωλονθυτα of 15:29 and 21:25 sufficiently defines the term in ritual terms.

⁶⁶Indeed, the information concerning blood in Leviticus 17 thematically explains the sufficiency of the atonement from Leviticus 16. Atonement occurs because of the substitution of one life for another.

⁶⁷Cf. Simon, "The Apostolic Decree," 444-49.

. . . in Acts 15 we are told of a council in Jerusalem which endorsed the mission to the Gentiles but laid certain restrictions, including food laws, on the converts. Paul nowhere suggests in any way that he knows of this decree, and he certainly would not have accepted its terms.⁶⁸

We would certainly agree that the theology of Paul ought not to conflict with the rest of scripture but it is also true that the teaching from one book should not overrule or force the interpretation found in another. A presupposition of this writer is that each book of scripture is a self-interpreting piece of revelation.

That the theology of Paul contradicts this passage is also a matter of opinion. According to the view presented here, the council of Jerusalem decrees a “law-free” gospel for Gentiles which in the context means that Gentiles do not need to become Jews. Circumcision and law observance are not necessary for Gentiles, but this does not mean that they are free from the moral commandments of the decalogue or that certain minimal regulations do not apply. As Wilson notes, “Gentile Christians are thus required to observe those parts of the law applicable to them, and it is misleading to speak of a ‘law-free’ Gentile mission because it was never the intention of the law itself that Gentiles should observe any more than these few rules.”⁶⁹ Many interpreters consider this to conflict with the doctrine of justification by faith, so forcefully taught by Paul, but much of this confusion comes from the failure to understand the proper function of the Law. As Pentecost rightly affirms, the Law was never intended as a means to salvation but as instruction for the redeemed.⁷⁰ Marshall’s confusion of these separate issues is evident as he comments about verse eleven:

Peter is talking about the kind of *faith in God* that leads to salvation (cf. verse 7). If both Jews and Gentiles are saved in this way, clearly obedience to the law is not required of Gentiles. Nor, may we add, is obedience to the law demanded of Jews as a means of salvation (Gal. 5:6). . . . why, then, it is asked did the Jewish Christians not give up circumcision themselves?⁷¹

⁶⁸Sherman Johnson, “Antioch, the Base of Operations,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 18 (1983):2:71. Cf. also Paul J. Achtemeier, “An Elusive Unity: Paul, Acts and the Early Church,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (January 1986): 1-26, and Simon, “The Apostolic Decree,” 460.

⁶⁹Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 76. Cf. also Haenchen who notes that “From Luke’s point of view these four requirements were thus not a burden: the Apostolic Council’s edict is rather the final recognition of the mission free from the law, hence of Gentile Christianity free from the law,” Haenchen, *Acts*, 459.

⁷⁰J. Dwight Pentecost, “The Function of the Law,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (July 1971): 232.

⁷¹Marshall, *Acts*, 250. The same bias and assumption display themselves when he comments about the Pharisees in 15:5, “The point was not accepted, however, by certain Christians who *had been* Pharisees in their pre-conversion days There is nothing surprising about former Pharisees being converted—Paul *was* one himself . . .” *Ibid.*, 250 (emphasis mine). Marshall evidently sees no problem invoking the past tense though Paul uses the present (23:6)!

The implication of Marshall's question is "if the Law has no role in salvation then it has no role in the life of the Jewish believer." One wonders if he would have the same response to the validity of the ritual regulation of post-conversion baptism today. The principle of justification by faith was just as valid during Moses' time as during Paul's time and by itself did not prevent the proper observance of the law any more in 49 B.C. than in A.D. 49.

Another objection to this view is that it would conflict with the truth established in Acts 10 concerning the acceptability of Gentiles without any obligation to the Law. That is, the decree would be a retreat from the full acceptance already gained by Gentiles.⁷² In response, it is true that the original objection (15:1) that circumcision was necessary for salvation for Gentiles was a regression from the truth confirmed in Cornelius (11:18). However, the council quickly answered that question by Peter's brief recital of the Cornelius incident (15:6-11). But the scope of the question at the council was wider than simply the issue of salvation and involved the general question of the Gentiles' relationship to the Law. In this regard the council addresses a different issue or at least a broader issue than Cornelius. In Acts 10 the issue and the principle defined was confined to the issue of salvation.⁷³ The issue of how Cornelius would live with reference to the Law after salvation was not addressed by Luke's coverage and in fact would have been moot since he was already portrayed as a very close adherent to the synagogue. That is, the four elements of the decree would not have been an imposition on Cornelius because as he is portrayed by Luke he probably already kept them.⁷⁴ Since his lifestyle was already very devout it was pointless to address the issue and policy is not made where there is no need. Although the record is not definitive it appears that even on Paul's first missionary the majority of Gentiles saved were "god-fearers" and closely aligned to the synagogue.⁷⁵ It was not until a great

⁷²Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 71.

