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The Council at Jerusalem
15: 1-21

48 AD

The council at Jerusalem DIG: What other things might these Pharisees be saying were necessary for the Gentiles to do (Mark 2:16, 18, 24, 7:1-5)? If you were a Gentile hearing that these regulations were required, how would you feel about your faith? As a strict Jew, why would these things be important for you? What is the main issue as Paul sees it (Galatians 2:21, 3:5, 3:10-14)? How would you describe Peter's struggle with this issue (Acts 10:28, 34-35; Galatians 2:11-13)? How does Paul's teaching in Galatians 2:15-16 show its influence upon Peter here? Knowing Paul's Pharisaic background (26:5) and Peter's desire to keep kosher (10:14), how might their testimony carry the day? What is James' position in the matter? What has led him to change his mind? What is the significance of the council's decision in light of 1:8? Given Paul's advice about a similar controversy in First Corinthians 8:1-13, why were the conditions of 15:20 included?

REFLECT: What roles do you see played by experience, theology, and practical considerations in the decision-making process of the council? What troubling issues in your life could be resolved by looking at them with the same three realities in mind? In your Messianic community or church? Is there some area of your faith where you feel like Peter – going back and forth because you are not sure what is right? How might verse 11 relate to this concern? Is there a "Christian-Oral Law" in your church? Spoken or unspoken? What should you do about that?

Certain chapters in the B'rit Chadashah are uniquely important to messianic **Jews** because they bear directly on the central issue of messianic **Judaism**, which is: What does it mean to be at the same time both **Jewish** and a believer in **Yeshua**, and how does one go about doing justice to both? This is one of those chapters.[330]

The wholesale entrance of **Gentiles** into the Messianic Community was very disturbing and threatening to some of the **Jewish believers.** Many believed that **Gentiles** who wanted to become Christians had to first become **Jewish** proselytes. They believed that **the Gentiles** were taking a shortcut in the process and needed to go through **Judaism** to become a believer. From childhood it had been drilled into them that circumcision was the symbol separating **God's people** from pagans. Naturally, they expected believing **Gentiles** to start acting like **Jews**! The thought of that not happening shocked and overwhelmed them. They could not conceive that pagans could simply enter the kingdom of **God** and immediately be on an equal basis with **Jewish believers**. That seemed unfair to those who had devoted their lives to keeping **God's Torah**.

Given those concerns, conflict was inevitable. As long as **the Gentile** converts were few and were already **Jewish** proselytes (like the Ethiopian eunuch) the issue could be avoided. But by the time of the council at **Tziyon**, matters had come to a head.[331]

The background: Now some men coming down from Judea, false brothers who secretly slipped in to spy out those who sought **freedom in Messiah (Galatians 2:4). They were** continually **teaching the [Gentile] brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moshe, you cannot be saved" (15:1).** These **men were Judaizers, those of the circumcision,** meaning **Jews** that believed that **Gentiles** had to act like **Jews** (see the commentary on **Galatians, to see link click Ag – Who Were the Judaizers**), and **who** had taken **issue with Peter** earlier (see **Bh – Peter's Report to Jerusalem**). Being **zealots for the Torah** and claiming to follow **Messiah**, **they** insisted on the necessity of **circumcision** even for **Gentiles**. However, **they** were not authorized by **James** or the Messianic Community in **Yerushalayim** to be **teaching the brothers (15:24)**.

The phrase **according to the custom of Moses** is actually shorthand for something far more comprehensive. Those **men from Judea** were insisting that **Gentiles** must become **Jews** in every sense. In **verse 5** they make this clearer by adding specifically that **the Gentile believers** should be directed to **keep the Torah of Moshe,** by which **they** meant both the Written and **Oral Law** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**). This demand goes beyond the requirements for individual salvation described in the TaNaKh, in **Judaism**, or by **the apostles**. The TaNaKh says, and **Peter** quotes in **2:21, that everyone who calls on the name of Adonai shall be saved (Joel 3:1-5a**

LXX).

Therefore the requirement that **Gentiles** convert to **Judaism** posed a serious threat to the gospel. For if people not born into the **Jewish** culture and society are required to become **Jews** before **God** will recognize their **faith** in **Him**, far fewer **Gentiles** would trouble themselves to accept the gospel. The real issue is this: Can **faith** in **YHVH** and **His Messiah** transcend **Jewish** culture? Can a **Gentile** become a Christian without also becoming a **Jew**?

