

ACTS 15

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. MCKEE

MESSIANIC
APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.net

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ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
Ara: Aramaic	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	IVPBBC: <i>IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)</i>
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	Jastrow: <i>Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature</i> (Marcus Jastrow)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	JETS: <i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	KJV: King James Version
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	Lattimore: <i>The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore</i> (1996)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	LITV: <i>Literal Translation of the Holy Bible</i> by Jay P. Green (1986)
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	LS: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Liddell & Scott)
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	LXE: <i>Septuagint with Apocrypha</i> by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	LXX: Septuagint
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	m. Mishnah
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	MT: Masoretic Text
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	NBCR: <i>New Bible Commentary: Revised</i>
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	NEB: New English Bible (1970)
eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text	Nelson: <i>Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words</i>
EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>	NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)	NIB: <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i>
exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own	NIGTC: <i>New International Greek Testament Commentary</i>
EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>	NICNT: <i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
Ger: German	NIDB: <i>New International Dictionary of the Bible</i>
GNT: Greek New Testament	NIV: New International Version (1984)
Grk: Greek	NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
<i>halachah</i> : lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community	NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)	NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)	NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
Heb: Hebrew	NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
	NT: New Testament
	orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world
	OT: Old Testament
	PreachC: <i>The Preacher's Commentary</i>

REB: Revised English Bible (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament

Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*

TEV: Today's English Version (1976)

TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)

TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*

UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew
New Testament revised edition

v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of
Old and New Testament Words*

Vul: Latin Vulgate

WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*

Yid: Yiddish

YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

PROLOGUE

When many of our evangelical Christian brothers and sisters read the New Testament, they often struggle with applying it in the Twenty-First Century. The Church of today is not the First Century *ekklesia*, a relatively infant group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, trying to determine the eschatological purpose and plan of God, and how all people are to unite as one in the Messiah. Today's Messianic movement, on the other hand, has little difficulty relating to the struggles of the First Century Body of Messiah, because like them we are a steadily-growing group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, united in common cause around the salvation of Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus), similarly trying to determine the purpose and plan of God. We do, however, have some issues with trying to interpret and properly apply the teachings and rulings of the Apostles, so we can mature into all of the things that the Lord wants us to be.

Today's Messianic movement has a wide variety of competing visions and viewpoints as to what it should become. Many think that the Messianic movement is only to be a group of Jewish Believers in Yeshua, who can be a part of a relatively cultural homogeneous community of Jews who express trust in Israel's Messiah. This group may have some non-Jewish Believers, who have married a Jewish spouse, but not really anyone else, as the rest of the non-Jewish Believers should just remain a part of the greater Christian Church. Many think that the Messianic movement is to be a "Torah movement," where Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are all welcome, but where our primary emphasis is to study and enforce the Law of Moses, perhaps a bit strictly and rigidly. Others think that the Messianic movement is going to bring about the restoration of Israel, and that just about all non-Jewish Believers led into it are part of the scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim. Not enough, given the tenor of the Jerusalem Council, have probably sought the will of the Holy Spirit, which is blind to one's ethnicity, social status, or gender (Acts 15:8-9) — **and is to move forward God's plan at His pace.**

Given all of the competing agendas that are present in the broad Messianic world, it should be no surprise that some people are very confused about how to view the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council. For quite some time I have known that a detailed examination of Acts 15 was going to be necessary. While I am of the conviction that the Torah is relevant instruction for *all* of God's people, I have seen far too many teachers who share this view, haphazardly refer to Acts 15:21 — "For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath" — with very little consideration for the context and the setting of what James says here. Sooner or later I knew I would have to analyze Acts 15 verse-by-verse, not only because of how important the Apostolic Council was to the spread of the gospel among the nations in the First Century, but so the emerging Messianic movement can be effective for God's service in the Twenty-First Century.

