

And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness Against sorcerers, Against adulterers, Against perjurers, Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, And against those who turn away an alien -- Because they do not fear Me," Says the LORD of hosts. <sup>6</sup> "For I *am* the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

**Malachi 3:5-6**

The fact that our god does not change - that He's consistent and unmovable – is one of the most precious aspects of the god of our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Just think about it – God said that because He does not change, Israel is not consumed. This would lead one to surmise then that, if God does change, Israel would be consumed. This is important, especially when we consider the Acts 15 conference.

The Acts 15 conference is one of the most misunderstood passages in the New Testament scriptures. From this one chapter spring a number of varying fundamental beliefs – all different. And from these various understandings we could draw a number of different conclusions:

- The apostles had the authority to “do away with” various portions of “the Law”
- God has one law for the Jew and another law for the non-Jew (the Gentile)
- God's law is spiritual, and the apostles had the authority to “spiritualize away” aspects of the law they considered to be too hard for the “spirit filled” believers in Messiah.
- The apostles were unclear of the role of Torah for the non-Jew (Yeshua had not prepared them for the influx of non-Jewish believers into the believing community)
- Yeshua Himself did not understand the Law since he apparently assumed that “. . . not one jot or tittle would pass away . . .”

If we were to subscribe to any of these conclusions, we would have to admit that God is not true to His word and that He does indeed change! But God is true to His word – He does not change - otherwise our faith is meaningless, because if God changes, He is no better than the pagan gods who (according to their subjects) changed their minds based on whims and penance.

So how can we understand Acts 15, this pivotal passage of scripture which has led to so many differing conclusions? Is there a conclusion that upholds the name and character of The Creator and His Son? Yes there is, but to find it we have study this conference in the context of the first century Jewish people as well as God's plan for His chosen people – Israel. So let's review some of what we know about Israel and the culture of the first century Jewish people<sup>1</sup>.

When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldaea's, He promised to bless him with a land, a people, and a descendant who would become a blessing to all people by redeeming His people and bearing the penalty for their sins. In addition, though it's not as obvious, He promised that Abraham's descendants would be mixed throughout the nations<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These topics are all discussed in detail on the 'Articles' page of the Ami Yisrael web site – <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles.html>.

<sup>2</sup> See explanation at <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/Understanding-Israel-P1.htm#Nevrecuh> Israel - P1.ht

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We understand that the nation that came from Abraham was Israel. They were a nation that was called to live a lifestyle that would become the envy of the nations, but as we know, Israel failed to fulfill her calling. As a result, they were divided into two nations and both were eventually driven from the land of their fathers and went into captivity. But their captivity was only temporary, and eventually both nations – Israel and Judah – spread throughout the world. Though Judah remained somewhat intact as a people, the northern tribes of Israel mixed in with the peoples of the nations and became for all practical purposes – Gentiles<sup>3</sup>.

Even though the Israelites failed in the purpose for which they were called, they still have a job to do . . . God is not going to let them off the hook. They are, and will, do the job God has called them to do<sup>4</sup>. What's more, God moved practically all His prophets – beginning with Moses – to show that even as God scattered Israel throughout the nations, He intends to, and will, gather them back at the end of days, and they will then fulfill their role as lights to the nations.

Scriptural evidence indicates that a mini-restoration took place in the first century. This would stand to reason since many of God's prophecies have dual fulfillment. This mini-restoration is noted in Acts 2 where many of Yeshua's followers met together on Pentecost just days after Yeshua's resurrection. The text indicates that those who gathered came from many of the nations around Israel. It must also be noted that many (if not most) of Yeshua's followers were Jewish<sup>5</sup>.

Let's now take a look at the culture of the first century Jewish people. Since a majority of the people subscribed in one way or another to the teachings of the Pharisees, we'll concentrate on them.

The Jews, specifically the Pharisees, believed in two sets of law . . . that given to Moses and handed down in writing – the Written Torah, and another set of laws that were supposedly given by God to Moses, but were handed down orally from generation to generation. This code of law is known as *Oral Torah*. Though originally intended as the explanation of the Written Torah, the Oral Torah later, at least in part, took on the same level of importance as God's written Torah. According to Acts 15, some of those Jews who believed in Yeshua were Pharisees, and as such, many continued to observe the Oral Torah.

