

# Acts 15:21, Ongoing Controversies

I have heard you say that you do not believe that Acts 15:21 is the most important verse, detailing the events of the Jerusalem Council. Can you please explain?

In a wide majority of today's Messianic discussions and debates, over the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council, it would be fair to deduce that a huge amount of attention has been given to Acts 15:21: "For from ancient generations Moses has those who preach him in every city, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath" (2020 NASB). It should also be fair to deduce that almost all of us, whether we be leaders, teachers, or readers, have been caught up in some form of Acts 15:21 over-analysis. This was mainly the result of how over the past two to three decades (1990s-2010s), older and more dogmatic voices frequently made us choose sides regarding the intention of Acts 15:21 in the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council. Yet, no one could have foreseen or anticipated, in the 2000s for example, the even more problematic (and negative) impact of social media regarding Acts 15:21—especially in the form of overly simplistic memes getting passed around.

It is not inappropriate for any of us, looking back on the past several decades, to be able to make some fine-tuning or necessary adjustments in our approaches to Acts 15:21. **This even includes acknowledging how the main theological trust of the Jerusalem Council is not Acts 15:21**, contrary to a great deal of the discussion many of us have witnessed and participated in (from all sides.)

David H. Stern, in his 1995 *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, noted how Acts 15:21—"For from the earliest times, Moshe has had in every city those who proclaim him, with his words being read in the synagogues every *Shabbat*" (CJSB)—"is a difficult verse."<sup>1</sup> The baseline interpretation which a wide number of Acts examiners will agree upon, is that the four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree—"we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols, from acts of sexual immorality, from what has been strangled, and from blood" (Acts 15:20, 2020 NASB)—were prohibitions listed in the Torah of Moses, which First Century Jewish people would hear read every Sabbath, and take offense from witnessing. By the new Greek and Roman Believers adhering to these prohibitions, table fellowship and involvement in the faith community, could be better facilitated with Jewish Believers.

Many of us, in our Messianic experience, have encountered the view that the statement of Acts 15:21, **told** the new, non-Jewish Believers in the First Century, **to go** to their local Jewish synagogue to hear the Torah be taught every *Shabbat*. This perspective has been challenged by many, because the Apostolic letter following includes no reference to the Torah, the Sabbath, or the local synagogue:

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<sup>1</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995), 279.

Stern proceeds to offer six different interpretations of Acts 15:21, only apparently committing himself to some variance of the first four.

“[T]hey sent this letter with them: ‘The apostles and the brothers who are elders, to the brothers *and sisters* in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles: Greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have confused you by *their* teaching, upsetting your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah. Therefore, we have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word *of mouth*. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from *acts of sexual immorality*; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell” (Acts 15:23-29, 2020 NASB).

It can be fairly acknowledged that this may only be an abridgment of the actual letter sent by the Jerusalem Council, to the non-Jewish Believers in Asia Minor. When the Apostolic representatives delivered the Apostolic Decree (Acts 15:20, 29), they would doubtlessly have had to field many questions about what the four prohibitions actually meant, and what their implications would be when followed. With this in mind, a much better approach could be, that **when followed**—“abstain[ing] from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29, TLV)—that the new Greek and Roman Believers would be effectively cut off from their old spheres of social and religious influence. This would logically result in a community where the One God of Israel was acknowledged, and Moses was being taught every week, being their new sphere of social and religious influence. In the record of the Book of Acts and Apostolic letters, readers do encounter various levels of success and difficulty, regarding how easy or difficult it was, to simply see the four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree followed.

Reflecting back on two to three decades of Acts 15 discussion, in the broad Messianic community, a number of questions continue to remain at the forefront of what Acts 15:21 means for the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council. It is hardly a surprise that when these questions are considered, why so many of us have placed so much attention on Acts 15:21 in our reading and evaluation of Acts 15:

- Why is there a statement about Moses being read in the local Jewish synagogue every Sabbath/*Shabbat*?
- What would be the result of the new Greek and Roman Believers adhering to the four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree?
- How would, or could, many of the new Greek and Roman Believers access the Scriptures of Israel, to at least practically know what the four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree meant?

It is recognized, by a number of Messianic Jewish resources, that by following the four prohibitions of Apostolic Decree, that the new Greek and Roman Believers would have some resultant involvement with the First Century Jewish community. The 2016 *Complete Jewish Study Bible* acknowledges,

“[T]he four principles given should not be seen as the only commandments expected for the non-Jewish followers of Yeshua to keep, but they were the necessary commands to peacefully coexist with Jews. There were no Catholic or Protestant churches down the street for these Gentiles to attend, so the natural understanding was that they would worship in the synagogue. This would explain Ya’akov’s (James’s) exhortation in verse 21...”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Rubin, gen. ed., *The Complete Jewish Study Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 1584.

