

## Acts 11:1-18

### “Peter’s Vision of the Sheet”

“Now the apostles and the brethren who were throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him, saying, ‘You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them.’ But Peter began *speaking* and *proceeded* to explain to them in orderly sequence, saying, ‘I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, an object coming down like a great sheet lowered by four corners from the sky; and it came right down to me, and when I had fixed my gaze on it and was observing it I saw the four-footed animals of the earth and the wild beasts and the crawling creatures and the birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat.” But I said, “By no means, Lord, for nothing unholy or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” But a voice from heaven answered a second time, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy.” This happened three times, and everything was drawn back up into the sky. And behold, at that moment three men appeared at the house in which we were *staying*, having been sent to me from Caesarea. The Spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. These six brethren also went with me and we entered the man’s house. And he reported to us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, and saying, “Send to Joppa and have Simon, who is also called Peter, brought here; and he will speak words to you by which you will be saved, you and all your household.” And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as *He did* upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” Therefore if God gave to them the same gift as *He gave* to us also after believing in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, who was I that I could stand in God’s way?’ When they heard this, they quieted down and glorified God, saying, ‘Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance *that leads to life.*’”

Acts 11:1-18 includes a retelling of what has just occurred in Acts ch. 10 preceding, albeit somewhat abbreviated. Such a retelling of an important, prior occurrence, is common to Luke-Acts, as is also seen with events such as the ascension of Yeshua into Heaven (Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9) or Yeshua’s appearance to Paul on the Damascus road (Acts 9:1-9; 22:4-11; 26:12-18). A retelling of a prior event is witnessed because of a key, transitional moment in salvation history, for the people of God and His purposes. Given the Apostle Peter’s testimony regarding what had just transpired regarding the vision of the sheet and his declaration of the good news of Israel’s Messiah to Cornelius and his companions, a Bible reader is necessarily asked: *What is the main issue of what has taken place?*

Seeing Peter report back to his fellow colleagues in Jerusalem, it is appropriate, that in considering the true intention of Peter’s vision and Peter’s actions, *to question whether Peter’s vision really was about the abrogation of the Torah’s dietary laws*, as is commonly concluded by Christian examiners. Presumably, the content of Acts 11:1-18, as Peter’s vision and its effect on the First Century Body of Messiah are relayed, will guide all readers and interpreters in the right direction.

In this text which immediately follows Peter’s vision and his visit to Cornelius, we see the reaction that the Messianic Jewish leaders have as to what has transpired. Peter repeats what he was shown by God, and what took place regarding Cornelius. What is important for us to take note of, are not just the positive reactions that the Jerusalem Believers have regarding the salvation of Cornelius, but also what they say—or do not say—about the details of Peter’s vision conveyed to them. I. Howard Marshall is correct to conclude, “It was the reaction of these Jewish Christians to the response of the Gentiles which was all-important for the future.”<sup>1</sup> As will be witnessed in Luke’s record of Acts 11:1-18, the conclusion drawn by the parties, is: “It’s really happened! God has

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall, *Acts*, 195.

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broken through to the other nations, opened them up to Life!” (v. 18, The Message). The salvation of those from the nations at large, is what has now taken place, **which is far more significant than anything regarding food or diet**. Yet this would not be without challenges, as is summarized by Ben Witherington III:

“[T]he story of Cornelius is not just an exceptional situation...but the acceptance by the Gentiles (τα ἔθνη [*ta ethnē*]) of God’s word about Jesus. In other words, a whole new ethnic group, involving the multitude of pagan nations, has come into the picture. 11:1 should be compared with 8:14 for the similarity of language. First it was the Samaritans, now it’s the Gentiles, and the Jerusalem church is caught just as unprepared as they were with the results of the mission of Philip in Samaria.”<sup>2</sup>

11:1-3 Luke narrates how, “The apostles and the brothers and sisters throughout Judea heard that even the Gentiles had welcomed God’s word” (v. 1, Common English Bible). While there was presumably much excitement over what had just occurred regarding the Jew Peter’s declaration of the good news or gospel to the Roman Cornelius, and that the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon those from the nations (vs. 17-18), there was some criticism of Peter having gone to Cornelius: “And when Peter came up to Jerusalem, those who were circumcised took issue with him” (v. 2).

