

EXCERPT FROM *PAUL DIDN'T EAT PORK*

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Chapter 4: Acts and Paul

On the road to Syria to arrest followers of Yeshua the Nazarene, Paul discovered that the days of Messiah had come. Having thought one way most of his life, Paul's orientation changed dramatically in one conclusive vision.

Paul's readers can undergo a similar reorientation when considering the Paul of Acts. Much of popular opinion about Paul is formed from a cursory reading of his letters. Few people take the Paul of Acts seriously or even know much about him. Those who do might have a dramatic change of belief nearly comparable to Paul's vision of Jesus. Paul kept the Law all his life and expected that other Jews would do the same.

Paul and his Nazirite Vow

"Where does it say that Paul offered sacrifices at the temple?" the young woman challenged me. The group of college students were incredulous. Paul turned his back on Judaism. Everyone knows that.

I showed them Acts 21:26, which shows Paul participating in a Nazirite vow. The text says, "he purified himself along with them."

"Well, that doesn't say he offered sacrifices?" the young woman retorted.

The encounter was a perfect illustration of how the Bible is misunderstood. The young woman was unaware of the meaning and method of the sacrifices and the Nazirite vow. She was able to remain in the dark about a potentially revealing insight into Paul precisely because Jewish elements in the story remained to her a closed book.

In her mind, purification might have been merely a matter of prayer, not bloody sacrifice in an outdated temple complex. The thought of Paul, a Christian, offering an animal sacrifice was never entertained as a possibility in her reading of the story.

The whole story of Paul's participation in the Nazirite vow is not told. The story is more complex than a one-verse summary can make clear. The basic facts would seem to be: Paul paid for the sacrifices for himself and four men who were under a vow. The first purification took place at the beginning of a seven day period and there was to be a final purification at the end of seven

days. The final purification did not take place because Paul was seized by a mob.¹

Some detective work is necessary to reconstruct the story of Paul's Nazirite vow. First, the mention of seven days suggests something out of the ordinary. Nazirite vows ordinarily lasted thirty days or multiples thereof according to the Mishnah.² The mention of a seven-day period suggests that one or all of the men had become ritually defiled during an existing Nazirite vow which was already under way. Numbers 6:9-11 legislates that those who come in contact with a corpse during their vow period must shave the head on the first and seventh day and make offerings on the eighth day.

Paul may have still been under a Nazirite vow from his time in Cenchreae several years earlier³ or was simply purifying himself along with the men who needed to restart their Nazirite vow.

The one odd note in the Acts story is that Paul and the other men purified themselves at the beginning of the seven days and were waiting to finish their purification at the end. There are two possibilities: the purification referred to on the first day may have simply been shaving of the hair and appearing before the priest. Or perhaps in Paul's day there was an additional sacrifice made at the beginning of the seven days.⁴

Whatever the case may be, Paul either offered animal sacrifices when he purified himself or intended to offer them at the end of the seven day period. What kind of sacrifices would he offer?

Numbers 6:14-15 requires five offerings of the Nazirite: a burnt offering, sin offering, peace offering, grain offering, and drink offering. The required animals for the five men in Paul's group would include: five male lambs, five ewe lambs, five rams, and the accompanying offerings of grain, wine, and olive oil. The cost of such an offering is staggering, which is why the four men needed a sponsor to afford the offerings.

Yet the young woman's doubts about Paul offering sacrifices reflects legitimate concerns a modern Jesus-follower might have reading this story. Would Paul need animal sacrifices, especially a sin offering, when he had put his faith already in the offering of Messiah?

Again, though the question is important, it again illustrates the popular misreading of Paul. By not understanding the true purpose of the animal sacrifices, many Jesus-followers assume that the cross eliminated the need for them. Few Christians read Leviticus or read it thoughtfully.

The animal sacrifices were never miniature versions of the cross, bringing forgiveness to the offerer.⁵ The animal sacrifices purified the tabernacle (or temple) from the sin stains of the people living in the land. The regular offering of sacrifices kept the land ritually pure so the holy God could continue to dwell there.⁶ Thus, not only do animal sacrifices have a different purpose than the cross, but they will be resumed in the Messianic Age when the temple is rebuilt and Jesus rules the earth from Jerusalem for 1,000 years.⁷

Those who want to understand Paul's message, and his view of the Torah in particular, need to understand the Paul of Acts, the man who offered animals on the altar at the temple in Jerusalem.

