

Acts 15:19-21

Pastor: Acts 15:19-21: The Apostolic decree says nothing about new Christians observing the Mosaic Law.

“Therefore it is my judgment that we do not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood. For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath.”

The broad Messianic movement tends to be quite familiar with the Apostolic decree of Acts 15:19-21, the issues of the Jerusalem Council, and the controversies surrounding the inclusion of non-Jewish Believers from the nations into the First Century Body of Messiah.¹ There are, to be sure, differences of both opinion and approach to the scene of Acts 15, in navigating through traditional Christian interpretations, as well as the conclusions drawn by different sectors of our Twenty-First Century Messianic faith community. The overarching issue of Acts 15 was for the Jewish Apostles and leaders of the *ekklēsia* to find resolution to the claim of various, hyper-conservative Jewish Believers who made circumcision and Torah observance matters to be ordered upon the non-Jewish Believers, for their very salvation (Acts 15:1, 5). The Apostolic decree includes the direction “that they abstain...from what is strangled, and from blood....from blood, from things strangled” (Acts 15:20, 29, TLV), and it bears some involvement for how “Moses...is read in all the synagogues every *Shabbat*” (Acts 15:21, TLV).

In the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council, the Apostle Peter rose up and recounted the conclusion of his previous vision (cf. Acts 10-11), in that the God of Israel saved Jewish people and those of the nations equally by His grace manifested in Yeshua. To claim anything other than this was to place upon them an improper yoke, which was surely not that of the Messiah (cf. Matthew 11:29-30), and be tantamount to testing God:

“After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, ‘Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Yeshua, in the same way as they also are’” (Acts 15:7-11).

There was further discussion at Jerusalem, from Barnabas and Paul, about how God was changing the lives of Greeks and Romans, and performing mighty miracles among them (Acts 15:12). James the Just, half-brother of Yeshua, arose (Acts 15:13-14), and placed what was taking place within the venue of Tanach prophecy, asserting, **“With this the words of the Prophets agree...”** (Acts 15:15). What he specifically references is Amos 9:11-12 and the restoration of the Tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16-18), something which was taking place via the work of Israel’s Messiah. Within this restoration would be a reconstituted Twelve Tribes of Israel at the center, and Israel’s Kingdom realm expanding to incorporate “the rest of humanity” (Acts 15:17, TNIV), similar to how King David’s domain reached beyond Ancient Israel proper and ruled over Edom.²

¹ This entry has been adapted from the *Messianic Sabbath Helper*.

² For a further discussion, and its relationship to ecclesiology, consult the analysis of Acts 15:15-18 provided in the publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?* by J.K. McKee.

It is critical that Bible readers acknowledge the importance of how the salvation of the nations was placed within the context of Tanach prophecy and the will of God, which was to serve as *the alternative* to human compulsion forcing people to do things. And certainly to be noted is how even with Amos 9:11-12 specifically quoted in Acts 15:16-18, a variety of prophetic words have been mentioned as perhaps being in the mind of James beyond this. (Eckhard J. Schnabel specifically mentions: Isaiah 2:2³; 45:20-23⁴; Jeremiah 12:15-16⁵; Zechariah 8:22⁶, among those to be considered.⁷) As Schnabel asserts, what is happening in Acts 15 “reflects what the prophets teach and confirms the conviction of Peter, Paul, and James that uncircumcised Gentiles can become members of God’s people, marking it as fulfillment of God’s promises.”⁸

From Acts 15 and the letter sent to Antioch, the Apostles make it clear how “some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls” (Acts 15:24), an indication of how the claim that the non-Jews needed to be circumcised as formal proselytes to Judaism for their salvation (Acts 15:1, 5) **was not authorized by them**. Instead, the four abstentions issued (Acts 15:20, 29), were presented with the intention of allowing God’s plan and the work of the Holy Spirit to naturally take shape. *The Jerusalem Council’s ruling had the purpose of seeing that Tanach prophecy could be facilitated.*

There is, without any doubt, debate both internal and external, to be encountered when Messianic people examine Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council. In 2009, I conducted an entire Bible study on Acts 15, and the implications of the Apostolic decree. I especially spent some time evaluating the approaches of Acts 15:21—“For from the earliest times, Moshe has had in every city those who proclaim him, with his words being read in the synagogues every *Shabbat*” (CJB/CJSB)—in contemporary Christian scholarship. This analysis of Acts 15:19-21 has largely been transplanted from the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*, but has been amended in a number of places, especially with some observations—some constructive and some critical—on the current approaches (2014-2015) to Acts 15:21 and the intention of the Apostolic decree, as witnessed within the Messianic community since 2009.

15:19-21 Having just described how a prophetic plan, foretold in the past, is at work via the salvation of the nations (Acts 15:15ff), James the Just now makes a ruling on the inclusion of the non-Jewish Believers within the Body of Messiah. Luke narrates how he says *egō krinō* (ἐγὼ κρίνω), “I judge” (Acts 15:19, NKJV). James is the one able to issue this ruling not only because he is the main leader of the Jerusalem congregation, but being the half-brother of the Lord Yeshua, his thoughts carry significant weight.

Given James’ well known piety and the high regard he had for the Torah (Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.4-6),⁹ would he have issued a ruling that would have seen the non-Jewish Believers not have to follow any

³ “Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it” (Isaiah 2:2).

⁴ “Gather yourselves and come; draw near together, you fugitives of the nations; they have no knowledge, who carry about their wooden idol and pray to a god who cannot save. Declare and set forth *your case*; indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*” (Isaiah 45:20-23).

⁵ “And it will come about that after I have uprooted them, I will again have compassion on them; and I will bring them back, each one to his inheritance and each one to his land. Then if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, ‘As the LORD lives,’ even as they taught My people to swear by Baal, they will be built up in the midst of My people” (Jeremiah 12:15-16).

⁶ “So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem and to entreat the favor of the LORD” (Zechariah 8:22).

⁷ Schnabel, 638 fn#35.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 638.

⁹ “James, the brother of the Lord, who, as there were many of this name, was surnamed Just by all, from the days of our Lord until now, received the government of the church with the apostles. This apostle was consecrated from his mother’s womb. He drank neither wine

of the Torah? This would seem very unlikely. Yet for a leader like James, “If...you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF’ [Leviticus 19:18], you are doing well” (James 2:8). Unlike the hyper-conservative Pharisees who would make salvation a matter of ritual proselyte circumcision and their legalistic yoke of Law-keeping—James, no different than Messiah Yeshua, recognizes that a proper obedience to the Torah begins with love for neighbor. And, love for, and welcoming acceptance of neighbor, is why he would insist that the new, non-Jewish Believers not be unnecessarily troubled (Acts 15:19).

Given James’ orientation toward the Prophets (Acts 15:15) in regard to the salvation of the nations—placing it squarely within the expectations regarding the restoration of Israel—it is probably enough to say that he expected the plan of God to occur at *His pace*. Requiring the non-Jewish Believers to be circumcised as proselytes, would be tempting God (Acts 15:10), if for any other reason it would be like taking His Divine sovereign plan and then allowing it to be muddled by the demands of limited mortals—who would actually judge others for their salvation no less (Acts 15:1)! The Prophets expected those of the nations to come to Zion to be taught the Torah (Isaiah 2:2-3; Micah 4:2). The fulfillment of such an expectation, as He moved on hearts, should have been enough for any First Century Jew faithful to the Scriptures to recognize. The key for the ancient *ekklēsia* was in making sure that the right environment was in place for this, and various other prophecies, to take their course. The Apostolic decree would serve to lay some definite ground rules so that non-Jewish Believers could be more easily included within the mixed group of Messiah followers, than what the hyper-conservative Pharisees were requiring.

The origins of the prohibitions that compose the Apostolic decree made by James in Acts 15:20, known in some German theological works as *Jakobsklauseln*, meaning “James clauses”¹⁰—are debated.¹¹ Questions that are often asked by interpreters of James’ ruling, include,

- Were these regulations in place before the giving of the Law to Ancient Israel at Mount Sinai?
- Were these regulations to be considered some kind of commandments given to Noah (b.*Sanhedrin* 56a), a man who the Jews believed that all humanity was descended from?
- Were these regulations to be considered some kind of rules for the resident alien who lived among Ancient Israel (cf. Leviticus chs. 17-18)?
- Were these regulations at all considered to be based in the Tanach (Old Testament), or did they simply address issues where Jewish culture had significant clashes with the surrounding pagan culture?

In past Acts scholarship, it was often thought that the prohibitions James issues in Acts 15:20 were based in the Jewish Noahide laws, but scholars today are rather hesitant to accept this, as these regulations were not codified in the First Century C.E. Ben Witherington III thinks, “It is anachronistic to bring the latter rabbinic concept of *seven* Noahdic commandments, binding on all descendants of Noah, into our discussion.”¹² This often leaves the options of (1) the non-Jewish Believers being considered some kind of aliens in a Jewish-led

nor fermented liquors, and abstained from animal food. A razor never came upon his head, he never anointed with oil, and never used a bath. He alone was allowed to enter the sanctuary. He never wore woolen, but linen garments. He was in the habit of entering the temple alone and was often found upon his bended knees, and interceding for the forgiveness of the people; so that his knees became as hard as camel’s, in consequence of his habitual supplication and kneeling before God. And indeed, on account of his exceeding great piety, he was called the Just, and Oblias (or Zaddick and Ozleam) which signifies justice and protection of the people; as the prophets declare concerning him” (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.4-6; Eusebius of Caesarea: *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. C.F. Cruse [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998], pp 59-60).

¹⁰ Bock, 507.

¹¹ Cf. C.K. Barrett, *International Critical Commentary: Acts 15-28* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), pp 733-734.

¹² Witherington, *Acts*, 464; also Schnabel, 644.

Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, “Noahide Laws.”

ekklēsia, or (2) the need for the non-Jewish Believers to be sensitive to ancient Jewish cultural taboos, as those preferred by current Acts interpreters.