The criticism was lodged by *hoi ek peritomēs* (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς), which is rendered by the RSV/ESV as “the circumcision party,” but would be a bit more neutrally, “those of the circumcision” (NKJV, TLV). While previously in 10:45, *hoi ek peritomēs pistoi* (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοὶ) or “the circumcised believers” would be a general reference to Jewish Believers, *hoi ek peritomēs* in 11:2 bears the tenor of a sub-group or sect among the Jerusalem Believers raising their disapproval of Peter’s action (a group which will be seen again in 15:1, 5). In the view of F.F. Bruce, “by expression we are perhaps to understand more particularly those Jewish [Believers] who were especially zealous for the law and sticklers for the ban on social intercourse between circumcised and uncircumcised.”<sup>3</sup> But, this would notably *not* include all of the Jerusalem Jewish Believers. The tone of this overly-conservative group of Jewish Believers might be similar to what is seen in *Jubilees* 22:16 in the Pseudepigrapha: “And do not become associates of theirs. Because their deeds are defiled, and all of their ways are contaminated, and despicable, and abominable.”<sup>4</sup>

The offense that Peter apparently committed, as issued by the circumcision party, is: “You went into the homes of uncircumcised men and even ate with them!” (v. 3, CJB). While there is a criticism of Peter having eaten with *andras akrobustian* (ἄνδρας ἀκροβυστίαν), perhaps more literally “foreskinned men,”<sup>5</sup> was the main issue actually eating something with them, **or** the fact that Peter had table fellowship with the uncircumcised? Keep in mind that Cornelius was a God-fearer (10:2), meaning that he already recognized Israel’s God and kept a wide degree of the Torah’s instructions. It has been observed by various interpreters, how the accusation, “You actually went in and shared a meal with uncircumcised men!” (Phillips New Testament), bears some degree of similarity with how Yeshua Himself shared a meal in fellowship with tax-collectors and sinners (Mark 2:16; Luke 15:2), who were notably already members of the Jewish community, and would have served the

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<sup>2</sup> Witherington, *Acts*, 361.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce, *Acts*, 234; also: Witherington, *Acts*, 362; Bock, 406.

Against: Marshall, *Acts*, 195; Stott, *Acts*, 194, who both favor how the NEB has, “those who were of Jewish birth.” Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 216 similarly states, “Kefa’s hearers, the strict Circumcision faction, ‘zealous for the Torah’ (21:20), are no more Torah-observant than Kefa himself.” Such a statement, while recognizing how there were Jewish Believers appropriately concerned about Torah fidelity in 21:20 following (“You see, brother, how many tens of thousands of believers there are among the Judeans, and they are all zealots for the Torah” [CJB]), comes up short in failing to consider how an over-zealousness on the part of many First Century Messianic Jews was being demonstrated, when set in view of Messiah faith.

Consult discussions present in “The Implementation of the Apostolic Decree and Acts 21:17-26,” in the commentary *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* by J.K. McKee.

<sup>4</sup> Wintermute, in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, 98.

<sup>5</sup> The term *akrobustia* (ἀκροβυστία), while commonly rendered as “uncircumcised” in most English Bibles, is more properly “the foreskin” (LS, 30).

## Messianic Kosher Helper

Messiah a kosher meal. Eating with someone would demonstrate a high degree of personal acceptance and welcomeness (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:11), and Peter's demonstration of such welcomeness to Cornelius and his company was too much for some. David G. Peterson observes how, "They criticized him for an action that seemed to have more significance for them than the salvation of these Gentiles. But it must be remembered that Peter's action challenged their understanding of Scripture and what it meant to be the holy people of God."<sup>6</sup>

While there would have been various general issues and controversy regarding the principle of a Jewish person like Peter, dining with Greeks and Romans, perhaps because of the cuisine served—this should not be thought to be as big of an issue as many conclude. Eckhard J. Schnabel, for example, makes the critical point, "One could assume that Cornelius, being a God-fearer who had a good reputation in the Jewish community (10:2, 22), would have offered Peter and the Jewish believers from Joppa only kosher food that observant Jews are able to eat, such as bread, legumes, vegetables, and fruit. However, observant Jews suspected that Gentiles were most likely unclean and thus a source of defilement."<sup>7</sup> As the later scene in Antioch reveals (Galatians 2:11-14), the issue of table fellowship between the Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, probably did not concern what was being eaten (discussed further)—as much as it concerned how one group of Believers was uncircumcised, and that the circumcised Jewish Believers needed to be distanced from them. Even when kosher meat or some neutral foodstuffs were provided, uncircumcision status of Greeks and Romans was too much for some of the early Jewish Believers, to overcome for table fellowship and social intercourse. As Darrell L. Bock describes,