The 2022 commentary *Acts of the Emissaries* by Barney Kasdan, also indicates,

“It could also be that these four areas would be a good starting point for the non-Jews, but they’d continue their education by their natural interaction with the Jewish community.”<sup>3</sup>

And once again, it is organically witnessed from a survey of the Book of Acts and Apostolic letters, that the new Greek and Roman Believers, experienced various levels of involvement with the Jewish community.

One of the most obvious factors regarding the statement of Acts 15:21, which is probably not stressed enough, **is how the statement of Acts 15:21 is affected by the circumstances of the late 40s-early 50s C.E.** It is plain enough, by simply reading a letter like 1 Corinthians, that the four prohibitions of the Apostolic Decree were not always followed by the new Greek and Roman Believers, and that the Corinthian Messiah followers had been ejected from the local Jewish synagogue. It should also be apparent, that Acts 15:21 was a temporal statement, having been made just as the good news was beginning to expand out into the Mediterranean basin. This was before some of the complicated circumstances of the 60s C.E., which witnessed, among other things, the Jewish revolt in Judea and eventual destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

Very little troubleshooting has been done, across the board, by far too many Messianic readers of Acts 15:21 over the years. The array of (overly-)simplistic interpretations, at times, is proof of this. *What if a different statement were actually made, than what appears in the canonical Acts 15:21?* How might that change one’s approach to the circumstances and issues addressed in Acts 15? How might that reorient one’s viewpoint of what the Jerusalem Council was actually intending to see helped? If we might theologize through this for a moment, have you ever thought that there could have been a better or more logical statement which could have appeared in Acts 15:21—from the teachings of James the Just himself, who actually issued the Apostolic Decree? To many, the statement appearing in the canonical Acts 15:21, about Moses and synagogues, does seem a bit out of place or disjointed.

For the sake of theory, what would we do if a statement such as James 2:26 were substituted for the canonical Acts 15:21?

“Therefore, it is my judgment that we do not cause trouble for those from the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them that they abstain from things contaminated by idols, from *acts of sexual immorality*, from what has been strangled, and from blood....For just as the body without *the spirit* is dead, so also faith without works is dead” (Acts 15:19-20; James 2:26, 2020 NASB).

If the canonical Acts 15:21, “For from ancient generations Moses has those who preach him in every city, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath” (2020 NASB), did not actually appear in the text, then what would we do? Many would probably be able to more clearly and objectively see the various levels of involvement that the new Greek and Roman Believers had, with the Jewish community. Readers would also see that the new Greek and Roman Believers were hardly *told* to go to the synagogue on *Shabbat*. But, we would see the non-Jewish Believers involved with Jewish Believers and Jewish non-Believers, in a great deal of Jewish space.

If a passage like James 2:26 canonically appeared after Acts 15:19-20, it would be fairly deduced that by the new, non-Jewish Believers following the four prohibitions of the Apostolic

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<sup>3</sup> Barney Kasdan, *Acts of the Emissaries: The Early History of the Yeshua Movement* (Clarksville, MD: Lederer Books, 2022), 115.

Decree, they would be demonstrating significant growth and maturation in their faith. Additional good works, incumbent on those recognizing the One God of Israel and His Messiah, would doubtlessly be expected, via the supernatural activity of the Holy Spirit and discipleship by their fellow Messianic Jewish brothers and sisters. The four requirements of the Apostolic Decree, though, were the main areas where immediate change had to be seen.

If the canonical Acts 15:21 were not actually present in the Jerusalem Council deliberations of Acts 15, Bible readers would have no choice but to turn to another statement in Acts 15, to properly evaluate what the intentions of the Jerusalem Council actually were. Not to confuse anyone, we do indeed treat Acts 15:21 as canonical and authentic to the discussions of the Jerusalem Council! Unfortunately, though, because of some of the dogmatic approaches witnessed regarding Acts 15:21 over many years—to which we have all been subjected in one way or another—what is perhaps **the most important verse** of the entire scene of Acts 15, has been too widely overlooked and ignored. Acts 15:21 is not the most important verse of Acts 15, because regardless of how anyone interprets it, it was temporal to the mid-First Century C.E.

*So what might be the most important verse of Acts 15, if it is not Acts 15:21?* This is important because many of our future discussions and deliberations (and even revisions of older teachings), need to consider the long term salvation historical significance of what is witnessed in the discussions of the Jerusalem Council.