The most frequently chosen option in today's Acts scholarship appears to be commentators who wish to see the Apostolic decree as only composing regulations against pagan idolatry. Gary Gilbert indicates, as appears in the *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, that "James proposes a set of requirements for Gentiles: although not certain, it is likely the four elements relate to participation in pagan worship."¹³ The four prohibitions that James lists in Acts 15: 20, then, only concerned those areas where the Jewish community had significant religious and cultural clashes with its neighbors. If the non-Jewish Believers followed these things, then they would serve to demonstrate loyalty to Israel's One God, the fact that they had turned their backs on idolatry, and they would avoid offending Jews—either Messiah Believers or not. As F.F. Bruce summarizes, "This would smooth the path of social and table fellowship between Christians of Jewish and Gentile birth."¹⁴ It is, of course, impossible to disagree with the assessment that the prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were targeted at pagan idolatry and were intended to help the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers fellowship together.

It is in James' explanatory word of Acts 15:21 where common Christian views of the Apostolic decree, and the opinions of various of today's Messianics, largely diverge. Darrell L. Bock correctly claims, "The limitations are probably to keep relations from being strained in a community of Jews and Gentiles as well as to warn about association with idolatry." But he continues, incorrectly concluding, "the issue is the burden of adding the law to Gentiles."¹⁵ What is overlooked is how the hyper-conservative Pharisees demanded Torah-keeping *for salvation* (Acts 15:1). What is commonly not considered is the role the Torah played for the Apostles in the process of non-Jewish advancement *in sanctification*.

Whereas not all of today's Acts commentators are agreed that the prohibitions in v. 20 derive from the Torah, the view that following these prohibitions would give the non-Jewish Believers a kind of "alien" or "sojourner" status in the *ekklēsia* is present. Bruce notes, "The *modus vivendi* was probably similar to the terms on which Jews of the dispersion found it possible to have some degree of intercourse with God-fearers."¹⁶ The Jewish Believers, at least from this angle, would need to relate to the non-Jewish Believers like the Ancient Israelites in the Pentateuch would at times relate to various sojourners in the Land. There are interpreters who think that the Apostolic decree would have only been a temporary sort of arrangement, because Jewish Believers would be eventually outnumbered by non-Jewish Believers, although until then Jewish cultural taboos would need to be respected.

David G. Peterson is right to recognize that at the Jerusalem Council, "As Christians wrestled with the question of the law's ongoing relevance and application, reflecting on Christ's own teaching and the events by which he inaugurated the New Covenant, there was need for sensitivity and generosity on all sides."¹⁷ But where many of today's commentators conclude that the Torah was for a previous age, Messianics in contrast would conclude that the Apostles would have to let time take its course in order for the "change in law" (Hebrews 7:12) enacted by the unique work of Yeshua to be fully evaluated. While some new dynamics have definitely been introduced by His sacrificial work, they do not warrant relegating the Torah's instruction to past history. Many of today's Messianics would also think that the non-Jewish Believers were not to be afforded some kind of "resident foreigner" status, but rather be considered the full equals of the Jewish Believers (Galatians 3:28).

¹³ Gilbert, in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 229.

¹⁴ Bruce, *Acts*, 311.

¹⁵ Bock, 506.

¹⁶ Bruce, *Acts*, 311.

¹⁷ Peterson, 436.

15:19 Prior to issuing his ruling, James expresses his view, “in my judgment, we should not cause difficulties for those who turn to God from among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:19, HCSB). How would the new, non-Jewish Believers be troubled? Acts 15:1 has already said it: “Unless you are circumcised...you cannot be saved.” James and the other Apostolic leaders knew that the non-Jewish Believers had to follow some code of conduct, but the manner in which the hyper-conservative Pharisees were going about it was not the right way.

The verb employed in Acts 15:19 for “make difficulties” (*Lattimore*), is *parenochleō* (παρενοχλέω), “to trouble greatly” (*LS*).¹⁸ A notable place where this verb previously appears, which definitely can factor in to how we interpret the Apostolic decree, is in 1 Maccabees 10:34-35 in the Apocrypha. Here, one of the Seleucid kings, Demetrius, issues a letter promising the Jews that they will not be hassled for observing the holy days prescribed by their Law:

“And all the feasts and sabbaths and new moons and appointed days, and the three days before a feast and the three after a feast—let them all be days of immunity and release for all the Jews who are in my kingdom. No one shall have authority to exact anything from them or annoy [*parenochleō*] any of them about any matter.”

Noting this verb, F. Scott Spencer comments, “Just as the Jews did not want to be harassed into giving up their laws by pagan authorities, so, James contends, Gentiles should not be pressured into keeping Jewish laws.”¹⁹ Most Christian interpreters today would conclude that the non-Jewish Believers should not be made to keep any of the Mosaic Torah, but what we actually have here is an important point of previous Jewish history, which affected the ideology of the hyper-conservative Pharisees. The major cause of the Maccabean crisis a century-and-a-half earlier, created by Antiochus Epiphanes, was, “Where the book of the covenant was found in the possession of any one, or if any one adhered to the law, the decree of the king condemned him to death” (1 Maccabees 1:57). The word of a later Seleucid-Greek monarch like Demetrius, that the Jews should not be harassed for keeping their religious Law, would have been greatly welcomed.

The point of comparison is that the hyper-conservative Pharisees, by demanding immediate ritual proselyte circumcision and Torah observance of the non-Jewish Believers—are acting not too much differently than the Seleucid authorities who murdered their ancestors—only for the *opposite* reason. Rather than Jews being executed for keeping the Torah as decreed by Antiochus, the non-Jewish Believers will just be considered “unsaved” and without true redemption by the Jewish Believers. Neither James the Just, nor any of the other Apostles, would have wanted old problems from the past to reappear in new forms. A different solution than forcing people to do things, as though by the will of a demanding tyrant or a rigid group of autocrats, had to be sought.

The expectation of the Prophets ran completely contrary to those who would force the Torah onto anybody. Micah 4:2 states how people will say, “Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.” This going to Zion to be instructed from God’s Torah is something initiated by those wanting it; it is not something that is forced on them by caustic people (affected by past injustices like the Maccabean crisis). Wanting to go to Zion and hear the instruction of the Messiah who brings peace (Isaiah 2:4), comes by a special wooing of the Spirit and in God’s prophetic plan naturally taking shape.

While the Apostolic Council would have paled in comparison to the total eschatological scene foretold by both Micah and Isaiah, Believers from the nations were turning to Zion for guidance—and James the half-brother of the Messiah was the one who issued the definitive instruction about their inclusion into the *ekklēsia*. While substituting the Apostolic Council for the eschatological Zion, and James the Lord’s brother for the Lord

¹⁸ *LS*, 607.

¹⁹ F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 167.

Himself—is by no means what is totally intended by either Micah 4:2 or Isaiah 2:3-4—we can at least see a partial parallel.

The question that is not easily answered is not that many of the new, non-Jewish Believers had already been associated as God-fearers in association with the Jewish Synagogue. Many had been, and were already familiar with various Torah commandments. The question that is not easily answered is *how long* such people had been God-fearers, or how much they had really been personally mentored, counseled, or taught. Was attending Synagogue services just something that they did along with some side participation in previous Greco-Roman religious activities? Had they only been associated with the Synagogue a short time before hearing the good news of Israel's Messiah, or a long time? Were some of these people really not that familiar with how they would need to change in order to interact with Jews? Were the hyper-conservative Pharisees so rigid that they would not interact with any person not born a Jew, until full proselyte status was achieved, such as that which caused the incident in Antioch (cf. Galatians 2:11-16)? James' word, to whatever the specific social circumstances were in the First Century, was simply for the non-Jewish Believer to not be unnecessarily deterred from being welcomed into the community of Messiah followers.

James emphasizes that since the nations coming to faith is something prophesied in the Tanach (Acts 15:15), that those who were turning to the God of Israel *apo tōn ethnōn* (ἀπὸ τῶν ἐθνῶν) need not be troubled. Prophecy needs to be allowed to take place on its own, after all. Yet with this in view, it has to be noted that the Greek verb *epistrephō* (ἐπιστρέφω), in Acts 15:19, mainly meaning, “**to cause a pers. to change belief or course of conduct, with focus on the thing to which one turns,**” can also mean “**to return to a point where one has been, turn around, go back**” (BDAG).²⁰ It is notable that it appears in the prophetic word of Amos 9:14, with Amos 9:11-12 having just been appealed to—“Also I will restore [Heb MT: *shuv*, שׁוּב; Grk. LXX: *epistrephō*]²¹ the captivity of My people Israel...” This should be taken as a good indicator that the Apostles not only recognized that the salvation of the nations signaled a major step forward in Israel's ultimate, corporate redemption—but they really did consider the non-Jewish Believers coming to faith to be participants within such a restoration, along with them (Acts 15:14; cf. Zechariah 2:11). We will await the completion of this restoration today.

The point being made to the hyper-conservative Pharisees was that the God of Israel had a **significantly big prophetic plan** at work. Their intentions were to make the non-Jewish Believers into proselytes, whereas God's sovereign design was to eventually see Israel's Kingdom expanded, and fully restored. James, in not troubling the new, non-Jewish Believers, was not about to go against the program of the Heavenly Father. *The gospel was changing lives, and people were turning from paganism* (cf. Ephesians 2:12).

15:20 James' list of prohibitions of things that the new, non-Jewish Believers had to follow, and were imposed on them by the authority of Jerusalem (Acts 15:28), are actually not that difficult to understand. Contrary to the hyper-conservative Pharisees who would have demanded the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch to be circumcised and keep the Torah to be saved (Acts 15:1), James' word to the Apostolic Council is, “[let us] write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20). These regulations were primarily intended to combat pagan codes of conduct, as Jewish stereotypes of the nations largely looked at them as sexually immoral idolaters (cf. Romans 1:18-32).