"For these Jewish believers, the likelihood of Peter contracting uncleanness was almost certain. This follows the general Jewish view that Gentiles were inherently unclean...How much contact Jews would have with Gentiles was debated; scrupulous Jews were concerned about such issues. This problem with circumcision and table fellowship will persist across the [ekklēsia] and be discussed again in Acts 15."<sup>8</sup>

The thought that an upstanding God-fearer like Cornelius, who while uncircumcised, could not socially interact with a Jewish person like Peter—indicates how deeply some prejudices, against those of the nations at large, **needed to be overcome** by various groups of First Century Messianic Jews.

11:4-10 Peter knew he would have to "explain himself" to the Jerusalem Believers, "So Peter began explaining to them point by point" (v. 4, TLV). Peter presents his vision to the Jerusalem Believers in vs. 5-10, as it was to serve as being preparatory for the arrival of the party sent by Cornelius. John R.W. Stott interjects the useful direction of how for Peter, "It took...successive hammer-blows of divine revelation before his racial and religious prejudice was overcome, as he explains to the Jerusalem"<sup>9</sup> congregation,

"I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, something descending, like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came down to me. Looking at it closely I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'No, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven" (vs. 5-10, RSV).

Among the statements which are repeated from Acts ch. 10, 11:9 echoes the claim *ho Theos ekatharisen* (ὁ θεὸς ἐκαθάρισεν), "what God has cleansed." Frequently, in Acts 10 examination (previously analyzed), this is concluded to be the nullification of Torah distinctions between clean

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<sup>6</sup> Peterson, 343.

<sup>7</sup> Schnabel, 508.

<sup>8</sup> Bock, 406.

<sup>9</sup> Stott, Acts, 194.

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and unclean meats. Yet, does *ekatharisen* have any kind of relationship with various Septuagint uses of the verb *katharizō* (καθαρίζω), "to cleanse," where the purity of people is in view (i.e., Leviticus 13:6, 13, 17)?

What is the response of the Jerusalem Believers to the Apostle Peter recounting his vision to them? Is there a specific acknowledgement that the dietary laws of the Torah have been abrogated? Or, is there something else which is recognized (vs. 15, 17)? Stott, in commenting on this scene, actually does state, "In consequence, Peter grasped the idea that the clean and unclean animals...were a symbol of clean and unclean, circumcised and uncircumcised persons."<sup>10</sup>

11:11-14 Peter continues telling the Jerusalem Believers what had happened to him, as following the vision of the sheet, the party from Cornelius arrived, they went to Caesarea, and how Cornelius told him that Peter would be coming to deliver a salvation message:

"At that very moment, three men arrived at the house where we were, sent to me from Caesarea. The *Ruach* [Spirit] told me to go with them without hesitating. These six brethren also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He reported to us how he had seen an angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter. He will speak words to you by which you will be saved—you and all your household'" (TLV).

11:15-18 The way Peter tells what has happened, to his Jerusalem colleagues, is significant, because the central focus of his visit to Cornelius and his companions is, "I had hardly begun speaking when the *Ruach HaKodesh* fell on them, just as on us at the beginning!" (v. 15, CJB). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Roman centurion Cornelius, and all those gathered, took place **without any preconditions of circumcision, kosher, or Torah observance**. And even with Cornelius and his family being God-fearers, and already keeping a fair degree of the Torah's instruction—the likelihood of there being some of his colleagues and associates, who were not God-fearers but curious pagan onlookers, is rather strong. *God is surely free to act however God wants on whomever God wants*. Peter interjects his own thought of how, "I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, 'John immersed with water, but you will be immersed in the *Ruach ha-Kodesh* [Holy Spirit]'" (v. 16, TLV; cf. 1:5). Perhaps with Galatians 3:27 in mind,<sup>11</sup> Schnabel interjects the rather important conclusion:

"Peter was justified to associate with Gentiles who had come to faith in Jesus and upon whom the Holy Spirit had fallen. Moreover, Peter was also justified to incorporate them into the congregation of 'Israel' by immersion in water and by eating with them. All people, both Jews and Gentiles, without distinction, upon whom the Messiah bestows the Holy Spirit, are part of God's restoration of Israel and belong to the people of God."<sup>12</sup>

The involvement of the redeemed from the nations, being participants in the restoration of Israel's Kingdom, is something which will feature in the later deliberations of the Jerusalem Council (15:15-18; cf. Amos 9:11-12).