⁷³Luke's summary of the issue is given through the words of the men of Jerusalem at the end of the story, "Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life," (11:18).

⁷⁴Haenchen notes, "it is obvious that the centurion's piety could have accommodated them," Haenchen, *Acts*, 450. "Filson argues that the majority of Gentiles kept these rules long before the Council, in deference to Jewish scruples. The decree was merely a diplomatic arrangement, confirming an already accepted practice," Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, 189, n. 1.

⁷⁵In 13:16 and 26 Luke uses the term καὶ οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν and in 13:43 uses the term οἱ σεβόμενοι προσηλύτοι. The "Greeks" of 14:1 are found in the synagogue although the Greeks who came from "the whole city" in 13:44 may not have had any previous attachment to Judaism. "The first adherents to the new faith among the Gentiles were recruited from among non-Jews who were already close to Judaism. These were the 'God-fearers', who accepted certain basic Jewish obligations, at least

number of Gentiles were saved, and what was previously an isolated incident with Cornelius became a pattern with Paul, that a judgment was necessary. Thus, this view is not in conflict with, but is naturally complementary, to the Cornelius incident.

Another objection to the ritual view is that the regulations were to be kept not because they were Mosaic but apostolic.⁷⁶ In response to this, however, the words of the decree were not formulated by an apostle, but by James. Although James is the *defacto* leader of the council he clearly was not endowed with apostolic authority from Christ, and yet curiously he is the one who formulates the decree.⁷⁷ How is he able to make such an authoritative statement? In this view, his authority is not personal but, as he demonstrated before (15: 16-18), found in the text. James feels the freedom to decree church-wide policy because he does so in accordance within the guidelines of Scripture.

One final objection is that not all of the commandments from the Law which apply to Gentiles are included here.⁷⁸ The only other commandment likely to be included which is applied to the stranger is the sabbath, “but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates (Exod 20:10).⁷⁹ Deuteronomy 5:14, however, clarifies that the law does not apply indiscriminately to Gentiles but to those who were slaves in a Jewish household. That is, in fairness, a Jewish master could not force anyone or anything under his care including his Gentile slave to work seven days a week:

but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, or your manservant, or your maidservant, or your ox, or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates, that your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you (Deuteronomy 5:14).

the so-called Noachide precepts” David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1988), 630.

⁷⁶Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 101.

⁷⁷Note the emphatic wording of the text, διὸ ἐγὼ κρίνω (15:19).

⁷⁸Schwartz says of the ritual understanding, “all versions of the explanation have great difficulty in explaining why only some Mosaic requirements—even only some of the demands Mosaic law makes of Gentiles—are here adopted,” Schwartz, “The Futility of Preaching Moses (Acts 15,21),” 278, though unfortunately he gives no examples.

⁷⁹Two other commands involving capital crimes, the “sin of a high hand” (Num 15:30) and blasphemy (Lev 24:16) were not included perhaps because the Jewish people did not even have the authority to execute such sentences in Israel let alone the diaspora or perhaps these particular laws involving apostasy were irrelevant for regenerate people.

The final statement of James (15:21) has given rise to a number of interpretations,⁸⁰ but should probably be seen in some sense as drawing upon Moses for support. James begins the sentence with γὰρ and uses the specific term καρύσσω. After surveying the use of the term in Acts, Wilson concludes:

The flavour of the word, while clearly controlled largely by the subject matter of Luke's two volumes, suggests the announcement of something new and previously unknown to the audience. That Luke chooses this term to describe Jewish preaching in the synagogues perhaps suggests that he was thinking of the preaching to Gentiles who attended the synagogue rather than the regular reading and exposition of the law for Jews which was the main purpose of synagogue gatherings.⁸¹

If this is true then it suggests that James is justifying the decree on the grounds that many Jews and especially Gentiles were already familiar with these Mosaic demands. This would not clarify the nature of the commands (whether they were ritual or ethical)⁸² but does suggest that James looks to the Scriptures and particularly Moses for support for his decision. That is the Law-free mission to the Gentiles does not occur in spite of Moses, but with the full support of Moses.⁸³

⁸⁰Cf. Schwartz, "The Futility of Preaching Moses," 276-81.

⁸¹Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 84.

⁸²Though we would agree with Haenchen that "The γὰρ can only refer to verses 19-20 so that Gentiles must be enjoined to abstain from the four things mentioned, because the law preached everywhere requires this of them," Haenchen, *Acts*, 450. He adds later, "That this was indeed the sense in which Luke intended those solemnly stylized words of James is corroborated it seems to us, by 21.25," *Ibid.*, 470.