We have good reasons to think that the four prohibitions that James lists in Acts 15:20, are not just those areas where Jewish Believers would require some rightful, immediate changes so that non-Jewish Believers could fellowship with them—but they are a distillation of various commandments delivered in the Torah:

²⁰ BDAG, 382.

²¹ “I will return [*epistrephō*] the captivity of my people Israel” (Amos 9:14, NETS).

1. The “pollutions of idols” (RSV) or *tōn alisgēmatōn tōn eidōlōn* (τῶν ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων), would not have just pertained to idol worship in general, as those from the nations were turning to God, but would have also involved whatever was served in association with festive meals in pagan temples (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:7). C.K. Barrett notes how the verb form of *alisgēma* (ἀλισγημα), *alisgeō* (ἀλισγέω), appears in the LXX rendering of Daniel 8:1.²² He summarizes how, “This was food which for a variety of reasons a Jew would be unwilling to touch; it would not have been prepared in the ways required by the Law, it might well consist of the flesh of unclean animals, it was certain that tithe would not have been paid on it.”²³ Not being able to participate in meals offered at pagan temples itself infers that idolatrous worship is off limits, which is something that an English reading alone implies.

2. *Porneia* (πορνεία), commonly rendered as “fornication” (NASU) or “unchastity” (RSV), we would think would be pretty straightforward. Leviticus 18:6-20, for example, specifies a very wide array of forbidden sexual unions. Some, arguing that the non-Jewish Believers were to be treated as though they were resident aliens, might try to wrongly limit *porneia* only to marriage relationships, and by extension make homosexual practice at least quasi-acceptable. Barrett is right to describe how “There is...no convincing reason for thinking that *πορνεία* was ever understood to simply refer to marriage within the forbidden degrees.”²⁴ If a pagan temple is being used as a point of reference, *porneia* would highlight temple prostitution as being off limits, but would by no means be the end of sexually repugnant practices. Also within the expectations would be adherence to the Leviticus 20:10-21 regulations, which lists some severe sexual sins such as homosexuality and bestiality. Also not to be overlooked, could be the Apostle Paul’s writing after the Jerusalem Council to those in Corinth: “It is actually reported that there is immorality [*porneia*] among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father’s wife” (1 Corinthians 5:1, RSV). New, non-Jewish Believers from the nations would need to be instructed in the Torah’s high code of sexual ethics.

But while the first two prohibitions James issued might be pretty easy to see, the second two are not as easy. These two regulations pertain **to eating**.

3. What is intended by *tou pniktou* (τοῦ πνικτοῦ) is something that many Bible readers struggle with when reading the Apostolic decree. The NIV renders this as “the meat of strangled animals.” The term *pniktos* (πνικτός) does not appear in the Greek LXX, and so it is likely that while kosher eating is an issue here, the bigger issue is the method of slaughter used that kept blood in the meat, as consuming blood is prohibited by the Torah.²⁵ *TDNT* points out, “The issue is the prohibiting of certain foods on the basis of Lev. 17:13-14; Dt. 12:16, 23...It seems that the practice of eating the flesh of strangled or choked animals falls under the OT prohibition,” further describing how inappropriately killing animals was associated with much pagan idolatry.²⁶ The Jewish philosopher Philo described the revolting practice of how pagans would often strangle or choke their sacrifices, not letting the blood out, in opposition to God’s Law:

²² “And Daniel purposed in his heart, that he would not defile [*alisgeō*] himself with the king’s table, nor with the wine of his drink: and he intreated the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile [*summolunomai*, συμμολύνομαι] himself” (Daniel 1:8, LXE).

²³ Barrett, 731.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 732.

²⁵ Genesis 9:4; Exodus 22:31; Leviticus 17:13-16.

²⁶ H. Bietenhard, “*pniktós*,” in *TDNT*, 895.

“But some men, with open mouths, carry even the excessive luxury and boundless intemperance of Sardanapalus to such an indefinite and unlimited extent, being wholly absorbed in the invention of senseless pleasures, that they prepare sacrifices which ought never be offered, strangling their victims, and stifling the essence of life [Leviticus 17:11], which they ought to let depart free and unrestrained, burying the blood, as it were, in the body. For it ought to have been sufficient for them to enjoy the flesh by itself, without touching any of those parts which have a connection with the soul or life” (*Special Laws* 4.122).²⁷

If the non-Jewish Believers were really told to abstain from meat classified as *pniktos*, then where would they get proper meat for eating? In all likelihood, when eating meat, they would have to buy it from some kind of a Jewish source where the blood had been drained. Or, they would have to learn about the kind of meat available to them in the normal marketplace, not associated with idolatry, and not butchered with the intention of having large amounts of blood coagulated in it.²⁸ We can safely deduce that having a kosher-style of diet is implied here, as John R.W. Stott does state, “the Gentile believers would be expected to eat ‘kosher’ food, prepared according to Jewish dietary rules.”²⁹ (And do remember, James himself was a vegetarian, and he was not imposing his own style of diet on the non-Jewish Believers.)

4. The final prohibition of v. 20, *tou haimatos* (τοῦ αἵματος), “blood,” is a continuation of “what is strangled.” Eating blood itself was clearly prohibited by the Torah, as it would communicate a complete disrespect for the discontinuation of an animal’s life, given for a human being’s nutrition (or enjoyment).³⁰ There are some who interpret this reference to “blood” not in reference to diet, but rather as relating to violence, as “from what is strangled and from blood” as only regarding diet is viewed as being redundant. Barrett somewhat mirrors this thought, remarking, “It must therefore not be too readily assumed that avoidance of blood means avoidance of blood in food, especially since avoidance of πνικτόν...would include avoidance of blood.”³¹

At the same time, the Apostolic decree primarily related to table fellowship, trying to fix the incident that had occurred in Antioch (Galatians 2:11-16). Among all of the Biblical commandments that any non-Jewish person would have been taught, if they were outsiders to the local Jewish synagogue looking in, the Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17) would have been one of the main ones. The prohibition against murder would have been considered among those principles impressed upon the conscience via the *imago Dei* (Romans 1:19). So, it is unlikely that the Apostolic decree in v. 20, as delivered by James, really includes a reference against murder—because of how obvious a crime murder would be!³²

The Phillips New Testament renders the last prohibitions as, “eating the meat of strangled animals, or tasting blood.” We need not rule out the fact that the second reference to blood could

²⁷ *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 628.

²⁸ Wall offers the further thought, “The levitical injunctions regarding table fellowship extend not only to certain kinds of foods but also to food preparation, both of which were routinely broken during pagan feast days” (in *NIB*, 10:220).

²⁹ Stott, *Acts*, 249.

³⁰ Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 7:26-27; 17:10-14; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23.

³¹ Barrett, 733.

³² Do note that a more recent argument, put forward by David Instone-Brewer, regards a dual meaning of *pniktos* that has “a culinary context and the killing of infants...The Jewish literature of the time speaks of choking sacrifices in pagan temples...and smothering infants—a practice which most non-Jews regarded as a normal form of birth control” (“Infanticide and the Apostolic Decree of Acts 15” in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 52 No. 2 [2009], 321).

If James’ did intend the reference to “blood” to actually regard murder, then some kind of infanticide by exposure, suffocation, or some kind of abortion, could be considered.

be related not only to the moral problems of consuming blood, but also any ancient pagan ceremonies that involved its being eaten.³³

Christian Bible readers of the Apostolic decree do not often have difficulty with the prohibitions James issues against “things contaminated by idols and...fornication” (Acts 15:20, NASU). This is pretty straightforward instruction against things associated with idolatry and sexual immorality (ranging from infidelity to fornication to temple prostitution to homosexuality). What Christian Bible readers struggle with is seeing “what is strangled...and blood” as prohibitions issued by James, because with them comes the implication that the new, non-Jewish Believers were supposed to follow some kind of kosher diet to some degree. How would this have affected those in Antioch to whom the Apostolic decree would be directed (Acts 15:23ff)?

The Jewish historian Josephus actually records how the Jewish community of Antioch attracted many of the local Greeks, with many of them becoming proselytes and God-fearers (*Wars of the Jews* 7.43, 45). Generally speaking, many of the non-Jews associated with the Jewish Synagogue in Antioch had adopted various elements of Torah observance. This would have been the first group open to the gospel, and who made up the assembly where Barnabas and Paul had been important leaders. So, elements of Torah practice would likely have already been a part of these Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Yeshua fellowshiping together. (Even if such non-Jews really did not know the specifics of them all.)

Richard B. Hays describes how the split in Antioch, in Galatians 2:11-14—and why Peter separated himself to the more conservative faction of Jewish Believers from Jerusalem—could have been over the degree of *kashrut* observed, and not unclean things eaten. He says, “it seems unlikely that such flagrant violation of Jewish norms would have been practiced at Antioch, particularly if the Gentile converts [to Christ] were drawn primarily from the ranks of the ‘godfearers,’ who presumably would have already assimilated to Jewish dietary practices.” He also details the ever-important, “The Law of Moses contains no prohibition of eating with Gentiles...[because] as long as certain fundamental dietary precautions were observed, there was no reason why even strictly Torah observant Jews could not share table fellowship with Gentiles.”³⁴ From this vantage point, the prohibitions of Acts 15:20 would have acknowledged that the overly conservative “men from James” (Galatians 2:12) followed an inappropriate *halachah* in separating themselves from people who were probably already eating a kosher-style of diet, albeit either not as strict as some others—or they separated just because they had not become proselytes. (And, they over-extended whatever mandate James had given them.)

Christian interpreters who want to view the Apostolic decree as having less to do with table fellowship—which would undeniably require *some level* of Torah observance on the part of the non-Jewish Believers—commonly argue that these prohibitions *only* regarded the non-Jewish Believers disassociating themselves from pagan temples and/or pagan feasts. Witherington, for example, states, “The Jews regularly thought such a combination of activities” as seen in Acts 15:20 “was likely by pagans in a temple.”³⁵ Of course, he is not incorrect. He refers us to the defilement of the Jerusalem Temple during the Maccabean crisis, and how God’s House was turned into a whorehouse:

“For the temple was filled with debauchery and reveling by the Gentiles, who dallied with harlots and had intercourse with women within the sacred precincts, and besides brought in things for sacrifice that were

³³ Cf. Witherington, *Acts*, 464.