Paul Zealous for the Torah and Traditions

"Paul found freedom from the Law of Moses and the traditions of the Jews when he came to faith in Jesus," one can imagine almost any Bible teacher proclaiming. There is just enough truth in the words to be persuasive for those who will not look further into Paul's life and teaching.

Yes, Paul was free from the Law and said so himself in 1 Corinthians 9:20 and other verses. Yet what Paul was free from was not the obligation to keep the Law, whose commandments are holy and good, but from the condemnation of the Law.

If anyone says that Paul changed his lifestyle and quit obeying the Law or taught other Jews to do so, they are speaking in ignorance of the Paul of Acts. James, brother of Jesus, put it to Paul this way, "[The Jewish believers in Jesus here in Judea] have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs."⁸

The concern raised about Paul was three-fold:

1. Was Paul teaching Jews to forsake Torah?
2. Was Paul teaching Jews not to circumcise?
3. Was Paul teaching Jews to abandon Jewish customs added to the Laws of Torah?

James clearly knew the charges to be false and did not even entertain them as true. He was certain that, contrary to popular opinion about Paul in our time,

the apostle would never say to Jews: forsake the Torah of Moses, forsake circumcision, and quit keeping Jewish customs which are added to the Torah.

Knowing this fact leads us to a vital principle in interpreting Paul's letters: Paul fully expected Jews to obey the commandments of the Torah and maintain even the traditions of the Jewish people (when they didn't violate the spirit of Torah).

Notice that James did not say, "They have been told that you are teaching Gentiles not to circumcise or obey Moses." The Gentiles are a separate issue entirely and that became the subject of the Jerusalem Council.

Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council

"2,000 years ago, people didn't ask how you could be Jewish and believe in Jesus? Instead they thought, 'Gentiles for Jesus? That's crazy, like a vegetarian for beef!'" he said to the Sunday morning audience in a Baptist church.⁹ Truly he was right, for the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 illustrates how modern thinking about Jews, Gentiles, and Messiah has reversed over time.

The Jerusalem Council decided that Gentiles should not be troubled to keep certain commandments of Moses.¹⁰ Especially it decided that Gentiles need not be circumcised and convert to Jewishness¹¹ in order to be saved.

Imagine what the world would look like today had it not been for the Jerusalem Council. Gentiles would have had to convert and be circumcised (ouch!) in order to become followers of Jesus. In addition to Jesus, people would have had to take on the yoke of a new national identity. It would have been Messiah plus conversion instead of just Messiah. When telling your friends about Jesus, you would have to convince them to change their whole culture.

The issue before the Council was simple: some in the new Jesus-movement were saying that "unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."¹² In Jerusalem, some Pharisees who believed in Jesus added another clause: "and to order them to keep the Law of Moses."¹³

As an aside, we should note that being a Pharisee did not put one at odds with faith in Jesus. Paul remained a Pharisee all his days.¹⁴ These Pharisee followers of Jesus may have been wrong about Gentiles and the Law, but there is no evidence that they later refused to accept the decree of the apostles at the Council. Also, it is not true to think that no influential Jews decided to

follow Jesus. Not only were some Pharisees believers, but also some of the priests.¹⁵

Regarding the issue of Gentiles following Jesus, Paul and Barnabas opposed the Gentile-conversion model. Paul had been fighting this battle for a long time. Galatians was probably written prior to the Jerusalem Council. Otherwise, Paul would have referred to it when arguing with the Jewish proselytizers of Galatians. And in Galatians, the entire issue is whether Gentiles must be converted in order to be saved.

Peter also opposed the Gentile-conversion model. He reminded the Council of the story of Cornelius and the Gentiles who received the Holy Spirit by faith. As Peter observed, God “made no distinction between us and them.”¹⁶

Finally, James spoke. Already Paul, Barnabas, and Peter had weighed in on this important issue. Would James, the brother of Jesus and most respected elder of the congregation (along with Peter) agree with these heavyweights?

James’ answer is somewhat complex. First, he notes that God has “taken from them [the Gentiles] a people for his name.”¹⁷ His statement is worded precisely. He did not say, “God has accepted Gentiles as Jews.” Rather, God has called Gentiles to himself without conversion.