It is one of the supreme ironies of our lifetime is that the issue has become exactly the opposite: Can a **Jew** becomes a follower of **Yeshua Messiah** without becoming a **Gentile**? Much of the opposition within the **Jewish** Community to **Jews'** coming to trust in **Yeshua** takes it for granted that the answer to that question is No. It is assumed that when ethnic **Jews** accept **Yeshua they** abandon **their** people, adopt a **Gentile** lifestyle and is lost to the **Jewish** community. While some **Jews** who became Christians have done just that, the very existence of the early Messianic Community started from the beginning that it did not have to be so.

These **Judaizers from Judah** seem to have been unaware that **Cornelius**, **his friends and family** had been received into the Messianic Community without being circumcised (see **Bg – Peter Goes to the House of Cornelius**), or **they** were aware of it but opposed it, and unwilling to accept that fact, **they** decided on **their** own to do something to limit the influx of **Gentiles**.[332]

When Paul and Barnabas had a big argument and debate with them and would not allow **their Gentile brothers** to be bullied by the self-appointed guardians of orthodoxy. So the **elders** of the church at Syrian **Antioch** officially **appointed Paul, Barnabas with some others from among them** like **Titus (Galatians 2:1)** to **go up to Jerusalem to the** twelve **apostles and elders about this issue (15:2). The** twelve **apostles** had the authority **to prohibit and to permit** in the governance the Messianic Community.

Yeshua had told **the apostles: Yes! I tell you that whatever you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and whatever you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven (Matthew 18:18).** This is not a blank check for our desires nor is it even related to prayer as many suppose. As in **Matthew 16** (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Fx – On This Rock I Will Build My Church**), we remember the terminology reflects rabbinic decisions, not personal requests. For example, **the Talmud speaks of binding a day by declaring it a**

fast day (Tractate Ta'anit 12a), thus making food prohibited. The Greek perfect tense here points to the fact that whatever is already **the LORD's** decision **in heaven** will be revealed to the godly church leadership on earth. Whether it is **prohibited** (Hebrew: *asur*) or **permitted** (Hebrew: *mutar*). This passage deals with making legal judgments and halakhah, not prayer.

So the Antioch community escorted **Paul and Barnabas** a certain distance as a mark of honor and **sent them on their way. They were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and they were** continually **bringing great joy to all the brothers and sisters. When they arrived in Tziyon, they were welcomed by the community and the apostles and the elders.** That showed that **the Judaizers,** or the **[sect] of the circumcision,** was in the minority. **They reported all that God had done in helping them (15:3-4).**

But some belonging to the [sect] of the Pharisees who had believed (Greek: *peoisteukotes* from *pisteuo*, meaning *to believe*, *to have faith in*, *to trust in*) **stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Torah of Moshe" (15:5).** The term **[sect]** refers to a distinct subgroup that has distinct beliefs. Those **believers**, who were also **Pharisees**, thought **the Gentiles** should be circumcised. There is nothing surprising about former **Pharisees** being **saved** – **Paul** was **one himself** – nor about **their** old attitudes carrying over.[333] **The rabbis taught that the Torah is eternal, and Yeshua reinforced their belief** (see the commentary on **Exodus Du – Do Not Think That I Have Come to Abolish the Torah**)**.** But the one thing had to change after the cross (see the commentary on **Hebrews Bp – The Dispensation of Grace**) was that salvation comes *only* by **the blood** of **Messiah**. The phrase **to keep the Torah of Moshe** means **keeping the** *whole* **Torah** (and the Oral Law) – all 613 commandments in the five books of **Moshe** – including **circumcision** and the Levitical sacrifices. Evidently these **Pharisees** hadn't grasped that change and mistakenly clung to the traditions that **they** had known all **their** lives. There were different views among **the believers** in the early Messianic community that needed to be sorted out (see the commentary on **Hebrews** for the theology of that transition).[334] But opposed to **the Judaizers** who kept on demanding **Gentile circumcision**, once **James** and the Council at **Yerushalayim** made **their** decision, you never hear of any objections from **those belonging to the [sect] of the Pharisees** again. **They** were obedient to **the Ruach ha-Kodesh**, **the apostles** and **elders** of the Messianic community. **They** eventually understood that salvation

equals **faith** plus nothing. Not **circumcision**, not the Levitical priesthood, and not **the Oral Law**.



Therefore, the apostles and elders were gathered together to examine this issue (15:6). Because **Acts** is a transitional book, and because **the** twelve **apostles** would eventually die out, we see the transition of the leadership of the Messianic community gradually shift from **the** twelve **apostles** to **the elders** of the various churches established by **Paul**. There were two key issues: **Gentile circumcision** and **Gentile Torah** obedience.