We are entering into a new decade of Messianic growth and development, and with this is going to come some redrawing of the map, and some theological

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shaking. There are some who once advocated that the Torah was relevant instruction for all of God's people, but are now saying that Jewish people have a more privileged status before God than everyone else, and that non-Jewish Believers *can* follow the Torah if they want to. Like all Messianics, I very much believe in honoring the Jewish people and our faith heritage from the Synagogue (cf. Romans 11:29), but the vision of the Jerusalem Council was not to produce two sub-peoples of God. The Jerusalem Council was intended to meet and fairly address what was to be done with new, non-Jewish Believers, who had been raised in Greco-Roman paganism. Understanding the broad cultural backgrounds, from the First Century Mediterranean, is imperative to properly interpreting not only the Apostolic decree, but also applying it for a Twenty-First Century Messianic movement whose non-Jewish and Jewish members were largely raised in a *significantly different* cultural environment (mostly in North America).

In the past decade, I have witnessed too much of a sub-standard level of engagement on the part of various Messianic Bible teachers and some of our "leaders" in applying the Scriptures. *There has not been enough critical thinking.* This not only includes people who conclude that the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council required the non-Jewish Believers to go to the local synagogue and learn from Moses' Teaching, but also those who conclude that they did not have to learn from it. This is ultimately the reason why in this interesting season we have witnessed some theological flip-flopping. While this Acts 15 study has been planned for almost a year now (since late 2008), current events only intensify its need. I realize that this is a unique study, per the fact that there presently is no *Acts for the Practical Messianic* commentary written (even though this is a long-term goal), but we will still all be able to learn quite much. It would be my hope that we can learn to critically engage not only with the opinions of scholars and interpreters, but make sure that our maturing Messianic movement is really in touch with the will and trajectory that God has laid out in His Word. This will require us, just as the Apostles did, to recognize how the unique work of the Holy Spirit in this post-resurrection era, has changed some of the dynamics (Acts 15:12).

I hope that if you share the same conviction as I—that the Holy Spirit is to write God's Law onto the hearts of all His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—that it will be confirmed. It is my goal to give you a much more detailed answer to your questions, than those who are not concerned with a socio-historical reading of the text, those who prefer to cut corners with their exegesis, or those who shift their positions because of entangling ministerial alliances.

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Acts is certainly monumental for any of us to understand the growth and expansion of the First Century Messianic movement out into the Mediterranean world. Not only did many Jews eagerly embrace the good news that the Messiah had come, but many from the nations were also freed from their sins by hearing that the true Savior of humanity had arrived. But how these two distinct groups of people were to relate to one another, and whether they were to really come together and be united around their common hope of salvation, was a great debate that we are affected by even today. How do we come to a proper balance of recognizing the origins of the gospel in Ancient Israel and First Century Judaism, and also its worldwide implications?

Acts 15:1-35 covers the Jerusalem Council, also known as either the Jerusalem Conference or Apostolic Council, and is considered by many interpreters to be the main transition point within the Book of Acts. The leadership of the *ekklesia* at the home base of Jerusalem, notably including the Apostle Peter (cf. Matthew 16:18) and James the brother of the Lord, came together with Paul and Barnabas, and ruled on what was to take place concerning the nations' salvation. How were the new, non-Jewish Believers to be admitted into the assembly of faith? What were they required to do? Was their salvation something that was a bi-product of the Jews' salvation, or something anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures all along? Were all Believers equal in the Lord Yeshua, or did God plan on having two sub-peoples? In the estimation of F.F. Bruce, "The Council of Jerusalem is an event to which Luke plainly attaches the highest importance; it is...epoch-making,"¹ especially how it directly related to the mission of the Apostles in the years to come.

It is not difficult to detect how within the Book of Acts itself, up to ch. 15 or so, there is a prime Jewish orientation for the spread of the good news and the working of the Holy Spirit. Following ch. 15, while the Jewish orientation is by no means forgotten, it is certainly expanded among the nations in the Mediterranean basin, so that by ch. 28 we end up with Paul in the center of the Empire at Rome (albeit with him preaching in a Roman synagogue). In about the first half of Acts (chs. 1-12), an Hebraic style of Greek composition consistent with the Septuagint is noticeable, given the primary Jewish orientation of the characters and main events.² This does shift, as the places and events become more cosmopolitan in the greater Greek and Roman world.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 298.

² Cf. Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp 44-45; C.K. Barrett, *International Critical Commentary: Acts 15-28* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), pp xlv-xlvi; Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 13; David G. Peterson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp 13-15.

