

7. Debate in Jerusalem Over Acceptance of the Gentiles (15:1–35)

Acts 15:1–35 stands at the very center of the book. Not only is this true of its position halfway through the text, but it is also central in the development of the total plot of the book. The first half of Acts has focused on the Jewish Christian community, particularly on the influential Jerusalem church. The Christian witness had begun there (chaps. 1–5). Through the Hellenists especially it had spread to Samaria and all of the land of the Jews (chaps. 6–9). Through the witness of Peter to Cornelius, the outreach of the Antioch church, and especially through the first major mission completed by Paul and Barnabas, the gospel had broken through to the Gentiles (chaps. 10–14). All the preliminary steps had been taken for a major effort to reach the Gentile world. The precedents had been established; the first major successes among the Gentiles had been witnessed.⁷⁷ The stage was set for Paul's mission to the heart of the Greco-Roman world as *the* missionary to the Gentiles.

There remained only one final hurdle, and that was the agreement of the whole church on the Gentile mission. There were still those among the Jewish Christians who had serious reservations about the way the outreach to Gentiles had been conducted. These reservations and the final solution to them worked out in a major conference in Jerusalem are the subject of 15:1–35. There the whole church agreed on the Gentile mission. The way was now open for the mission of Paul, and that will be the subject of the rest of Acts. Hereafter the Jerusalem church fades into the background. When it does reappear, as in chap. 21, it will be wholly in connection with Paul's Gentile ministry. The focus is entirely on him.

The debate in Jerusalem revolved around the issue of *how* Gentiles were to be accepted into the Christian fellowship. [✎] The more conservative Jewish Christians felt that they should be received on the same basis that Jews had always accepted Gentiles into the covenant community—through proselyte initiation [✎]. This involved circumcision of the males and all proselytes taking upon themselves the total provisions of the Mosaic law. For all intents and purposes, a Gentile proselyte to Judaism *became a Jew* [✎], not only in religious conviction but in lifestyle as well [✎]. That was the question the con-

⁷⁷ For the centrality of 15:1–35 in the total outline of Acts, see J. C. O'Neill, *The Theology of Acts in Its Historical Setting* (London: SPCK, 1970), 66.

servative group of [Jewish Christians](#) raised: Should not Gentiles be required to become Jews in order to share in the Christian community? It was a natural question. The first Christians were all Jews. [Jesus](#) was a Jew and the Jewish Messiah. God had only one covenant people—the Jews. Christianity was a messianic movement within Judaism. Jews had always demanded of all Gentile converts the requirements of circumcision and rituals of the Torah. Why should that change?

Evidently the requirements *had* changed. There was no indication that Peter had laid such requirements on Cornelius, or the Antioch church on the Gentiles who became a part of their fellowship, or Paul and Barnabas on the Gentiles converted in their mission. This was a cause for serious concern from the more conservative elements. Not only was it a departure from normal proselyte procedure; it also raised serious problems of fellowship. How could law-abiding [Jewish Christians](#) who seriously observed all the ritual laws have interaction with Gentile Christians who did not observe those laws? The [Jewish Christians](#) would run the risk of defilement from the Gentiles. These were the two issues that were faced and resolved in Jerusalem: (1) whether Gentile converts should submit to Jewish proselyte requirements, especially to circumcision and (2) how fellowship could be maintained between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

In [Gal 2](#) Paul told of a conference in Jerusalem that had many similarities to [Acts 15:1–35](#). Although the two accounts contain significant differences, the similarities seem to outweigh these, and it is probable that they relate to the same event.⁷⁸ Both

⁷⁸ One of the major reasons scholars are hesitant to equate [Gal 2](#) and [Acts 15](#) is that of fitting together the visits of Paul related in Galatians and Acts. This problem is given disproportionate significance, and many follow Ramsay's suggestion that [Gal 2:1–10](#) refers to the visit of [Acts 11:30–12:25](#). This is to ignore totally the question of content, the really important consideration. [Acts 11:30–12:25](#) deals only with an offering for famine relief. [Acts 15](#) deals with the requirement of circumcision for Gentile converts, as does [Gal 2](#). The problem of the visits can be treated with less drastic surgery, such as assuming that Paul failed to mention the brief famine visit because he had no contact with any apostles on that occasion. This was the solution proposed by Zahn and followed in the commentaries of Rackham (239), Stagg (157), and Robertson ([WP 3:221–22](#)). See also the discussion in chap. IV, n. 136. For additional arguments for equating [Gal 2:1–10](#) with [Acts 15](#), see R. Stein, "[The Relationship of Gal 2:1–10 and Acts 15:1–35: Two Neglected Arguments](#),"

dealt with the issue of circumcision, Paul and Barnabas defended their views against the more conservative Jewish Christians in both accounts, and the final agreement was reached in both that the Gentiles would not be required to submit to Jewish proselyte circumcision. In [Gal 2:1–10](#) Paul did not go into the question of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (though [Gal 2:11–14](#) clearly concerns table fellowship between Gentile and Jewish Christians), but that issue was a natural outgrowth of the decision not to require Gentiles to live by the Torah. That it comprised part of the agenda at the Jerusalem Conference is highly plausible.⁷⁹ In any event, it will be assumed in the commentary that follows that Paul and Luke were referring to the same conference, and where appropriate Paul’s account will be cited to supplement that of Acts.