Peter was not the pope: If **Peter** had been the head of the Church at that time, as the Roman Catholic Church asserts, the other **apostles** seem totally unaware of it. Nowhere do **they** acknowledge **his** authority. And nowhere does **he** attempt to exercise authority over them. The council at **Jerusalem** reveals quite clearly how the Church operated in those days. Had the present papal hierarchy been in place, there would have been no need for a council in the first place. The church at **Antioch** would have written a letter to **Kefa**, the bishop of **Rome**, and he would have issued a papal bull settling the matter. And of all the churches the one at **Antioch** was the last that should have appealed to **Tziyon**. For according to Roman Catholic legend **Peter** was bishop in **Antioch** for seven years before transferring his authority to **Rome**. But the appeal was made to a church council at **Yerushalayim**, not to **Peter**. And **James** presided and announced the decision, not **Peter**. In fact, **Kefa** didn’t even so much as express an opinion. **He** did not attempt to make any infallible pronouncements although the subject under discussion was a vital matter of **faith**. Furthermore, after the council in **Yerushalayim**, **Kefa** is never again mentioned in the book of **Acts**! That would be a pretty strange way for a pope to

act.[335]

ADONAI chose the Gentiles: There was no attempt to cut this **debate** short. **After much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God chose from among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the message of the Good News and believe (15:7).** From **Peter's** having **the keys to the Kingdom** and opening the door of salvation to **the Gentiles** (see **Bg – Peter Goes to the House of Cornelius**) to the council at **Jerusalem**, somewhere between ten and twelve years had passed. It was **God's** choice that a **Peter**, a **Jew**, should preach the gospel to **the Gentiles**.

This was authenticated by the Ruach ha-Kodesh: And God, who knows the heart (Greek: *kardiognosta*, meaning *the heart searcher*)**, testified to them by giving them the Ruach ha-Kodesh – just as He also did for us. He made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts through faith (15:8-9).** The fact that the gift of tongues was given to **the Gentiles**, just as it had been given to **the Jews** at Shavu'ot was the key evidence of acceptance. **Peter** had used this as evidence twice before, first in **10:4-48**, and secondly to **the Jews** in **11:15-17. The Gentiles** received **the Ruach** on the basis of **faith** and not on the basis of the Levitical sacrificial system.

Therefore, why do you challenge **Gentile** salvation and **put God to the test by putting a yoke on the neck of the [Gentile] disciples – which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear (15:10)?** Christian teaching contrasts the supposedly oppressive "yoke of the **Torah**" with the words of **Yeshua**: **My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:30).** This is a mistake on two accounts. First, any observant and knowledgeable **Jew** does not consider **the Torah** a burden, but a joy. If a person things something is pleasant, you will not be able to convince him or her otherwise. Second, and much more importantly here, such teaching mistakenly identifies **the yoke** that **Peter** says has proved so **unbearable**.

The term **yoke** is **Jewish** enough. For example, the Oral Law explains why **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** precedes **Deuteronomy 11:13-21** in the *Sh'ma* portion of the synagogue liturgy: **For what reason does the [paragraph beginning with the word] "*Sh'ma*" precede the [paragraph beginning with] "*V'hayah im shamoa*?" So that one should first accept upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and [only] after that accept upon oneself the yoke of the mitzvot,** or **the yoke of the commandments of God (B'rakhot 2:2).**

In this context the term **yoke** does not imply an oppressive burden any more than **Yeshua's** does. Accepting **the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven** means acknowledging **God's** sovereignty and **His** right to direct our lives. Once one acknowledges **His** right to direct our lives, it is obvious that if **He** has given us commandments we should obey them. The same is true of **Yeshua**, who put it this way in **Yochanan 14:15**: **If you love Me** (compare the first paragraph of the *Sh'ma*)**, you will obey My commands** (compare the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*)**.**

So then, if **the yoke of the commandments** is not burdensome, they what is **Peter** talking about? He is speaking of the detailed, mechanical rule-keeping that some (but not all) of **the Pharisees**, apparently including the ones mentioned in **15:5**, held to be the essence of **Judaism**. This was not **the yoke of the mitzvot** given by **God** that expresses gratitude to **Him** for the gift of life, but rather, **the yoke** of legalism given by men. **The yoke** of legalism is indeed **unbearable**, but **the yoke of the commandments** has always required, first of all, the love of **God** and **neighbor (Mark 12:28-34)**, and now implies love toward **Yeshua Messiah.** But love can never be legalistic. **Paul** also spoke of legalism as **a yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1)**, and wrote a detailed account of the subject in **Romans 1-11**.

