

Gentiles Who Are Called by My Name – Part 2

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The video version of this teaching is at: <https://youtu.be/iTJ1HVgVkYc>

The scripture reading is Acts 15:20-35

“Stand by the roads and ask for the ancient paths where the good way is and walk in it and find rest for your souls...” That is sage advice from the prophet Jeremiah chapter six verse sixteen. I think it is a good summary of what we Gentiles in the Messianic or Hebraic Roots movement are attempting to do today; to find those ancient pathways of the LORD. But how do we do that?

Our struggle today is no different than that faced by the Gentiles of the time of the apostles. In that day, many Gentiles were drawn to the Jewish communities and synagogues to learn about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. According to the revelation given to Paul, through Messiah Yeshua, the pathway to salvation was now open to all.

Ephesians 3:6 NKJV 6 that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel,

There was now a well-established body of believers, both Jew and God-fearer in Syrian Antioch. Paul and Barnabas had traveled through the region of Galatia bringing this gospel message of salvation to the communities there. Yet there was strong and vocal opposition to Paul’s gospel among the believing Jews and within the apostolic community. It was up to the council of the apostles in Jerusalem to decide the issue and determine the status of the Gentile God-fearers.

The full council in Jerusalem was comprised of the twelve apostles, James the brother of Yeshua, and the seven elders. Yeshua had given them the power to forbid or permit, that is to bind or loose, legal interpretations of the Torah. Last week, in part one, we looked at the opening arguments for and against Paul’s gospel of full Gentile inclusion and fellowship in the community of believers. We ended with the decision of the council announced by James who was the Council president.

There was much debate before the Council, and it was decided that the Gentiles did not need to convert to Judaism and therefore were not obligated to the full yoke of the Torah. In other words, they were loosed from certain obligations.

Acts 15:19-21 NKJV 19 "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, 20 "but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood. 21 "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

These four rules outlined by James and adopted by the council were not the only Torah commandments incumbent on the Gentile God-fearers; these four things were in essence a summary of those things already well established and taught as a minimum standard of Torah for the God-fearers. There were seven laws known commonly as the Noahide Laws. These seven laws were derived from Genesis chapter nine. They are: 1)Do not worship idols, 2)Do not curse God, 3)Establish courts of justice, 4)Do not commit murder, 5)Do not commit sexual immorality, 6)Do not steal, and 7)Do not eat flesh from a living animal.

The sages taught that these seven laws applied to all human beings. If these laws did not exist, how could God exact judgment and punishment for the Gentiles in the time of Noah, or the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Amorites and Canaanites in the days of Joshua? There had to be a standard of righteousness in order for God to make a judgment. The Torah is that standard as Paul pointed out.

Romans 5:12-13 NKJV 12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned-- 13 (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

Because of this universal and long-standing acceptance of the Laws of Noah, the Jerusalem Council saw no need to spell out the obvious moral and ethical statutes that would be required of Gentile believers. They would learn these things from the teachers in the synagogues.

Paul's detractors were arguing that full conversion was necessary for salvation. By citing this summary of the Laws of Noah, the council was establishing a baseline for ethical and moral conduct of the God-fearers and other Gentiles just coming into the faith. Salvation was a separate issue and came to the Gentile God-fearers through the grace of Messiah Yeshua.

I suppose it begs the question; If Judaism already had in place these minimum standards of Torah observance for the Gentiles, then why did some Jewish believers insist that the Gentiles be circumcised; that is to convert to become Jews?

As we observed at the assembly in Syrian Antioch, Paul's gospel considered the Gentile God-fearers to be co-heirs to the Messianic promises. At Antioch, and presumably elsewhere, the Gentile God-fearers who had become believers and received salvation through Messiah, were fully participating in the Jewish community as well as worshiping, fellowshiping and eating together with their fellow Jewish believers in the synagogues. The long-standing practice of a separation by a physical wall in the synagogue and entering the home of a Gentile had been eliminated.