³⁴ Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:232.

³⁵ Witherington, *Acts*, 461.

unfit. The altar was covered with abominable offerings which were forbidden by the laws” (2 Maccabees 6:4-5).

None of us can deny that these sorts of activities were off limits in the First Century, and are still off limits in the Twenty-First Century, **for all true followers of the God of Israel**. The challenge is that various interpreters, like Witherington, prefer to limit the Apostolic decree as only prohibiting the non-Jewish Believers from associating with the social activities present at pagan temples, not the non-Jewish Believers having to follow any of Moses’ Teaching. But this is not what is in the mind of James the half-brother of Yeshua. Ancient people could have participated in nominal idol worship or reverence, outside of a temple, with their various household gods. Sexual immorality could be practiced outside of a pagan temple, every bit as much as it could be practiced inside. Barrett makes some rather interesting observations on how idolatry and sexual immorality need not have just been limited to the local pagan shrine:

“Jews had long known that the temptation to idolatry most often came through the butcher shop and the brothel. Hence what is in effect the command to use only Jewish butchers, where one could be confident that no εἰδωλόθυτα, πνικτά, or αἶμα would be sold, and the prohibition of πορνεία. It should be noted that such commands, especially the prohibition of idolatry, would be necessary for salvation, and not merely in order to fellowship between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.”³⁶

We do not have to agree with Barrett with the thought that what the non-Jewish Believers *ate* directly affected their salvation, even though idolatry and worship of other gods certainly would.

The major inference that James issues in Acts 15:20 **is that the previous social and religious circles of the non-Jewish Believers**—where they would participate in various festal gatherings or meetings—**were now off limits**. Many pagan temples were areas where people conducted business transactions, seeking the favor of the gods. The new social and religious sphere of influence, contrary to this, was to be the non-Jewish Believers’ fellow Jewish brethren. By implication, such a new sphere of influence could have included Jews who did not yet recognize Israel’s Messiah, but certainly did recognize the One True God. From these people the non-Jewish Believers would learn how to live properly, from the code of conduct contained in Israel’s Scriptures. Those places where Believers in Israel’s God and Messiah would meet—such would be the same of the non-Jewish Believers.

There can be little doubt that the prohibitions listed by James largely worked in getting the non-Jewish Believers out of the social sphere of the pagan temples, and into the social sphere of those who acknowledged Israel’s God. But it did not always work, as the problems described in the Epistle of 1 Corinthians make us aware.³⁷ A sad word also appears in the Book of Revelation, as the Messiah rebukes the assemblies at Pergamum and Thyatira:

“But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of immorality*...But I have *this* against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit *acts of immorality* and eat things sacrificed to idols” (Revelation 2:14, 22).

Either it was difficult to get all of the First Century Believers to follow the Apostolic decree, or by the end of the First Century, many were reneging on it. The Lord is not pleased how some of His followers made their way back into a fleshly, debauched, pagan, and ungodly sphere of influence they were supposed to be rid of.

³⁶ Barrett, pp 733-734.

³⁷ This is discussed further in “The Implementation of the Apostolic Decree and Acts 21:17-26,” appearing in the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*.

Unlike the hyper-conservative Pharisees whose actions created the need for the Apostolic Council, not all Jews were as stringent as they in matters of Torah. While there were many matters of the Mosaic Law where Jews were willing to be a bit forbearing to non-Jews associating themselves with the Synagogue, or there were areas where they were willing to compromise in order to associate with outsiders to a limited degree—there were specific areas where no compromise or forbearance were acceptable. Barrett points out, “though in persecution a Jew was not expected to give his life on any minor issue, there were three matters on which compromise was impossible. These were עבודה זרה, idolatry; שפיכות דמים, the shedding of blood; and גילוי עריות, incest.”³⁸ The Apostolic decree, then, could summarize the areas where no forbearance of any kind, or patience for them to change, was acceptable for the inclusion of non-Jewish Believers. Even if many of the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch, to whom the Apostolic decree would be directed, were already familiar in varying degrees with these crimes against God—the Apostolic decree would have to serve a purpose for many more new Believers coming from the nations (Acts 21:25).

While many Christian expositors read the Apostolic prohibitions as only relating to the First Century, this is not a position held to by all. Stanley D. Toussaint, a dispensationalist, is one who concludes, it is “still the responsibility of Christians today” to follow the Apostolic decree, “even to the point of not eating blood sausage and raw meat.”³⁹ Many, in contrast to this, think that the Apostolic decree was just a temporary measure regulating the interactions for table fellowship between Jews and non-Jews in the First Century. And, since Jews are such a small minority in the Body of Messiah today, these regulations are really not thought to be that necessary to take notice of. David H. Stern summarizes this view as, “Today, when Messianic Jews are a small minority in the Body of Messiah, and few if any of them take umbrage at Gentiles’ eating habits, the issue is irrelevant, and there is no need for Gentile Christians to obey a command never intended as eternal.”⁴⁰ Yet, neither Stern nor I think that the Apostolic decree was only to have an affect on the mid-First Century C.E. *It continues to communicate principles that affect the Body of Messiah in the Twenty-First Century.*

It is also quite notable, in any examination of Acts 15:20, that there are some later textual differences, notably with the Western text. Bruce M. Metzger describes how “The Western text omits ‘what is strangled’ and adds a negative form of the Golden Rule in 15.20 and 29.”⁴¹ This would lead to only idolatry, fornication, and bloodshed/murder being prohibited—and largely not relate to Jewish/non-Jewish table fellowship. Metzger goes on and points out, “But this reading can scarcely be original, for it implies that a special warning had to be given to Gentile converts against such sins as murder, and that this was expressed in the form of asking them to ‘abstain’ from it—which is slightly absurd!”⁴²

The reasons why there would be later modifications to Acts 15:20, making it into some editions of Acts, are explained on the grounds of how the original circumstances of the Jerusalem Council gave way in the later centuries of Christianity. Bruce describes, “At a later time, when the issue [of eating] was no longer a live one, the provisions proposed by James and adopted by the council were modified so as to become purely ethical injunctions.”⁴³ The variants seen in Acts 15:20, and later Acts 15:29, would be a place where Robert W. Wall’s thoughts should be well taken:

“While these later interpolations [within Acts] may well reflect an early scribal commentary on Luke’s Acts in the service of the canonical process, they helped to foster a supersessionist theology and anti-Semitic prejudice within the church that remains to this day.”⁴⁴

³⁸ Barrett, 734.

³⁹ Toussaint, in *BKCNT*, 396.

⁴⁰ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, pp 278-279.

⁴¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London and New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 430.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp 431-432.

⁴³ Bruce, *Acts*, 312.

⁴⁴ Wall, in *NIB*, 10:17-18.

Thankfully, our mainline English Bibles today (including the KJV), include the fourfold division of prohibitions issued by James.

15:21 There is probably no verse more important for today's Messianics, in the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council, then James' summarizing statement of Acts 15:21. There is also probably no verse more ambiguous or head-scratching for today's Christian interpreters, than Acts 15:21. What was specifically intended by James' closing word, **"For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath"**? *Mōusēs gar ek geneōn archaiōn kata polin tous kērussontas auton echei en tais sunagōgais kata pan sabbaton anaginōskomenos* (Μωϋσῆς γὰρ ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων κατὰ πόλιν τοὺς κηρύσσοντας αὐτὸν ἔχει ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς κατὰ πᾶν σάββατον ἀναγινωσκόμενος). This verse involves no small discussion as to the role that the Torah plays in the faith expression of non-Jewish Believers. One of the things that we can immediately note, though, is that Acts 15:21 is an historical reference to the fact that the tradition of consulting a section from the Torah every week in the Synagogue goes back to at least the First Century.

Stern, in his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, lays out six different views of Acts 15:21,⁴⁵ which are more or less represented by today's Acts commentaries. There are three notable views of Acts 15:21 that we need to be considering in our deliberations of what James has ruled:

1. This was only a reminder for the non-Jewish Believers to be sensitive to Jewish scruples from the Law of Moses, which they hear read every week in the local synagogue in cities throughout the Roman Empire.
2. This was to remind the Jerusalem Council that the prohibitions of Acts 15:20 are rooted within the Law of Moses, in passages like Leviticus chs. 17-18, and the Apostolic decree has a Biblical basis.
3. This was to instruct the non-Jewish Believers that in needing to know more about these four prohibitions, and about what God considers proper behavior of Messiah followers to involve, hearing the Law of Moses read on the Sabbath should be in order. There are synagogues in cities all over where Moses can be heard.

Acts 15:21 begins with the clause *Mōusēs gar* (Μωϋσῆς γὰρ), and as LS points out, the conjunction *gar* (γάρ) is "regularly placed after the first word of a sentence: to introduce the reason."⁴⁶ But what would this reason be, and how would the reading of the Torah of Moses affect the prohibitions listed by James in Acts 15:20? The additional lexical meanings of *gar* that BDAG provides might only further add to the debate over Acts 15:21, as it notes how it can serve as a **"marker of clarification, for, you see,"** or be used as **"marker of inference, certainly, by all means, so, then."**⁴⁷ This could relate to qualifications met, in order for later action to be followed. Daniel B. Wallace considers *gar* to be in an explanatory conjunction, detailing how "This use indicates that additional information is being given about what is being described. It can often be translated *for, you see, or that is, namely.*"⁴⁸

All interpreters are agreed that once the definite prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were followed by the non-Jewish Believers, then they could participate in table fellowship with Jewish Believers. So, is Acts 15:21 only to serve as a reminder that the prohibitions are rooted in the Torah, which the Jewish Believers hear every *Shabbat*? To what degree is the reference to Moses being preached on the Sabbath, related to the four prohibitions? Could there be something more in play?