Then **Peter** summarized **his** argument. **But instead, we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Yeshua, in the same way as they are (15:11). The Jews** only had to believe in **Yeshua** to be **saved,** and **the Gentiles** are **saved** in the same way. **He made no distinction between us and them.** This was **Peter's** final word in the book of **Acts**.

Then the whole group became silent and were listening to Barnabas and Paul (the only reason **Barnabas** is listed first here is because **he** was better known to the council in **Jerusalem** and probably in this context **Barnabas** took the lead) **as they were describing in detail all the signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles (15:12). His** point was that **God** would not have blessed **Barnabas and Paul** if **He** didn't want **the Gentiles** to hear the gospel and be **saved** by **faith** and **He** would not have **saved them** if **He** wanted **them** first to be **circumcised**.

Yes, there were a few close companions of the apostles who also received the gift of healing, namely **Barnabas** (here), **Philip (8:7)** and **Stephen (6:8)**. But we never see the gift being used at random in the different churches that **Paul** started. It was a gift associated only with **Messiah**, **the apostles**, **the seventy** (see the

commentary on **The Life of Christ Gv – Jesus Sends Out the Seventy**), and **some** who were intimate coworkers with **the apostles**.[336]

After Barnabas and Paul finished speaking, James (the half-brother of **Yeshua** one of the pillars of the early Messianic community) responded. **He** was the chief elder it was **his** responsibility to offer a solution. **He** said: **Brothers, listen to me. Simon (Peter) has described how God first showed His concern by taking from the Gentiles a people** (Greek: *laos*, meaning *a people of God*) **for His Name** (see **Bg – Peter Goes to the House of Cornelius**)**.** Instead of the usual term for **Gentiles** (Greek: *ethne*, from *etho*, meaning *a people joined by practicing similar customs or common culture, usually referring to unbelieving Gentiles*), the term **a people** is used here where normally that word is reserved for Isra'el **(2:47, 3:23, 4:10, 5:12, 7:17** and **34, 13:17)**. **God** had promised **Gentile** inclusion; now **He** was fulfilling it. The events that happened when **Peter** visited **Cornelius agreed** with **the words of the Prophets,** indicating that what follows would be a composite citation.[337] The reference to **the prophets** is important. **James'** point is not just about one passage from **Amos,** rather, this passage reflects what **the prophets** teach as a whole **(Zechariah 2:11, 8:22; Isaiah 2:2, Hosea 3:4-5** and **Jeremiah 12:15-16)**. **James** was stressing fulfillment, for **the prophets** agree with what **Peter** had described. **God** had promised **Gentile** inclusion; now **He** was fulfilling it.[338] **As it is written (15:13-15).**

After this I will return and rebuild the fallen tabernacle of David.
I will rebuild its ruins and I will restore it,
so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord –
namely all the Gentiles who are called by My name – says Adonai,
who makes these things known from of old (15:16-18).

James' quotation matches **Amos 9:11-12 LXX** with material in **verse 18** from **Isaiah 45:21**. The TaNaKh clearly predicted the salvation of **the Gentiles**. But the complete fulfillment of **Amos'** prophecy will take place when the King **David's** Kingdom is restored (see the commentary on **Revelation Fi – The Government of the Messianic Kingdom**). Meanwhile, this was a beginning.

The Decision: Therefore, I judge not to trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God by **faith** alone**– but to write to them to abstain from** four things that would not cause **Jews** to be offended. These four things are a summary of what the Jews call the Noachide laws, or the seven laws of Noah. And if they didn't participate in these offensive practices, they would be

accepted as **believers** in **the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**.