[Acts 15:1–35](#) falls into four natural parts. The first comprises an *introduction* and relates how the debate arose in Antioch and led to the conference in Jerusalem to attempt some resolution (vv. 1–5). The second part focuses on the *debate* in Jerusalem (vv. 6–21) and primarily centers on the witness of Peter (vv. 6–11) and of James (vv. 12–21). The third part deals with the final *solution*, which takes the form of an official letter sent to Antioch (vv. 22–29). The narrative *concludes* where it began—in Antioch—with the delivering of the letter by two delegates of the Jerusalem church (vv. 30–35).

(1) *The Criticism from the Circumcision Party (15:1–5)*

¹Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” ²This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question. ³The church

JETS (1974): 239–42.

⁷⁹ A number of German scholars would divide [Acts 15:1–35](#) into two separate occasions: (1) the original Jerusalem Conference when only the issue of requirements for Gentile converts was debated and (2) a letter from Jerusalem (“the decrees” of [15:22–29](#)), which was sent later, after the dispute over table fellowship arose in Antioch (to which Paul referred in [Gal 2:11–14](#)). See Schneider, 2:189–91; A. Weiser, “Das ‘Apostelkonzil’ (Apg. 15:1–35),” *BZ* 28 (1984): 145–67.

John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992).

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sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad. ⁴When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them.

⁵Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”

15:1–2 There were many Gentiles in the church at Antioch (cf. [11:20f.](#)). There is no indication that they had been circumcised when they joined the Christian fellowship. This was disturbing to some [Jewish Christians](#) who came from Judea and insisted that circumcision in strict obedience to the Jewish law was necessary for salvation (v. 1).⁸⁰ Evidently they shared the views and perhaps were even some of the same persons as the “circumcision party,” who are identified in the Western text as belonging to the sect of the Pharisees and who challenged Peter for having table fellowship with Cornelius ([11:2](#)). The group evidently represented the strict Jewish viewpoint that there was no salvation apart from belonging to the covenant community, the people of Israel. To be a part of that community a Gentile must take on the physical sign of the covenant, the mark of circumcision, and live by all the precepts of the law of Moses, ritual as well as moral. In the sharp debate that this demand provoked, Paul and Barnabas were the main opponents to this Judaizing perspective (v. 2). They had laid no such requirements on the Gentiles converted in their recent mission. It is altogether likely that the large number of such converts in their successful mission had attracted the attention of this Judaizing group in the first place.

The group soon realized that such a basic issue could not be settled in Antioch. It needed the attention of the whole church, since all Christians, Jew and Gentile, would be affected by its resolution. An “[ecumenical](#) conference” was arranged in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the “mother church.” The apostles were there. It was the suitable site to debate such an important issue. It is unclear who appointed Paul and Barnabas and

⁸⁰ The Western text has the group make two demands: circumcision *and* conduct according to the law of Moses. This is perhaps a harmonization with v. 5.

“some other believers” to represent Antioch in Jerusalem. The Western text has the Judaizing group summoning Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem “to be judged.”⁸¹ More likely the Antioch church appointed them as its official delegates to the meeting. Paul mentioned that Titus accompanied him and Barnabas to Jerusalem ([Gal 2:1](#)), so he may well have been one of the “others” of [Acts 15:2](#).

15:3–4 The distance between Antioch and Jerusalem was in excess of 250 miles, and the apostles may well have spent a month or so on their journey. They used the opportunity to visit congregations along the way. It could almost be described as a “campaign trip,” since most of these congregations would likely be sympathetic with their viewpoint that Gentiles should not be burdened with circumcision and the Torah.⁸² This would be especially true of the Christians of Phoenicia whose congregations were likely established by the same Hellenists who reached out to the Gentiles in Antioch ([11:19–20](#)). The congregations along their route rejoiced at the news of Paul and Barnabas’s success among the Gentiles. Evidently they did not share the misgivings of the Judaizing Christians. When the Antioch delegation arrived in Jerusalem, they were well received by the “apostles and elders” (v. 4). These would be the central groups in the deliberation. Peter would be the spokesperson for the apostles, and James would represent the elders. Just as Paul and Barnabas had reported the success of their mission to the sponsoring church at Antioch ([14:27](#)) and to the congregations on their way ([15:3](#)), so now they shared with the leaders in Jerusalem what *God* had done through them. The emphasis on God’s blessing was essential. That God’s *leading* was so evident in accepting the Gentiles apart from the law would determine the final outcome of the conference.