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Acts 15 itself, as a significant transition point within Luke's historical record of the First Century *ekklesia*, is a passage of Scripture that is considered to be quite important for many of today's Messianic Believers. (It is because of its importance why I have produced this study, not necessarily waiting to produce a commentary on the entire Book of Acts.) Many of today's Messianic teachers and congregational leaders refer to Acts 15, but they often pull bits and snippets out of this chapter, without enough detailed examination—and most especially without understanding the Jerusalem Council for the role that it played in God's (then-)unfolding plan of salvation history. Acts 15 is often referred to by our "leaders" a bit too frequently for trying to figure out what God's plan was with the nations at large coming to faith: by those who believe that they were to be the equals of the Jewish Believers as a part of the redeemed community of Israel, and by those who think that they were only to be considered some kind of associate participants in Israel. Yet, there is often no verse-by-verse examination as is necessary for an adequate evaluation of what was decided.

Too frequently, we not only forget that we need to place the Jerusalem Council within the much larger series of events that occur within the Book of Acts, but also in conjunction with Luke's previous volume written to Theophilus. For Luke, a main theme of the mission of Yeshua is embodied in His words to those assembled in the synagogue at Capernaum, where the Messiah quoted from Isaiah 61:1:

"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED" (Luke 4:18).

It is notable that this is not a message, from Luke's perspective, solely directed to the Jewish people. The message of the gospel is one that affects all of humanity. In the First Missionary Journey of the Apostle Paul (chs. 13-14), occurring prior to the Jerusalem Council, he proclaimed to the Jews at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, "we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers" (13:32). Yet he would also attest, after encountering some resistance from some of the local Jews, "the Lord has commanded us, 'I HAVE PLACED YOU AS A LIGHT FOR THE GENTILES, THAT YOU MAY BRING SALVATION TO THE END OF THE EARTH,'" directly appealing to Isaiah 49:6. The good Jewish Apostle, as a servant and agent of Yeshua, proclaimed the good news to his own brethren first, and then to whomever else would hear (cf. Romans 1:16). These are both controlling rubrics with which we have to understand the themes and emphases of Luke-Acts.

While the Apostle Paul was called by God as His emissary to the nations (Romans 11:13), he was surely not the only one who emphasized the worldwide effects of the good news. In his riveting message declared at *Shavuot*/Pentecost, the Apostle Peter recognized how the Holy Spirit was not discriminatory as to who was to be transformed (2:16-21; cf. Joel 2:28-32). While almost all of the new Believers who heard the good news on this day were Jewish, with some proselytes, Peter's proclamation was that "the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself" (2:39). So serious was this message of Yeshua's salvation, that those who would not heed it would be like those in the Torah who failed to acknowledge the words of a prophet, facing severe consequences (3:22-24; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-16). While Peter had some personal prejudices to later overcome, per his vision and encounter with the

Roman Cornelius (chs. 10-11), he still recognized the humanity-wide significance of the Messiah event.

While Paul and Peter knew that the good news, while originating in Israel's Scriptures and with their own Jewish people, **would affect the entire world**, there were many Jewish Believers who had difficulty with this. They knew salvation was going to spread beyond their people, but by what manner would this be accomplished? Many from the nations in the First Century had become full-fledged Jewish proselytes, from many diverse places within the ancient world. Yet Yeshua Himself condemned the manner in which much of this took place, chastising the Pharisaical leaders, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel around on sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves" (Matthew 23:15). The proselyte process may have started out with good intentions, in wanting to expose others to the God of Israel, but by the Apostolic period it had not necessarily achieved what it originally set out to do—often promoting salvation by ethnicity (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1).

By the time we get to Acts 15, occurring almost two decades since Yeshua's resurrection, was it appropriate to demand that the new, non-Jewish Believers become Jewish proselytes—or was something a little different to take over? Were the non-Jewish Believers to pray "God of your fathers'" (m.*Bikkurim* 1:4),³ a common occurrence for proselytes, in the presence of Jewish Believers—or recognize the LORD as the same Creator of all humanity? Darrell L. Bock rightly concludes, "Salvation leads to becoming a part of God's new community, composed of both Jew and Gentile, as Acts 15 makes clear."⁴ But whether this new community of people was an assembly separate from Israel, or an Israel maximized for God's purposes, **is a significant debate**.