First, **they** would not eat things that were **sacrificed to idols (15:29),** especially **meat**. This was forbidden under **the Torah (Exodus 34:15)**, but permitted under grace **(First Cor 8:1, 4, 7, 10** and **10:19)**. What this shows is that these four abstentions were not absolute law. **Paul** himself allowed for **believers** to eat **meat** sacrificed to **idols** because just because someone does that (who are just pieces of wood anyway), it doesn't mean they are worshiping **idols**.[339]

Secondly, **they** were to abstain **from** any form of **sexual immorality.** In the first-century pagan world (as, unfortunately, in the twenty-first century Western world), sexual unions outside of marriage were no big deal, along with homosexual behavior, temple prostitution and other improper practices. In **Judaism**, on the other hand, these were abominations **(Leviticus 18:6-18)** and would definitely be offensive.[340]

Thirdly, **from what is strangled (Leviticus 17:13,** that is, **meat** from animals not slaughtered in a way that allows **the blood** to flow out. **According to the Oral Law, Jewish *sh'chitah* (slaughtering) requires that an animal be killed with a single knife stroke across the neck. The animals instantly dies, that it, humanely, and the blood drains quickly.** This was also permitted under grace. **Gentile** believers could eat **their meat** rare unless it offended a **Jewish** believer.

And fourthly, **from** drinking **blood**, which was a pagan practice forbidden by **the Torah (Leviticus 17: 10** and **14)**. It was permissible to eat blood sausage (under the Dispensation of Grace) as Germans like to do, but again, not if eating with a **Jewish** believer because that would be offensive to him or her **(15:19-20)**.

For Moshe from ancient generations has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read in all the synagogues every Shabbat (15:21). The point here is quite clear; those from **the Gentile nations** are certainly encouraged as a voluntary action to grow in their understanding of **Torah** because of their **faith** in **Yeshua of Natzeret**, but at the same time their legal requirements under **Torah** were not the same as they were for **Jews**.

The larger question is this, "Who is the One who is the ultimate offense to the **Jewish** people?" The answer is clear. It is **Yeshua**, or as some **Jews** call **Him**, Yeshu, which is an acronym for, "May his name be blotted out." The name of **Yeshua** represents the greatest name of uncleanness in **Judaism** today, as it has

for the last 2,000 years.

Even the traditional Hebrew prayer *Aleinu* (the final prayer in the daily prayers based on Zechariah **14:9**), we read in one of the final phrases that, “they bow down to vanity and empty things.” Although it is difficult to know the exact meaning behind these words, many believe that the subjects of this particular part of the prayer are messianic **Jews**. The strong possibility that this particular comment was added to the prayer clearly emphasizes the deep negative emotions that most of the **Jewish** world holds toward **Yeshua** as the ultimate symbol of *the tameh* (*unclean*) – the unkosher animal forbidden by **Jewish** dietary laws – (Hebrew: *hazir*), or the pig.

The sages teach that the pig will return and become kosher during the days of Messiah. Somehow the pig’s nature will be changed. They teach that one of the hints (*remez*, one of the four levels of rabbinic interpretation using allegories) given to us is that the root letters of the *hazir* are *Het-Zayin-Resh*, from which are also derived the word *hazar*, which literally means *to return*. So the Hebrew root letters have a dual meaning – either *pig* or *return*.

Furthermore, the sages explain that according to the sod of sods, or secrets-of-secrets of the Torah (the fourth levels of rabbinic interpretation), there is a “Prince in the heavens” and His name is Hazir-el, which is literally translated as “the pig of God.” Then the sages come to an incredible conclusion, “This particular Prince is the Prosecutor of Isra’el, and in the future, God will return Him to Isra’el to be her defender. In other words, the “Kosher Pig” is none other than the Angel of ADONAI, Yeshua Messiah, who will have the authority to be the defender of Isra’el before the Mighty One of Isra’el. And since He will return, the implication is that He was here once before! A compelling parallel to this idea can be found in the prophet Zechariah 14:3-4.

Why is His name called pig? Because in the future He will return (Hebrew: *lachzir*) in order to return to crown as in the days of old. This means that the Angel of ADONAI will not only return to redeem, protect, and defend Isra’el, according to the sod of sods mentioned above, but He will also return to the glory and splendor that was lost. He will return to His lawful place as King, as the crown belongs to Him. This midrash should not be held of equal value to Scripture, but it does provide us with a concept, thought, or idea that

is to be discovered in the text of Scripture.[341]

*Father, You have made me alive in **Messiah** even though I was dead in my sins. By **grace** I am **saved**! You have also raised me up in **Christ** and seated me with **Him** in the heavens, so that in the coming ages **You** might display the immeasurable riches of **Your grace** in **Your** kindness to me **in Yeshua**. **For by grace I have been saved through faith. And this is not** anything that comes **from [within me] – it is THE gift of God. It is not based on [anything I have done], so that I may not boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).** Having been liberated into such freedom, may I stand firm and never submit again to **the yoke of slavery (Galatians 5:1)**, or be ungrateful or insecure enough to saddle anyone else with it.*[342]