The climax of what has transpired in Peter's visit to Cornelius, is obviously **the salvation of Cornelius and his companions**. As Peter concluded, "Therefore, if God gave them the same gift as he gave us after we had come to put our trust in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, who was I to stand in God's way?" (v. 17, CJB). This is often, and indeed rightly, concluded to mirror what took place earlier at *Shavuot*/Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (2:1-4). And it is something that Peter will acknowledge later at the Jerusalem Council: "And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us" (15:8). As obvious as it may seem to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

He does also state in this quotation that the issue of clean and unclean meats was "a distinction which Jesus had abolished," referencing Mark 7:19 (previously addressed).

<sup>11</sup> "For all of you who were baptized into Messiah have clothed yourselves with Messiah" (Galatians 3:27).

<sup>12</sup> Schnabel, pp 511-512.

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Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Bible readers, the conclusion of Peter's Messianic Jewish fellows in Jerusalem was quite radical for their time:

"When they heard this they became silent. Then they glorified God, saying, 'So God has granted repentance resulting in life even to the Gentiles<sup>13</sup>!'" (v. 18, HCSB).

With some First Century Jewish prejudices and limitations needing to be overcome, the effect of Peter's vision of the sheet, his visit to Cornelius in Caesarea, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to those of the nations—was apparently enough for his fellow Messianic Jews in Jerusalem to largely conclude, "obviously God has given to the gentiles also the gift of repentance which leads to life" (Phillips New Testament).

**Acts 11:1-18 application** Largely because Acts 11:1-18 is an abbreviated repeat of the events that transpired previously in Acts 10, commentators can tend to brush through the Apostle Peter's report back at Jerusalem. The narrative focus of Acts 11:1-18, in response to the accusation that Peter fellowshiped and ate with the uncircumcised (v. 3), is that as soon as he arrived in Caesarea, the Holy Spirit was poured out (v. 15), with the conclusion of the Messianic Jewish Believers being that the Holy Spirit had indeed been poured out on those from the nations (v. 18). Interestingly enough, **what is never stated** in the report of Peter, or in the conclusion of the Jewish Believers, **is that somehow the dietary laws of the Torah had to be abrogated and nullified**, in order for this to take place. The conclusion of Acts 11:18 was similar to that of Peter in Acts 10:28. The issue in view was social discourse and interaction of the Jewish Believers with those from the nations, whom God had obviously cleansed, and to whom He had provided His Spirit.

Issues pertaining to the inclusion of new Believers from the nations, into the Body of Messiah, their circumcision status, what they ate, and their relationship to the Torah or Law of Moses, were hardly resolved at Peter's return to Jerusalem in Acts 11:1-18. Ajith Fernando draws readers' attention to how "For the moment the circumcision party is silenced. They will emerge again in chapter 15 when they see what large numbers of Gentiles have come into the [assembly]. Not everyone has undergone the permanent change of conviction that Peter has. They join in the praise now, but as they see the wider implications of this step, they will rise up again in protest."<sup>14</sup> And, in fact, a scene which would erupt between Peter's reporting back to Jerusalem here, and the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, would be Peter's falling back into some previous prejudices against those from the nations, during his visit to Antioch (Galatians 2:11-14). The Jerusalem Council's decree would then have to establish non-negotiable entry requirements to the new, non-Jewish Believers coming to faith, which had to be observed in order for them to enter into the assembly of faith, and be cut off from paganism.

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<sup>13</sup> Grk. *kai tois ethnesin* (καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσιν); often just rendered as "to the Gentiles also" (NASU, RSV/ESV), but with some favoring "even to the Gentiles" (NRSV, TLV).

<sup>14</sup> Fernando, 339.