Looking back on many of the theological discussions and debates which I have witnessed in all of my time in the Messianic movement, it is fair to say that a verse like Acts 15:21 has been quoted and (over-)analyzed, at the expense of some other statements which bear much greater importance for the intentions of the Jerusalem Council. It is legitimately recognized that the new, non-Jewish Believers coming to faith in the First Century, did not need to be ordered to be circumcised as Jewish proselytes, and keep the Torah, to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). The Apostle Peter made it clear that Jewish and non-Jewish Believers were saved equally by the grace of the Lord Yeshua (Acts 15:11), and that no yoke of legalism was to be placed onto anyone (Acts 15:10). Continuing, James the Just, half-brother of Yeshua and leader of the Jerusalem assembly, issued “no greater burden than the following essentials” (Acts 15:28, NASU).

James the Just actually gave a very profound answer to the claim that the new Greek and Roman Believers had to be circumcised as Jewish proselytes and ordered to keep the Torah, to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5). In confronting a forced work of the flesh, he advocated that the plan of God was instead at work, in his clear words appealing to the Tabernacle of David being restored in Acts 15:15-18. In Amos 9:11-12, one witnesses a restored Twelve Tribes of Israel at the center of the Kingdom, and then enlarged Kingdom borders to welcome in the righteous from the nations:

“The words of the Prophets agree with this, just as it is written: ‘AFTER THESE THINGS I will return, AND I WILL REBUILD THE FALLEN TABERNACLE OF DAVID, AND I WILL REBUILD ITS RUINS, AND I WILL RESTORE IT, SO THAT THE REST OF MANKIND MAY SEEK THE LORD, AND ALL THE GENTILES WHO ARE CALLED BY MY NAME,’ SAYS THE LORD, WHO MAKES THESE THINGS known from long ago [Amos 9:11-12, LXX]” (Acts 15:15-18, 2020 NASB).

It should be astounding to each of us, how frequently what is the most important verse of the entire Jerusalem Council, tends to just be glossed over—and perhaps it has taken a decade or more, of Acts 15:21 being incessantly quoted over and over again—for us to hopefully realize how important it is that we all shift the Acts 15 debate. **The most important verse of Acts 15 is Acts 15:15:** “The words of the Prophets agree.” This is the long term statement which all readers of the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council have to contend with.

The specific prophecy quoted in Acts 15:15-18 is Amos 9:11-12 (notably in its Greek Septuagint version), but with “words” and “Prophets” in the plural (*hoi logoi tōn prophētōn*), it hardly means that this was the only Tanach prophecy which could have been in the mind of James. Indeed, as is seen, many commentators on the Book of Acts have proposed various other Tanach prophecies, not specifically quoted by James in Acts 15:15-18, as being among “the words of the Prophets” (Acts 15:15). In the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, I. Howard Marshall properly asserts how “the reference may take account of the fact that the quotation includes allusions to other passages.”<sup>4</sup> In his Acts commentary, Eckhard J. Schnabel specifically lists in a footnote Isaiah 2:2; 45:20-23; Jeremiah 12:15-16; Zechariah 8:22 as being among the specific prophecies one can consider.<sup>5</sup> So, what have a selection of Acts commentators noted regarding “the Prophets” in Acts 15:15? Here are a number of approaches witnessed:

- I. Howard Marshall: “James cites only one text, but he could have been thinking of more than one passage (e.g. Zec. 2:11) when he refers to *the prophets*. In any case, however, the reference is to ‘the book of the twelve prophets’, i.e. the scroll of the minor prophets (as in 7:42), from which the citation from Amos 9:11f comes.”<sup>6</sup>
- Robert W. Wall: “The use of plural ‘prophets’ is perplexing since only Amos is mentioned. Upon closer reading, however, we find a pastiche of fragments mostly from Amos 9:11-12 LXX, but also including a bit from Jeremiah and another piece from Isaiah.”<sup>7</sup>
- Darrell L. Bock: “James now notes how the teaching of the prophets matches or agrees with the inclusion of the Gentiles. The verb...(*symphōnousin*) literally means ‘share the same sound,’ and thus ‘match’ or ‘agree’...The reference to the prophets is important. James’s point is not just about this one passage from Amos; rather this passage reflects what the prophets teach in general, or what the book of the Prophets as a whole teaches. Other texts could be noted (Zech. 2:11; 8:22; Isa. 2:2; 45:20-23; Hos. 3:4-5; Jer. 12:15-16). James is stressing fulfillment, for the prophets agree with what Peter has described. This is not an affirmation of analogous fulfillment but a declaration that this is now taking place. God had promised Gentile inclusion; now he is performing it. Paul cites a string of OT texts on this theme in Rom. 15:7-13.”<sup>8</sup>
- Craig S. Keener: “in the prophets a remnant of gentiles would become part of God’s covenant people (Isa 19:18-25; Zech 2:11; 9:7; Zeph 3:9; cf. Jer 12:16).”<sup>9</sup>

While Amos 9:11-12 was specifically quoted by James the Just, as being among the “words of the Prophets,” examiners are witnessed as proposing other possible Tanach passages as also being either in the mind of James, or related to the themes of Amos 9:11-12. The Tanach passages which have been suggested by the previously referenced commentators, have been catalogued below:

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<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 589.