The Book of Acts records the history of the early Messianic *ekklesia*, covering a roughly thirty-year period from the ascension of Yeshua into Heaven to Paul's imprisonment in Rome.⁵ Luke, the doctor (Colossians 4:14), is the traditional author of Acts, attested to by a wide variety of early Christian sources.⁶ The traditional authorship of Acts went unchallenged until the end of the Eighteenth Century, and while Acts is strictly anonymous from a textual standpoint, most conservatives continue to consider, or label Luke, as the author, given the fact of how both Luke and Acts were written to the patron Theophilus (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). Luke himself is believed to be an active participant and traveling partner in the many "we" passages that are seen within the Book of Acts.

Little more is actually said of Luke in the Biblical canon, other than him being a physician. We can assume many things from examining Luke-Acts, though, pointing to how he was a very accomplished man. The sheer breadth of both of

³ Margaret Wenig Rubenstein and David Weiner, trans., in Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah: A New Translation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 167.

⁴ Bock, 34.

⁵ Consult the author's entry for the Book of Acts in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

⁶ These include: the Muratorian Canon; Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3.1; 3.14.1-4; the anti-Marcionite Prologue; Clement of Alexandria *Stromatias (Miscellanies)* 5.12; Tertullian *Against Marcion* 4.2; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.4; 3.24.15.

Cf. D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, second edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 291.

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these two compositions within the Apostolic Scriptures, reveal how they could be equally appreciated by both religious Jews and philosophically conscious Greeks and Romans. Because of Luke's excellent knowledge of the Tanach Scriptures, which he does quote throughout his compositions, it is rightly speculated that before hearing the good news he was either some kind of a God-fearer or a Jewish proselyte, associated with the Diaspora Synagogue. Ben Witherington III concurs, "it seems unlikely that the author could have been converted to [Christ] from a purely pagan background. The author's obvious interest about Judaism and Diaspora synagogues comport with either of the two aforementioned possibilities."⁷ The only other thought we could surmise is that Luke was so well mentored by the Apostle Paul that he learned the Tanach as well as he, but I think some prior association with the Jewish Synagogue on Luke's part seems necessary. Also, given his detailed approach to writing, some kind of previous training at an ancient classical academy or school, also seems fairly likely.⁸

The Book of Acts forms a major foundation for us understanding much of the background behind the Pauline Epistles, the least of which is ch. 9 and Paul's Damascus Road encounter with the risen Yeshua. Acts 15 itself plays a role for us understanding why a letter like Galatians was (previously) written, which in rather virulent language addressed the issue of non-Jewish inclusion within the covenant community of God on the basis of faith. Acts 15 also helps us to understand why Paul's later letters, which subsequently followed, had a much more calm tenor to them.

A significant feature in the Book of Acts is the movement of the gospel from Judea, into Samaria, and finally out into the nations—just as Yeshua had commanded (1:8). But what was to happen once people from the nations took a hold of Israel's Messiah? *This is why the Jerusalem Council was convened.* As David G. Peterson describes it, "The Jerusalem Council provides the opportunity to reflect on the way God has formed and maintained an international movement consisting of Jews and Gentiles through the preaching of the gospel of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit (15:7-12)."⁹ The First Century *ekklesia* certainly experienced some challenges trying to implement this, and they were not unaffected by the currents and eddies of the greater Jewish or Greco-Roman world. Today's Messianic movement should desire to evaluate the gravity of the Jerusalem Council, as many of us feel that the Father has given His people a second chance **to really get it right** before His Son returns.

WHO WERE THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL?

The Jerusalem Council was convened because of a scene that took place in Antioch, after some Jewish Believers from Jerusalem came and insisted that the non-Jewish Believers be circumcised and keep the Torah to be saved (15:1). Both

⁷ Witherington, *Acts*, 54.

⁸ Lorman M. Petersen thinks that Luke was trained at the medical school in Philippi (perhaps even being a native Philippian himself), given his reference in Acts 16:12 to Philippi as "a leading city":

"There is a touch of pride in Luke's description of Philippi as 'the leading city of the district' (Acts 16:12)" ("Philippi," in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 781).

⁹ Peterson, 95.