There appeared to be a new status for the Gentile God-fearer in the body of Messiah. They were no longer just mere "sons of Noah." In the language of the Torah, they had become "the stranger who sojourns among you." As such there are certain commandments which apply to them as part of the community. A commentary by Markus Bockmuehl states:

"If indeed it is the case that in Christ these Gentiles have a portion in Israel's covenant membership and national eschatology, i.e., that they are saved as Gentiles, then it suffices to apply them to the same ethical principles that would in any case apply to righteous Gentiles living with the people of Israel, i.e., resident aliens"ⁱ

What are the Torah obligations of the Gentile believers? The Torah, as well as the rest of the scripture, make some specific distinctions between the obligations of the Jews and those of the Gentiles. James seems to have taken his list of four laws or commandments straight from Leviticus chapters seventeen and eighteen, although in a slightly different order. These chapters of Leviticus outline the sins of the Canaanites and warns the Israelites not to imitate them.

At first glance this list of four items appear to leave the Gentile believer with very few obligations, however a closer examination reveals that there are numerous details associated with these four prohibitions that reveal broader requirements.

The first prohibition of the Council's list is "things polluted by idols". We will first look at Leviticus seventeen verses seven through nine.

Leviticus 17:7-9 NKJV 7 "They shall no more offer their sacrifices to demons, after whom they have played the harlot. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations." 8 "Also you shall say to them: 'Whatever man of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who dwell among you, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice, 9 'and does not bring it to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from among his people.

It was vitally important for the Israelites to bring their sacrifices to God at the Tabernacle or Temple. This also applied to the "the strangers who dwell among you." At the time of the apostles, meat, as well as other foods, generally available in the public markets were often foods that were sacrificed in the pagan worship practices of the society at large. The generally accepted and long-standing practice of separation of fellowship with Gentiles, even God-fearing Gentiles, assured the practicing Jew that they would not inadvertently pollute themselves with idolatry. James' restating of this prohibition appears to have the effect of creating a heightened sense of awareness of the rampant idolatry in their world, allowing the Gentile God-fearer believers to distance themselves further from it therefore allowing for a greater fellowship between believing Jew and Gentile.

The next injunction for the Gentile believers was to abstain from sexual immorality. This was a very general statement and remained undefined in the context of Acts chapter fifteen. If the Gentiles were commanded to abstain from sexual immorality, then it would make sense to know what this prohibition involved. They needed to learn the details by attending the synagogues where Moses, that is the Torah, is taught.

There is a long list of prohibitions and rules for behavior in this category in Leviticus chapters eighteen and twenty. This injunction, rather than being a simple, single one, refraining from sexual immorality is a broader, umbrella commandment that includes dozens of specific commandments detailed in the Torah. It would be naturally assumed that the new Gentile believers would learn and follow the Torah commandments going forward.

The last two of the four prohibitions of the Council's decree are closely related and deal with different aspects of the same issue. The first is to abstain from what is strangled. Bible scholars are almost universally agreed that this is referring to the prohibition of eating meat that has not been slaughtered by the accepted Jewish kosher standards. The common understanding of the Hebrew word for strangled, along with its Greek equivalent in the Greek speaking Jewish communities of the day, meant any slaughter method which left the blood in the meat of the slaughtered animal.

The fourth prohibition of the consumption of blood is connected to the prohibition of things strangled. Without proper methodology of slaughter, the blood remains in the meat. In a recent commentary, we find the following:

"The prohibition of "blood" came under the same requirement, referring to the consumption of the blood of animals in any form. These three requirements (abstention from food sacrificed to idols, things strangled, and blood) were thus all ritual, dealing with matters of clean and unclean food."ⁱⁱ

There is much historical evidence that the early Christian church, even following its complete split from Judaism, followed the dietary laws of kosher well into the sixth century.

In addition to refraining from eating blood, the sacredness of the lifeblood extends to prohibiting murder, that is taking the lifeblood of another person.

Genesis 9:5-6 NKJV 5 "Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it, and from the hand of man. From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man. 6 "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

It seems evident that through this decree from the Jerusalem council, the apostles were encouraging the Gentile believers to not only remain as Gentiles, but to, also, adopt a stricter or more orthodox Torah observance than what was required of the God-fearers. However, nowhere do we find in scripture or later writings, decrees incumbent upon the Gentiles to take on the trappings associated with the Jewish people, namely the sign commandments such as tefillin, tzitzit, circumcision, and interestingly enough, a strict observance of the Sabbath. There was always to be a distinction between Jew and Gentile. And Paul wrote about this to the Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 7:17-19 NKJV 17 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. 18 Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters.

Just as with the Jews, Gentile believers in Messiah were expected to take up the commandments of the Torah that pertained to them and live a life worthy of the kingdom of Messiah.