Then James quotes Amos 9:11-12, a prophecy remarkable for one particular phrase, “Gentiles who are called by my name.” In the past, there have been people who joined Israel and came to Israel’s God, such as Ruth. Yet they did not remain Gentiles, but joined Israel. Numerous prophecies in the Hebrew Bible speak of times when many Gentiles will join with Israel.¹⁸ Amos speaks of an even greater phenomenon: Gentiles who remain Gentiles while becoming followers of Israel’s God.¹⁹

James then renders his judgment: “we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God,”²⁰ yet we must ask them to abstain from four things. The four abstentions are: meat sacrificed to idols, strangled meat, blood, and sexual immorality.

Not troubling the Gentiles was James’ way of saying, “Let’s not make them live as Jews.” While some held that only conversion and joining Israel could save Gentiles on the day of God’s judgment, James knew otherwise. And if Gentiles converted, they would then be under obligation as Jewish proselytes to observe all the Law of Moses—including parts only required of Jews.

Instead of requiring Gentiles to wear fringes on the garments, maintain Jewish food Laws, and observe Jewish holy days and temple worship, James commanded four prohibitions. Their meaning is a matter of debate.

Some see these as a form of the Noahide Laws. The Noahide Laws are based in Genesis 9, where God commanded all the people (not Jews, but Gentiles) to abstain from eating blood and from murder. From this chapter, the rabbis derived seven Laws for mankind, which they said were God’s only requirement for non-Jews. However, James’ list looks quite different from the Noahide Laws.

Another view is that James was addressing the problems of table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles eating together. Jews and Gentiles would eat better if the Gentiles abstained from blood, idol-meat, strangled meat, and sexual immorality. This view is also impossible for two reasons: sexual immorality has nothing to do with table fellowship and unclean meats (such as pork) would be just as much a problem as strangled meat.

Tim Hegg offers a better interpretation in his book, *The Letter Writer: Paul’s Background and Torah Perspective*. He notes that the four items mentioned best fit the description of practices in the pagan temples.²¹ Pagan temples were the heart of life in most Roman towns. They were meat markets where portions of sacrifices (those that were not burned for the gods) were sold. Sexual immorality was also common, as some temples involved fertility cults and temple prostitution. Meat was sometimes strangled instead of being killed by slaughtering and draining blood. Hegg even provides evidence that drinking blood sometimes occurred amongst the priests.

Why did James address these issues? The answer is simple: the biggest change Gentiles coming into the Jesus movement would experience was leaving the pagan temples. For the apostles’ not to require this would be tantamount to allowing idolatry amongst the congregation. Even Naaman the Syrian understood this way back in the days of Elisha. He asked the prophet’s (and God’s) forgiveness in advance for the fact that he would have to accompany his king into the temple of his nation’s god.²²

The effect of the Jerusalem Council would change the world. Gentiles could come to Israel’s God and Israel’s Messiah without having to join Israel as a people.²³ Yet the Gentiles would need to recognize some immediate changes in the life and practice if they would worship in the same congregation with Jewish followers of Jesus.

Gentiles and the Torah

The apostles specifically decided at the Jerusalem Council not to require Gentiles to be circumcised or obey the Torah of Moses as a whole. Yet a great deal of qualification is required here.

Namely, the apostles did not mean, as many modern readers assume, that the Law of Moses has no application to Gentiles. Those at the Jerusalem Council were not like modern Dispensationalist theologians who say that God's ways with man change in different eras. The Law is the old era and only commandments found in the New Testament continue to apply. Nor were the apostles modern Reformed theologians who divide the Law into categories: moral, ceremonial, and civil. Under this perspective, it is commonly assumed that only the so-called moral Laws of the Torah have continuing validity.²⁴ Neither of these views best synthesizes the evidence of the whole of scripture.

The apostles, as we know from the later dialogue between James and Paul in Acts 21, assumed everyone knew that Jews must continue to keep the Torah even as followers of Jesus. Yet Gentiles have a different relationship to the Torah than Jews.

God has never required that non-Israelites keep certain Laws which were given to separate Israel from the nations. God required Israel to circumcise their males on the eighth day to set Israelites apart as a covenant people. God required Israelites to observe the seventh-day Sabbath as a sign between him and Israel forever.²⁵ God required Israelites to wear fringes on their garments as markers of their identity.²⁶ God required Israelites to make a pilgrimage three times a year to Jerusalem,²⁷ but certainly didn't expect Gentiles to do so. God required Israel to restrict its diet of meat to certain species and to avoid accidentally killed animals.²⁸ God did not forbid, but allowed non-slaughtered meat to be sold to Gentiles.²⁹

This is what James meant by Gentiles not being troubled about the Torah. He did not mean that Gentiles should feel free to violate any and all commandments of God in the books of Moses. Rather, Gentiles do not have to become Jews. Therefore their relationship to the Torah remains a Gentile relationship. The commandments of Torah do still apply to Gentiles, unless a commandment is limited in application to Israel.