Paul and Barnabas, as well as some other representatives from the Antioch congregation, would go to Jerusalem so that this issue could be resolved (15:2).

Those who feature prominently in the meeting of the Jerusalem Council included those who came from Antioch, principally Paul and Barnabas. It also included “some of the sect of the Pharisees” who insisted upon non-Jewish circumcision and Law observance (15:5), but this by no means made up all of the Jewish Believers who were Pharisees (which would have included Paul, as he testified later before the Sanhedrin in 23:6). Also featured in the Jerusalem Council by name are Peter (15:7-11) and James the Just (15:13-21). The rest of those who made up the Jerusalem Council included unnamed “apostles and elders” (15:6), Judas or Barsabbas, and Silas (15:22). Judas and Silas would go back to Antioch to help deliver the Apostolic decree (15:32).

Clearly, the main figures of interest for us in the Jerusalem Council are Paul and Barnabas who arrived from Antioch, who have directly witnessed the work of the gospel out among the nations, and Peter and James from the home base in Jerusalem. Among the unnamed apostles and elders were presumably some of the original Twelve Disciples of Yeshua, as well as other close associates who were taught personally by the Lord.

There is no full agreement on who the specific Pharisees were, demanding the non-Jews to become circumcised as proselytes. Were these the “men from James” Paul alludes to in Galatians 2:12? Were they associates or mentors to the Judaizers/Influencers Paul refutes in his letter to the Galatians? Or were they completely unassociated from the Influencers, their only shared trait being that they insisted upon the new, non-Jewish Believers becoming ethnic Jews for inclusion among God’s people? While those refuted in Galatians may have claimed some kind of approval from the Jerusalem assembly, the Jerusalem Council made it clear to those in Antioch—who had been similarly stirred—that they did not authorize anyone to go and disturb or instruct them (15:24). Paul had been overseeing their discipleship training, for which he had already been approved (Galatians 2:7-9).

WHEN DID THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL CONVENE?

When the Jerusalem Council actually convened, and then issued its decision about the new, non-Jewish Believers, is no small debate in theological circles. It is most important for us to consider, especially in relation to the composition of Paul’s letters, specifically whether his letter to the Galatians was written immediately prior to the Council, or some time after.

The Book of Acts itself covers a large period of time from the mid 30s C.E. to the early or mid 60s C.E., a history of the expanse of the gospel (cf. Luke 1:1-4). Conservatives generally place the composition of the Book of Acts somewhere in the late 60s C.E. to early 70s C.E., with many convinced of a composition prior to the Jewish Revolt of 70 C.E., but a majority of scholars may actually prefer sometime from 70-85 C.E.¹⁰ D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo argue for a date of composition not long after 62 C.E., when Paul was imprisoned in Rome.¹¹ This

¹⁰ Cf. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), pp 361-362; Witherington, *Acts*, 62; Peterson, pp 4-5.

¹¹ Carson and Moo, pp 298-300.

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could have been around 64 C.E., prior to when Nero's policies against the early Believers took effect.¹² While this is important for us to keep in mind, the Jerusalem Council itself takes place almost in the exact middle of not only the Book of Acts, but almost in the middle of the general timeframe in which the events of Acts occurred.¹³

When did the Jerusalem Council convene and make its rulings? Does the perspective of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians reflect something written before or after the Jerusalem Council? These are the questions that have to be considered in relation to how the non-Jewish Believers were to be regarded as the equals of the Jewish Believers in Messiah, not having to become ethnic Jews to be welcomed into the assembly.

There is a long-standing debate among interpreters over whether the meeting Paul describes in Galatians 2:1-10 is actually the Jerusalem Council, or something else. If this trip that Paul took to Jerusalem, along with the Greek Titus, was not the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, then what was it? *It obviously would have had to have taken place earlier.* While there are scholars, addressing Acts and/or Galatians, who feel that the Galatians 2:1-10 meeting was the Jerusalem Council,¹⁴ there are others who do not agree, and would argue instead that the Galatians 2:1-10 meeting was Paul's relief mission recorded in Acts 11:27-30.¹⁵

While it may be tempting to associate Paul's visit in Galatians 2:1-10 with the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, as a majority of (liberal) commentators may conclude, there are excellent reasons for us to think that this was actually the relief visit of Acts 11:27-30:

- Paul says that he traveled to Jerusalem "because of a revelation" (Galatians 2:2). This could be because of a personal longing to go to Jerusalem, but also because of Agabus' prophecy of a great famine (Acts 11:28).
- Paul and Barnabas had been given the right hand of fellowship by the Jerusalem leaders James, Peter, and John (Galatians 2:9), indicating a degree of approval of their ministry activity among the nations. At the Jerusalem Council, more than just these pillars are present to discuss Paul and Barnabas' continuing ministry work (Acts 15:6).

