CHAPTER 16

James and the Jerusalem Council Decision

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The most momentous decision the early Christian movement had to make was on the status of Gentiles who wished to join it. That Gentiles should join the movement was not in itself problematic, since there was a widespread Jewish expectation, based on biblical prophecies, that in the last days the restoration of God's own people Israel would be accompanied by the conversion of the other nations to the worship of the God of Israel. Since the early Christians believed that the messianic restoration of Israel was now under way in the form of their own community, it would not have been difficult for them to recognize that the time for the conversion of the nations was also arriving. What was much less clear, however, was whether Gentiles who came to faith in Jesus the Messiah should become Jews, getting circumcised (in the case of men) and adopting the full yoke of the Torah, or whether they could remain Gentiles while enjoying the same blessings of eschatological salvation that Jewish believers in Jesus did. It is not unlikely that in the early days there were Gentiles who joined the Christian movement, at the same time converting to Judaism. At any rate the issue does not seem to have been clearly posed to the leaders of the movement in Jerusalem before the conversion of the God-fearer Cornelius and his household (Acts 10). For Peter, who preached the gospel to them, this was a landmark event, something the narrative of Acts emphasizes by narrating it twice (the second time when Peter tells the story to the other Jerusalem leaders in Acts 11:4 – 17). When this group of Gentiles believed in Jesus, they immediately received the Holy Spirit in so evident a way that Peter could only conclude that God had extended salvation to them as Gentiles, not requiring that they first become Jews. He therefore baptised them, admitting them to the messianic people of God without expecting them to be circumcised or to observe any more of the Torah than they already did (as God-fearers who worshiped the God of Israel and lived by the moral principles of the Torah).

It is very important to understand what preconceptions Peter had to set aside, both when he visited Cornelius in his home and, more important, when he recognized that

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God had given these Gentiles, even though they remained Gentiles, the same blessing of eschatological salvation that Peter and other Jewish believers in Jesus had received at Pentecost. The preconceptions Peter had to set aside were those that the Jewish leadership of the Christian movement would finally (in Acts 15) have to set aside in a decision binding on the whole movement. Crucial to the account of Peter and Cornelius are the words “making a distinction” (Acts 10:20; 11:12; 15:9). The Spirit guides Peter to go with Cornelius’s messengers, not making the distinction he would usually make between Jews and Gentiles. Such a distinction was one that God himself made in the Torah (Lev 20:24, 26), where it was symbolized by the distinction between clean and unclean animals that Israelites were to make in their diet (Lev 20:25). The message of Peter’s dream, in which he was shocked to hear God telling him to break the dietary rules by eating unclean animals (Acts 10:11–16; 11:5–10), accompanied by the declaration, “What God has purified, you must not consider profane” (Acts 10:15; 11:9), was not literally concerned with Jewish diet, but with the separation between Jews and Gentiles. Peter explains this when he meets Cornelius’s household: “You yourselves know that it is taboo for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or impure” (10:28).

In Jewish eyes Gentiles were both profane and impure. They were “profane” (i.e., not holy) simply because they were Gentiles and so did not share the holiness of the people of Israel, who alone constituted God’s holy people. The sense in which Gentiles were considered “impure” has often been misunderstood. In the later Second Temple period Gentiles were not usually considered impure in the ritual or cultic sense, that is, defiled by the sort of impurity Jews contracted from such sources as corpses, sexual intercourse, childbirth, or scale disease. The rules of cultic purity did not apply to Gentiles. But the Torah and later Jewish thought envisaged another kind of impurity that scholars have tended to neglect. This is the defilement that resulted from certain especially heinous sins, usually idolatry, sexual immorality of many kinds, and murder. It was with this kind of impurity that, paradigmatically, the Canaanites had defiled not only themselves but also the land (Lev 18:24–25, 27), and Israelites were stringently warned against imitating such practices (Lev 18:24–28; 20:1–5; Num 35:33–34). In the later Second Temple period, especially in the land of Israel, where the presence of Gentiles defiling the land was naturally offensive to devout Jews, Gentile society as a whole was generally regarded as morally impure because of the pervasive idolatry and the prevalence of sexual practices abhorrent to Jews. The prohibition on intimate association between Jews and Gentiles, whether in intermarriage or visiting Gentiles in their homes or eating with them, had this basis. The danger was not that Jews would contract ritual impurity through physical contact, but that they would be contaminated by Gentile idolatry and immorality. In the case of idolatry, for example, all the institutions and practices of Gentile life were so implicated in it that Jews could all too easily be unwittingly involved.