The Jerusalem Council was not about Lawlessness, but a proper understanding of Gentiles serving God as Gentiles. This misunderstanding has cost many churches a valuable part of the Bible. Many Christians feel the

books of Moses are in the Bible, but not relevant for Gentiles. The Torah is for everyone with only a few commands limited to Israel.

Yet some have misunderstood James's argument in a different direction. Maybe he wasn't saying Gentiles don't need to be troubled with circumcision and other Jewish-specific commands. Maybe he meant, "We don't need to bother the Gentiles now about keeping these commands, because they will learn the Torah later in synagogue and then start keeping them."

Moses is Taught in the Synagogues

"Gentiles have the same relationship to Torah as Jews," he said. "James said that Moses was taught in the synagogues, meaning that the Gentiles would learn the Torah later as they attended synagogue."

I found the teaching very persuasive the first few times I heard it. Perhaps that is what James meant: only bother the Gentiles now with four issues and they'll learn the rest later in synagogue.

James said, "For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."³⁰ I looked in a well-written commentary by a respected scholar and found this explanation of James's comment: "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, Gentile Christians ought to respect their scruples."³¹ I didn't find this answer very convincing.

Later, I read an article by a Messianic Jewish leader who I felt truly captured the meaning of the statement.³² In context, James has just shown that God's plan was to call Gentiles to himself as Gentiles, without making them become Jews. He is celebrating the movement of Gentiles turning to God and rejecting the call to convert them. In that vein, James notes that Moses has for generations (past) been preached in synagogues. The past part is very important.

His point is not that Gentiles can learn the Torah in the future by attending synagogue. That would be unlikely anyway. In Rome, Jews were being forced out of the synagogue for believing in Jesus.³³ It is very unlikely that Gentile Jesus-followers were going to be able to stay in them or that James would think this possible. His point is that Gentiles have been hearing Moses read in synagogues for generations and that never started this powerful movement of God that the apostles were now seeing amongst the Gentiles.

The God-fearers were Gentiles who attended synagogue to listen and learn without becoming proselytes. They had been doing so for generations and yet no mass-movement of Gentiles was turning to Israel's God.

James understood that God was doing something more powerful and amazing than converting Gentiles. God was accepting Gentiles as Gentiles. The power of God was already starting to change the Roman empire.

Paul's Jewish Observance in Acts

Understanding the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to the Torah clears up much confusion in interpreting Paul. One could easily think that the Paul of Acts must be a different person than the Paul of the letters. The Paul of Acts is a Torah-observant Jew. The Paul of the letters refuses to allow Gentiles to be made to follow the whole Torah.

Yet for all of Paul's statements about not being under the Law, there exists alongside them the record of Paul in the book of Acts.

Paul attended synagogue when he entered a town without a congregation of Jesus-followers.³⁴ Paul observed the Sabbath.³⁵ Paul kept Israel's festivals.³⁶ Paul remained a Pharisee.³⁷ Paul was careful to observe the Laws of the Torah as well as the customs of the Jewish people.³⁸

Anyone reading Paul's letters must understand this or a dangerous misinterpretation will result. That dangerous misinterpretation shows up every time someone challenges those of us in Messianic Judaism by saying, "Hey, we're not under the Law. Why are you doing these things?"

A dangerous misinterpretation occurs in the other direction when critics say of the church, "They are pagan. They don't keep the Biblical holidays. They violate the Sabbath. They eat unclean meat."

Truly these issues are not minor. They are in many cases the very reason why Paul wrote his letters.