After James and the Jerusalem Council made their decision, it needed to be communicated to the communities in the land and in the diaspora. Men were chosen to take the decree to the synagogues of the believers.

Acts 15:22 NKJV 22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

The council charged Barsabas and Silas to travel with Paul and Barnabas taking the decree with them. Barsabas and Silas were apparently well respected and perhaps were among the seventy who were close to Yeshua during His earthly ministry. They were known as prophets and would serve to authenticate the letter they carried to the believers in Antioch and elsewhere. The letter itself is recorded in its entirety in Acts fifteen verses twenty-three through twenty-nine.

Once the four of them had returned to Antioch, the entire congregation would have gathered together to hear the words of the Council.

Acts 15:30-31 NKJV 30 So when they were sent off, they came to Antioch; and when they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the letter. 31 When they had read it, they rejoiced over its encouragement.

In addition to reading the letter from the Council, Barsabas and Silas taught at length to the assembled believers. Their sermon that day was most likely an exposition on the decree and what it meant for the new believers and the community. I can imagine that with all the controversy surrounding the issue of Gentile inclusion, to finally have a definitive answer to their questions and their confusion, would have been enormously encouraging to both the Gentiles and the Jews of Antioch.

After a time Barsabas returned to Jerusalem to give a report to the Council. The others stayed in Antioch to teach and encourage the brethren.

Acts 15:32-35 NKJV 32 Now Judas and Silas, themselves being prophets also, exhorted and strengthened the brethren with many words. 33 And after they had stayed there for a time, they were sent back with greetings from the brethren to the apostles. 34 However, it seemed good to Silas to remain there. 35 Paul and Barnabas also remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.

For centuries traditional Christianity has insisted that Yeshua and the apostles taught the cancelation of the Torah and the end of Judaism as a legitimate faith. Through our studies, particularly these recent weeks in the Book of Acts, as we have known for quite some time, this long-standing interpretation of the words of Messiah Yeshua and the apostles is in error. Over the centuries most of the Jewish community has believed the Christian depiction of Yeshua and the apostles and rejected them without a second thought. We now realize that there are two kinds of believers; there are the Jews and the Gentiles, and each has his own obligations under the Torah and place in the kingdom of God.

Today many Gentiles are returning and rediscovering the Jewish roots of Christianity. We realize that Yeshua and the apostles did not preach a gospel of salvation at the expense of Torah observance. On the contrary, Torah observance was incumbent on the Jewish believers and expected to the degree possible of the Gentile believers. Indeed, this Torah observance by the Gentiles had nothing to do with their salvation through Messiah Yeshua but was necessary as the “stranger dwelling among the Jews” so they could have full fellowship with the Jewish believers.

Even though we live in a different time and culture, we can be encouraged by the example set by Paul, Barnabas, and the other apostles. We can listen to the ruling of the Jerusalem Council. Though they are not with us, their words are just as powerful and relevant to us as they were to the believers back then.

Study Questions:

1. In the teaching we spoke of the difference between the Torah obligations of the Gentiles and those of the Jews. How do these obligations differ? What are the requirements of each and can or should a Gentile take on more commandments than what is required of him/her? In other words, the commandments that are specifically for the Jews?
2. It is apparent that the assembly at Syrian Antioch was the example for the rest of the believers, both Jew and Gentile, throughout the rest of the world. How can we apply their example to our assemblies today?
3. One of the biggest arguments Paul’s detractors made was that Gentiles, even God-fearers who followed the same established rules regarding food and other purity related commandments as did the Jews in the same synagogue, were nevertheless still considered “unclean” by simply being Gentiles. How does the Council’s decree solve this issue, or does it?
4. Paul, in the 1st Corinthians 7:17-19, states that a Jew should remain a Jew and a Gentile should remain a Gentile. What other passages of scripture speak to this issue? Is there examples in both the Tanach and the Apostolic Writings?
5. Why was it important for Barsabas and Silas to personally deliver the letter to the church at Antioch as opposed to allowing Paul and Barnabas to deliver the message?

6. What new insight did you gain from this teaching? How do you respond to this new insight? How will you realign your life based on this new understanding?

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ⁱ Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the beginning of Christian Public Ethics*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000), 165.

ⁱⁱ John B. Polhil, *The New American Commentary, Acts, 330*