A REEXAMINATION OF THE PROHIBITIONS IN ACTS 15

Charles H. Savelle

THE BOOK OF ACTS, and especially chapter 15, serves as an important link between the Gospels and the Epistles. Two decisions in this chapter had a profound impact on the future of the church and its understanding of the gospel.

The first decision relates to the question of how Gentiles could be saved. That is, must Gentiles be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5)? The apostles and elders (v. 2) who composed the Jerusalem Council concluded that the answer to this is no.

The second decision took the form of four prohibitions. Representing the Jerusalem Council, James said that believing Gentiles should “abstain from things contaminated by idols and from fornication and from what is strangled and from blood” (v. 20). The letter that was sent from the Council to churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (v. 23) refers to these four in a different order: “abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things...”

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2 It is important to note that the issue is not whether Gentiles could be saved. That was settled, as far as Acts is concerned, in chapter 10. Although one might argue that Cornelius was at least a God-fearer, and thus not a true pagan, Peter’s vision of the sheet (10:10–16) seems to suggest that Cornelius was still considered covenantally unclean. Thus the debated issue was how Gentiles could be saved. It is also worth noting that in Jewish thinking salvation was not primarily individualistic but corporate. For example the apostles’ question about restoring the kingdom to Israel (1:6) is associated with Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God (v. 3). Thus in such a mindset, circumcision could be viewed not merely as a matter of personal piety but also in terms of redemptive corporate identification.
strangled and from fornication” (v. 29). This order is followed in the later summary when Paul returned to Jerusalem (21:25). The purpose of this article is to examine the origins, purposes, and significance of these four prohibitions in the apostolic decree of Acts 15.

The Greek Text of Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25

The textual traditions of the Book of Acts present significant challenges for any exegetical examination, including the prohibitions in Acts 15:20, 29; and 21:25. Although the Alexandrian tradition of the Greek text is favored by most translators and commentators, a brief examination of the variants in the textual tradition offers insight into understanding the decree and its prohibitions.

First, the phrase καὶ τῆς πορνείας (“and fornication”) is omitted from φ in 15:20 (15:29 and 21:25 have not survived in φ). Barrett notes that this omission also occurs in some Ethiopic manuscripts and is inferred from Origen’s Contra Celsum 8:29. Second, D gig Ir lack καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ (“what is strangled”) in 15:20, 29; and 21:25. Third, in 15:20, 29; and 21:25 a number of Western manuscripts (D 323 945 1739 1891 pc sa Ir) add καὶ δόσα ἀν μὴ θέλωσιν αὐτοῖς γίνεσθαι ἑτέροις μὴ ποιεῖν (“and not to do to others what they would not want to be done to themselves”), a negative form of the Golden Rule.

The first variant, the omission of the phrase καὶ τῆς πορνείας, is probably best understood as secondary. If the scribes responsible for this reading were working from an Alexandrian text, then the omission may have been intentional, since this phrase is the only explicit moral stipulation in the decree. On the other hand this may be a case of unintentional omission, with the scribe accidentally passing over one of the phrases.

The remaining two variants seem to represent an intentional shift or harmonization toward an ethical nuance for the prohibitions. By omitting καὶ τοῦ πνικτοῦ and adding καὶ δόσα ἀν μὴ θέλωσιν αὐτοῖς γίνεσθαι ἑτέροις μὴ ποιεῖν, all that is required for a

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4 D has the indicative θέλωσιν rather than the subjunctive θέλωσιν and the imperative ποιέτε in place of the infinitive ποιεῖν.

5 George Brockwell King lists several earlier occurrences of the “rule,” including Tobit 4:15 (second century B.C.), Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, and several appearances after the apostolic decree (the T. Naph., the Palestinian Targum, the Letter of Aristaenus), Philo, Eusebius (Praeparatio Evangelica 8.7), and Hillel (“The Negative Form of the Golden Rule,” Journal of Religion 8 [1928]: 268).
purely ethical injunction is to interpret καὶ τοῦ αἵματος ("and blood") as a reference to murder. The common explanation for this shift is that, as the church became more Gentile and less Jewish, the sensitivities behind the prohibitions were no longer relevant. Hence at least in the Western churches the prohibitions were reinvented along ethical lines. This argument seems to be reasonable, even though parts of the church continued to practice the mixed prohibitions (as represented by the Alexandrian text tradition) for several centuries.\(^6\) Furthermore from a text-critical perspective it seems difficult to envision a situation where ethical prohibitions would have been altered to include ritual food prohibitions. One must also take into account the likelihood of the originality of the Alexandrian tradition as a whole as it pertains to the Book of Acts.

It seems best to accept the version of the prohibition found in the Alexandrian tradition.\(^7\) That being said, the early appearance of the alternative readings in the Western manuscripts provides a glimpse of how at least some Christians sought to contextualize and apply the prohibitions.

### A Comparison of the Lists of the Prohibitions in Acts

The prohibitions in the apostolic decree appear three times in Acts as follows.

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The difference in order between πορνείας/πορνείαν and αἷματος/αἷμα is not considered significant, although the rationale behind the change in order is not readily apparent.\(^8\) The changes may be merely stylistic. Perhaps more significant is the change from ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων in 15:20 to εἰδωλοθύτων in 15:29 and 21:25. Here the change seems to be a deliberate attempt to clarify ἀλισγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων ("pollutions of idols").

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\(^6\) Ibid., 736.


\(^8\) Some suggest that the shifting in order of the prohibitions is an attempt to conform the order to Leviticus 17–18, a suggested source for the prohibitions.
WORD STUDIES RELATED TO THE PROHIBITIONS

One key to understanding the prohibitions involves attention to five Greek terms used by Luke.

'Αλίσγημα

This word occurs in the New Testament only in 15:20, and it is not found in the Septuagint or the Apocrypha. The meaning of this rare term ("pollution") is most often derived from the verbal cognate ἄλισγέω, a late Greek term that means "to pollute." The verb occurs in the Septuagint of Daniel 1:8; Malachi 1:7, 12; and Sirach 40:29. In all three contexts the word is used in conjunction with eating food. The corresponding Hebrew term in the passages in Daniel and Malachi also carries the meaning of “to pollute, desecrate.” The sense of “pollution” is confirmed by the fifth century A.D. lexicographer Hesychius, who described it as “the taking as food of defiling sacrifices.”

The connection of ἄλισγημα to τῶν εἴδωλων and the substitution of οἱ εἴδωλοθύτων in 15:29 and 21:25 suggests that the meaning of ἄλισγημα relates to cultic defilement associated with idolatry. Thus a translation such as “pollutions of idols” (i.e., a metonymy for “polluted things”) is contextually appropriate.

Είδωλόθυτος

In 15:29 and 21:25 the adjective εἴδωλόθυτος replaces the phrase ἄλισγημάτων τῶν εἴδωλων of 15:20. The basic meaning of the term is “something offered to a cultic image/idol.” This word is used seven times elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Cor. 8:1, 4, 7, 10; 10:19;

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12 E. A. Sophocles, Greek Lexicon of the Roman and Byzantine Periods (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1887), 1:114.

In each of these passages the context involves food sacrificed to idols. The Corinthian passages are particularly significant because the discussion includes the “weaker brother” principle. This or a principle similar to it is probably behind the prohibitions introduced by James. The verses in Revelation are historically significant in that they suggest that at least some churches were still struggling with eating meat sacrificed to idols forty or more years after the introduction of the decree.

The term also occurs in 4 Maccabees 5:1–2, where it relates Antiochus IV’s attempt to compel the Jews to “taste swine’s flesh, and things offered to idols.” Again the term εἰδωλόθυτος occurs in a negative context of food offered to idols. This negative perception is reinforced in 5:3 where the verb μιαροφαγέω (“to eat abominable meats”) is used.

In summary as a substitution for ἀλίσγημάτων τῶν εἰδώλων, the meaning of the adjective εἰδωλόθυτος both informs and is informed by the phrase that it replaces. In both Acts 15:29 and 21:25 it seems apparent that εἰδωλόθυτος refers to eating meat sacrificed to idols with the implication of defilement.

Πορνεία
This word occurs twenty-four times in the New Testament, and the related verb πορνεύω occurs eight times. However, it is used in Acts only in 15:20, 29; and 21:29. Luke’s Gospel does not include the term at all.

Πορνεία is generally understood as meaning “unlawful sexual intercourse, prostitution, unchastity, fornication.” Most New Testament uses of this term refer to literal sexual immorality of various kinds. The only possible exceptions seem to occur in the Johannine writings (John 8:41; Rev. 2:21 [possibly]; 14:8; 17:2, 4; 18:3; 19:2 [all in reference to Babylon]). The occurrence of πορνεία

14 Ἐιδωλόθυτων occurs in 1 Corinthians in 10:28 in C D E F G K L P cop arm. However, this variant is probably not original (Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, International Critical Commentary [1914; reprint, Edinburgh: Clark, 1978], 222).


17 Commentators are divided over whether πορνεία in Revelation 2:21 is literal or spiritual or perhaps both.

18 The association of πορνεία with Babylon probably conveys spiritual harlotry or apostasy.
in Revelation 2:21 is interesting because of the close proximity of this word to the \( \epsilon\iota\delta\omega\lambda\omicron\delta\upsilon\tau\omicron\sigma \) in verse 20. In the Septuagint \( \pi\omicron\nu\epsilon\iota\alpha \) is used about fifty times, usually as a metaphor for idolatry or unfaithfulness to God (Num. 14:33; 2 Kings 9:22; Wisd. 14:12; Hos. 2:4, 6; 4:11–12; 5:4; 6:10; Isa. 57:9; Jer. 2:20; 3:2, 9; 13:27; Ezek. 16:22, 25, 33, 34, 36, 41; 23:7–8, 11, 14, 17–19, 27, 29, 35; 43:7, 9; Mic. 1:7).

An interesting side note to this discussion is that some writers suggest that \( \pi\omicron\nu\epsilon\iota\alpha \) is not original, but is a substitute for either \( \pi\omicron\kappa\epsilon\iota\alpha \) or \( \chi\omicron\iota\nu\epsilon\iota\alpha \), both of which supposedly refer to “pork.” However, Simon has shown that these proposals rest on shaky lexical and textual grounds. The proposals seem to be an unsuccessful attempt to bring all the prohibitions into a cultic-food category.

In conclusion the evidence seems somewhat mixed, with the predominant usage of \( \pi\omicron\nu\epsilon\iota\alpha \) in the New Testament referring to literal illicit sexual activity, but with the usage in the Septuagint often being a metaphor associated with idolatry. The issue is further complicated by the fact that a number of pagan religions included immoral sexual activities as part of their worship. Thus, as always, the context must be the determinative factor.

\( \alpha\iota\mu\alpha \)

This word is used ninety-seven times in the New Testament with three basic meanings. In its most literal sense \( \alpha\iota\mu\alpha \) refers to “the basic component of an organism,” that is, the blood of people or animals (Mark 5:25, 29; John 19:34). Taken a step further, the term \( \alpha\iota\mu\alpha \) can also be used in reference to “the life of an individual” either as “the seat of life” (e.g., Luke 11:50; Acts 22:20) or “blood and life as an expiatory sacrifice” (Rom. 3:25; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12). \( \alpha\iota\mu\alpha \) can also be used in a purely metaphorical sense as “the (apocalyptic) red color, whose appearance in heaven indicates disaster” (Acts 2:19; Rev. 6:12; 8:7; 11:6).

The meaning of Alμα and abstaining from it in the prohibitions is debated and the discussion has important ramifications for the meaning of the prohibitions as a whole. Some writers suggest that Alμα in the prohibitions is a metonymy for murder. A number of texts in the Septuagint and in Jewish literature support this possibility (e.g., Lev. 17:4; Num. 35:27; Wisd. 11:6; Sir. 34:21; Sus. 46; T. Zeb. 3:3; and T. Levi 16:3). Furthermore taking this sense helps alleviate some of the redundancy with the prohibition against "things strangled" (see the following discussion on πνικτός). The benefit is even greater if one also adopts the Western, ethically oriented, reading. The combined effect would be to portray the prohibitions as completely moral in nature.

However, understanding Alμα in the sense of murder seems unlikely for at least two reasons. First, when Alμα is used with the sense of murder, the context usually makes it clear that it is to be taken that way. For example in Acts 5:28 the high priest stated that the apostles intended, "to bring this man's blood [Jesus' murder] upon us" (see also 22:20). However, no such context frames the use of Alμα in the prohibitions. Hunkin notes that Alμα "is not found by itself as equivalent to φόνος. . . . in every case it is some other word in the context like human" or "shedding" that defines the reference to murder, and not Alμα alone.25 Second, would something as obvious as prohibiting murder be included in what is clearly a highly selective list? This seems unlikely.

But what exactly is prohibited? The most likely answer in light of the Jewish context relates to Old Testament food laws, in particular Leviticus 17:10–14 (cf. Gen. 9:4; Lev. 3:17; 7:26–27; 19:26; Deut. 12:16, 23–25, 27; 15:23; 1 Sam. 14:32–34; Ezek. 33:25; Zech. 9:7). In these passages eating blood is prohibited (i.e., eating meat that had not been properly drained of blood). That such practices were common in the first century seems apparent from literature

24 Luke used Alμα eight times in his Gospel (8:43–44; 11:50, 51 [twice]; 13:1; 22:20, 44), but in only two of the three senses (the metaphorical-apocalyptic sense is absent).

before, during, and after this period (e.g., 1 Enoch 7:5; 15:4; 98:11; Jub. 6:7–18; 7:28–29; 21:6; Josephus, The Antiquities of the Jews 3.11.2; m. Ker. 1.1; 5.1, and m. Makkot 3.15.2).

Πνικτός

This adjective occurs in the New Testament only in association with the prohibitions. The term is not used in the Septuagint or in Jewish literature. The term does occur in Athenaeus and other Greek writers as a culinary term (e.g., “smothered”).26 Yet the basic meaning of “strangled, choked to death”27 is generally acknowledged. This sense is reinforced by the threefold use of the related verb πνίγω, which is used of thorns metaphorically choking out a plant (Matt. 13:7) of a creditor literally choking a debtor (18:28), and of swine being drowned in the Sea of Galilee (Mark 5:13). Luke used a compound form of the verb (ἀποπνίγω, “choke,” “drown”)28 in the passages that parallel Matthew 13:7 (Luke 8:7) and Mark 5:13 (Luke 8:33).29

But how is πνικτός used in the prohibitions in Acts? Most commentators link πνικτός to the Mosaic regulations that prohibit the eating of animals that had not had their blood drained properly (Lev. 17:13–14; Deut. 12:16, 23). In a strangled animal the blood is not drained out and remains within the carcass. “The reason behind the prohibition was possibly that among the heathen[...] animals were often killed by being strangled especially in the sacrificial cultus.”30 In any case the following citation from Philo, first-century Jewish philosopher and teacher, suggests that the practice was an issue in his day.

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, which they ought to let depart free and unrestrained, burying the blood, as

28 Ibid., 119.
29 Συμπνίγω, another compound form of πνίγω, is used with similar meaning in Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:7, 19; and Luke 8:14, 42. Thus the cognate terms also seem to confirm the meaning of πνικτός as “strangled, choked to death.”
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.

On which account Moses, in another passage, establishes a law concerning blood, that one may not eat the blood nor the fat. The blood, for the reason which I have already mentioned, that it is the essence of the life; not of the mental and rational life, but of that which exists in accordance with the outward senses, to which it is owing that both we and irrational animals also have a common existence.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{SUMMARY}

The term \textit{άλισγημα} speaks of cultic defilement associated with idolatry (i.e., "the pollution of idols"). The term \textit{είδωλόθυτος} relates to food sacrificed to idols. \textit{Πορνεία} is most often used in the New Testament of literal sexual immorality, but in the Septuagint a metaphorical view associated with idolatry is predominant. The rare term \textit{πνικτός} refers to things strangled and (in the context of the prohibitions) to animals that were killed without proper draining of the blood. Closely related to \textit{πνικτός} is the term \textit{αίμα}, which carries a literal sense in the prohibition against eating blood.

\textbf{THREE MAJOR INTERPRETIVE QUESTIONS}

\textbf{WHAT WAS THE SOURCE(S) OF THE PROHIBITIONS?}

Commentators have generally suggested three potential sources for the prohibitions: rabbinic teachings, the so-called Noahic precepts, and Leviticus 17–18.\textsuperscript{32}

\textit{Rabbinic literature as the source.} It is generally acknowledged that some later rabbinic teachings bear some resemblance to the prohibitions in Acts 15. The dating of these rabbinic materials is a complicated issue. The composition of the Targums, Mishnah, and Talmud falls into two broad periods, the tannaic (50 B.C.–A.D. 200) and the amoraic (A.D. 220–500),\textsuperscript{33} although some of the material probably originates in earlier oral traditions. Therefore care must be used when appealing to rabbinic literature.

\textsuperscript{31} Philo, \textit{Special Laws} 4.122–23.


Passages such as p. Shebiit 35a., 49f.; p. Sanhedrin 21b. 10–11; b. Pesahim 25ab; and b. Sanhedrin 74a suggest that a Jew may compromise to avoid persecution in any area except idolatry, the shedding of blood, and incest. As a result some commentators have sought to show that the prohibitions in Acts arose out of prevailing Jewish sensibilities reflected in the rabbinic teachings.

However, while one can see a correspondence to the idolatry, the blood, and the sexual immorality of the prohibitions, this view is problematic. First, there is no corresponding element to πυκτός, so one wonders why it would have been included in Acts 15. Second, this view does not seem to fit as well with verse 21, which refers to Moses, not to rabbinic teachings (though admittedly the rabbis were devoted to Moses).

The Noahic precepts as the source. The so-called Noahic precepts are rooted in God’s command to Noah and his descendants to abstain from eating meat with blood and from murder (Gen. 9:4–6). With this as a foundation, later Jewish literature (Jub. 7.20) and rabbinic teaching (t. Abod. Zar 8, 4; m. Gen. Rab., Noah, 34; b. Sanh. 56b) developed a more elaborate list of prohibitions. As Scott notes, “The various rabbinic writings offer different lists, numbering from six to more than thirty regulations.” The most well-known of these lists prohibits idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual immorality, theft, and eating from a living animal. These precepts had specific reference to Jews and non-Jews living in Israel (commonly referred to as “the stranger within your gates”). As Bockmuehl states, “Its basis is the fact that God gave certain pre-Sinaitic laws equally to all humankind; these laws may therefore form the ethical foundation of Jewish dealings with Gentiles.”

The advantages of this view are significant. First, there is a clear correspondence with three of the four prohibitions. Second, the universalistic nature of the original Noahic commandments in

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35 Other rabbinic materials related to specific aspects of the prohibitions include m. Yoma 5:6; m. Makkot 3:2; m. Hullin 1:1, 4; 2:1, 4; 3:1-4; 8:3; m. Keritot 1:1; 5:1; and m. Toharot 1:1.
36 These precepts are also referred to as Noachide or Noachian.
Genesis would provide a natural bridge to the Gentiles since the commandments were apparently applicable to all mankind and not just the Jews. Third, urging the Gentile believers to follow the Noahic precepts would probably have soothed some of the Pharisaic concerns and would have removed some of the sting about not requiring circumcision.

On the other hand there are difficulties in this view. The similarities between the prohibitions and the Noahic precepts are not as close as they may seem at first glance. For example Genesis 9 has only one clear correspondence to the prohibitions (eating meat with blood in it). The only other command relates to murder, and while αἷμα can be used as a metonymy for murder, the earlier examination of this term has shown that this meaning is unlikely. It is also problematic that πνικτός does not occur in the Noahic precepts. Furthermore why were between six and thirty precepts narrowed down by James to four. Suggesting that the Noahic precepts provide the source of the prohibitions is also problematic historically. As Wedderburn has noted, there is no evidence that the Noahic precepts were in use in the first century.

Witherington concurs when he writes, "It would be anachronistic to bring the latter rabbinic concept of seven Noahic commandments, binding on all descendants of Noah, into our discussion." Contextually the Noahic view seems difficult to sustain. For one thing, very little in the immediate context would bring Noah to the reader's mind. The first mention of the prohibitions in Acts 15:20 makes reference to Moses, not Noah. Also in verse 23 the letter is addressed to the churches outside of Israel (Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia). As Witherington points out, there is a significant difference between "the stranger within the gates" and the Gentiles in the Diaspora. It might be argued that Witherington is understanding the Noahic precepts too narrowly here, but even a proponent of this view states that at least one form of the Noahic precepts gives "the minimum requirements for aliens living in the land."

42 Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles XV-XXVIII*, 734. If James was calling attention to Noah here, it would be the only allusion to him in the Book of Acts.
43 It is possible that Moses was being used as a metonymy for the entire Pentateuch, which of course would include Noah. But, as has been noted, Genesis 9 bears little resemblance to Acts 15:20.
Leviticus 17-18 as the source. The most popular candidate for the source of the prohibitions is Leviticus 17-18 (the so-called “Holiness Code”). These two chapters have particular reference to non-Jews, that is, “the foreigner living among you” (17:8, 10, 12-13; 18:26). Proponents of this position draw correlations between the prohibitions in Leviticus 17-18 and Acts 15:20, 29; and 21:25.

This view has much to commend it. It provides a solid scriptural foundation for the prohibitions. It would also have been a well-known and readily acceptable option for the Pharisaic faction. The focus in Leviticus 17-18 on the “foreigner” would seem to be wholly appropriate in the context of Jew-Gentile relationships. Leviticus 17-18 also fits nicely with James’s comment regarding Moses being preached in every city (Acts 15:21). It is also interesting to note that the official written decree represented in verse 29 differs in order from the initial listing, possibly in order to conform it to the general order of Leviticus 17-18.

However, this view too has some problems. First, the alleged correspondences are not as close as they might appear. Neither the phrase ἀλισγημάτων των εἰδώλων from Acts 15:20 nor the clarifying term εἰδωλοθύτων is used in the Septuagint of Leviticus 17:8 (or elsewhere in Lev. 17-18). The suggested correlation to “things strangled” (πνικτός) in 17:13 is tenuous since the Leviticus passage actually talks about draining the blood of hunted game. One wonders whether this association would be made if one were not looking for a connection to the prohibitions. Likewise, although 18:6-23 does refer to various kinds of prohibited sexual activities, the term πορνεία, is not used in the Septuagint. As Wedderburn notes, “the only straightforward link between Lev 17-18 and the Decree is the latter’s prohibition of blood, the eating of which is forbidden in Lev 17:10-11.” Second, the prohibitions in Leviticus 17-18 concerning the “foreigner” in Israel are not wholly congruent with the foreigner living outside Israel (i.e., in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia).

These two weaknesses have been acknowledged even among proponents of the view, and significant articles have been written

45 This terminology also appears in Leviticus 17:3 in the Septuagint.
46 Idolatry (Lev. 17:7); eating meat with blood (17:10-14); strangled animals (17:13); sexual immorality (18:6-23).
47 These activities include incest, sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman, adultery, homosexuality, and bestiality.
to bolster the position. Callan has attempted to resolve the difficulties by arguing that the prohibitions "are largely, but not exclusively found in Leviticus 17-18."\textsuperscript{50} Callan identifies both biblical and extrabiblical sources that, in conjunction with Leviticus 17-18, provide the source for the prohibitions. Bauckham suggests that a possible answer to some of the concerns might be found in linking Leviticus 17-18 to Jeremiah 12:16 and Zechariah 2:11, 15.\textsuperscript{51}

An alternative view. While each of the three views has some evidence in its favor, the anomalies are significant. Therefore rather than seeking a single source of the prohibitions, it seems preferable to see each of them as contributing something to the origins of the prohibitions. That is, Leviticus 17-18, the Noahic precepts, and rabbinic teachings are each illustrative of the mindset behind the prohibitions. These three sources provide the general background, which gave rise to the prohibitions. A clue that seems to substantiate this idea is in Acts 15:15. James said, "The words of the prophets agree," and then he quoted from Amos 9:11-12 (and perhaps Jer. 12:15 and Isa. 45:21). James referred to the prophets (plural), but at most he quoted from three of them. This may reflect James's method. Amos 9 is representative rather than exhaustive of what the prophets taught about the Gentiles coming to God. James's argument might be stated this way: The prophets in general taught that Gentiles would come to the Lord, and the Mosaic Law taught in general certain requirements for Gentiles who sought to live with the Jews. Similarly in Acts 15:21 the entire Old Testament is summarized in one word: "Moses." Witherington may be correct when he suggests that "perhaps it is time to stop looking for such a precise scriptural background."\textsuperscript{52}

The advantages of this inclusive view are several. First, it removes the need to identify a particular source that unambiguously lists all four prohibitions in a specific place with specific terminology. Second, this view also seems to fit the context of the situation, as already noted in verses 15 and 21. Third, by combining the various sources, this view is able to enjoy the strengths of the other views while minimizing their weaknesses.

However, this proposal is not without difficulties. First, this view does not explain why only these four prohibitions were selected out of such diverse material, especially since verse 28 would


seem to suggest that these four are not representative but are specific and selective. In response it could be argued that perhaps these four were particularly relevant to issues in Antioch. Second, views that are dependent on assumptions about what people may or may not have been thinking are by nature tenuous. However, this criticism also applies more or less to all the views. Third, this view may seem too neat and convenient. Yet it seems to account for the evidence best, and it seems to provide the most plausible explanation for the source of the prohibitions.

WHAT WAS THE NATURE OF THE PROHIBITIONS?

Another issue that must be examined is the nature of the prohibitions themselves. Are they to be understood as ethical, societal, cultic, or some combination thereof?

The ethical view. In this view the prohibitions are seen as ethical standards to be kept by Gentile believers. This view is most readily associated with the Western text (with its omission of πυκτόν and the addition of the negative form of the “Golden Rule”), but it can also be held by those who prefer the Alexandrian reading. In this latter case αἷμα is often understood in the sense of murder. Turner suggests that the prohibitions are “a summary way of expressing the principal implications of the two halves of the Decalogue, the moral law in its most elementary form.”

This position would seem to fit well with the general tenor of the argument in that circumcision would not be required but only a few ethical commands would be. The prohibitions against idolatry and sexual immorality have obvious ethical components. This view would also seem to be in harmony with the segments of the early church that gave rise to the Western textual tradition.

The disadvantages of this view are significant. First, this view does not adequately account for the presence of πυκτός, and this view requires an unlikely meaning for αἷμα. Second, if these prohibitions are ethical, then why are other significant ethical prohibitions notably absent (e.g., stealing and lying)? Third, as noted earlier, the Western textual tradition is probably secondary.

The societal view. In this view the prohibitions are primarily understood in the light of Jew-Gentile relations. “As a whole,


54 Charles Perrot suggests a related but different slant of this view in that “these decrees were intended historically to define a legal status for Greek converts to Judeo-Christianity” (“The Decrees of the Council of Jerusalem,” Theology Digest 30 [1982]: 21–24). However, his view has not been readily accepted.
these stipulations had to do with those ritual prohibitions which enabled the Jew to live together with the Gentile Christian." Longenecker states that the prohibitions "should be viewed not as dealing with the principal issue of the council but as meeting certain practical concerns; not as being primarily theological but more sociological in nature; not as divine ordinances for acceptance before God but as concessions to the scruples of others for the sake of harmony within the church and the continuance of the Jewish Christian mission." The most popular version of this position relates to table fellowship. That is, the prohibitions would allow Jews and Gentiles to eat together (perhaps in sharing the communion table) by having Gentile believers avoid behaviors that would normally prevent such interaction.

The strengths of this view are several. First, it is generally acknowledged that the actions prohibited in the decree were considered highly offensive to Jews and thus their removal would facilitate fellowship (cf. Acts 11:1–3). Second, this view fits nicely with the earlier incident with Cornelius, which also involved the motif of unclean foods (Acts 10). This connection is strengthened by the allusions to the incident by both Peter and James in their speeches at the Jerusalem Council. Third, the later reinterpretation of the prohibitions, as in the Western tradition, is most commonly understood as arising during a time when Jew-Gentile relations were no longer in the forefront.

Although strong, the societal view is not without problems. The prohibition against sexual immorality seems better categorized as ethical rather than societal. Similarly the prohibition against idolatry seems better categorized as religious rather than societal. And the two prohibitions against things strangled and blood seem somewhat insufficient to encourage table fellowship. As Wilson states, "First the rules are too limited for table fellowship, for they do not even guarantee that no forbidden meat or wine (for example, pork or wine from libations) is used; and second, Lev. 17f does not play any part in Rabbinic rules for table-fellowship. Rather, they appear to be minimal rules which made contact possible between

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Jews and Gentiles, perhaps for common worship in the synagogue or church."\[^{58}\]

*The cultic view.* In this view the prohibited activities are associated in some way with pagan religious practices. For example Witherington points out that there is "evidence that the choking of the sacrifice, strangling it, and drinking or tasting of blood transpired in pagan temples."\[^{59}\] And the prohibition against sexual immorality can be understood as referring to temple prostitution.

Perhaps the most attractive aspect of this view is its ability to provide a thematic umbrella that covers all four prohibitions. This view also avoids the appearance of resurrecting the Mosaic food laws that had been abrogated (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15; cf. Rom. 14:14). The prohibition against idolatrous participation would help resolve some of the suggested tension between Paul's epistles and his silence about the decree. That is, when Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:23–28 about eating meat sacrificed to idols he may not have mentioned the decree because it did not apply to the situation in Corinth. In Corinth the issue was apparently eating sacrificial meat in private homes, not in pagan temples or as part of pagan rituals. The latter is clearly prohibited in verses 14–22.\[^{60}\] As Witherington puts it, "For Paul, the issue is clearly one of venue rather than menu."\[^{61}\]

Perhaps the primary weakness of the cultic view is that the overarching theme of pagan religious ritual is not altogether clear. The initial concern involved circumcision, not idolatry (Acts 15:1). Also if pagan worship were in view, how would giving it up constitute a burden (v. 28)? Similarly the statement in verse 29, "If you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well," would border on banality if what was being prohibited was pagan rituals. Another potential weakness is the ethical variants in the Western textual tradition. If the prohibitions related originally to idolatry, why would they be changed into an ethical code when paganism was still an issue?

**CONCLUSIONS**

The societal or cultic views seem to present the most likely options, since the ethical view can account (even loosely) for only three of

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58 Ibid., 189.
60 One obvious problem concerning this point is that it still does not explain why Paul did not appeal to the prohibition when it did apply, as in 1 Corinthians 10:14–22.
the four prohibitions. Of these two, the cultic view seems to have the most to offer and to be the least problematic. However, in light of some of the difficulties of the cultic view, it seems that a modified view is preferable. That is, the Gentile Christians were being asked to refrain from activities that even resembled pagan worship, thereby avoiding even the appearance of evil. This understanding may be further reinforced by the fact that violating the Sabbath is not included among the prohibitions, even though one might expect it. While it is somewhat speculative, it may not have been mentioned simply because it was not practiced by the pagans. It was not an issue. However, one cannot be dogmatic. It is possible that some unspecified circumstances were driving the prohibitions. Blomberg suggests that the prohibitions may have been nothing more or less than "ad hoc advice." But overall it seems best to hold to a modified form of the cultic view.

WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THE PROHIBITIONS?

A number of significant contextual clues in Acts 15:1–35 and 21:25 help determine the purpose of the prohibitions.

The first contextual clues occur in the prologue of the narrative (15:1–5). In this paragraph the problem is identified (Gentile circumcision), the main characters are introduced, and the setting is established. Thus one would expect that the purpose of the prohibitions would in some way be related to addressing the problem of circumcision within the framework of Jew-Gentile relationships.

James's comment that immediately precedes the first giving of the prohibitions provides a significant clue. He stated that the Council should "not trouble those who are turning to God from among the Gentiles" (v. 19). Therefore it seems that James did not view the prohibitions as overly burdensome (cf. v. 28).

Verse 21 is significant for at least two reasons. It is James's

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62 The reference to the Sabbath in Acts 15:21 would seem to indicate that it was not accidentally omitted in the prohibitions.


64 It might also be helpful to observe that Acts 15:1–35 has a problem-based rather than a goal-based plot. That is, Luke framed the story primarily in terms of solving a problem. This does not mean that the inclusion of the incident in the book is without purpose (it has already been shown to have a strategic purpose). Rather, a distinction can be made between how the narrative functions within itself and how it functions within the context of the book as a whole. In reference to the "why" question the emphasis is placed on the former.
first statement following the prohibitions, and this verse gives James's stated reason (γαρ) for the prohibition. It must be acknowledged that this reference to the regular preaching and reading of Moses is notoriously ambiguous and variously understood. However, one can still surmise that the prohibitions are in some way a response to Jewish religious sensitivities.

The official letter with the prohibitions is addressed to Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (v. 23). These congregations were established by Jewish converts who were fleeing persecution that was reaching Diaspora Jews (11:19) and eventually Gentiles as well (vv. 20–21). Thus the churches to whom the prohibitions were addressed were mixed congregations of Jerusalem Jews, Hellenistic Jews, and Gentiles. That setting may have influenced James and the Council. Since the prohibitions were in some sense a response to the concerns of Gentile believers (v. 24), one would expect that the prohibitions were not seen as adding to the Gentiles' troubles, but in some sense as redressing them.

The sending of Judas and Silas to confirm the decree (v. 27) may hint at the revolutionary content of the prohibitions. It is uncertain whether these men from Jerusalem were sent to convince the pharisaic elements or the Gentile elements or both. But the fact that Judas and Silas were sent points to the importance that the Jerusalem church placed on the decree.

Four significant points about the purpose of the prohibitions are made in verse 28. (1) The decree states that the prohibitions “seemed good to the Holy Spirit.” Thus the Jerusalem church believed that what they were asking of the Gentiles was wholly consistent with the work of the Spirit. (2) Apparently the Jerusalem church did not view the prohibitions as overly burdensome. (3) The decree specifies that the four prohibitions were not general and open-ended but specific and limited. (4) The decree refers to the prohibitions as “these essentials [or ‘necessary things’].” “The term ‘necessary’ (the adverb ἐπάναγκες used as a substantive) obviously has nothing to do with ‘necessary for salvation’ as in the Pharisees position (15:1, 5), but means rather ‘the minimal requirements for communion between Jew and Gentile believers.’” 

Although the prohibitions were communicated diplomatically, they were written dogmatically.


66 Witherington notes, “The language here is that of a formal decree—‘it seemed good to us . . .’—and should not be taken as the expression of a mere opinion. Indeed, the invoking of the Holy Spirit means that the words have divine sanction and
After the list of prohibitions, the decree adds the statement: “If you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well” (v. 29). The idea seems to be that keeping the prohibitions would be spiritually and relationally beneficial. By keeping the prohibitions, Gentile believers would be in harmony with the Holy Spirit, the Jerusalem church, and other Jewish believers. In this sense the prohibitions, while negative, are portrayed positively.

The response of the Gentile Christians to reading the decree is instructive: “They rejoiced because of its encouragement” (v. 31; cf. 16:4–5). This seems to indicate that the Antiochene church agreed with the Jerusalem church that the prohibitions were not overly burdensome. It is also likely that part of the joy was due to the fact that the standing of Gentile believers was finally and officially affirmed. Seen in this light, the prohibitions were but a small price to pay for the acceptance by Jewish believers.

The reiteration of the decree in 21:25 suggests at least two things. First, the decree was apparently still in effect eight or so years after it was given (A.D. 49–A.D. 57). Second, the decree was still considered in a positive light.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the prohibitions was to provide a means of unifying Jewish and Gentile believers. On the one hand the decree freed the Gentiles from any obligation to be circumcised and to become in effect Judaic-Christian proselytes. On the other hand the Gentiles would be required to refrain from activities that might be associated with pagan worship, activities that deeply offended Jewish sensibilities. These restricted activities would include both the obvious (sexual immorality) and three less obvious but highly offensive matters: food sacrificed to idols, eating meat from strangled animals, and eating meat with significant blood in it. However, “The newly prescribed foods are not intended to separate and divide peoples, as were the Jewish dietary regulations. On the contrary, to ensure commensality and thus to effect shared identity as Christians among those of Jewish and Gentile background, dietary restrictions are re-introduced. This does not cancel the abrogation in Acts 10–11 of the distinction between clean and unclean foods; rather it ensures that there will be an inclusive community by facilitating a common table. Here food proscriptions promote commensality, not division and separation.”

While the decree and its so should be readily obeyed” (The Acts of the Apostles, 469).

prohibitions related directly to relations within the believing community, it would seem natural to assume that it also fostered greater opportunities to reach unbelieving Gentiles. The Council's concern was primarily unity, but true unity is often great publicity.

CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

The four prohibitions in the Alexandrian Greek text most likely represent the original text, and the slight variations between the listings of the prohibitions in 15:20, 29; and 21:25 are more stylistic than significant. The evidence also suggests that there is not one specifically identifiable origin for the prohibitions. Rather, the commonly suggested origins say more about the ethos that gave rise to the prohibitions. Concerning the nature of the prohibitions the most likely explanation is that all four were associated to some degree with pagan religious practices. Since this association was highly offensive to Jews, Gentile believers were asked to avoid even the appearance of evil by avoiding such practices altogether. Thus the purposes of the decree and its prohibitions were to promote unity among believing Jews and believing Gentiles.