<sup>5</sup> Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 638 fn#35.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, “Acts,” in G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 589.

<sup>7</sup> Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:218.

<sup>8</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 503.

<sup>9</sup> Craig S. Keener, *New Cambridge Bible Commentary: 1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 368.

“Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it” (Isaiah 2:2, 2020 NASB).

“On that day five cities in the land of Egypt will be speaking the language of Canaan and swearing *allegiance* to the LORD of armies; one will be called the City of Destruction. On that day there will be an altar to the LORD in the midst of the land of Egypt, and a memorial stone to the LORD beside its border. And it will become a sign and a witness to the LORD of armies in the land of Egypt; for they will cry out to the LORD because of oppressors, and He will send them a Savior and a Champion, and He will save them. So the LORD will make Himself known to Egypt, and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day. They will even worship with sacrifice and offering, and will make a vow to the LORD and perform it. And the LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to their pleas and heal them. On that day there will be a road from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria; and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third *party* to Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of armies has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance’” (Isaiah 19:18-25, 2020 NASB).

“Gather yourselves and come; come together, you survivors of the nations! They have no knowledge, who carry around their wooden idol and pray to a god who cannot save. Declare and present *your case*; indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this long ago? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself; the word has gone out from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear *allegiance*” (Isaiah 45:20-23, 2020 NASB).

“And it will come about that after I have driven them out, I will again have compassion on them; and I will bring them back, each one to his inheritance and each one to his land. Then, if they will really learn the ways of My people, to swear by My name, ‘As the LORD lives,’ just as they taught My people to swear by Baal, they will be built up in the midst of My people” (Jeremiah 12:15-16, 2020 NASB).

“For the sons of Israel will live for many days without a king or leader, without sacrifice or memorial stone, and without ephod or household idols. Afterward the sons of Israel will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the LORD and to His goodness in the last days” (Hosea 3:4-5, 2020 NASB).

“For then I will restore to the peoples pure lips, so that all of them may call on the name of the LORD, to serve Him shoulder to shoulder” (Zephaniah 3:9, 2020 NASB).

“And many nations will join themselves to the LORD on that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the LORD of armies has sent Me to you” (Zechariah 2:11, 2020 NASB).

“So many peoples and mighty nations will come to seek the LORD of armies in Jerusalem, and to plead for the favor of the LORD” (Zechariah 8:22, 2020 NASB).

“And I will remove their blood from their mouth and their detestable things from between their teeth. Then they also will be a remnant for our God, and be like a clan in Judah, and Ekron will be like a Jebusite” (Zechariah 9:7, 2020 NASB).

The statement of James the Just, “The words of the prophets are in agreement with this” (Acts 15:15, 2011 NIV), invites each of us as Bible readers, to investigate the Tanach Scriptures and review passages concerning the end-time restoration of Israel, the inclusion of the nations within the restoration of Israel, and the involvement of people from the nations in matters of Torah. *These are the long term matters which many of today’s contemporary Messianic people believe are taking place in a greater concentration in the Twenty-First Century, than they were in the First Century.* Indeed, on the map of proposals quoted here, is the declaration of Zechariah 8:23: “The LORD of armies says this: ‘In those days ten people from all the nations will grasp the garment of a Jew, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (2020 NASB). This is something which many of today’s Messianic Jewish Believers affirm has started to take place, especially with the wide numbers of non-Jewish Believers the Lord has genuinely called, by His Spirit, to participate in today’s Messianic movement.

There are doubtlessly more Tanach prophecies, regarding the place and participation of the nations within the restoration of Israel, which can be identified and reviewed in future studies. **It should be obvious enough to all of us, that not enough attention has been given to Acts 15:15 and its reference to “the words of the Prophets,” in many of our deliberations over the Jerusalem Council and Acts 15.** Acts 15:15 has long term significance, whereas anything one may conclude from Acts 15:21, had a short term effect on the Believers in the 40s-50s C.E. Rather than see the new non-Jewish Believers ordered to keep the Torah to be saved (Acts 15:1, 5), James instead stressed that the organic fulfillment of Tanach prophecy should be allowed to take place. There were four matters where there could be no forbearance or tolerance on the part of the Jewish Believers (Acts 15:20, 29), but everything else could be left open-ended, as they participated in God’s sovereign, prophetic plan for Israel and the nations. Our responsibility today, is to make sure that we are indeed facilitating “the words of the Prophets” in our Messianic congregations and fellowships—a salvation historical trajectory of “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26).