¹² Bruce, *Acts*, 22.

¹³ Do note that among the Acts resources we will be consulting, Barrett's commentary in ICC represents some of the views of the liberal Tübingen school, including some challenges to Acts' historicity, albeit a bit watered down.

¹⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, "Luke-Acts, Book of," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:766-768; James D.G. Dunn, *Black's New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), pp 85-89; Barrett, pp xxxviii-xxxix; Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:220-227; F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 16.

¹⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp 242-249; Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in Frank E. Gaebelein, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:440-442; F.F. Bruce, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), pp 55-56; Bruce, *Acts*, pp 298-300; Richard N. Longenecker, *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*, Vol. 41 (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1990), pp lxxx-lxxxiii; Witherington, *Acts*, 86-97; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp 14-16; Bock, pp 19, 30-32.

- The controversy that arose in Antioch during Peter's visit (Galatians 2:11), involved him reneging on what God had supernaturally shown him about all people cleansed by Yeshua's work (Acts 10). Would Peter have separated himself (Galatians 2:12) with definite guidelines in place for Jewish and non-Jewish table fellowship, as seen in Acts 15?
- Paul was widely unknown (Galatians 1:22) before making his visit to Jerusalem in Galatians 2:1-10, whereas at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 the attendees are very familiar with who he is and what he has been doing.
- Paul's visit to Jerusalem in Galatians includes him being eager to remember the poor (Galatians 2:10), which is exactly what happened during the relief visit (Acts 11:29-30).

Galatians 2:1-10 records a private meeting between Paul and the Jerusalem leaders, which for the exception of a few false brethren who interrupted (Galatians 2:4-5), was closed. Paul received approval from the Jerusalem leaders for how he preached the gospel among the uncircumcised, and recognized the validity of the ministry that Peter had among the circumcised (Galatians 2:7-8), and was given the right hand of fellowship by the Jerusalem leaders (Galatians 2:9). The scene of Galatians 2:1-10, aside from a few hiccups, is one of relative tranquility and camaraderie—versus the very public Jerusalem Council which had much debate and clamor. But perhaps most importantly, Paul says in Galatians 2:6 that those he visited in Jerusalem, either the Jerusalem leaders or the false brethren, really did not contribute anything to his ministry work. Was this just the result of a preliminary meeting, with him sharing a progress report to the Jerusalem leaders about the first significant gospel work among the nations? To this they really would not have had much to say, with it being so new. Or was this really the Jerusalem Council, which did not amount to very much in Paul's estimation of things? Witherington observes,

"[I]f Galatians was written after the meeting referred to in Acts 15, then Galatians 2 lets us know that there were still serious ongoing tensions, disputes, and problems between Paul and the other early Christians over circumcision, food, and keeping the Mosaic law in general. The so-called apostolic council of Acts 15 settled little or nothing on this showing."¹⁶

Among those holding to the Galatians 2:1-10 visit being the Jerusalem Council, C.K. Barrett concludes, "The very existence of Galatians proves that the Council did not put an end to conflict."¹⁷ From this vantage point, then, while the Jerusalem Council did try to achieve something, Peter's incident when visiting Antioch (Galatians 2:11-13ff) shows how the Apostles often disagreed among themselves, sometimes quite strongly. While the basic gospel message proclaimed was the same, Peter had difficulty overcoming Jewish social prejudices toward outsiders, and Paul did not. Peter and Paul are thought by some to have even had disagreements on allowing the non-Jewish Believers into the assembly as the equals of the Jewish Believers. So for some interpreters, the Jerusalem leaders at the Council added nothing for Paul (Galatians 2:6)—and this is an indication from Paul

¹⁶ Witherington, *Acts*, 90.