2. Most translations have “not hesitating” (or similar), but the verb is the same as in 11:12 and 15:9 and makes a much more significant point.

3. All quotations from the New Testament in this chapter are my own translations, unless otherwise indicated. In many cases, I have given a more literal translation than those of most of the English versions.
We might suppose that this would not apply to Cornelius, “an upright and God-fearing man, of whom the whole Jewish nation speaks well” (Acts 10:22), but we should remember that he was a centurion in the Roman army, where participation in idolatry could scarcely be avoided. In any case, even if God-fearers in some diaspora synagogues might escape denunciation as impure, in Jewish Palestine, where Gentile impurity defiled the land and, even more shockingly, Jewish imitation of Gentile ways would defile the land and the sanctuary, there was more reason for suspicious prudence. The common view was that Gentiles could not escape moral impurity without the protection afforded by submission to the whole yoke of the Torah, including, of course, circumcision for males. Therefore it was necessary for Jews to “make a distinction” between themselves and Gentiles, avoiding intimate association. This did not mean avoiding, for example, business dealings or marketplace conversation, but it did mean avoiding table fellowship, which in the ancient world was the closest form of intimacy other than sexual relationships. This is why the whole Jerusalem church was shocked to hear that Peter had entered Cornelius’s home and shared meals with uncircumcised men (Acts 11:2 – 3). It is also why the events in which Paul clashed with Peter in Antioch concerned table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians (Gal 2:11 – 13). It was not the food or the wine that was the issue (any problems at that level could easily be avoided if the Jewish Christians supplied the food and the wine). The problem was that the Jewish Christians who on this occasion enforced separation (enlisting even Peter against his better knowledge) did not believe that Gentiles could be morally pure without observing Torah.

When Peter later recalled his experience with the household of Cornelius, he said that God “in cleansing their hearts by faith … made no distinction between them and us” (Acts 15:9). By the cleansing of the heart Peter refers here to the prophetic expectation that in the messianic age God would purify the hearts of his people and enable them to keep his commandments (see Ezek 36:16 – 36). It was not circumcision and Torah observance but the transformative power of the Spirit that changed the lives of the Jewish Christian community at Pentecost and subsequently. So the gift of the Spirit to the household of Cornelius showed that in the messianic age God was no longer making the distinction between the impure Gentiles and the pure people of God. Both were being cleansed of impurity in the same way — “through the grace of Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:11 NRSV). With the end of this kind of distinction, it was possible also to envisage the end of the distinction between “holy” and “profane” groups of people, that is, between Jews who were God’s people and Gentiles who were not. It became possible to envisage the messianic people of God as a community of both Jews and Gentiles, the former observing Torah, the latter not. Of course, neither Peter nor any of the Jerusalem leaders entertained the idea that Jewish believers in Jesus should give up observing Torah. But Torah observance no longer constituted a barrier between Jews and Gentiles, since their fellowship was based not on Torah, but on faith in Jesus the Messiah and experience of the transformative power of the Spirit. Despite his aberrant behaviour at Antioch, Peter had reached much the same position as Paul on this issue, as Paul recognized very well when he reproached Peter.
for letting himself be bullied into making a show of separation from Gentiles once again (Gal 2:11 – 16).