⁴⁵ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 279.

⁴⁶ LS, 160.

⁴⁷ BDAG, pp 189, 190.

⁴⁸ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 673.

He continues, stating, "Key conjunctions here are: γάρ, δέ, εἰ (after verbs of emotion), and καί."

We need to note the usage of the two main verbs in Acts 15:21: *kērussontas* (κηρύσσοντας) is a present active participle, describing how there are those “proclaiming him” (LITV); *anaginōskomenos* (ἀναγιγνωσκόμενος) is a present passive participle, describing how the scroll of the Torah/Moses is “being read” (KJV/NKJV) every Sabbath, with the action obviously being performed to the Torah/Moses.⁴⁹ Neither one of these things—“proclaiming” or “being read”—is some action in the past. The text describes current actions that directly affected the First Century *ekklēsia* in some way, which had their roots in an ancient tradition of public Scripture reading likely going back to the time of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁵⁰ The non-Jewish Believers being reminded that there were Jewish Believers out there who would take offense if some of the Torah’s major ethical commandments were violated—“Moses has those proclaiming him” (LITV)—which they hear every week on *Shabbat*, **is the baseline explanation that can be offered for Acts 15:21**. It is generally a view with which most readers and interpreters of the scene of Acts 15 are agreed.⁵¹

Is there anything more that can be deduced from James’ statement in Acts 15:21? Is there an implied impetus in Acts 15:21 that the non-Jewish Believers would need to know more about Moses’ Teaching, as the guidelines James has listed in Acts 15:20 were rooted within its commandments? Were the non-Jewish Believers to hear the Torah and the Prophets taught in any capacity, or were they just to *exclusively rely* on the Holy Spirit to disciple them without the aid of the Scriptures?

The chart below has summarized a number of significant opinions present in Acts scholarship, and has separated it between those who think that Acts 15: 21 does include, in some sort of way, an involvement of the non-Jewish Believers knowing or learning more about the Torah, and those who think that Acts 15:21 only regards being sensitive to First Century Jewish taboos:

ACTS 15:21	
LEARNING OR KNOWING MORE ABOUT MOSES’ TEACHING	BEING SENSITIVE TO JEWISH TABOOS
<p>This proposal, James urged, would not work to the detriment of Israel’s mission in the Gentile world; there was still ample opportunity for Gentiles to learn the law of Moses, for it was read publicly every sabbath in synagogues throughout the civilized world...This observation was perhaps intended to calm the apprehensions of the Pharisaic party in the Jerusalem church, in whose eyes it was especially important that the whole Torah should be taught among the Gentiles; this, said James, was being attended to already in the synagogues.⁵² F.F. Bruce</p>	<p>The fact that the law is read every sabbath throughout the empire may be taken either to support the Gentile mission (vss. 16-18) or to confirm the decree.⁵³ William Baird</p>

⁴⁹ Robert K. Brown and Philip W. Comfort, trans., *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 472 render Acts 15:21 from the source text as:

“For~Moses, from ancient~generations in every city **the ones preaching** him has in the synagogues on every Sabbath **being read.**”

⁵⁰ Ezra 7:10; Nehemiah 8:1-3.

⁵¹ Cf. Stott, *Acts*, 248; John B. Pohill, “Acts,” in Wayne Grudem, ed., *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2115.

⁵² Bruce, *Acts*, 312.

⁵³ William Baird, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in Charles M. Laymon, ed., *The Interpreter’s One-Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 749.

<p>James’s concluding statement is puzzling. It may be regarded as saying that since there are Jews everywhere who regularly hear the law of Moses being read in the synagogues, Christian Gentiles ought to respect their scruples, and so avoid bringing the church into disrepute with them. Alternatively, the point may be that if Christian Gentiles want to find out any more about the Jewish law, they have plenty of opportunity in the local synagogues, and there is no need for the Jerusalem church to do anything about the matter.⁵⁴ I. Howard Marshall</p>	<p>Circumcision and the ritual requirements of the Hebrew religion should not be imposed on the Gentiles. Only an appropriate conduct after conversion should be expected.⁵⁵ Lloyd J. Ogilvie</p>
<p>James’s concluding point in verse 21 was probably made to reassure the Christians who had come from the Pharisees and who wanted to see the Torah taught among the Gentiles. He says that this was happening in the synagogues in every city each Sabbath.⁵⁶ Ajith Fernando</p>	<p>The point is that the Mosaic Law, and not least the Ten Commandments, is already proclaimed throughout the Empire in synagogues. The witness of Gentile Christians was important to James. They must not give Jews in the Diaspora the opportunity to complain that Gentile Christians were still practicing idolatry and immorality by going to pagan feasts even after beginning to follow Christ.⁵⁷ Ben Witherington III</p>
<p>The practical result of listening to Moses according to James is that people will be prepared for a right hearing of the gospel. In other words, those who are most likely to respond to the gospel and grow in God’s grace are those attached to the congregation where the truth of Torah is embraced in faith and its core values embodied in human relations.⁵⁸ Robert W. Wall</p>	<p>[T]he Gentiles do not have to be circumcised nor must they observe the entire law of Moses, but they should abstain from a few ‘essential’ moral and religious taboos (15.19-29).⁵⁹ F. Scott Spencer</p>

In surveying these opinions of Acts 15:21, did James’ ruling imply anything *beyond* the non-Jewish Believers being sensitive to Jewish concerns from the Torah? Bock summarizes our options as follows:

“The remark makes one of two points: (1) Moses is read every week, so be sensitive to those who read him; or (2) as a Gentile, if you need more guidance as to Jewish concerns, these can be determined by hearing Moses, who is read regularly in the synagogue.”⁶⁰

The prohibitions James issued in Acts 15:20 are certainly based in Moses’ Teaching, and the new, non-Jewish Believers would definitely need to know not only more about these four things, **but also about why**

⁵⁴ Marshall, *Acts*, 254.

⁵⁵ Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *The Preacher’s Commentary: Acts* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 231.

⁵⁶ Fernando, 419.

⁵⁷ Witherington, *Acts*, 463.

⁵⁸ Wall, in *NIB*, 10:223.

⁵⁹ Spencer, 162.

⁶⁰ Bock, 507.

God considered these practices unacceptable. This could only really come by hearing the Torah expounded upon every week in the local synagogue, with concrete examples from real life circumstances in Israel's history explaining them. Many of the first non-Jewish Believers had already been doing this. Of the interpretations Stern provides for Acts 15:21, he describes how "These Gentile Christians have been hearing the *Tanakh* in the synagogues but have chosen not to convert to Judaism. Why press them now and put this obstacle in their way (v. 19) precisely when they have made a heart commitment to follow the God of Israel and his Messiah Yeshua?"⁶¹ This seems to be a good explanation for a large number of the early non-Jewish Believers, as they were to be accepted into the faith community not on the basis of proselytization, but rather their trust in Yeshua (cf. Galatians 5:6).

While some of the non-Jewish Believers had already been attending synagogue services, and were familiar with the Torah's code of morality in varying degrees—there would be many more coming into the *ekklēsia* who would not be. Another interpretation that Stern provides would seem to work well for the wider term, especially as the gospel would go forth and people would be coming to faith *directly* from pagan backgrounds. He says, "Let Gentiles enter the Messianic Community without becoming Jews, and don't be troubled over it, because, no matter where these Gentile believers live, they will continue visiting the local synagogue and hearing what Judaism teaches about living a godly life."⁶² Keep in mind that with their previous social spheres of the pagan temple and marketplace now largely off limits, their new social spheres would be their fellow Jewish Believers and other Jews who acknowledged Israel's One God. And, in order to know more about following James' prohibition (Acts 15:20), the practical reality was that they would have to go to the local synagogue to hear from Moses' Teaching. *In so doing, they would naturally learn much more.*

The non-Jewish Believers following the decree issued by James would no doubt go a long way, not only as Jewish Believers could see that these people have turned, **but Jews who had not yet acknowledged Yeshua could see a difference in them.** The normal Jewish Believer of the Diaspora may not have been as stringent toward Greeks and Romans as those who arrived at Antioch (Acts 15:1-2), but he or she would definitely have wanted to see some serious changes take place regarding the former, idolatrous lifestyle of the non-Jewish Believers. The Apostolic decree would serve this purpose, and more.

James' statement of Acts 15:21 is definitely meant to remind the Jerusalem Council that the prohibitions he gives are rooted in the Torah. These non-Jewish Believers clearly had to go somewhere to be instructed in the teachings of God's Word, and the Synagogue was the obvious place to which they had to go. Following James' decree, the implication is that the non-Jewish Believers would be able to easily enter the local synagogue, and learn more about what God expected of them. They would hear the accounts of Abraham, Moses, King David, the Kingdom of Ancient Israel, the expectation of Israel's Prophets for God's salvation to reach to the ends of the Earth, and...the Messiah.

It would be fair to say that the Apostolic decree in Acts 15:19-21 was intended to place the new, non-Jewish Believers onto what might be described as a "trajectory of Torah." Obedience to God's Law was not to be something strictly mandated or ordered (Acts 15:5), but "the words of the Prophets" (Acts 15:15) were to be facilitated and allowed to occur according to the Lord's grand design. *If* the Apostolic decree was properly followed by those who would receive it, consider how for 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,"** something similar to the following was likely intended to take place:

⁶¹ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 279.

⁶² *Ibid.*

1. Moses' Teaching was already being proclaimed and read every week by Jewish people, following ancient tradition, in synagogues all over the Mediterranean basin.
2. The prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were rooted in Moses' Teaching, and were things that the Jewish people who heard the Torah read every week (whether they were Believers in Yeshua or not), found considerably offensive and abominable. Violating these stipulations would mean a breach of fellowship and a certain rejection of the non-Jews coming to faith in Yeshua.
3. The new, non-Jewish Believers would logically need instruction in what the prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were, and by extension the local synagogue was the only real place found in cities all over, where the Scriptures could be accessed.
4. The prohibitions of Acts 15:20, when followed by the new, non-Jewish Believers, would effectively **sever these people** from their old spheres of social and religious influence. This, in turn, would make a community, which acknowledged the One True God of Israel *and* where Moses was being preached and read every Sabbath, their new sphere of social and religious influence.

Were the non-Jewish Believers anticipated to steadily keep more of God's Law, given both time and diligent discipleship? If the prophecies about the Word going forth, and people streaming to Zion to be taught the Torah are accurate (Isaiah 2:3-4; Micah 4:2), **then yes**. The promise of the New Covenant, though, was that the Spirit of God would write the Torah onto human hearts (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—as opposed to anyone ordering them to do it (Acts 15:5). Only through the power of the Holy Spirit, and not a forced conversion to become ethnic Jews, were the new, non-Jewish Believers to learn, appreciate the value of, and steadily follow the righteous guidelines of God's Torah. It was by no means to be a matter of their salvation or something to be strictly "obligated" or bound on them—but instead was to be a matter of their continual progression in holiness.

One of the legitimate questions that is to be asked, is that if the Apostolic decree anticipates the non-Jewish Believers going to the local synagogue in some way to be instructed from the Torah, then why is there not more instruction seen in the Apostolic letters, Paul's, in particular, telling these people to keep things like the Sabbath, appointed times, kosher, or circumcision? Are these not some important aspects of the Torah?

Where issues like these are considered, it is usually thought that Apostles like Paul really did not regard them as applying to non-Jewish Believers (i.e., Galatians 4:9-11; Romans 14:5-6; Colossians 2:16-18),⁶³ or more frequently that he considered them to be abolished. Some of these passages have important First Century background issues that need to be properly explored (like the scene of fellowship meals in Romans 14, and the role of the term *koinos*, κοινός—discussed further). When a proper evaluation of the data is considered, there are actually no prohibitions against these Torah practices in the Pauline Epistles—as much as there is teaching about their proper usage, an acknowledgement that these things are not "salvation issues," and often including words on how Jewish and non-Jewish Believers were not to be unnecessarily divided.⁶⁴

What there is undoubtedly more Torah-based instruction about—seen in all of the Apostolic letters—regards proper ethics and morality, which is fully consistent with the message of the Prophets (Acts 15:15), and indeed, most of the Torah obviously concerns ethics and morality. How often is it easily forgotten that most of the early non-Jewish Believers came from the lower classes, and even though having welcomed Yeshua into their lives, *they still needed basic ethical and moral teaching?* Principles such as the Ten

⁶³ Consult the thoughts summarized by the article "Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?", appearing in *Moedim: The Appointed Times for Messianic Believers* by J.K. McKee.

⁶⁴ For further examination, consult the author's books *Torah In the Balance, Volumes I & II*, and various other volumes in the *for the Practical Messianic* commentary series.

Commandments will always be given more attention than any other part of the Torah. Ephesians 4:28, written in 60-62 C.E., demands “He who steals must steal no longer.” If the Eighth Commandment were still being violated by a large number of the non-Jewish Believers (Exodus 20:15; Deuteronomy 5:19) in Asia Minor,⁶⁵ then this is at least one possible reason of why more specific attention to Torah-related issues like the Sabbath or appointed times is not seen in the Apostolic Scriptures. *Basic moral matters still needed to be expounded upon.* In fact, it might be said that Paul’s letters focus more on the four requirements of the Apostolic decree, than anything else, **because of how difficult it was to see them implemented!**

The need for the non-Jewish Believers to involve themselves in the local synagogue hearing God’s Torah read—turning their backs on idolatry, fornication, things strangled, and blood (Acts 15:20)—is not difficult to conclude when we consider the degradation of the larger Greco-Roman society. *They needed instruction.* First of all, how many of these people could even read? If they came from the lower classes, they would have to hear the Bible read to them. Secondly, how many of the non-Jewish Believers still struggled, having family members and friends still very much involved in Greco-Roman civic religion, who pulled on them to join back in? Only by seeing them implanted within a sphere that honored God and/or His Messiah, could they really be set on the right track. And third, why do many of today’s Bible readers somehow think that there were bookstores in every town? The only place where the Scriptures could really be accessed in the Diaspora—even in their Greek Septuagint form—would largely be in the local Jewish synagogue (cf. Acts 17:2). The only other major options for accessing the Scriptures would be from a wealthy family who may have owned some scrolls, or knowing people who really did memorize it. The highly educated Alexandrian Jew, Apollos, was one who “was mighty in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24) and probably did know much of the Word (in its Greek LXX form) from memory.⁶⁶ Obviously, though, people like him were few and far between.

The need for the non-Jewish Believers to understand the Torah and Tanach, and begin the process of discipleship with their fellow Jewish Believers, is also clear if for any other reason—because much of what is seen in Paul’s letters would have made little sense given all of their intertextual references. As a simple example (of many possible quotes) of this, commenting on Philippians 1:1-2 and Paul’s reference to him and Timothy being “servants of Christ Jesus” (RSV, NIV), Gordon D. Fee indicates, “They had entered the ‘society’ of a people whose roots were in Judaism and whose story had its origins in the Old Testament, a story that the Philippians by now would have known well in its Greek form—the Septuagint (LXX).”⁶⁷ This is an academic testimony to the fact that the early non-Jewish Believers were being trained in the foundational accounts of the Tanach (cf. 1 Timothy 4:13).

What do you do when you see intertextual references from the Tanach or Old Testament, appearing in the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament? Are you at all curious as to which passages are being referred to, and how they play into an author’s message or argument? Today, simply consider an English version like the New American Standard, which makes a point to use SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS in its New Testament translation, to point out to the reader where an Old Testament quote likely appears. (The United Bible Societies Greek New Testament uses **bolded** Greek text.) Have you just glossed over something like this thinking that it is just stylistic? Or, should you have encountered it before, do you sometimes realize that in examining a Tanach passage referred to, that your understanding of the passage needs improvement? Evangelical Christians today, who “rediscover” the Old Testament, still largely have a cursory knowledge of what it is simply

⁶⁵ Maxie D. Dunnam views these remarks by Paul as a strong indication that the early non-Jewish Believers “came from the dregs of society (cf. 1 Cor. 1:28-29; 1 Pet. 4:16). Many of them were slaves, and among slaves, stealing was regarded as normal” (*The Preacher’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Vol 31 [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982], 214).

⁶⁶ Apollos is notably a major candidate for the authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Notably, Hebrews includes over thirty direct quotations from the Greek Septuagint.

⁶⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 63.

because they have their own Bibles—quite contrary to the new, non-Jewish Believers frequently depicted in the Apostolic Scriptures.

Early in the history of the Messiah movement, the Believers often met in some kind of association with the local Jewish synagogue. James himself, in his epistle dating to perhaps the early 40s C.E., taught about, “Suppose a man comes into your synagogue [*sunagōgē*, συναγωγή] wearing gold rings and fancy clothes, and also a poor man comes in dressed in rags...” (James 2:2, YLT). He recognized the local synagogue as a place to receive proper instruction and fellowship, and this perspective is likely reflected in Acts 15:21.⁶⁸

Of course, even with Acts 15:21 including a reference regarding Moses being proclaimed and heard at the local synagogue, where non-Jewish Believers could receive instruction, this does not always mean that it would be possible in all cities. Bock does point out how, “Meeting regularly in the synagogue was no longer possible for the new community. They were forced to meet elsewhere, and they did so in house churches.”⁶⁹ Yet he notes this happened because of the *persecution* that the Jewish establishment enacted upon many of the Believers, ejecting them from the Synagogue. Simply consider the complex scene in Corinth in Acts 18:7-8, and how the Believers met in a house right next to the synagogue. Stern himself notes how going to the local synagogue in Acts 15:21 “is a ‘temporal’ interpretation applicable to first century conditions,”⁷⁰ as the impetus for James appears to be the non-Jewish Believers understanding what the prohibitions of Acts 15:20 are, and the other godly principles and instructions that they would hear about. Going to the local synagogue to hear Moses’ Teaching, would not exclude the need for the Believers to specifically get together themselves for times of reflection on the teachings of Yeshua, to pray and to worship Him, for counseling one another as fellow Messiah followers, and for working through the issues that affected *their* emerging and developing community.

Many Christians today have heard this Messianic interpretation of Acts 15:21, and that it includes an implied impetus for the non-Jewish Believers to be involved with a local synagogue and hear Moses taught. They do not agree, particularly because in Acts 15:23-29 following the text does not really include anything about Moses or synagogues. It is thus thought to be incorrect for any reader to conclude that the Apostolic decree includes an expectation or anticipation for the non-Jews to go to the local synagogue in their town or city, and begin some kind of instruction from God’s Torah. Not to be overlooked is the role that the Apostolic representatives sent to Antioch play, whose specific role would have been to explain what James’ ruling meant (Acts 15:30-33). Would they have told the non-Jewish Believers in Antioch that they needed to do their best that they were hearing from the Scriptures every week? Where would these Scriptures be found?

James’ decision is directed to the First Century non-Jewish Believers. In making due diligence to follow his four prohibitions (Acts 15:20), they would likely have to know what they involved by hearing the Torah taught in a local synagogue *and* in turn would naturally hear more about proper living from God’s commandments (Acts 15:21). Contrary to the hyper-conservative Pharisees who wanted to order them (Acts 15:5) to follow the Torah, the Holy Spirit could work on each heart and the Father’s prophetic plan could naturally take shape (Acts 15:15). We can certainly envision a scene of where Jewish and non-Jewish Believers would attend mainline Jewish services together at the local synagogue on *Shabbat*, and then later when the services were over, they would discuss what they had learned and how it applied to their shared Messianic faith—and they would discuss if anything taught by Jews, who had not yet acknowledged Yeshua, ran

⁶⁸ Some may try to argue that James’ epistle is only directed to a Jewish audience, given how it could have been written prior to the Jerusalem Council. The challenge with this view is that while James’ words have parallels with ancient Jewish literature, so do they also have parallels with ancient classical philosophy as well, indicating a broader audience including non-Jews.