¹⁷ Barrett, xl.

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that he may not have been that happy about what had occurred. If he were happy, then Jerusalem leaders like Peter would have eagerly joined into Paul's mission, and the scene where Peter is rebuked in Antioch by Paul would have never occurred.

Barrett holds to some critical views of Acts, including the thought that Paul, Peter, and James were at odds with one another. He does note, thankfully, "By the end of the 60s Paul, Peter, and James had all, it seems, died as martyrs...That they had once disagreed over weighty matters now seemed less important than that they had unitedly borne witness to Christ with their blood. They were united in death; it was hard to believe that they had ever been separated in life."¹⁸ The tone of this does seem as though he wishes the Apostles' theology to be in relative agreement, but his liberal training and reliance upon the German critical scholarship of F.C. Baur may get the better of him in some places.¹⁹

Evangelical interpreters (although not all) tend to lean toward the Galatians 2:1-10 visit being the relief mission of Acts 11:27-30. Paul's first visit to Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 9:26 not long after his conversion, is easily associated with Galatians 1:18-19. It is not that difficult to associate Paul's second visit to Jerusalem, recorded in Galatians 2:1-10, then, with the relief mission of Acts 11:27-30. What makes this important, is the fact that between this visit and the next one, Paul and Barnabas went on their First Missionary Journey, which included their proclaiming the gospel among the cities of the Roman province of Galatia (Acts 13:13-14:28). If the Jerusalem visit seen in Galatians 2:1-10 is the relief mission of Acts 11:27-30 and not the Apostolic Council—**then Galatians could very well have been written prior to the Apostolic decree on non-Jewish inclusion being issued.** Paul's letter to the Galatians deals with precisely the issue the Council met to discuss, and would have been strengthened significantly if the Apostolic decree had been made prior to him writing it. Yet, Paul makes no reference to the Acts 15:19-21 decree made by James, and it is appropriate for us to assume that between his travels to Galatia and the Jerusalem Council convening, the Epistle to the Galatians was composed. Witherington agrees, noting,

"Paul does not mention the decree of James *at all* in Galatians, which he surely could and should have done if he wanted to stop the Judaizers from trying to force circumcision on Galatian Gentile Christians, by means of citing an authority the Judaizers would respect!"²⁰

Luke records how those assembled at the Jerusalem Council agreed with James' ruling (Acts 15:22), and Paul himself took the letter issuing the decree back with him to Antioch (Acts 15:23). Unless we really are trying to find significant contradictions between the record of Acts and Paul's words in Galatians (i.e., Galatians 2:6)—and assume that Paul really *disagreed* with the Apostolic decree and was at constant odds with Jerusalem—then the Galatians 2:1-10 visit has to be the relief mission of Acts 11:27-30. This relief visit would have included a preliminary meeting on how the expanse of the good news among the nations was proceeding. Admittedly, the Jerusalem Apostles may not have been ready to hear everything

¹⁸ Ibid., pp xl-xli.

¹⁹ Specifically, where Barrett says, "The Pauline epistles make it clear that there was a conflict between Pauline Christianity and Judaizing Christianity" (Ibid., lxxiii). The latter, in his view, would noticeably include the faith practice of Jerusalem leaders like Peter and James.

²⁰ Witherington, *Acts*, 92.

Paul reported to them. By the time Acts 15 comes along, though, the Jerusalem Apostles had no choice but to be ready, as James testifies that they all had to recognize the oracles of the Prophets in the much larger redemption coming to the world via Israel’s restoration (Acts 15:14-15).

Those who conclude that the Jerusalem visit of Galatians 2:1-10 is the relief mission of Acts 11:27-30, are not agreed on all of the details of the year dates surrounding the events that led up to the Jerusalem Council. However, the basic pattern of the famine relief visit to Jerusalem, Paul’s First Missionary Journey including South Galatia, the composition of Galatians, and then the Apostolic Council remain consistent. Here is the ordering of the years as proposed by both Bruce and Witherington:

CHRONOLOGY OF ACTS AND GALATIANS	
F.F. BRUCE	BEN WITHERINGTON III
46 C.E. Jerusalem famine relief visit (Acts 11:27-30)	48 C.E. Jerusalem famine relief visit
47-48 C.E. First Missionary Journey of Paul, including visit to Cyprus, Asia Minor, South Galatia (Acts chs. 13-14)	late 48 C.E. First Missionary Journey of Paul, and clash with Peter in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-13ff)
48-49 C.E. Composition of Epistle to the Galatians	49 C.E. Composition of Epistle to the Galatians
49 C.E. Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35) ²¹	later 49 C.E. Apostolic Council in Jerusalem ²²

Both Bruce and Witherington agree that the Jerusalem Council was held by 49 C.E., with Paul’s letter to the Galatians written sometime prior. The main difference between their proposals is that Bruce holds the time between the famine relief visit of Acts 11:27-30 all the way to the Apostolic Council of Acts 15 occurring over a series of almost four years, and contrary to this Witherington holds all of these events occurring in about two years. Both views anticipate the need for some definitive resolution on what was to be decided regarding the non-Jewish Believers coming to faith, and how they were to be included in the community of Messiah followers without becoming Jewish proselytes. Witherington’s proposal of the year dates, though, makes the Apostolic Council being held a bit more urgent, given the closeness he places to the events, although Bruce’s proposal of the year dates by no means downplays the urgency.

It is the assumption of this commentary that the Jerusalem Council was convened after the composition of the Epistle to the Galatians, especially given

²¹ F.F. Bruce, “Acts of the Apostles,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:43.

²² Witherington, *Acts*, pp 83-84.

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the absence of the Acts 15:19-21 ruling in Paul's letter. Perhaps Galatians was written right before the Jerusalem Council, which when coupled with the circumstances arising in Antioch (Acts 15:1), necessitated an immediate consultation with Peter and James to decide what to do with the influx of Believers from the nations that was coming. Eventually we do know that the decree of the Apostolic Council did reach the Believers in Southern Galatia (Acts 16:1-5),²³ albeit after Paul had already written a rather stringent warning to them about not succumbing to the temptation of becoming proselytes to Judaism.

WHO WAS THE TARGET AUDIENCE OF THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL'S RULING?

The very reason that the Jerusalem Council was convened was because of some highly conservative Jewish Believers who visited Antioch, insisting that the new, non-Jewish Believers had to become circumcised and keep the Law to be saved (15:1).

The Apostolic decree would be first delivered to the Believers in Antioch, and its immediate environs (15:23), not just because of the recent visit from Jerusalem (15:1-2), but notably also because this was the place where the scene had erupted with the Apostle Peter (Galatians 2:11-13ff). By separating himself to the Jewish Believers during fellowship meals, the Apostle Paul accused Peter that he would make the non-Jewish Believers "Judaize" (Galatians 2:14, YLT), meaning that they would have to become Jewish converts in order to feel fully welcome and included among God's people (cf. Esther 8:17, LXX). Paul accused Peter of being a hypocrite (cf. Acts 10:28), and scolded him for placing the community's identity on sectarian "works of law" (Galatians 2:16a) that would require proselyte conversion of the non-Jews (cf. 4QMMT).²⁴ This was contrary to the "faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah"²⁵ (Galatians 2:16b, my translation) or His obedience unto death for all humanity, being the common basis for membership and identity among God's people. We are told that those in Antioch "rejoiced" (15:31) over the decree, perhaps because the rupture between Paul and Peter was now patched up.

The Apostolic decree would make its way to the South Galatian congregations, including those of Lystra (14:8-20a), Iconium (14:1-7), and Derbe (14:20b-21), among those to whom Paul wrote Galatians (cf. 13:13-14:28). Following the Jerusalem Council and Paul's return to Antioch, Paul would visit Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium (16:1-2), and Luke records "while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe" (16:4). The Apostolic decree had not yet been issued when Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians, which had been received by these people. Now, the Apostolic decree had plainly ruled that the non-Jewish Believers did not have to become

²³ This would be different than the "Galatian region" (Acts 16:6), as Paul's letters typically employ the Roman political designations for an area, and Luke-Acts tends to use the more local designations.

Consult the section "Introduction: Who Was the Target Audience of This Letter?" in the author's commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

²⁴ Consult the author's article "What Are 'Works of the Law'?"

²⁵ Grk. *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

Consult the author's article "The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah."