

Acts 15: THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM

by Moshe ben Shaul

MUCH of the "believing world" might view this information as either "off the wall" at best, or heretical at worse. However, I feel with all my heart that it is scriptural and logical. If anyone can show me that I am wrong, I will prayerfully consider their objections.

In Acts 15:1, we learn of a particular group of Pharisees that believed Yeshua was the Messiah. They were telling the Gentile believers, "Unless you become circumcised after the manner (or custom) of Moses, you cannot be saved." This can be interpreted as meaning that you cannot be saved unless you are circumcised, or it may more likely refer to the Oral Law.¹ This is more likely, because the word used here is "custom" or "manner," not Law. In this case, they are referring to the method and manner of circumcision, which are not in the Written Torah, but were part of the Oral Law. The Written Torah only discusses when, not how. Becoming circumcised as it was taught then in Judaism symbolized one's commitment to keep all the Law-written and oral.

Being "saved" (*sozo* in Greek) means delivered, protected, healed, made whole. It doesn't literally mean "eternal life," but in this case it means taken from paganism or a backslidden state into the family of believers in the true God. So Acts 15:1 means that certain men (of the Pharisees) were saying that Gentiles need to be circumcised in the correct manner to become part of the community of Israel, including its subset of believers in Yeshua.²

Please remember that the body of believers at that time was composed entirely of Jews and the Gerim, who were proselytes to Judaism. The Gerim observed Torah in many ways, which we will discuss later on in this article.

Lets back up a bit to Acts 13:14-16. We discover Shaul (Paul) attending a synagogue and being invited to speak to the congregation. In Acts 13:42-43, we find that many Jews and Gerim ("religious proselytes") came to believe in Yeshua. The synagogue had both Jews and devout proselytes. Gentiles who had not yet committed themselves to the level of "proselyte" were not in the synagogue, so they wanted Paul to speak to them the following Sabbath.³ Therefore, Shaul is in Antioch again at the end of chapter 14 to share what had happened to them since chapter 13. Who was he sharing with? Was it a church? Of course not! There were no churches. He shared in the synagogue. It could also be called an ecclesia or a kehila, that is, a congregation, but not a church.

Some of the congregation were angry, because they didn't think Paul should share with all these Gentiles (Acts 13:44-48). In Acts 13:44, it says that Paul was preaching the word of God. By the way, What was considered the word of God? It would be Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim.⁴

Returning to Acts 15:1, we discover that certain Pharisees felt that these Gerim could not be considered as one of them because they hadn't even been circumcised. They were probably saying, "Don't even let them in the front door of the synagogue." Devout proselytes were considered "one" with Israel, but these guys were still pagans in the eyes of this group of Pharisees, and they should still be treated as pagans, not Jews.

Acts 15:2. We find that Paul and Barnabas disagreed with these guys, so they took the matter to the Beit Din⁵ of the Messianic community headed by Ya'acov,⁶ Yeshua's brother. This was in keeping with Jewish tradition in that controversial matters were brought before a Beit Din for proper resolution. They bowed to the authority of the governing body to rule on this important question as to when Gentiles enter into fellowship with Jews as Jews. Different sects of Judaism had their own governing bodies, and in this case we see that the (Messianic Jewish) believers in Yeshua did also.

Acts 15:3. They were sent on their way by a synagogue, not a church. Would a church have cared about the issue of circumcising its members? On the way, they pass through different areas and share with their brethren about the conversion of the Gentiles. Let me ask you this: What were they being converted to? Believers in Yeshua were part of the Judaism of that era. Paul was converting Gentiles to his sect of Judaism, and we discover that it "caused great joy to all the brethren."

Acts 15:4. They arrived at Jerusalem, and were received by the Messianic Jews, not a church.

Acts 15:5. The Pharisees who were believers repeated their stance on the issue. Would Pharisees be going to a church? If they did, they wouldn't be considered Pharisees anymore. Remember that Paul also was a Pharisee (Acts 23:6). They were telling Paul, in essence, "You cannot convert Gentiles to Judaism without circumcising them and commanding them to keep the Law of Moses." In Pharisaic Judaism, they taught that the Oral Law also came through Moses. So the Gentiles have to be circumcised and keep Torah, and probably also the Oral Torah. So this was the issue before the Council that they had to rule on. We read in Acts that there were devout proselytes in virtually every synagogue even before they ever heard of Yeshua, but not to such an extent as was occurring after the news of Yeshua was preached among them.

There were questions to be resolved. Do they circumcise the Gentile proselytes before they enter in the conversion process, or after they have studied in the synagogue for a while? Were they considered true *gerim* before they had learned Torah and committed to it? Or could they start with minimal observance and adopt more observance as they learned more, as is indicated in Acts 15:21?

There were already proselytes to Judaism who followed Torah in varying degrees and were part of the synagogue, but there was no universal consensus of opinion on what they had to

do to reach the status of being a proselyte. Did they have to become full-fledged Pharisees keeping both the Oral and Written Law? Or could they just be starting the learning process? This was a major issue.

TO RECAP THE FIRST 5 VERSES: Certain synagogues were feuding and maybe even dividing over the issue of when it was the proper time to formally convert Gentiles to Judaism, perhaps even when to let them in the door. When were they considered brethren? How do they relate to them? Please remember that the Jews considered Gentiles to be unclean, which is why Peter had to struggle with his vision in Acts 10 and 11. A Jew couldn't even eat with them. Paul was converting some of these guys, while others said it was premature, because they didn't know enough. "They have to be totally like us first." It was a real big mess, and the Council was given the authority to rule on this matter. For instance, "Does circumcision come before, at, or after conversion?" These were issues not only for the Messianic Jews, but for all of Judaism at that time in history.

Let me give you a little background. There were two types of proselytes to Judaism back then. The first was the *Ger tzadik*. This group kept all of Torah and Oral Law according to their sect of Pharisaism - probably when Acts refers to some proselytes as devout (Acts 13:43, etc.), it is this type of *gerim*. They were considered fully converted to Judaism.

The second type of proselyte was a *Ger toe-shav* - known as a God-fearer, like Cornelius, the guy that Peter wouldn't want to eat with in Acts 10. They kept at least the basics later listed in Acts 15. They weren't considered full converts, but were allowed to participate in activities with the Jewish community. Paul was saying that these guys were true converts, and as time goes on they will adopt more and more of what they learn in the synagogue. There was a big disagreement in the Pharisaic community at large about the *Ger toshav*. Some believed like Paul that they were true converts, some considered them to be quasi converts, and others considered them to be just Gentiles. Many of the male *gerim* didn't want to be circumcised, while many of the women became full converts.⁷ The argument

was, "Do we consider these guys brothers or not?" This argument was throughout Judaism. Circumcision meant a commitment to follow it all. Many Jews were against circumcision of Gentiles until they had enough learning. Paul was part of that group. Today in Christendom there are similar arguments about when to baptize. How much should they know first? It is very similar.

Let me quote some ancient rabbis to show you the different trains of thought concerning all this. These quotes are from the Talmud, but these arguments go back at least to Yeshua's time:

"If a proselyte was circumcised, but had not performed the prescribed *mikveh* immersion," Rabbi Eliezer said, "behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that our forefathers were circumcised and had not performed *mikveh* immersion."

"If he performed the proper *mikveh* immersion, but had not been circumcised," Rabbi Joshua said, "behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that the mothers had performed ritual immersion, but had not been circumcised."

The sages however said, "Whether he had performed *mikveh* immersion but had not been circumcised or whether he had not performed the prescribed *mikveh* immersion, he is not a proper proselyte, unless he has done both."

So the argument was what do you have to do to be considered a full Jewish convert. Some of the Jews insisted that a *Ger toshav* should go on to keep the entire Mosaic Law. Other more lenient thought it better to nurture them along slowly leading them to more and more observance and finally to the level of a *Ger tzadik* - all in the course of one year. In the interim, the *Ger to-shav*, while learning the requirements of the Mosaic Law, was to have full equality with the House of Israel as soon as he had renounced idolatry in front of the three men of the Jewish court (Beit Din). They were required to observe the minimum requirement of the Noachide laws, which are basically outlined in the letter the Jerusalem Council wrote, plus not cursing God, not murdering, nor stealing, and also submitting to the Jewish courts during the application process.

You can see how widespread this issue was. Should these God-fearers be considered converts? Paul said yes, while others said no. The Messianics had a ruling at this council, yet within the rest of Judaism it wasn't decided for quite a while longer.

Acts 15:7-8. They argued, and Peter got up and referred to his vision and experience with Cornelius. He explains it, knowing that the vision wasn't literally about food, and that the Gentiles should be able to hear God's word, and according to Peter it is God's will, and He is blessing it.

Acts 15:9. God made no distinction between the true *Gerim* and the Jewish believers.

Acts 15:10. What was the yoke that neither they nor their fathers were able to bear? Was it Torah? NO. Torah was not considered an unbearable yoke. If that were the case, it would negate Matthew 5:17-19 and Acts 21:20 where these same guys were so pleased about the myriads (tens of thousands) of Torah zealous Yeshua believing Jews. This yoke was the Oral Law that this group of Pharisees (possibly Shammaites) wanted the *Gerim* to obey.⁸ This is what the Council decided was an unbearable yoke.

Acts 15:11. It is God's grace - the grace of Moshiach - that restores us to God. It is also a system of repentance, to repent and be restored by God's grace.

Acts 15:12. Paul and Barnabas explain how God was with them in the ministry to the Gentiles.

Acts 15:14. Simeon shows that originally all people were Gentiles until God called out a people through Avraham and that God promised to call out Gentiles again, which was happening mightily at that time.

Acts 15:19. The Gentiles were repenting of their heathenism and turning to God's ways. So when do we accept them into fellowship in the synagogue? When do we consider them 'clean' enough?

Acts 15:20. Giving up idols was one of the evidences of having turned to God. Three other things are mainstays of the idol-worshipping nations: Sexual immorality in the form of sex outside of marriage; adultery, homosexuality, and even temple prostitution were commonplace. These, plus eating blood, were anathema, things that Judaism teaches a Jew should die rather than commit. These acts would be an incredible offense to Jews.

Acts 15:21. If they obey the above restrictions, they are considered pure enough to enter the synagogue and study Torah. By their faithfulness, they will grow and hear Torah and obey more and more. This compassionate ruling eased the transition of Gentiles, making it easier for them to sojourn among the Jews and learn and grow.

Acts 15:22. This Council, and not a "church," sent Paul and Barnabas back with Silas (three men, as in a Beit Din, so that their testimony would be accepted).

Acts 15:23. They sent along a letter of the ruling of the Council with Paul, Yehuda, and Silas where the theological feud existed in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. There were presumably similar problems coming from the more rigid Pharisaic side, possibly part of the same group that would have had problems with Stephen (Acts 6:9, 14). Again, the main concern was changing the "customs of Moses," known as the Oral Law.

Acts 15:24. The letter was to the Gentiles who had been recent converts, which certain believers among the Pharisees were insisting weren't really converts. The *Gerim* needed assurance of their standing, so they assured the *Gerim* of their good standing as long as they were keeping the basics that they had pledged to do in the first place. They were already

attending a synagogue, and would be allowed to continue to do so, so that they would continue to learn, grow, and obey. They were considered part of the kingdom of God.

Acts 15:31. When the Gentile converts received the letter, "they rejoiced for the consolation (a Greek word also meaning 'comfort' or 'encouragement')." They were comforted that they were considered converts by the (Messianic Jewish) leadership.

Acts 15:35. Paul and Barnabas stay and teach and preach the word of God. Again, this was not the New Testament, but Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim (Tanakh, "Old Testament").

Acts 15:41. They went to other congregations with the letter and explained the decisions of the Jerusalem Council. In some Mid-East areas such as Syria, most males were already circumcised (even among the Gentiles), so the issue was more the manner of the circumcision and what it represented.

Acts 16:1. Shaul goes to Derbe and Lystra and circumcises Timothy right after that (16:3). Would it make sense to circumcise Timothy and then preach against circumcision? (This is further evidence that Paul wasn't opposed to circumcision, only to those who would insist upon circumcision as an evidence for conversion.)

There were other issues that hadn't been totally resolved. Was Jewishness passed on through the mother or father? According to modern Rabbinic Halakhah, if Timothy's mother had been Jewish, he would have been circumcised as an infant, because Rabbinic Halakhah says that the child of a Jewish mother is Jewish. However, the genealogies in Matthew 1 would seem to imply that Jewishness was passed on through the fathers at that time. It seems to me that Timothy was becoming a *Ger tzadik* at that time. There obviously were no theological disagreements between Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy, or Paul wouldn't have wanted Timothy to come along with them. Paul obviously believed in Torah.

CONCLUSIONS

Gentiles could become part of the House of Israel without first becoming circumcised. They had to follow some basic rules to prove their sincerity, and they would attend the synagogue and learn Torah and incorporate more of it as time went on.

HOW IS THIS IMPORTANT?

1. It shows that it was the intent of the Messianic believers of the First Century for the converts to become Jewish.
2. Converts. Once again, this is a hard term to define. The Gentile converts are considered as one with the House of Israel, every bit as Jewish as someone born Jewish, according to Rabbinic Halakhah.
3. All are to study Torah (the first five books of the Bible).
4. The ruling of the Council was in line with non-Messianic Jewish rabbis in traditional Judaism.
5. No new religion was started at that time.

(As further evidence to back up what is written in this article, it should be noted that the New Covenant was promised only to the House of Israel and the House of Judah, as we learn from the prophet Jeremiah: *"Behold, the days come," saith YHWH, "that I will make a New Covenant with the House of Israel, and with the House of Judah."* [Jer. 31:31].

There is no mention of God making a new covenant with the Gentiles, so it may be safe to assume that there was no covenant with the Gentiles, unless you prefer to "add to the Word," which is prohibited. Therefore, the only way for Gentiles to partake of the covenants that YHWH made with Israel is to be grafted in to the natural olive tree [Israel], as is verified in Romans 11:17-25.)

¹According to the Rabbis, there was an Oral Law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai and passed on orally to succeeding generations, and finally written down in the Talmud in about 450 to 500 CE (Common Era).

²Also called the "sect of the Nazarenes" (Acts 24:5), the Messianic Jews of that era.

³As is seen throughout the New Testament, Shabbat continued to be the day in which believers assembled.

⁴The "Law" (more accurately, Instruction), the Prophets, and the Writings, also called the "Tanakh" (O.T.). The New Testament hadn't even been invented yet!

⁵Literally, "House of Judgment."

⁶Or "James" as it is so badly translated in most Bibles. The name in Greek is Yakobos. The Anglicized equivalent would be "Jacob," never James.

⁷It was easier and less painful for women to become proselytes. For the men, circumcision was a definite impediment to Jewish proselytizing before anesthesia came along.

Also, please note what it says in D'varim: *"For this commandment which I command you today is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very nigh unto you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it."* (Deut. 30:11-14).

⁹ The Gentile converts to Judaism and Gentile God-fearers attended the synagogues and worshipped in them, as we see in Acts 2:43; 14,1; 17:4,17; 18:4. It was assumed that after learning of the Messiah, they would continue to worship in the synagogues. As they learned in the synagogues, they would grow in their level of Torah-observance.

The KJV adds, "saying, 'Ye must be circumcised, and keep the Law,' to whom we gave no such commandment." This addition is lacking in most ancient manuscripts, and may be a scribal addition, and is therefore not in modern English translations beginning with the James Duncan Version of 1836.

¹¹For more evidence of this, please note Acts 22:3, 23:6, 25:8, and 28:17.

These promises to the House of Israel and the House of Judah are repeated in Hebrews 8:8-10.

Deuteronomy 4:2, Revelations 4:18.