Consult the commentary *James for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

⁶⁹ Bock, 38.

⁷⁰ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 279.

contrary to the imperatives of the gospel. The Jewish Believers would very much have the responsibility to mentor the non-Jewish Believers, and be very welcoming and loving toward them.

But while the salvation and proper behavior of the nations is the main subject of James' speech (Acts 15:14-21), and how while ritual proselyte circumcision was not required of non-Jewish Believers to be received as fellow brethren—it is nowhere implied that Jews should *forsake the Torah* to be Messiah followers. Jews should continue to live as Jews as they always have,⁷¹ although they were to understand the position of the new, non-Jewish Believers who had received Israel's Messiah. These people were not to be unnecessarily troubled (Acts 15:19), and be shown some forbearance and patience as the two distinct groups of people came together and started to form the "one new humanity" (Ephesians 2:15, NRSV/CJB). Where this would lead, as James' testified, is the ultimate restoration of the Kingdom of Israel detailed in the Prophets (Acts 15:15).

In the record of the New Testament, we see variance in terms of groups of Messiah followers being associated with a local synagogue. Some were able to be a part of the congregational body, and others, because of their faith in Yeshua, were not. We also see variance in terms of how easy and difficult it was for the non-Jewish Believers to follow *just* the four prohibitions of the Apostolic decree. By the end of the First Century and certainly by the Second Century, due to the forces of history and growing anti-Semitism in the Roman Empire—in no small part due to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E.—the Believers in Yeshua steadily became independent of Judaism. And this is where we have to remember how conditioned the Apostolic decree was to the circumstances of the late 40s and early 50s C.E.

Acts 15:21 intention The place and intention of Acts 15:21 in the narrative of the Jerusalem Council convening, has certainly caused a great stir in the contemporary Messianic movement. There has frequently been too much rhetoric and posturing demonstrated,⁷² without enough probing of the Biblical text, the intention of the Apostolic decree, and the wider implications of Tanach prophecy being in play. There has been enough written on the Jerusalem Council and Apostolic decree, though, to discern that there are three general approaches to James' word, "For Moshe from generations of old has in every city those who preach him, being read in the synagogues every Shabbat" (Acts 15:21, HNV):

- **substantive:** the intention of the Apostolic decree was to only remind the new, non-Jewish Believers that both Jewish Believers and non-Believers hear the Torah of Moses taught every Sabbath in the synagogue, and that in order to fellowship with them, not being an unnecessary offense, some basic guidelines based in such a Torah needed to be followed
- **prescriptive/resultative:** the effect of the Apostolic decree, in issuing prohibitions to the new, non-Jewish Believers, was to not just stop such people from practicing things which the Jewish community would find offensive, but would naturally result in them seeking further instruction in the Torah, as the four requirements (Acts 15:20, 29) serve as gateways to understanding many of the Torah's other commandments; some sort of synagogue attendance and involvement would be anticipated as necessary in order to access the Scriptures of Israel

⁷¹ Cf. Wall, in *NIB*, 10:214.

⁷² This has, perhaps, been most recently demonstrated via the release of IAMCS Steering Committee (2014). *One Law, Two Sticks: A Critical Look at the Hebrew Roots Movement, A position paper of the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS)*. Available online via <<http://iamcs.org>>.

While this white paper discussed many legitimate problems and listed various figures of disrepute to be avoided, it ultimately did not address or analyze the Bible passages from which it derived its title (Exodus 12:48-49; Leviticus 7:7; 24:22; Numbers 9:14; 15:15-16, 29-30; Ezekiel 37:15-28). The all too common, and most unfortunate practice, of some contemporary Messianic Jewish leaders, has been to address an issue with a disapproving position statement, rather than actually conduct any detailed exegetical analysis.

The issues pertaining to the One Law/One Torah passages and sub-movement, are addressed in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics; the issues pertaining to the Two-House teaching and sub-movement, including a lengthy exegesis paper on Ezekiel 37:15-28, are addressed in *Israel In Future Prophecy: Is There a Larger Restoration of the Kingdom to Israel?* by J.K. McKee.

- **imperative-directive:** the intention of the Apostolic decree was to state that not only were the four prohibitions based in the Torah of Moses, but that once adhered to, the new, non-Jewish Believers must go to the local synagogue for further instruction and direction
How, more specifically, has Acts 15:21 been analyzed, with these three approaches in mind?

substantive In the relatively recent (2014) book *The Acts of the Emissaries: Practical Sermons on the Spirit-filled Birth & Explosive Growth of Messianic Judaism*, Joel Liberman would seem to be most reflective of Acts 15:21 serving as a substantive, meaning that the new, non-Jewish Believers were to adhere to the four prohibitions (Acts 15:20, 29) as a means of table fellowship and not causing any offense to their fellow Jewish Believers and/or members of the Jewish community. In his overall estimation,

“The Jerusalem Council was convened for the very purpose of considering whether Gentile Believers would be required to be circumcised and to keep the Law of Moses. The Council’s response is unambiguous and leaves no gray area, stating forthrightly that Gentiles are *not* required to accept circumcision and all that it implies, but only to keep some basic laws of diet and morality.”⁷³

Liberman’s main position regarding Acts 15:21 is stated as how, “The requirements were practical social requirements for fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Believers so that Jewish Believers would not be offended in the faith.”⁷⁴ Obviously responding to the common, directive approach of Acts 15:21, as held by many within the One Law/One Torah sub-movement, Liberman states,

“It is important to notice that the actual letter sent to Antioch did not include the statement in v. 21! For if the intent of the Council was to advise the Gentile Believers to begin a process of becoming *Torah* observant by attending a Synagogue, this isn’t communicated by their letter. We have already seen an example of synagogue leaders opposing *Sha’ul* preaching salvation to the Gentiles (13:44-47). Personally, I do not believe the Gentiles would have been allowed to attend non-Messianic *Shabbat* services in these cities after they came to faith even if they wanted to.”⁷⁵

Of course, as the record of the Book of Acts, and testimony of the Pauline Epistles indicate, there were varied levels of involvement between First Century groups of Messiah followers and a local Jewish synagogue. It does too much to perhaps press a statement like “They will make you outcasts from the synagogue...” (John 16:2), as though this would occur in one-hundred percent of all cases, any more than how in the Last Days thinking that all parents will be turned into the authorities by their children (cf. Matthew 24:10). Whether there was going to be any non-Jewish association with a local Jewish synagogue, should be determined by what was most likely to take place when its prohibitions were followed.

This approach seems to represent the thought that the Jerusalem Apostles envisioned a rather limited Torah obedience on the part of the new, non-Jewish Believers entering into the Body of Messiah.

⁷³ Joel Liberman, *The Acts of the Emissaries: Practical Sermons on the Spirit-filled Birth & Explosive Growth of Messianic Judaism* (San Diego: Tree of Life, 2014), 202.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

prescriptive/resultative The prescriptive/resultative approach to Acts 15:21, attempts to evaluate what would most likely happen, when the prohibitions of the Apostolic decree were observed by the new, non-Jewish Believers coming to faith in Israel's Messiah. A prescriptive/resultative approach would assert that further instruction in Moses' Teaching would naturally be necessary, at least in order to understand what the prohibitions actually meant. This is the approach widely detectable in the materials of the popular ministry First Fruits of Zion, in several different publications intended for wide distribution across the Messianic world, including one on the kosher dietary laws, and another on the Sabbath:

Toby Janicki, *God-Fearers*: "...God had already shown his approval of Gentiles in Messiah by giving them the Spirit before circumcision. Instead, these new converts should, at a minimum, observe four essential prohibitions...[quoting Acts 15:19-21, ESV]...

"They were instructed to abstain from: things contaminated by idols, sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood. At first glance it appears to deal with, but upon closer examination each of these four prohibitions becomes, in a sense, an overarching category which contains many sub-category commandments. This may be one of the reasons the Apostle James adds the phrase about Moses being read in the synagogue every Sabbath. The new Gentile believer would need to attend the local synagogue to learn how each of these four prohibitions plays out practically in everyday life."⁷⁶

Aaron Eby, *Biblically Kosher*: "[I]f we interpret the instructions of the Jerusalem Council as calling for kosher-slaughtered meat, it is hard to believe that the apostles would have imagined setting up *shechitah* for swine and other animals that are not kosher. If a person only eats kosher-slaughtered meat, then they will normally be limited to kosher species of animals. This might suggest that it was already obvious to the apostolic community that Gentiles should only eat kosher species; at the very least, the Council seems to be pushing in this direction.

"It should be pointed out that the apostles set these standards at a minimum threshold of dietary law, not a maximum. They pointed the new Gentile believers in the direction of the Torah's higher standards by encouraging them to remain in the synagogues and learn Torah from the weekly readings...[quoting Acts 15:21, ESV]....

"Thus as the Gentiles were attending synagogue, they would be learning more about the ways of Torah and the kosher diet given to the Jewish people.

"The Master and his disciples all ate kosher; many of the new Gentile believers, such as Cornelius, were God-Fearers and would have been keeping a kosher diet on some level as well. When Gentiles keep kosher they are not only connecting with Yeshua but also with practices of the very earliest non-Jewish believers."⁷⁷

D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Sabbath Breaker*: "The apostles...seem to have expected that the Gentile believers would celebrate the weekly Sabbath along with the rest of the believing community (which was Jewish), and they expected that the Gentile believers might even attend synagogue and hear the Torah taught on the Sabbaths, if that is the meaning of James' obscure statement in Acts 15:21..."⁷⁸

The perspectives represented in these three quotations referenced, would be compatible with what was concluded in the preceding analysis of Acts 15:21: that when followed, the Apostolic

⁷⁶ Toby Janicki, *God-Fearers: Gentiles and the God of Israel* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2012), pp 50-51.

⁷⁷ Eby, pp 151-152.

⁷⁸ D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Sabbath Breaker: Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels' Sabbath Conflicts* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2013), 11.

decree would cut off the new, non-Jewish Believers from their old social and religious spheres of influence, making a community where Moses Teaching' was being declared every week, their new sphere of social and religious influence. There is an anticipation in Acts 15:21, that the new, non-Jewish Believers would avail themselves of a local Jewish synagogue, in order to hear and access the Scriptures.

imperative-directive The view of Acts 15:21 being an imperative-directive, is that which is often witnessed by people identifying themselves as a part of the One Law/One Torah sub-movement. It is not enough to conclude that when followed, the Apostolic decree would see that the new, non-Jewish Believers were a part of a community where Moses' Teaching was being heard and proclaimed every week; Acts 15:21 includes a direct imperative *to attend the local synagogue*. This approach to Acts 15:21 can be seen as generally represented by Tim Hegg:

"v. 20, which contains the Four Prohibitions, is the basis for the statement in v. 21. The sense can be plainly stated by paraphrasing these two verses like this: 'The believing Gentiles are to abstain from these four things, for Moses is preached and ready in every city, in synagogues, every Sabbath.' In other words, since the Torah was the central subject of study in the synagogues, the believing Gentiles must understand that their lifestyle would be constantly inspected by the light of the Torah....James and the Apostles gave the Gentiles the 'fences' necessary to help them be accepted within the synagogue community. One could imagine Jewish believers, especially those who were 'zealous for the Torah,' were taken aback at such a short list of requirements for Gentiles! But James immediately explains why: 'For Moses is preached....' The Gentiles will grow in their learning and obedience to the Torah through their inclusion in the synagogue community."⁷⁹

While criticized by many, because the statement of Acts 15:21 does not appear in the letter sent to the Believers in Antioch in Acts 15:23-29 following, this is not as big of a problem as some have made it out to be. Would the Apostolic representatives sent to Antioch ever prescribe that the non-Jewish Believers be hearing the Holy Scriptures read to them every week? Likewise, if Acts 15:23-29 is an abridgement of the actual letter, then Acts 15:21 need not be repeated any more than how the Acts 11 retelling of Peter's vision does leave out many details, including the proper name of his host Cornelius. An imperative-directive view of Acts 15:21 is not impossible.

Still, an imperative-directive view of Acts 15:21 has more potential issues than a prescriptive/resultative approach. Perhaps one of the biggest deficiencies among those who identify themselves as One Law/One Torah, is in failing to recognize how the four prohibitions of the Apostolic decree were not always followed by the new, non-Jewish Believers. Likewise to be considered is how if the reasoning of Acts 15:21 implied any kind of synagogue attendance to hear the Scriptures, is how James' statement was conditioned by the circumstances of the 40s-50s C.E., before more of the complications of the 60s, subsequent Jewish Revolt in Judea, and steady distancing of the *ekklēsia* of Messiah followers from the wider Jewish community.

A ministry like Outreach Israel and Messianic Apologetics would be prone to follow a *prescriptive/resultative* approach to James' word of Acts 15:21, the reason stated (*Mōusēs gar, Μωϋσῆς γάρ*) for the Apostolic decree. But, we have to say that **we are most disappointed**, in witnessing all of the different approaches to Acts 15:21 just summarized, **how far too frequently, present examination of the Apostolic**

⁷⁹ Tim Hegg (2009). *An Assessment of the "Divine Invitation" Teaching*. Torah Resource. Retrieved 06 October, 2009, from <<http://torahresource.com>>.

decree in the Messianic movement has not given James' appeal to the Prophets enough of its proper due: "With this the words of the Prophets agree" (Acts 15:15).

The Apostles recognized how in the post-resurrection era, a time period of the universal availability of God's Spirit, how His Spirit was being poured out on "all flesh" (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:39; cf. Acts 15:7-8). The prophesied New Covenant would provide permanent atonement and forgiveness from sins, *as well* as a supernatural transcription of God's Torah onto redeemed people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). The nations were to come to Zion to be taught God's Torah (Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 2:2-4). God's plan would surely have to take shape at God's direction—and not the direction of any mortals, like the hyper-conservative Pharisees demanding that the non-Jewish Believers be circumcised as proselytes. Instead, God's Spirit needed to direct what was going on.

Acts 15:19-21 in further Bible reading How important was the Apostolic decree (Acts 15:19-21) for the First Century *ekklēsia*? **Quite serious.** The message of the Hebrew Prophets was that the Messiah would not only come to restore Israel, but spread God's salvation to the entire world (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). Recognizing that the salvation of the nations was a major part of His plan (Acts 15:15), James' ruling before the Jerusalem Council was to serve as a pragmatic way of cutting the new, non-Jewish Believers off from their previous sphere of social and religious influence in Greco-Roman paganism—without them having to be circumcised as proselytes and be Torah-keeping for salvation, as was being demanded (Acts 15:1, 5). **What James ruled was necessary for them to follow to demonstrate that they had changed.**

By following the four prohibitions issued by James (Acts 15:20), the new, non-Jewish Believers could demonstrate in concrete actions that they were indeed loyal to Israel's God, and to His Messiah, Yeshua. They would not need to be ordered to follow God's Torah, because Tanach prophecies such as Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2 already foresaw the nations coming to Zion to be taught God's Torah. The First Century Jewish Believers just needed to help facilitate the right environment to see this come to pass. The Apostolic decree would serve this need. When followed, the non-Jewish Believers would be able to go to the local synagogue on *Shabbat* to hear from Moses' Teaching (Acts 15:21), in order to understand the four prohibitions issued to them (Acts 15:20), and other facets of living the holy life it requires. The enactment of the New Covenant power of supernaturally writing the commandments on the heart (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27), would then be able to naturally take its course.

Very few of us often try to consciously put ourselves back into the First Century culture of the time. The new non-Jewish converts to faith in Messiah lived in a society where the Greco-Roman "mythology," as we call it today, was much of the "theology" of the people. They believed that the god Mercury was delivering divine messages to and fro. They believed that Cupid made people fall in love. They believed in Mount Olympus and that the Fates controlled people's destinies. Some of them even believed that when it rained the gods were urinating from the clouds. The First Century culture of the Greeks and the Romans had temple prostitutes, and many practiced infant exposure. The kinds of religious writings that these people would consult would not be Psalms or Proverbs, but would instead be things like Homer's *Iliad* or *The Odyssey*, or various kinds of epic plays.⁸⁰ While we might make some crude jokes about Greco-Roman temple prostitutes, visiting such persons and "interacting" with them—*really was* a religious experience.

The early non-Jewish Believers had a great deal going against them from their background, if they really did want to be a part of the First Century Messianic movement, and join with Jewish Believers as their fellow brothers and sisters. The Apostolic decree would serve in helping to get the negative, anti-God character traits

⁸⁰ Consult the books *New Testament History* by F.F. Bruce (New York: Doubleday, 1969), and *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* by David A. deSilva (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000) for a broad(er) review of the period.

from the cultural background of the non-Jewish Believers, out of them.⁸¹ And enacting four definitive, non-negotiable, necessary “essentials” (Acts 15:28), could not have come any sooner for the First Century Believers. Bruce indicates for us how,

“Before long there would be more Gentile Christians than Jewish Christians in the world. The Jewish Christians feared that the influx of so many Gentile believers would bring about a weakening of Christian moral standards, and the evidence of Paul’s Corinthian correspondence shows that their misgivings were not unfounded. How was this new situation to be controlled?”⁸²

That the new, non-Jewish Believers were anticipated to go to the local synagogue and learn from Moses’ Teaching (Acts 15:21) and the Tanach Scriptures should be quite obvious.⁸³ The Jewish Synagogue was, for the most part, the only place where the Scriptures would be accessible. There was no “New Testament” written for these Believers to follow or consult. There was only the Torah and the Prophets and the Writings—the Tanach. The only Scriptures in existence at the time were the Torah of Moses and the Prophets—copies of which were largely only available at a local synagogue—especially in the Diaspora. How were the early non-Jewish Believers supposed to understand what the God of Israel expected of them unless they went to the Jewish Synagogue to hear Moses’ Teaching?

The testimony of the Apostolic Scriptures demonstrates that the rulings of the Jerusalem Council were implemented with varying degrees of success. In some cases, there were no problems, as various communities of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers had already been associated with a local synagogue or Jewish community (like Philippi, and probably also Colossae), and the non-Jewish Believers already had a grounding in a large part of the commandments of God in the Torah. In other cases, though, some difficulties had to be overcome, as non-Jewish Believers came to faith directly from paganism (like Thessalonica), and still had to wrestle with the Torah’s basic ethical and moral code. In a few cases, for whatever reasons, antinomianism and a large disregard for God’s commandments had been allowed (like Corinth), and groups of Believers needed to be sternly admonished. Still, there would also be problems in seeing unity formed between diverse groups of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, some of which would divide over trivial issues (like Rome).⁸⁴

⁸¹ This is not to say that Greco-Roman culture did not have any positive character traits that enhanced the First Century Body of Messiah. It surely did, as there were certainly parallels to be found between the ethical and moral tenor of some of the various philosophers, and sentiments expressed within the Holy Scriptures. The Apostles were frequently able to find areas of agreement between the Scriptures and contemporary Greco-Roman philosophy, even though the Bible would often be quite subversive or superior to such philosophy in some way.

For some further thoughts, consult John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

Also useful is J.D. Charles, “Pagan Sources in the New Testament,” in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 761-763, which mostly describe common points of agreement between the Biblical message and various Greek and Roman (often quite localized) cultural values.

⁸² Bruce, *Acts*, 301.

⁸³ Consult B. Chilton and E. Yamauchi, “Synagogues,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, pp 1145-1153, for a summary of the kinds of things that were typical to synagogues of the First Century C.E.

⁸⁴ For a further analysis, be sure to consult the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.