Discussion Questions

- *How does lack of knowledge of the Torah keep people from understanding verses like Acts 21:26?*
- *What happens during a Nazirite vow?*
- *What was the true purpose of animal sacrifices?*
- *What had some in Jerusalem heard about Paul?*
- *What is the truth about Paul, the Law, and Jewish customs?*
- *What scripture did James use to prove Gentile inclusion? How did he interpret the scripture?*
- *What are the Noahide Laws?*
- *What better explains the four prohibitions of James for Gentiles to observe?*
- *What are some Torah commandments not required of Gentiles?*
- *What are two possible interpretations of the statement that "Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him"?*
- *What is the problem with assuming that Gentile followers of Jesus would be able to attend synagogue in their towns?*

NOTES

1. Acts 21:30.
2. Mishnah Nazir 1:3.
3. Acts 18:18.
4. Normally a person would shave his hair on day one, be sprinkled with water on day three and seven, then offer two turtledoves on day eight, and restart the vow (Mishnah Nazir 7:2).
5. Hebrews 9:9, 10:4.
6. Verses such as Leviticus 15:31 and Numbers 35:34 show that the concern of the sacrificial system was to preserve the purity of the land so God can dwell there. With regard to the atonement language of Leviticus, as Jacob Milgrom (*Leviticus: Anchor Bible Series*) observes, the sacrifices atone for the tabernacle and its furniture directly but on behalf of (not directly) the offerer.
7. Ezekiel 40-48 describes a temple that has never been built along with a system of sacrifices, land allotment, and Messianic features that can only convincingly be interpreted as a yet-to-be-fulfilled prophecy of the days of Messiah. Those who try to allegorize these chapters of Ezekiel make a mockery of Biblical interpretation, opening the door to any wild allegorical rendering.
8. Acts 21:21.
9. Overheard in a sermon by Murray Tilles of Light of Messiah Ministries in Atlanta, Georgia. As I understand it, this statement originated with

- sermons used by the Jews For Jesus ministry based in San Francisco, California.
10. Some interpret it differently, but in the ensuing exposition I will seek to prove my point.
 11. People often speak of converting to Judaism, not Jewishness, but this can be misleading. It is not so much a religion that is being converted to as a people with an allegiance to God. Jewishness is not a race or religion, but a peoplehood, which is a larger concept. Many in Israel had Gentile ancestry (Joseph's wife was Egyptian, Moses' first was a Midianite and his second a Cushite, and the list goes on). Israel was a people from whom the native-born could be cut off and into whom strangers could be adopted.
 12. Acts 15:1.
 13. Acts 15:5.
 14. Acts 23:6.
 15. Acts 6:7.
 16. Acts 15:9.
 17. Acts 15:14.
 18. Such as Isaiah 2:2-4 and Zechariah 8:23.
 19. Historically this happened with a few individuals such as Naaman the Leper (2 Kings 5 and Luke 4:26) and the widow of Zarephath (1 Kings 17 and Luke 4:27).
 20. Acts 15:19.
 21. Hegg, Tim. *The Letter Writer: Paul's Background and Torah Perspective*. Tacoma: First Fruits of Zion, 2002. p.275.
 22. 2 Kings 5:18.
 23. This is not to say that Gentiles are not joined to Israel in other ways, as Paul makes clear in Romans 11:16-24. Gentiles are wild olive branches grafted into a natural olive tree. As wild branches grafted in, Gentiles retain their identity as non-Jews while sharing in the spiritual blessings of Israel. The physical blessings of Israel (ownership of the land and restoration in the days of Messiah) still belong to physical Israel (though only those of faith will inherit the promise).
 24. Such thinking is rooted in a very false idea of morality: that we can know what is moral based on conscience and reason. Rather, morality is defined by God. If God forbids something, though we do not understand why, it is immoral to dissent from God. Justice is right because God is just. It is false to say that God is just because justice is right.
 25. Exodus 31:17.
 26. Numbers 15:38.
 27. Deuteronomy 16:16.
 28. Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14:21.
 29. Deuteronomy 14:21 says that the meat can be sold to Gentiles and emphasizes that Israel may not eat it because they are a chosen people, separated from the nations.
 30. Acts 15:21.
 31. Marshall, I. Howard. *Acts: Tyndale New Testament Commentary*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980. p.254.
 32. Resnik, Russ. "Is the Torah Only for Jews? The Relationship of Jew and Non-Jew in God's Covenant", umjc.org.
 33. Acts 18:2 refers to Jews ejected from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. According to Seutonius (*Life of Claudius* 25:4), this expulsion occurred because of rioting in the streets between Jews and Messianic Jews over the issue of Chrestus (Christ).
 34. Acts 13:14, 14:1, etc.
 35. Acts 16:13, 18:4.
 36. Acts 20:16.
 37. Acts 23:6.
 38. Acts 21:21, 24.