At what deserves to be called the first Jerusalem conference, immediately after Peter's visit to Cornelius, Peter persuaded the rest of the Jerusalem church, both leaders and other believers, to agree with him (Acts 11:1 – 18). It was in accordance with this decision that Barnabas, as a representative of the Jerusalem leaders, became deeply involved in the first large-scale movement of Gentile conversions at Antioch (Acts 11:20 – 26). From this followed the missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul to the cities of south Galatia, where they established thriving communities of both Jewish and Gentile believers (Acts 13 – 14). But we should not be surprised that the issue of how Gentile believers should relate to the Torah was not yet finally settled. It is normal in human affairs that agreements on really controversial issues have to be negotiated again and again. Perhaps the Jewish believers (former Pharisees, according to Acts 15:5) who began campaigning for Gentile believers to be circumcised were themselves recent converts, not party to the earlier decision of the church. Perhaps they had had doubts all along but were spurred to action by the success of Paul and Barnabas's mission to Gentiles. In any case, according to the narrative of Acts, the debate was such that a full assembly of the apostles, the elders of the Jerusalem church, and all the Jerusalem believers was convened in an attempt to resolve the issue once and for all (Acts 15:6 – 21).

Scholars have long disagreed as to whether the event recounted in Acts 15 is identical with the meeting between Paul, Barnabas, and the three “pillars” of the Jerusalem church that Paul recounts in Galatians 2:1 – 10. The accounts are so different that many who think the same event is being described in both cases also conclude that Luke's account is seriously unreliable as history. My own view (which there is not space to defend here) is that there were two distinct events. Paul's account is of a private consultation that he and Barnabas had with the three senior Jerusalem leaders — James the Lord's brother, Peter, and John — before they set out on their missionary journey to south Galatia. Even then there were believers Paul regards as “false brothers” who infiltrated the meeting (Gal 2:4 NRSV) and plainly took a different view of the matter. When such people stirred up things in Antioch on Paul's return (Gal 2:12; Acts 15:1 – 2), the need was seen for a plenary meeting of the Jerusalem church, involving all the Christian leaders who could attend, with the aim both of debating the matter seriously and of promulgating an official ruling for all the churches.

According to the narrative in Acts 15, it is Peter who opens the proceedings by reminding his audience of the conversion of Cornelius and his household. He makes the points about this that we have already discussed, concluding that Gentile converts should not be required to shoulder the yoke of the Torah. Barnabas and Paul support Peter's argument with the account of their missionary outreach to Gentiles, which God has evidently blessed by doing "signs and wonders" (Acts 15:12). These speakers are all, in effect, offering miraculous interventions of God as proof that God accepts Gentiles into his eschatological people. However, this may not have been sufficient for some of those present. After all, the matter was one of halakah (interpretation of Torah). Later rabbis — and therefore plausibly some of those present at the Jerusalem
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council — held that matters of halakah could be decided only from Scripture. Therefore it is not the speeches of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul, but the speech of James the Lord's brother (who, by this stage, seems to have reached a preeminent position in the Jerusalem church) that provides the clinching argument. James argues from Scripture that the Gentiles who, it depicts, will join the messianic people of God will do so as Gentiles.

James's quotation from “the prophets” (Acts 15:15–18) is in fact a conflated quotation, combining Amos 9:11–12, the main text, with allusions to related texts that assist the interpretation. In addition, the form of the text has been selected and adapted to suit the interpretation. These are Jewish exegetical techniques that are known to us not only from the New Testament but also from the Qumran biblical commentaries (pesharim). Their use is evidence of skilled exegetical work. What appears to be merely a quotation of a scriptural text turns out to be in fact also an interpretation of the text.

The interpretation takes “the dwelling of David” in Amos 9:11 to be the eschatological Temple God will build as the place of his eschatological presence in the messianic age when Davidic rule is restored to Israel. He will build this new Temple so that all the Gentile nations may seek his presence there. Such a reading of the words of Amos is promoted by the other, related prophetic texts to which allusion is made (Hos 3:5; Jer 12:15–16; Isa 45:21), as well as by following the variant form of the Hebrew text that is represented by the Septuagint Greek translation (i.e., reading “the rest of humanity will seek” instead of “they will possess the remnant of humanity,” as in the Masoretic Hebrew).

The importance of this text for the issue in question at the Jerusalem council turns especially on the words: “all the nations over whom my name has been invoked” (Acts 15:17). This is a Hebrew idiom, frequent in the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish literature, that denotes YHWH's ownership. It is frequently used of Israel as YHWH's own people (e.g., Deut 28:10; 2 Chr 7:14; Jer 14:9; Dan 9:19), distinguished from the Gentiles, who are “those over whom your name has not been invoked” (Isa 63:19). Its use in Amos 9:12 of “all the nations” is unique and would have been read by early Christians as strong evidence that Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to belong to the messianic people of God. There are few, if any, other prophetic texts that James could have selected to make this point as decisively as this one. It shows that in the messianic age, Gentiles, precisely as Gentiles, will no longer be “profane” but will join the Jews in belonging to God’s holy people, those “over whom YHWH's name has been invoked.”

The text says that all the Gentiles will “seek the Lord,” and in line with other prophetic texts that envisage the converted nations coming into God's presence in the Temple (e.g., Isa 2:2–3; Zech 14:16), James no doubt takes this to mean that they will seek the Lord in his Temple, the restored Temple of the messianic age, “the dwelling of David” mentioned by Amos. But we need also to recall that the early Christians thought of their own community as the new Temple. When applied to their own situation, the text implies that, whereas Gentiles were prohibited from entering the Temple...
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built of stone in Jerusalem, they could enter the new Temple of the messianic age, the Christian community.

While Amos 9:11 – 12 provides the exegetical basis for maintaining that Gentile Christians are not obligated to keep the law of Moses, it is not obvious why this conclusion is then qualified in James’s speech by the proviso that there are four prohibitions they must observe (Acts 15:20). Luke’s summary has obscured the exegetical argument on which the terms of the “apostolic decree,” as it has often been called (Acts 15:28 – 29), are based, but it can be uncovered. The four prohibitions correspond to the four things that are prohibited to “the alien who sojourns in your/their midst” in Leviticus 17 – 18 (the phrase occurs in Lev 17:10, 12, 13; 18:26): (1) “things sacrificed to idols” are prohibited in Leviticus 17:8 – 9 (cf. 3 – 7); (2) “blood” (i.e., eating blood) is prohibited in Leviticus 17:10, 12; (3) “things strangled” (i.e., meat which has not been slaughtered in such a way as to drain the blood from it) are prohibited by implication in Leviticus 17:13; and (4) “sexual immorality” refers to Leviticus 18:26 and covers all the prohibited forms of sexual practice in Leviticus 18:6 – 23.

The reason these four are selected from the commandments of the Torah as alone applicable to Gentile members of the messianic people of God is exegetical. They are specifically designated as obliging “the alien who sojourns in your/their midst” as well as Israelites. Applied to the situation of the messianic people of God, this phrase could be seen as referring to Gentiles included in the community along with Jews. But the point is made more precisely by the use of this same phrase in two of the prophecies about the conversion of the Gentiles in the messianic age: Jeremiah 12:16 (“they shall be built in the midst of my people”) and Zechariah 2:11 (LXX: “they shall dwell in your midst”). In the light of these exegetical links, the Torah itself can be seen to make specific provision for these Gentile converts, who are not obliged, like Jews, by the commandments of the Torah in general, but are obliged by these specific commandments.

There is yet another feature of these four commandments in Leviticus 17 – 18 that marks them out as meeting the problem the Jerusalem council faced. They can easily be taken to be just the commandments to which reference is made in Leviticus 18:24 – 30 when it exhorts the Israelites not to follow the practices of the Canaanite peoples with which they had defiled themselves and the land. In other words, the offences that are prohibited both in Leviticus 17 – 18 and in the apostolic decree are those most often regarded as constituting the moral impurity of Gentiles. The fit with the situation in Acts 15 is perfect. If God has indeed, as Peter claims, “purified their [the Gentiles] hearts by faith,” these are the impurities — the typical Gentile sins — from which they are henceforth to be pure. In formulating the apostolic decree, James does not really add to Peter’s position on the matter. He simply spells out a necessary implication of Peter’s view: that Gentile members of the messianic people of God are to refrain from the moral impurities in which Gentiles typically indulged. Since they are members of the messianic people as Gentiles, they do not require circumcision and other requirements that the Torah makes on Israelites in order to become or to remain morally pure, but they are obliged by these specific prohibitions of the Torah against morally polluting practices.
This also makes clear why, as Peter has known since his vision and its explication, close association, such as sharing meals, between Jewish and Gentile believers is not problematic. It had been taboo in order to protect Jews from the morally polluting influence of Gentile sinners. But Gentile believers in Christ, according to James and the decree, should not be suspected of idolatry and immorality. By explicitly applying the prohibitions of Leviticus 17–18 to them it is made unequivocally clear that they are expected to avoid the impurities that would otherwise impede fellowship between Jews and Gentiles in the church.

It is important to note that the reason the apostolic decree facilitates Jewish and Gentile table fellowship is not because three of its four prohibitions concern meat. It would have been easy enough for Jews sharing even a meal provided by Gentiles to observe these prohibitions by simply not eating meat. The first three practices forbidden by the decree, like the fourth, are matters not of ritual but of moral impurity. The danger of table fellowship with Gentiles was of becoming implicated in these idolatrous and immoral practices of the Gentiles. Their prohibition to Gentiles in the apostolic decree, as in Leviticus itself, has the secondary effect of making close association of Jews and Gentiles who observe the prohibition possible. But they are prohibited primarily because they are pollutions of which all the people of God, Jewish and Gentile, must be free.

There is good evidence that observance of the prohibitions in the apostolic decree was widespread for a long period. It is true that the common view that Christians should not eat “things sacrificed to idols” need not presuppose the apostolic decree. But the conjunction of “to eat things sacrificed to idols” and “to practise sexual immorality” in Revelation 2:14, 20, strongly suggests that the decree is in mind. When the Didache advises “concerning food, bear what you are able, but in any case keep strictly away from meat sacrificed to idols, for it is the worship of dead gods” (6:3), it seems likely that it refers, not to Jewish food laws in general, but to the terms of the apostolic decree. While it shows that avoidance of blood was not found practical by all Christians, it also maintains that ideally this is desirable. That Christians abstain from eating blood is taken for granted by the Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons (ap. Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 5.1.26), Minucius Felix (Oct. 30.6–7), Tertullian (Apol. 9.13; Pud. 12.4–5; Mon. 5), and Clement of Alexandria (Strom. 4.15). Origen (Cels. 8.29–30) refers explicitly to the decree and clearly sees no problem in regarding all three of the first three prohibitions as binding on and actually observed by Christians in his time. None of these writers relate the decree to table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, which would, in any case, hardly have been a matter of concern in their contexts. Few of them (Origen is an exception) show any sign of knowing the decree from Acts, which is extremely unlikely in several cases. Such wide acknowledgement of the prohibitions in the decree could not have started when Acts became widely known, but must go back to widespread circulation of the terms of the decree from an early period, independently of Acts. Only if the decree came with the authority of the mother church in Jerusalem, as Acts 15 portrays it, can this be plausibly explained.

We have discussed the evidence that the four prohibitions in the apostolic decree
were widely acknowledged and observed. But, of course, logically prior to the four prohibitions was the accompanying decision of the Jerusalem council that Gentile Christians did not have to be circumcised (and thereby be obligated to keep the whole law). This decision was, if anything, more influential than the four prohibitions. It is remarkable how little evidence there is, after this decision must have been promulgated by the Jerusalem church, of Christians proposing that Gentile Christians should be circumcised. To attribute this to the influence of Paul is greatly to exaggerate Paul's influence. James in particular should probably be given much of the credit for the policy that had such an extraordinarily determinative influence on the history of early Christianity.

For Further Reading


Diffenderfer, Margaret Ruth. “Conditions of Membership in the People of God: A Study Based on Acts 15 and Other Rele-