⁸³"it is made clear that the Law-free Gentile mission stands in full harmony with the Mosaic Law (15:21)," Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, 193. Dickinson adds "In summary, the final statement of James confirms the Mosaic origin of the stipulations and relates to the dual theme of his speech. 'For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him' emphasizes the universal mission discussed in verse 17; and, 'for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues' (vs. 21, emphasis mine) reveals that it is through Judaism that salvation is made possible, as stated in verse 16. James is concerned with the statements put forth in verses 1 and 5, and he responds to them by demonstrating that the restoration of Israel provides the avenue for the Gentile mission and that the preaching of Moses removes the obstacle of Gentile idolatry and so furnishes the basis for Christian salvation," Dickinson, "The Theology of the Jerusalem Conference," 81.

Holladay states, "The genius of this proposal is that these are the strictures the OT itself places on "strangers among the Jews" (Lev. 17:8, 10-13; 18:26), i.e., Gentiles. The implication is that circumcision was meant only for Jews in the first place, not Gentiles. Accordingly, Gentile acceptance of these prohibitions would be fully in keeping with the Mosaic Scriptures that have been read weekly in the synagogue 'from early generations' (Acts 15:21). James's proposal thus commends itself because it is scriptural in the strictest sense it binds on Gentiles what God through Scripture had bound, and that alone, and it succeeds in waiving circumcision as a requirement for Gentiles. It thus allows Gentiles 'to keep the law of Moses' (v. 5) in God's intended sense, not in the narrow sense insisted on by the 'particularist' Jewish Christian Pharisees (v. 5)." Carl Holladay, "Acts," *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays, 1077-1118 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 1099.

The Demonstration 16: 1-3

Although the circumcision of Timothy is not directly connected to the decree it does occur sufficiently close in the narrative that it appears as a practical demonstration of Paul's understanding of the decision of the council. It is included here as somewhat of a test case for our view of the decree.

Many view the circumcision of Timothy as simply non-historical.

Perhaps some of Paul's other acts of simulated Jewish piety are believable, but the circumcision of Timothy is not. It is too inconsistent with the central teaching of Galatians, no matter the social setting of the incident or the 'Jewishness' of the circumcised.⁸⁴

Others, hold that the circumcision was conciliatory in order to "win the Jews," not because it was any longer necessary.⁸⁵ It is clear that the motives are an important part of any action, but does this mean that Timothy was obligated to the whole law (Gal 5:3)? Would Paul have condoned Timothy sacrificing at the Temple? Those who hold the first view would differ with the second, of course, charging that even 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 would not allow Paul to so quickly deny the terms of the decree.⁸⁶ A third view is possible, however.

If in fact Jewish believers still considered the Law to be relevant for them and the ruling of the council only concerned Gentiles then it is possible that Paul circumcised Timothy because it was the inherently correct action to take. That is, it was a proper example of obedience to the Law. The problem with this view, however, is the phrase describing Paul's motive that he circumcised Timothy

⁸⁴Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Was Timothy Jewish (Acts 16:1-3): Patristic Exegesis, Rabbinic Law, and Matrilineal Descent," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 252. Others who hold this view are William O. Walker, "The Timothy-Titus Problem Reconsidered," *The Expository Times* 92 (May 1981): 231-35, who considers the account as a corruption of an incident involving Titus. "The statement about the circumcision of Timothy stands in direct contradiction to the theology of Paul, but it fits Luke's view that the law retains its full validity for Jewish Christians," P. Vielhauer, "On the 'Paulinism' of Acts" in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 40-41.

⁸⁵Toussaint, "Acts," 398.

⁸⁶"Above all, however, it must have been impossible for Paul, especially after the agreements made at the Apostolic Council, to consider circumcision as a ceremony irrelevant to faith and missionary activity. He could scarcely do such a thing for the sake of the Jews for whom circumcision meant more than that," Günther Bornkamm, "The Missionary Stance of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9 and in Acts," *Studies in Luke-Acts*, eds. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 203. Note Bruce's defense as he confuses rhetoric for support, "Both in his own days and in more recent days there have never been lacking critics ready to charge the apostle with inconsistency in this and similar matters; but the consistency which some expect from Paul is that 'foolish consistency' which R. W. Emerson, in his *Essay on Self-Reliance*, describes as 'the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.' They will search in vain for this so-called consistency in the great mind of Paul, and they will miss the true, large-scale consistency which brought all the activities of his life and thought 'into captivity to the obedience of Christ and subordinated every other interest to the interests of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:23)." Perhaps no better support can be found.

“because of the Jews” (16:3). It implies that were it not for them, Paul would not have circumcised his young friend.