15:5 The reception was somewhat cooler from a group of believers “who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (v. 5). It was perhaps some of their group who had first stirred up the controversy in Antioch. They at least shared the same viewpoint: Gentiles who become Christians must undergo Jewish proselyte procedure. They must be circumcised. They must live by the entire Jewish law. It was not the moral aspects of the law that presented the problem but its ritual provisions. The moral law, such as embodied in the Ten Commandments, was never in question. Paul, for instance, constantly reminded his churches of God’s moral standards in his letters. The ritual aspects of the

⁸¹ I. M. Ellis, “Codex Bezae at Acts 15,” *IBS* 2 (1980): 134–40.

⁸² P. Gaechter, “Geschichtliches zum Apostelkonzil,” *ZTK* 85 (1963): 339–54.

law presented a problem. These were the provisions that marked Jews off from other people—circumcision, the food laws, scrupulous ritual purity. They were what made the Jews Jews and seemed strange and arbitrary to most Gentiles. To have required these of Gentiles would in essence have made them into Jews and cut them off from the rest of the Gentiles. It would have severely restricted, perhaps even killed, any effective Gentile mission. The stakes were high in the Jerusalem Conference.

It should come as no surprise that some of the Pharisees had become Christians. Pharisees believed in resurrection, life after death, and the coming Messiah. They shared the basic convictions of the Christians. Because of this they are sometimes in Acts found defending the Christians against the Sadducees, who had much less in common with Christian views (cf. [5:17](#); [23:8f.](#)). A major barrier between Christians and Pharisees was the extensive use of oral tradition by the Pharisees, which [Jesus](#) and Paul both rejected as human tradition. It is not surprising that some Pharisees came to embrace Christ as the Messiah in whom they had hoped. For all their emphasis on law, it is also not surprising that they would be reticent to receive anyone into the fellowship in a manner not in accordance with tradition. That tradition was well-established for proselytes—circumcision and the whole yoke of the law.

(2) The Debate in Jerusalem (15:6–21)

⁶The apostles and elders met to consider this question. ⁷After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. ⁸God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the [Holy Spirit](#) to them, just as he did to us. ⁹He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. ¹⁰Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? ¹¹No! We believe it is through the grace of our [Lord Jesus](#) that we are saved, just as they are.”

¹²The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them. ¹³When they finished, James spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from

the Gentiles a people for himself. ¹⁵The words of the prophets are in agreement with this, as it is written:

¹⁶“After this I will return

and rebuild David’s fallen tent.

Its ruins I will rebuild,

and I will restore it,

¹⁷that the remnant of men may seek the Lord,

and all the Gentiles who bear my name,

says the Lord, who does these things’

¹⁸that have been known for ages.

¹⁹“It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. ²⁰Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. ²¹For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

The central section of [Acts 15:1–35](#) relates the debate in Jerusalem over the circumcision issue. There were two major witnesses, both in defense of the view that the Gentiles should not be burdened by circumcision and the law. Peter spoke first (vv. [7–11](#)), followed by James (vv. [13–21](#)). Both speeches are preceded by brief summary notices that set the larger context of the conference (vv. [6, 12](#)).

PETER’S WITNESS ([15:6–11](#))

[15:6](#) Verse [6](#) relates the gathering for the conference. Since it mentions only the apostles and elders, many interpreters see this as a reference to the private conference Paul mentioned in [Gal 2:2](#) with “those who seemed to be leaders.” These interpreters would see the full church being first gathered together for the “discussion” in v. [7](#) or even later—with the mention of the whole assembly in v. [12](#). If Luke mentioned Paul’s private conference at all, it would more likely be the initial meeting with the apostles and elders in v. [4](#). Verses [6–29](#) are a continuous narrative, and one would assume the whole group was gathered together for the discussion—the apostles and elders, other members of the Jerusalem church (including the Pharisaic Christians), Paul and Barnabas, and the other members of the Antioch delegation. The apostles and elders were singled out as the leaders of the assembly. They initiated the formal inquiry.⁸³

15:7–9 The meeting began with a lively discussion (v. 7). After the various viewpoints had been aired, Peter rose to speak. He began by reminding the assembly of his own experience in the household of Cornelius (v. 7b). Even though it was “some time ago,” possibly as much as ten years before, the experience had made an indelible impression on Peter. God had chosen him to witness to the Gentiles (cf. 10:5, 20, 32). Peter could expect the Jerusalem Christians, including the circumcisers, to remember this because he had given them a full report following the incident (cf. 11:1–18). What he had learned on that occasion was that God looks on the heart, not on external matters. God is no respecter of persons (10:34). Perhaps Peter had in mind the distinction made by the prophets that God does not look to the external circumcision of the flesh but the internal circumcision of the heart (Jer 4:4; 9:26; cf. Rom 2:29). God had convicted Cornelius, looked to the inner circumcision of his heart, and accepted him on that basis. God had proved his acceptance of Cornelius and the Gentiles at his home by granting them the gift of his Spirit. God only grants his Spirit to those he has accepted (cf. 10:44, 47; 11:17). The fact that they had received the Spirit just as Peter and the Jewish Christians had was proof that God had accepted Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles on an equal footing (v. 9). He “purified their hearts” by faith. Peter undoubtedly was thinking of his vision: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). For the Jew circumcision was a mark of sanctity and purity, of belonging to God’s people and being acceptable to him. But in Cornelius God had shown Peter that true purity comes not by an external mark but by faith. In the account of Cornelius in chap. 10, his faith is never explicitly mentioned but is certainly evidenced in his following without question every direction God gave him. Here Peter made explicit what was implicit there: Cornelius had been accepted by God on the basis of his faith.

15:10–11 In v. 10 Peter gave his conclusion drawn from the experience with Cornelius. It was an emphatic no to the question of Gentile circumcision and the “yoke” of the law. God had accepted the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house without either of these. How could Jewish Christians demand anything more than the faith already shown? To demand more would be to put God to the test, to act against God’s declared will, to see if God really meant what he had already shown in accepting Gentiles apart from the

⁸³ For the view that ἰδεῖν περί is a Latinism based on *videre de* and indicating a former investigation, see J. L. North, “*Is idein peri (Acts 15, 6, cf. 18, 5) a Latinism?*” *NTS* 29 (1983): 264–66.

law.⁸⁴ Peter's statement in v. 10 is strong but should not be misconstrued. By speaking of the "yoke" of the law, he did not mean that the law was an intolerable burden that Jewish Christians should abandon. Peter was using a common Jewish metaphor for the law that had the same positive meaning Jesus had given it (Matt 11:29f.).⁸⁵ Peter did not urge Jewish Christians to abandon the law, nor did they cease to live by it. Peter's meaning was that the law was something the Jews had not been able to fulfill. It had proven an inadequate basis of salvation for them. Neither they nor their fathers had been able to fully keep the law and so win acceptance with God (cf. Rom 2:17–24). For the Jewish Christians the law would remain a mark of God's covenant with them, a cherished heritage. It could not save them. Only one thing could—faith, believing in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus (v. 11).

Faith alone, grace alone—one could hardly sound more like Paul. Paul had said much the same thing at Pisidian Antioch (13:38f.). It is something of an irony that Paul had to remind Peter of this same truth just a short time later in Antioch when his actions went counter to his convictions (Gal 2:14–17). It is interesting to observe Peter's progression throughout his speech. He began by pointing out how God had accepted the Gentiles "just like he accepted us" (v. 8). Now the shoe was on the other foot. The Gentiles had become the example for the Jews—"we are saved, just as they are" (v. 11). God's acceptance of the Gentiles had drawn a basic lesson for the Jews as well. There is only *one* way of salvation—"through the grace of our Lord Jesus." The emphasis on grace in 15:11 fits well with the emphasis on God's sovereign activity in the salvation of the Gentiles. Peter's ultimate point was that God is free to save whomever and however he pleases.

JAMES'S TESTIMONY (15:12–21)

15:12 At the end of Peter's speech the entire assembly sat in silence. The hubbub with which the conference began (v. 7) now ceased. Paul and Barnabas had already shared their missionary experience with the leaders (v. 4).⁸⁶ Now they gave their testimony

⁸⁴ For the concept of "tempting/testing" God, cf. Deut 6:16; Exod 17:2; Ps 78:18; Matt 4:7.

⁸⁵ For the law as a "yoke" see *m. Abot* 3:5. The rabbis saw the Torah not as an instrument of enslavement but as a yoke that bound them to God's will. It was a gift of his mercy. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); J. Nolland, "A Fresh Look at Acts 15:10," *NTS* 27 (1980): 105–15.

before the entire congregation (v. 12). Their emphasis was again on *God's* initiative in the mission, his work through them, the signs and wonders that had attested to his presence and affirmation of their ministry.⁸⁷ This missionary report was the entire role that Paul and Barnabas had in the conference. The main arguments were offered by Peter and James, the leaders of the apostles and elders. Paul and Barnabas evidently offered no defense of their position on the Gentile question other than the implicit argument that God had endorsed it. This was wise procedure. Often those who are most involved in an issue cannot be heard objectively by their opponents. A third party can address the issue with less passion and more authority. This was the role filled by Peter and James, who were in essence the spokespersons for the two missionaries.

15:13 When Paul and Barnabas had completed their testimony, James rose to speak (v. 13). It was James the brother of Jesus. Paul also mentioned James's role at the Jerusalem Conference (Gal 2:9; cf. 1:19) and called him one of the "pillars" of the church, along with Peter and John. James had evidently become the leading elder of the Jerusalem congregation. His leadership of the church has already been indicated in 12:17. Upon Paul's final visit to Jerusalem he appears to have been the sole leader of the congregation, and the apostles no longer seem to have been present in the city (21:18–25). Here James continued the defense of Peter's position that the Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised or embrace the Jewish law. Peter's argument had been based primarily on his personal experience, which had shown that God had accepted the Gentiles by sending his Spirit on them solely on the basis of their faith. James furthered Peter's position by giving it scriptural grounding (vv. 14–18). Then, realizing that such a solution would create real problems for Jewish Christians in their fellowship with Gentile Christians, he offered a suggestion for alleviating that situation (vv. 19–21).⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Luke usually had "Paul and Barnabas," but the order of names is reversed in v. 12. This may reflect Luke's awareness that because of his long personal association with the Jerusalem church Barnabas held a certain priority there.

⁸⁷ The Western text offers a significant variant in v. 12, adding at the beginning, "And when the elders had agreed to the words spoken by Peter, the whole assembly became silent." The silence is thus interpreted as the Judaizers having been silenced.

⁸⁸ In James's speech of Acts 15:13–21 there are a number of verbal coincidences with the Epistle of James, as has been noted by J. B. Mayor, *The Epistle of James* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 3–4.

15:14–18 James began by referring to Peter’s just-completed witness to God’s acceptance of the Gentiles at Cornelius’s home and described it as God’s “taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (v. 14).⁸⁹ James used the word *laos* to describe the Gentiles, a term usually applied to Israel. In [Zech 2:11](#) (LXX [2:15](#)), the Septuagint also applies the term *laos* to the Gentiles who will in the final days come to dwell in the renewed Zion and be a part of God’s people.⁹⁰ Something like this seems to be the meaning here. In Christ God brings Jew and Gentile together into a single *laos*, a single people “for his name.”⁹¹

James now showed how the coming of the Gentiles into the people of God was grounded in the Old Testament prophets. Basically he quoted from the Septuagint text of [Amos 9:11–12](#), with possible allusions from [Jer 12:15](#) and [Isa 45:21](#).⁹² In the Hebrew text of [Amos 9:11–12](#), the prophet spoke of the coming restoration of Israel,

⁸⁹ James referred to Peter as “Simeon,” an Aramaizing form used of Peter elsewhere in the NT only in [2 Pet 1:1](#). Some early church fathers, notably Chrysostom, confused the Simeon of [Acts 15:14](#) with the Simeon of [Luke 2:29–32](#). Others have identified him with Simeon the Black ([Acts 13:1](#)). Clearly James was referring to Peter’s speech in v. 14. See E. R. Smother, “Chrysostom and Symeon ([Acts xv, 14](#)),” *HTR* (1953): 203–15.

⁹⁰ See J. Dupont, “*Laos ex ethnon*,” *Etudes*, 361–65; Dupont, “Un Peuple d’entre les nations ([Actes 15:14](#)),” *NTS* 31 (1985): 321–35; N. A. Dahl, “A People for His Name ([Acts xv. 14](#)),” *NTS* 4 (1957–58): 319–27.

⁹¹ [Acts 15:14–18](#) is a key passage in traditional dispensational theories. The reference to “first” in v. 14 is taken to refer to the coming of the Gentiles; v. 16 is taken as the subsequent restoration of Israel. See W. M. Aldrich, “The Interpretation of [Acts 15:13–18](#),” *BibSac* 111 (1954): 317–23. The context of the Jerusalem Conference, however, does not call for prophecy. James was describing what was happening in his day, Jew and Gentile coming together into a single people of God. See W. C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Davidic Promise and the Inclusion of the Gentiles ([Amos 9:9–15](#) and [Acts 15:13–18](#)): A Test Passage for Theological Systems,” *JETS* (1977): 97–111.

⁹² [Jeremiah 12:15](#) seems to be behind the opening words, “After this I will return” (v. 16). [Isaiah 45:21](#) may lie behind the phrase “known for ages” (v. 18), but the phrase may also have been drawn from the reference to the “ages” in [Amos 9:11](#). See G. D. Kilpatrick, “Some quotations in Acts,” *Les Actes*, ed. J. Kramer, 84–85.

which God would bring about. The house of David would be rebuilt and the kingdom restored to its former glory. Edom and all the nations over which David ruled would once again be gathered into Israel. The Greek text differs significantly and speaks of the remnant of humankind and all the nations seeking the Lord.⁹³ In both traditions there is the concept of “the nations which are called by my name,” which links directly with “a people for his name” (“for himself,” NIV) in v. 14. This is the main concept James wished to develop. In the Gentiles, God was choosing a people for himself, a new *restored* people of God, Jew and Gentile in Christ, the true Israel. In the total message of Acts it is clear that the rebuilt house of David occurred in the Messiah. Christ was the scion of David who fulfilled the covenant of David and established a kingdom that would last forever (2 Sam 7:12f.; cf. Acts 13:32–34). From the beginning the Jewish Christians had realized that the promises to David were fulfilled in Christ. What they were now beginning to see, and what James saw foretold in Amos, was that these promises included the Gentiles.⁹⁴

15:19–20 Having established from Scripture the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God, James drew his conclusion to the question of *requirements* for Gentile membership (v. 19). Gentiles should not be given undue difficulties; no unnecessary obstacles should be placed in their way. Though somewhat more restrained in expression, his conclusion was basically that of Peter (v. 10): Gentiles should not be burdened with the law and circumcision. The leading apostle and the leading elder were in agreement. The issue was all but settled. Resolving it, however, raised another problem. If Gentiles were not being required to observe the Jewish ritual laws, how would Jewish Christians who maintained strict Torah observance be able to fellowship with them without running

⁹³ The problem is, of course, that James’s argument is best carried by the Septuagint text. It is not impossible that James knew Greek and quoted the Septuagint text in a conference that had a number of Greek-speaking delegates. Even if Luke was responsible for providing the Septuagint text (for his Greek readers), the key phrase “nations [Gentiles] called by my name” occurs in *both* the Hebrew and Greek texts, and either would have suited James’s argument.

⁹⁴ See J. Dupont, “Apologetic Use of the Old Testament,” *Salvation of the Gentiles*, 139. See also M. A. Braun, “James’ Use of Amos at the Jerusalem Council: Steps Toward a Possible Solution of the Textual and Theological Problems,” *JETS* 20 (1977): 113–21.

the risk of being ritually defiled themselves? James saw the question coming and addressed it in his next remark (v. 20). Gentiles should be directed to abstain from four things : from food offered to idols, from sexual immorality (*porneia*), from the meat of strangled animals (*pnikton*), and from blood (*haima*).

When looked at closely, all four of these belong to the ritual sphere . Meat offered to idols was an abomination to Jews, who avoided any and everything associated with idolatry. “Strangled meat” referred to animals that had been slaughtered in a manner that left the blood in it. Blood was considered sacred to the Jews, and all meat was to be drained of blood before consuming it. The prohibition of “blood” came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form.⁹⁵ These three requirements were thus all ritual, dealing with matters of clean and unclean foods. The fourth category seems somewhat less ritual and more moral: sexual immorality (*porneia*). It is possible that this category was also originally intended in a mainly ritual sense, referring to those “defiling” sexual relationships the Old Testament condemns, such as incest, marriage outside the covenant community, marriage with a close relative, bestiality, homosexuality, and the like.⁹⁶ It is also possible that a broader meaning was intended including all illicit “natural” relationships as well, such as fornication, concubinage, and adultery. Gentile sexual mores were lax compared to Jewish standards, and it was one of the areas where Jews saw themselves most radically differentiated from Gentiles. The boundary between ritual and ethical law is not always distinct, and sexual morality is one of those areas where it is most blurred. For the Jew sexual misbehavior was both immoral *and* impure. A Jew would find it difficult indeed to consort with a Gentile who did not live by his own standards of sexual morality.⁹⁷

The four requirements suggested by James were thus all basically ritual requirements

⁹⁵ On “blood” as a sign of paganism, see I. Logan, “The Decree of Acts xv,” *ExpTim* 39 (1927–28): 428.

⁹⁶ That *πορνεία* should be seen in a wholly ritual sense is argued by M. Simon, “The Apostolic Decree and Its Setting in the Ancient Church,” *BJRL* 52 (1970): 437–60.

⁹⁷ For the interesting suggestion that the decrees were designed to give social identity to Gentiles as being Christians alongside Jewish Christians, see C. Perrot, “Les Décisions de l’Assemblée de Jerusalem,” *RSR* 69 (1981): 195–208.

aimed at making fellowship possible between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Often referred to as “the apostolic decrees,” they belonged to a period in the life of the church when there was close contact between Jewish and Gentile Christians, when table fellowship especially was common between them. In a later day, by the end of the first century, Jewish Christianity became isolated into small sects and separated from Gentile Christianity. There no longer existed any real fellowship between them. The original function of the decrees no longer had any force, and they tended to be viewed in wholly moral terms. This tendency is very much reflected in the textual tradition of Acts 15:20, 29 and 21:25, particularly in the Western text, which omits “strangled meat,” adds the negative form of the golden rule, and reads “idolatry” rather than idol meat. There are thus four moral prohibitions: no idolatry, no sexual immorality, no murder (“blood” now viewed as the shedding—not consuming—of blood), and “do not do to another what you wouldn’t wish done to yourself.”⁹⁸

15:21 The question might be raised: Why were the original decrees ritual rather than moral in the first place? The answer quite simply is that the moral rules, such as the Ten Commandments, were already assumed. All Christians, Jew and Gentile, lived by them. The Gentiles needed no reminder of such basic marks of Christian behavior. Morality was not the issue at the Jerusalem Conference.⁹⁹ Fellowship was, and the decrees were a sort of minimum requirement placed on the Gentile Christians in deference to the scruples of their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ.¹⁰⁰ They were really

⁹⁸ For further treatment of the complex textual tradition of the “decrees,” see T. Boman, “Das textkritische Problem des sogenannten Aposteldekrets,” *NovT* 7 (1964): 26–36; G. Resch, *Das Aposteldecree nach seiner ausserkanonischen Textgestalt* (Leipzig: Hinrichs’sche, 1905); A. F. J. Klijn, “The Pseudo-Clementines and the Apostolic Decree,” *NovT* 10 (1968): 305–12.

⁹⁹ Some scholars would disagree strongly with this and maintain that the decrees were primarily ethical from the beginning; e.g., S. G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983), 73–102. H. Sahlin argues that the Western reading is original and based on the three “cardinal sins” of the rabbis, “Die drei Kardinalsünden und das neue Testament,” *ST* 24 (1970): 93–112.

¹⁰⁰ The basis of the decrees in providing a means for fellowship of Jewish and Gentile Christians is also argued by M. A. Seifrid, “Jesus and the Law in Acts,” *JSNT* 30 (1987): 39–57. A. Weiser describes it as providing a “modus vivende” between the two: “Das ‘Apostelkonzil’ (Apg. 15:1–35),”

not something radically new. The Old Testament lays down similar rules for the resident alien dwelling in Israel and for much the same purpose: to assure the purity of the Jewish community and to allow for social interaction between the Jews and the non-Jews in their midst. In fact, all four of the “apostolic decrees” are found in [Lev 17 and 18](#) as requirements expected of resident aliens: abstinence from pagan sacrifices ([17:8](#)), blood ([17:10–14](#)), strangled meat ([17:13](#)), and illicit sexual relationships ([18:6–23](#))¹⁰¹. Perhaps this is what James meant in his rather obscure concluding remark (v. 21): the law of Moses is read in every synagogue everywhere; so these requirements should come as no shock to the Gentiles. They are in the Old Testament and have been required of Gentiles associating with Jews from the earliest times. James’s remark could also be taken in another sense, which would fit the context well: there are Jews in every city who cherish the Torah. Gentile Christians should be sensitive to their scruples and not give them offense in these ritual matters, for they too may be reached with the gospel.¹⁰¹

(3) *The Decision in Jerusalem (15:22–29)*

²²Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.

²³With them they sent the following letter:

The apostles and elders, your brothers,

To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia:

Greetings.

²⁴We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. ²⁵So we all agreed to choose

BZ 28 (1984): 145–67.

¹⁰¹ Verse 21 is difficult, and a wide variety of interpretations have been offered. In addition to the two given in the commentary, it has also been viewed as meaning that the Gentiles had already heard the law propounded and hadn’t responded; it would thus be futile to impose it on them: D. R. Schwartz, “[The Futility of Preaching Moses \(Acts 15, 21\)](#),” *Bib* 67 (1986): 276–81. J. Bowker sees v. 21 in the context of a formal *taqqaneh* or “alleviation of Torah.” Verse 21 serves to reassert the primacy of the Torah even though it has been relaxed with regard to Gentile proselyte procedure: “The Speeches in Acts: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form,” *NTS* 14 (1967–68): 96–111.

John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992).

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some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul—²⁶men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁷Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. ²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.

Farewell.

15:22–23a James had provided a suitable solution that jeopardized neither the Gentile mission nor the fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. All parties seem to have been satisfied and to have agreed to James’s suggestion (vv. 22–23a). They decided to draft a letter presenting the solution and to send two delegates from the Jerusalem church to Antioch along with Paul and Barnabas. The two delegates would be able to give their personal interpretation of the letter’s contents and of the conference in Jerusalem. They are described as “leaders” in the church of Jerusalem, a term that is not further defined. In v. 32 they are called “prophets.” Of Judas Barsabbas (“Sabbath-born”) we know nothing more. He may have been related to the Joseph Barsabbas of 1:23, but even that is uncertain. Silas, who is a major New Testament character, is another story. He accompanied Paul on his second missionary journey and is mentioned often in that connection (nine times in the Greek text of 15:40–18:5; fourteen times in the NIV since it often supplies subjects). Silas is a shortened form of the Greek name Silvanus, and the Greek name has led some to suggest that he may have been a Hellenist. That would certainly be likely if he is the same Silvanus who served as Peter’s amanuensis (1 Pet 5:12). He definitely seems to be the Silvanus whom Paul mentioned as a coworker in several of his epistles (2 Cor 1:19; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). The churches of Corinth and Thessalonica were established on Paul’s second missionary journey when Silas accompanied him. It was thus natural for him to include Silas/Silvanus when writing to them. Like Paul, Silvanus may have been a Roman citizen. Acts 16:37f. seems to indicate so. It is interesting to note that Paul’s mission companions came from those who represented the Jerusalem church (cf. Barnabas, 11:22). This is another way in which the close bond between Paul’s missionary activity and the Jerusalem church is exemplified. Not only did the Jerusalem Christians approve Paul’s law-free Gentile mission in principle at the

conference, but they ultimately furnished his personnel as well.

Verses [23b–29](#) give the letter sent from the Jerusalem church to the Christians in Antioch. It was written in a very formal style, beginning with the salutation typical of Greco-Roman letters, listing first the senders, then the recipients. This was followed by the customary greeting (*chairein*). The only other places in the New Testament where this characteristic Greek greeting form was used are in [Acts 23:26](#) and in the Epistle of [James 1:1](#). The letter ends on an equally formal note with “farewell” (*errōsthe*), the Greek equivalent of the Latin *valete*.¹⁰² The formality is most pronounced in the long “periodic” sentence that runs from v. [24](#) through v. [26](#), one long complex sentence very tightly woven together. There is only one other periodic sentence in all of Luke-Acts, Luke’s prologue to his Gospel ([1:1–4](#)). Since the overall style of the letter is so markedly Greco-Roman, one has the impression that the basically Jewish congregation of Jerusalem was making every effort to communicate clearly and in the style of their Greek-speaking brothers and sisters at Antioch.

[15:23b–24](#) The letter was written in the name of the Jerusalem leaders, “the apostles and elders.” The recipients were denoted “the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia.” Actually, this could be considered almost as a single address. Syria-Cilicia was administratively a single Roman province, and Antioch was a city within it. It was at Antioch that the debate had arisen ([15:1](#)), and so it was to Antioch that the Jerusalem leaders sent their response. Verse [24](#) provides some additional clarification concerning the Judaizers of [15:1](#). They may have come from Jerusalem, but they were in no sense official representatives of the church. In fact, the language of the letter expresses some dismay with this group. They are described as “troubling” (literally “plundering” or “tearing down”) the minds of the people in Antioch. The word was a military metaphor (*anaskeuazō*), meaning originally *to plunder or loot a town*. The Jerusalem leadership was obviously not happy with the wholly unauthorized Judaizers and their so upsetting the Gentiles of Antioch.

[15:25–26](#) Verses [25–26](#) basically recapitulate the content of v. [22](#) with the additional commendation of Barnabas and Paul as those who had “risked their lives” for the name of Jesus. The verb used here (*paradidōmi*) can mean either *to devote* or *to risk*, and the

¹⁰² This form occurs nowhere else in the NT except in a variant reading in Lysias’s letter ([Acts 23:30](#)).

distinction between the two in this context would be slim. It was in their wholehearted devotion to Christ that the two missionaries had incurred so many dangers. The Jerusalem leaders referred to them as their “dear friends” (*agapētos*, “beloved”). One is reminded of Paul’s account of the conference ([Gal 2:9](#)), where he spoke of the Jerusalem leaders’ giving them the “right hand of fellowship.”

15:27–28 Verse 27 continues to delineate the circumstances of the letter, noting the role of Judas and Silas. Only at v. 28 does the “meat” of the letter begin. The assembly had decided not to burden the Gentiles—no circumcision, no law, only these “necessary things” (author’s translation). The idea was really that there was to be no burden on the Gentiles. Instead of a burden, the Gentiles were to be asked to follow the four proscribed areas of the “apostolic decree”—not as a law, but as a basis for fellowship. The addition of the Holy Spirit in v. 28 is significant. Just as the Spirit had been instrumental in the inclusion of the Gentiles ([15:8](#), [12](#)), so now in the conference the Spirit had led the Jerusalem leaders in considering the conditions for their inclusion.

15:29 Verse 29 lists the four provisions of the apostolic decree just as originally proposed by James (v. 20). There is one slight variation. Whereas James had spoken in terms of “food polluted by idols,” the letter defined this with the more precise term “food sacrificed to idols” (*eidōlothyton*). The proscriptions will be referred to one more time in Acts ([21:25](#)) and there in the same four terms that appear in [15:29](#). Evidently these regulations continued to be taken seriously in large segments of the church. Two of them, food sacrificed to idols and sexual immorality, appear in the letters to the churches in Revelation ([Rev 2:14](#), [20](#)). Tertullian attests to the churches of North Africa abstaining from blood and illicit marriages. In the fourth century the Syrian church forbade sexual immorality, the consumption of blood, and strangled meat.¹⁰³

It has often been argued that Paul either didn’t know of the decrees or flatly rejected them, since he never referred to them in his letters. Some have observed further that in his own account of the Jerusalem Conference, Paul stated that “nothing” was added to his message ([Gal 2:6](#)). This does not necessarily conflict with the existence of the decrees. The conference did approve Paul’s basic message of a law-free gospel for the Gentiles—no circumcision, no Torah, no “burden.” The decrees were a strategy for Jewish-Gentile fellowship, and that was something different. The assumption that Paul

¹⁰³ Simon, “Decrees,” 455–59.

showed no knowledge of the decrees in his letters is also questionable. In [1 Cor 5–10](#) Paul seems to have dealt with two of its provisions: sexual immorality in chaps. [5–7](#) and food sacrificed to idols in chaps. [8–10](#). The latter treatment is particularly instructive, where Paul advised the “strong” not to eat idol meat in the presence of the “weak.” This reflects the basic “accommodation” principle of the decrees—to enable fellowship between Christians. True, Paul did not accept the decrees as “law”; he did seem to embrace their spirit.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁴ See M. D. Goulder, “[Did Luke Know Any of the Pauline Letters?](#)” *PIRS* 13 (1986): 97–112. Goulder argues that the form of the decrees may have been influenced by 1 Corinthians.