Perhaps more basic to the understanding of this dilemma, however, is the difficult ruling on Timothy’s race. Was Timothy a Jew or a Gentile? Cohen asserts on the basis of historical evidence that during the middle of the first century, one’s race was judged patrilineally.⁸⁷ This changed when rabbinic law determined that lineage would be determined matrilineally, but the earliest evidence for this is early in the second century, so that he concludes:

Was Timothy Jewish? In all likelihood Luke did not think so. The vast majority of ancient and medieval exegetes did not think so. There is no evidence that Paul or the Jews of Asia Minor thought so. . . . because there is no evidence that any Jew in premishnaic times thought that the child of an intermarriage followed the status of the mother. Was Timothy Jewish? The answer must be no.⁸⁸

Cohen notes that the rabbinic law may have been in existence in the first century but that even if it was, rabbinic Judaism was only one type of Judaism and there is no evidence that all the Jews in the ancient world listened to the rabbis and followed rabbinic norms. But as Bryan points out, this argument cuts both ways. It may well be that as the custom was becoming law that both opinions of lineage were propounded simultaneously. It is clear from the decree that Paul would not have imposed circumcision upon a Gentile, but Luke also wants us to know from a later charge (21:21) that Paul does not teach the same for Jews. What better way for Luke to demonstrate the falseness of the charge in 21:21 than to show Paul who, though he denies circumcision for Gentiles, circumcises Timothy who shows the slightest connection to Israel.⁸⁹ This would make good sense out of the phrase “because of the Jews in that place because they all knew that his father was a Greek.” That is he did not circumcise Timothy out of fear of them or simply to make his gospel more acceptable to them but as a practical demonstration to convince them of his commitment to the Law for Israel.⁹⁰ They all knew that Paul might logically have claimed exemption for Timothy on the basis of Gentile lineage, but in order to demonstrate that he was not against Israel or her law he performed the rite. This does not mean of

⁸⁷Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish,” 263-67.

⁸⁸Ibid., 267-68.

⁸⁹Christopher Bryan, “A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107 (June 1988): 292-94.

⁹⁰Paul N. Tarazi, “The Addressees and the Purpose of Galatians,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 33 (1989): 178-79.

course that Paul would have behaved differently if there were no Jewish pressure, but that he was eager for his position to be known. “I may believe that justice should be seen to be done, but that does not necessarily mean I am unwilling to do justice if it is not seen.”⁹¹ Thus, it is possible that Paul circumcised Timothy, not out of a principle of expediency so as not to offend, but in order to demonstrate the truth of his theology.

Conclusion

Acts 15 does not address the issue of the Law in general, but rather the specific concern of the relationship of Gentiles to the Law. The decree then should not be applied broadly as though it speaks to the Jewish believer’s obligation to Moses. As Peter noted neither Jew nor Gentile were saved through the Law but by the grace of God. The appropriate way to express one’s obedience after salvation, however, was another matter. James then sought scriptural proof for the recognition of the place that Gentiles should have in the blessings of Israel. He found prophecy which spoke of Gentiles being saved as Gentiles and then found scriptural precedent for the demands of the Law upon Gentile sojourners who lived among the Israelites. He listed four prescriptions from Leviticus 17–18 demanding that Gentiles “abstain from meats sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled and from illicit marital unions” (15:29). Gentile Christians thus find their share in salvation not because the Law had been cancelled but because the Old Testament looked forward to their salvation. God’s blessings to the nations were given not in spite of Israel but rather through Israel. The Law which believing Israelites continued to observe also provided for the inclusion of Gentile believers as well. While arguing for this relative freedom from the Law for Gentiles, the circumcision of Timothy allows Paul an opportunity to publicly affirm his abiding loyalty to the Law. Fitzmyer summarizes:

James seeks scriptural proof for the recognition of the share that the Gentiles have in the heritage of Israel. Nevertheless, he demands of such Gentile Christians that they live among Jewish Christians as the law itself demands of pagan sojourners dwelling among the Israelites. . . . In other words, Gentile Christians are associated with Jewish Christians and find with them the same salvation ‘through the grace of our Lord Jesus’ (15:11), but they find it not because ‘the law and the prophets’ have been abrogated and are no longer normative, but because the law and the prophets themselves have provided for their share in the very promises made to the fathers of old. That is why ‘God has deigned to take from the Gentiles a people for his name’ (15:14).⁹²

⁹¹Bryan, “A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3,” 294.

⁹²Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Luke the Theologian: Aspects of His Teaching* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 194-95. “Thus reconstituted, Israel is composed of, first and foremost, repentant Jews who have accepted the apostolic proclamation of the gospel and welcomed that ‘savior that God has brought to Israel, Jesus,

according to (his) promise' (13:23), but also the people taken from among the Gentiles for his name, associated with this Israel. Thus, the very law and the prophets that remain normative for the repentant Israel provides for the association of Gentile converts to it as the one reconstituted people of God."