Because the Israelites from the northern tribes had assimilated into the nations by the time of the first century, the Jews were the only identifiable people left who worshipped the God of their fathers – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus Judaism was the only visible 'godly' belief structure. Since Judaism<sup>6</sup> was the sole representative of God in the early first century, it was believed that if a person wanted to have eternal salvation, they had to become Jewish. The Mishnah records –

“All Israelites have a share in the world to come, as it is said, Your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified.”<sup>7</sup>

The Jews had developed a process by which a non-Jew could become proselyte – a convert to Judaism. Except for proselytes, the Jews had little casual contact with non-Jews. To have fellowship with non-Jews, especially *table fellowship* (eating a meal) was considered illegal. This fact is quite clear in the case of Yeshua eating with non-Jews and the case of Peter and Cornelius -

(Luke 15:2) And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."

(Acts 10:28) Then he said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation . . .

Thus, for a non-Jew to fully participate in the synagogue he had to become a proselyte and eventually convert to Judaism via a traditional conversion process. Keep in mind that this process was a Jewish tradition, and not necessarily defined in Torah. Instead, the Torah states that if a person wanted to

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<sup>3</sup> For the sake of this study, they will be considered “non-Jews”

<sup>4</sup> Romans 11:29

<sup>5</sup> Acts 21:20

<sup>6</sup> There were various sects of Judaism in the 1<sup>st</sup> century

<sup>7</sup> m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1 referring to Isaiah 60:21

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become a part of the Israelite community (and thus observe the Passover), all he had to do was to be circumcised, after which all the Torah would apply to him<sup>8</sup>.

One final point before getting into the text itself and that has to do with the person of James. It is important that we understand who this person was since he plays a pivotal role in the decisions made at the conference.

The James of Acts 15 was not the same James, the son of Zebedee mentioned in Matt. 4:21, the one who became one of Yeshua's disciples. Instead, the James of Acts 15 was the brother of Yeshua. After Yeshua's death, he became known as *James the Just* and was held in high esteem by practically all sects of Judaism, including the Pharisees, Essenes, Zealots, and the Priesthood. The Talmud even credits James with this statement –

“The world is sustained by three sayings, the Law, the Temple Service and the practice of benevolence.” (Mishnah, Aboth. 1.2)

Besides being a ‘just man’ – a man who knew the Torah inside out, sources agree that James served as the *nasi* (president) of the Sanhedrin, and as such had the authority to establish halacha (judgments) at the Acts 15 “Jerusalem” conference. Thus, it can be assured that the decree made by James at the conclusion of the council would have had to fit within the framework of the Torah.

Now that the groundwork has been laid, let's get into the text of Acts 15 . . .

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**Acts 15:1** - And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner (custom) of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

These “certain men” appear to be believers since they were accepted into the congregation in Antioch (Acts 14:26). Though Antioch is north of Judea, it is said that they came down from Judea. In Hebrew thought, everywhere is down from Jerusalem.

More than likely these fellows were believing Pharisees. We know that a number of Pharisees believed that Yeshua was Messiah. Nicodemus is one (John 3:1-2), and apparently, he was not alone. We will also recall that Paul himself was a Pharisee and made it a part of his defense before the council (Acts 23:6). To the Philippians, Paul used his relationship with the Pharisees as a statement of his attention to the Torah. So, for the sake of this discussion, we'll submit that they were Pharisees, though it doesn't really make any difference.

Apparently, these ‘Pharisees’ showed up at the assembly, more than likely a synagogue, in Antioch where Paul and Barnabas were teaching. Because they came from Judea – possibly Jerusalem – they would be considered more authoritative than if they came from someplace like Capernaum or Joppa since Jerusalem was obviously the capital of the Jewish religion. Thus their message to the assembly, a message that was contrary to what Paul and Barnabas had been teaching, caused quite a stir. They claimed that the non-Jews in the assembly would have to be circumcised “*according to the custom of Moses*” in order to be saved.

Just what is “*the custom of Moses*”? Is that a Biblical mandate, and if so, where do we find it in the Torah? Did Moses provide specific requirements for circumcision beyond what God had given Abraham? Actually – no! The law God gave Moses says very little about circumcision, but the men from Judea were saying the circumcision had to be done “after the manner of Moses”. If Moses had given specific instructions beyond what God had given Abraham, we should be able to find them in the Torah.

The following are all the verses in the Torah concerning circumcision that appear after Moses comes on the scene:

- Moses having a problem circumcising his own children -  
(Ex. 4:26) So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.

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<sup>8</sup> Exodus 12:48; Exodus 12:49; Numbers 15:16

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- What to do if a stranger – a “ger” – wants to eat the Passover –  
(Ex. 12:44) But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof  
(Ex. 12:48) And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof.
- Circumcise your newborn male children on the eighth day –  
(Lev 12:3) And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.
- Circumcise your heart –  
(Deu 10:16) Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked.  
  
(Deu 30:6) And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.

As you probably noticed, none of the above verses pertain to a method of circumcision that leads to salvation. Circumcision is an outward sign of a covenantal relationship – not a pathway to salvation.

So what is the “custom” that was mentioned in verse 1? To get a better idea, let’s look at the Greek word for “custom”. That word is “ethos” (Strong’s 1485) which according to Strong’s means: 1) custom; 2) usage prescribed by law, institute, prescription, rite

Practically everywhere the word “*ethos*” is used in the NT, it refers to Jewish tradition, i.e. - Oral Law. Here’s a sampling:

**NKJ Acts 21:21** "but they have been informed about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs (ethos).

**NKJ Acts 6:14** "for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs (ethos) which Moses delivered to us."

**NKJ Luke 22:39** Coming out, He went to the Mount of Olives, as He was accustomed (ethos), and His disciples also followed Him.

**NKJ John 19:40** Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom (ethos) of the Jews is to bury.

Notice that in the first passage above, James, when telling Paul about the myriads of Jews in Judea who are zealous for the law, i.e. – the Torah (vs. 20), states that He had heard that Paul was telling the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake the *customs*, not the law.

In the next passage, the same is true. A distinction is made between the law and the customs (compare vs. 13 and 14). In the Mount of Olives passage, it’s obvious that Yeshua’s custom was not a commandment but a tradition, and finally, the Torah does not give instructions pertaining to how a corpse is prepared for burial.

Thus it’s clear that circumcision after the manner or custom of Moses had to be a tradition and not a commandment, and as we continue, we’ll see evidence of that from the Jewish writings themselves. One thing is clear – to the believing Pharisees, if a non-Jew was going to become a part of the Jewish religion and thus obtain salvation, he had to submit to this custom, this tradition.

Jewish sources show that the traditional Jewish conversion process included baptism, circumcision, and sacrifice. What few realize is that there was a debate in the first century as to which came first – baptism or circumcision. And to complicate matters even more, there was a question as to what to do with a person who had been previously circumcised (more than likely at 8-days old) who was just now wanting to become, or return to, the people of God.

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The following is a quote from the Jewish Encyclopedia concerning the pathway to Jewish conversion in the first and second century AD –

“The details of the act of reception [into the community of Israel] seem not to have been settled definitely before the second Christian century. From the law that proselyte and native Israelite should be treated alike (Numbers 15:14 et seq.) the inference was drawn that circumcision, the bath of purification, and sacrifice were prerequisites for conversion . . .”<sup>9</sup>

Then there’s a record of the debate between two rabbis over which came first – circumcision or baptism (underlining for emphasis by me) -

“Our rabbis taught: ‘If a proselyte was circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution [immersion], R. Eliezer said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that our forefathers were circumcised and had not performed ritual ablution’. If he performed the prescribed ablution [immersion] but had not been circumcised, R. Joshua said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that the mothers had performed ritual ablution but had not been circumcised’.[2] The sages, however, said, ‘Whether he had performed ritual ablution but had not been circumcised or whether he had been circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution, he is not a proper proselyte, unless he has been circumcised and has also performed the prescribed ritual ablution [immersion]’”<sup>10</sup>

This next quote is from the Jewish Encyclopedia and discusses a debate between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel (both early first century Jewish sages) in regards to the “re-circumcision” of a person “born circumcised”, i.e. – circumcised shortly after birth. I’ve underlined parts of the text for emphasis -

“The issue between the Zealot and Liberal parties regarding the circumcision of proselytes remained an open one in tannaitic times; R. Joshua asserting that the bath, or baptismal rite, rendered a person a full proselyte without circumcision, as Israel, when receiving the Law, required no initiation other than the purificative bath; while R. Eliezer makes circumcision a condition for the admission of a proselyte, and declares the baptismal rite to be of no consequence (Yeb. 46a). A similar controversy between the Shammaites and the Hillelites is given (Shab. 137a) regarding a proselyte born circumcised: the former demanding the spilling of a drop of blood of the covenant; the latter declaring it to be unnecessary. The rigorous Shammaite view, voiced in the Book of Jubilees (I.c.), prevailed in the time of King John Hyrcanus, who forced the Abrahamic rite upon the Idumeans, and in that of King Aristobulus, who made the Itureans undergo circumcision (Josephus, "Ant." xiii. 9, § 1; 11, § 3). According to Esth. viii. 17, LXX., the Persians who, from fear of the Jews after Haman's defeat, "became Jews," were circumcised.”<sup>11</sup>

Keeping in mind that a covenant is ratified with blood, an already circumcised person who wanted to join into the covenant presented a problem to the Jewish leadership, thus they came up with this custom. And since (according to the rabbis) all the customs came from Moses, then (re)circumcision was “of Moses”. Yet neither a conversion “process” nor “re-circumcision” is described in Torah. It’s all Jewish tradition.

So let’s move on . . .

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NKJ **Acts 15:2** Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Paul and Barnabas were obviously not pleased with the believing Pharisees from Jerusalem. They considered their message to be equivalent to an insurrection, an attempt to destroy what they had

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<sup>9</sup> Jewish Encyclopedia Online Version - <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=556&letter=P#2074>

<sup>10</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yebamot, 46a

<sup>11</sup> Jewish Encyclopedia Online Version - <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=514&letter=C#1789>



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spent years building throughout Asia Minor. Thus, the elders in the assembly at Antioch decided to send Paul and Barnabas to the leaders in Jerusalem to see what was going on.

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:3-4** So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.  
<sup>4</sup>And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

In the reading of the above two verses, we get a little hint as to the identity of the people Paul was working with in Antioch and the other places he had gone. As Paul and Barnabas made their way from Antioch to Jerusalem, it says that their report of what was happening among the Gentiles brought “great joy” to the assemblies they visited along the way. The Greek word for “great” in this passage is “*me-gas*” (Strong’s 3173), and as the word suggests, it was greater than great . . . it was “mega-joy”. Why would the conversion of the Gentiles bring Joy to the Jews in the northern parts of Israel? I submit that the reason is that the “Gentiles” who were being brought into “the way” were actually descendants of the northern tribes of Israel, i.e. – the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel – and thus to the believing Jews, this signaled the beginning of the fulfillment of the myriads of prophecies pertaining to the re-gathering of Israel at the end times. More on this latter . . .

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:5** But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses."

Once they got to Jerusalem, some of the believing Pharisees stated their opinion that the “Gentiles” from Asia had to be circumcised and had to keep the law of Moses in order to be saved, which according to the Jews, could only take place if they converted to Judaism. Now pay close attention . . . they were saying that the new non-Jewish believers – 1) had to be circumcised, and 2) would have to keep the law of Moses. But isn’t circumcision part of the law of Moses – the Torah – anyway? Certainly! It’s a sign of God’s covenant people, a sign that Abraham, his son Ishmael, and his entire household took upon themselves. So why are these Pharisees separating circumcision from Torah . . . or are they?

Because only some of the Pharisees held to this position, we can safely assume that some of them didn’t hold to that position. Now we know that the Pharisees were staunch supporters of the Torah, so the question basically revolved around circumcision. But what aspect of circumcision? Was it a matter of timing – baptism then circumcision - or the other way around? Was it a question about what to do if the Gentiles were already circumcised? Or was it sort of a code word for something else?

We can rule out the question of whether circumcision was required at all because the Torah is very clear - circumcision is required of anyone who wanted to keep the Passover . . . that’s in the Torah<sup>12</sup>, and the Pharisees supported the Torah!

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:6** Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

The “elders” were probably part of the Sanhedrin. It is shown in Josephus that James, the brother of Yeshua, was the “nasi” or president of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem during this time. As was said earlier, James was considered to be very pious and righteous by all sects of the Jews and thus was in a unique position to make a determination in this case.

One might ask “How could the head of the Sanhedrin be a believer in Yeshua?”, and the answer would be quite simple. In the first century, the believing Jews were just another sect of Judaism<sup>13</sup>. According to James, there were thousands of Jews who were believers<sup>14</sup>, and most of them attended the synagogue and worshipped at the Temple alongside their non-believing brothers.

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<sup>12</sup> Exodus 12:48 - 49

<sup>13</sup> Acts 24:5; 28:22

<sup>14</sup> Acts 21:20

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:7-9** And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: "Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> "So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as *He did* to us, <sup>9</sup> "and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

We are all familiar with the Acts 10 story of Cornelius, the sheet that appeared in a vision to Peter, and the unclean animals. Cornelius was a "God fearer" – a non-Jew who worshipped the God of Israel. According to Jewish tradition, God fearers attached themselves to the Jewish people, but did not go through the traditional conversion process, which included baptism, circumcision, adherence to the Mosaic law, and observance of the Oral Torah.

Because of questions concerning Cornelius' adherence to the Torah, it would have been improper for Peter to sit down at his table and eat<sup>15</sup>. But God, in a vision, showed Peter that just because Jewish tradition had declared it illegal to eat with a non-Jew like Cornelius, God Himself had not done so. So Peter went against the accepted halacha<sup>16</sup>, and entered Cornelius' house and ate. During his visit, the Ruach – the Holy Spirit - fell on Cornelius and his household, and contrary to Jewish tradition, it did so before they were baptized or circumcised. In other words, God side-stepped the Jewish conversion process. This, of course, made an impact on Peter who now saw that it was not necessary for a non-Jew to convert to Judaism to be counted as part of the people of God.

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:10** "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

What is this "yoke" being spoken of here? Is it the Torah? Circumcision? Or is it the Jewish oral traditions, specifically those pertaining to a person wanting to be in covenant with God? It's relatively easy to rule out the Torah, because if God does not change, and God gave the Torah for our good, would He later consider it bad or evil?

The scripture is replete with examples of God's people praising the Torah. Here are a few examples –

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Deuteronomy 32:46-47** and He said to them: "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe -- all the words of this law. <sup>47</sup> "For it is not a futile thing for you, because it is your life, and by this word you shall prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess."

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Deuteronomy 30:11-14** " For this commandment which I command you today *is not too* mysterious for you, nor *is* it far off. <sup>12</sup> "It *is* not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend into heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' <sup>13</sup> "Nor *is* it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' <sup>14</sup> "But the word *is* very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Psalms 119:97-98** Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day. <sup>98</sup> You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; For they are ever with me.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Romans 7:12** Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

Keep in mind that the Romans passage was written by Paul many years after the Jerusalem conference, thus proving that the Torah was not the issue in Acts 15.

What about circumcision. Was that the yoke that was too hard to bear? Hardly! Remember, Peter was talking about a yoke that was too hard for "our fathers" . . . and Peter's fathers were Jewish. Now think about it, when would, or what's more - when could a Jewish man have a problem with circumcision? For nearly 100% of Jewish males, circumcision was something that happened to them when they were eight days old. They never had a chance to discuss it, complain about it, or refuse it. In fact, most of them thought they were born that way!

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 10:28

<sup>16</sup> Literally – "the way one walks"

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What about the child's father. Was he reluctant to have his sons circumcised? No, and in fact circumcision was and still is an honor that a father bestows on his sons simply because it symbolizes them being a part of the covenant people. It was so important to the Jews that during the time of the Maccabees, observant Jews were willing to die for the right to circumcise their sons. So circumcision, at least in regards to the instructions given in the written Torah, was never a yoke to the Jewish people.

So what was the yoke? The yoke was the Jewish oral traditions, the Oral Law that had to be taken on if a person was going to convert to Judaism. Here's what Yeshua had to say in regards to the Oral Law –

**NKJ Matthew 23:2-4** . . . "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. <sup>3</sup> "Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, *that* observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. <sup>4</sup> "For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay *them* on men's shoulders; but they *themselves* will not move them with one of their fingers.

The oral law is a heavy burden, hard to bear, but God's law is just the opposite. It's not hard; it's not far off -

**ESV Deuteronomy 30:11** "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.

But if a person believed – as the believing Pharisees were claiming – that he had to convert to Judaism to be saved, that person would be obligated to take on the entire yoke of oral law, not just the conversion process they had prescribed. He would have to become part of "the circumcision", the Jewish people. To be "circumcised" (as they said in verse 5) simply meant they had to convert to Judaism. It was sort of a code word that once you understand it makes much of the New Testament easier to understand.

God never said a person had to convert to Judaism to be saved. He never said that a person had to submit to a religious code of law in addition to the Torah. In fact, there's nothing in the entire Tanakh that says such. Like as has been mentioned earlier, it simply says that if a person wanted to attach himself to Israel and eat the Passover (a picture of being redeemed by YHVH), he would have to be circumcised.

So, going back to verse five, it's now clear that those believing Pharisees thought that the non-Jews would have to keep the law of Moses . . . which is true, and that they'd have to convert to Judaism . . . which is not true.

Let's go on . . . Peter continues by saying –

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**NKJ Acts 15:11-15** <sup>11</sup> "But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they." <sup>12</sup> Then all the multitude kept silent and listened to Barnabas and Paul declaring how many miracles and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> And after they had become silent, **James answered**, saying, "Men *and* brethren, listen to me: <sup>14</sup> "Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name. <sup>15</sup> "And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written:

Now that we know that circumcision was not really the issue, and that the Torah was just as valid as ever, we're now ready for Peter and James to reveal a few more details about what was going on. First, Peter reveals a common Jewish belief that salvation came about by grace. Salvation by grace was nothing new to the Jews or to the believers; after all, the Jews thought they would be 'saved' simply because they were Abraham's seed. If that's not grace, what is? But the thought that non-Jews would be saved by grace – without converting to Judaism – was new, and Peter's visit to Cornelius made it very clear that that was indeed the case!

At this point I want to interject a fact that is often mis-understood by Bible students, but is very clear in the Bible, and that fact is this . . . all Jews are Israelites, but not all Israelites are Jews. BUT – in the first century, just as it is today, most people believed that since the Jews (for the most part) were the people who keep the Torah, they represent the entirety of the Israelite people. Fortunately for us, that is not true. It wasn't then, and it isn't today! To understand what James is getting ready to explain, a person needs to understand this very important fact. It's not hard, but you have to start at the beginning. I've prepared a



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seven-part series of articles entitled “Understanding Israel” that helps explain who Israel is and isn’t. It can be found on our web site – [www.amiyisrael.org](http://www.amiyisrael.org). Now – getting back to the conference . . .

As leader of the Jerusalem council, James began to speak. It’s important that he took control at this point because, as was stated earlier, James was so well respected by both the believing as well as the non-believing Jews. Thus, he had the ‘clout’ to make a halachic decision that would be both binding and have the weight to resolve the issue.

James began by making a statement that many people miss. He said that God visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people. Notice that James did not say that God took Gentiles as a people for His name, but that He took out of the Gentiles a people. In other words, God was beginning to draw out a people who were not Gentiles, but who dwelt among the Gentiles. These people whom God was drawing out were more than likely the Israelites from the northern tribes, i.e. – the lost sheep of the house of Israel.<sup>17</sup> This would stand to reason since prophecy shows that the gathering of the lost sheep would take place in the end times, and the first century Jewish people believed they were living in the end times. In fact, James quotes one of those prophecies to explain what he had just said.

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NKJ **Acts 15:16-17** “After this I will return And will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, And I will set it up; <sup>17</sup> So that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, Even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, Says the LORD who does all these things.

This is a quote from Amos 9:11-12. What’s more, it’s from the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures called the Septuagint. The Septuagint was the most commonly read text of the scriptures in the first century<sup>18</sup>. It’s important to note that this is from the Septuagint (LXX) because the LXX reads a little different than the Masoretic text from which we get most of our modern Bibles.

In Acts 15:15, James was saying that his analysis of what was currently happening amongst the non-Jewish messianic believers was foretold by the prophet Amos. Thus a key to understanding Acts 15 is to understand Amos 9:11-12, specifically as it reads in the LXX. Here’s the text –

LXE **Amos 9:11-12** <sup>11</sup> In that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David that is fallen, and will rebuild the ruins of it, and will set up the parts thereof that have been broken down, and will build it up as in the ancient days: <sup>12</sup> that the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, may earnestly seek *me*, saith the Lord who does all these things.

The book of Amos is a prophecy against Israel, specifically the northern tribes of Israel that were taken captive by the Assyrians in about 700 BCE. Amos laid out many of the sins of Israel and ultimately stated in chapter 9, verse 8 –

LXE **Amos 9:8-9** <sup>8</sup> Behold, the eyes of the Lord God are upon the kingdom of sinners, and I will cut it off from the face of the earth; only I will not utterly cut off the house of Jacob, saith the Lord. <sup>9</sup> For I *will* give commandment, and sift the house of Israel among all the Gentiles, as *corn* is sifted in a sieve, and *yet* a fragment shall not in any wise fall upon the earth.

What God is saying here is that He is not going to destroy Israel (i.e. – the northern tribes) because of their sins, but instead will sift them throughout the nations. They will be mixed in with the Gentiles and for all practical purposes, become Gentiles<sup>19</sup>. They will no longer be recognized as Israel. But this is not the end for Israel – the northern tribes. Just as He does in many other prophecies concerning Israel, God concludes the prophecy of their punishment – their exile - by a prophecy of their return<sup>20</sup>

In my Bible, a New King James, Nelson Edition, the caption above Amos 9:11 reads “**Israel Will Be Restored**”, and this is indeed the context of this passage all the way to the end of the book of Amos. Yet many commentaries say that this passage is about the Tabernacle of David being rebuilt with Gentiles,

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 10:5-6; Matthew 15:24

<sup>18</sup> Keep in mind there was no New Testament until the later first century

<sup>19</sup> See my article “the Sieve Analogy” on the Ami Yisrael web site for further clarification

<sup>20</sup> Deut. 30:1-3; 2 Chon. 6:34-36

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and with Jesus as King. Can this be true? Is that the intent of Amos' prophecy? Let's delve into these two verses and find out. As mentioned earlier, we will use the same text as did James, the LXX.

The first thing mentioned is the Tabernacle of David. What was the Tabernacle of David? How can it be raised up? The answer is quite simple.

David was anointed king before his predecessor, King Saul, had died in battle, but after both Saul and Jonathan were killed, the leaders of Judah came to David and anointed him king over Judah<sup>21</sup>. At the same time, Ishbosheth, Saul's son, began to reign over Israel<sup>22</sup>. This began an extended war between the House of Judah and the House of Israel. A few years later, Ishbosheth was killed, thus leaving Israel without a king, but the leaders of Israel, tired of war with Judah, came to David at Hebron and asked him to be their king as well. Thus, seven years after being anointed king over Judah, David was anointed king over Israel and Judah<sup>23</sup>. Israel had become a united kingdom.

After becoming king over both Israel and Judah, David fought a war with the Philistines, then proceeded to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the City of David, just south of Jerusalem, and placed it in a tent – a tabernacle – that he had set up for it. This tabernacle that David built represented the united kingdom of Israel. It was the first time the Ark had dwelt with Israel since the time of the judges.

The Ark was later transferred to Solomon's Temple. Solomon reigned over a united Israel for 40 years, during which time Israel reached the pinnacle of greatness, but Solomon dis-obeyed God in many respects. Thus, after his death, the kingdom was split once again . . . Judah continued to follow Solomon's son, Rehoboam, but Israel choose a man from the tribe of Ephraim, Jeroboam, to be their king.

Within two hundred years, Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians, and then a couple of hundred years after that, Judah was taken captive by the Babylonians. Thus David's dynasty is a deposed dynasty and the fallen Tabernacle (or tent) of David is an idiom for the nation being divided.

The next part of verse 11 talks about rebuilding the dynasty as it was before, setting up the parts as they were before. It doesn't say anything rebuilding the dynasty with different parts than the original, but with the broken parts, and who are those parts? Israel – the northern tribes, and Judah – the southern tribes. This is explained quite well in Expositor's Bible Commentary, Vol. 7, pg. 329-330. Yahweh is saying that in the last days, he is going to unite and restore the kingdom of Israel as it was in the time of David, complete with the Ark of the Covenant. This is consistent with all the prophets and is pictured in Ezekiel 37, the Two Sticks prophecy, where the stick of Judah and the stick of Israel become one in the hand of God.

Continuing on in verse 12 we see the purpose for the reunification of Israel. It is so that the remnant of man, and all the Gentiles, may seek Him. This is important, for since the fall of Israel, God has hidden His face from them. Israel was unable to seek God until the time that James is referring to, years following the death of Messiah Yeshua.

Who then are the people that can now seek Him? Is it truly the Gentiles, or is it – as James said – a people who come out from the Gentiles? Keep this question in mind as we continue through James' dialog.

Here are a couple of points to consider. The first point is that Israel is the remnant. God refers to them as such a number of places in scripture<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, the Gentiles, or better – the nations, are never referred to as the remnant. Another point is that the Gentiles are never called by God's name, but Israel is called by His name<sup>25</sup>. So it would appear that the rebuilding of the Tabernacle of David will take place when Israel is once again able to seek God.

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<sup>21</sup> 2 Samuel 2:4

<sup>22</sup> 2 Samuel 2:10

<sup>23</sup> 2 Samuel 5:2

<sup>24</sup> Isaiah 10:20; 11:10,11,16; Jer. 23:2 & 3

<sup>25</sup> Deut. 28:10; 2 Chron. 7:14; Is. 43:3; Jer. 14:9

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Here's my paraphrase of the Amos 9:11-12 passage that might be a little more understandable in light of the various prophecies God made concerning Israel.

*In that day I will restore the dynasty of David, the united Kingdom of Israel, that had fallen down, and rebuild it as it was in David's time so that the remnant of my people Israel, who are called by My name, may earnestly seek me. I, YHVH, will make it come to pass."*

So James was saying that what they were experiencing was the early stages of the reunification of Israel and what they hoped would be the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Israel.<sup>26</sup> This would then seem to indicate that the "gentiles" who were being drawn toward the Torah and Messiah Yeshua, probably were not Gentiles at all, but – as James said, were people being drawn from out of the Gentiles. In other words, they were Israel, part of the Lost 10 Tribes that had been taken captive and exiled from the land nearly 700 years earlier. And since they were already Israelites, why would they have to go through a conversion to Judaism, i.e. – circumcision, so they could become "a part of Israel"? The answer is simply – they didn't, and that is what James had come to see.

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NKJ **Acts 15:18** <sup>18</sup> "Known to God from eternity are all His works.

This statement, which is tied to Amos' prophecy which he had just quoted, is quite interesting. Notice that in verse 12 of Amos 9, the prophet wrote "*says the LORD who does all these things*". God had shown the prophet - and James confirmed it - that God was the one who would bring this all to pass. If you were to read in Amos' prophecy from this point to the end of the chapter, it's all about the return of the captives of Israel – it's not about the Gentiles. God, throughout the prophets, and beginning with Moses, declared the path that Israel would follow. Just as He told King Rehoboam ". . . *for this thing is from Me*" in regards to the division of the kingdom<sup>27</sup>, God has been directing the paths that the children of Israel would take from the days of Jacob himself.

Thus when James said "*known to God from eternity are all His works*", he was just reiterating the point that God is in control when it comes to Israel. It's His work, it is what he does. God is actively involved in what happens to "*ami yisrael*", His people. He directs their paths<sup>28</sup> as is shown in Isaiah –

ESV **Isaiah 46:9-13** "remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, <sup>10</sup> declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose' . . . <sup>13</sup> I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay; I will put salvation in Zion, for Israel my glory."

Thus, in closing his case before the believing Pharisees, James showed that what the believing Jews were experiencing was something that had been prophesied long ago – the beginning of the restoration of Israel. As history will reveal, this restoration was just a precursor to the real restoration that will take place in the days leading up to The Messiah's return.

After stating his case, it was now time for James, in his position as *nasi* or president of the assembly, to make a judgment. Notice his words, because they've been mis-read for centuries -

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NKJ **Acts 15:19** "Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God . . . ,

James made two important points that are often missed when reading this scripture:

1. He said that the people in question, the messianic believers, were *from among the Gentiles*, and
2. They were turning, or as we'll see – *returning* to God.

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<sup>26</sup> Acts 1:6

<sup>27</sup> 1 Kings 12:24

<sup>28</sup> See also Isaiah 46:3-4;

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Let's look at the first phrase – *from among*. This term comes from the Greek word *apo* (Strong's 575) and implies a separation, i.e. – something that is in something, but is not a part of it. A good example is Yeshua's teaching about judging your brother –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 7:4** Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of (Gr – *apo*) your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye?

In this passage the Greek word *apo* is translated as *out of*. Clearly, the speck is not a part of the eye, but it's in the eye. This is the case of those James was talking about . . . they were among the Gentiles, but they were not (in the true sense of the word) Gentiles. Like a speck in someone's eye, you have to look closely to determine what it is. The same holds true for the exiles of Israel. They were scattered throughout the nations, but they did not become a part of them – God always knew who and where they were.<sup>29</sup>

The second phrase in verse 19 that we want to look at is “*are turning*”. When reading this out of most translations, it would seem that these people are – for the first time – turning to God; and indeed for many of the individuals Paul and the other apostles were dealing with, they were beginning a totally new walk – leaving behind the worship of the pagan gods they grew up knowing. But to get a better gist of what's being said, we must remember that God deals with Israel both corporately and individually. The prophecies given to Israel were – for the most part – corporate . . . He is dealing with Israel as a nation – a people.

Even though individually the people were *turning* to God, corporately they were *returning* to God. The Greek word used in this phrase is *epistrepho* (Strong's 1994) which means “to turn to”, “to cause to return”, and even “to turn one's self about, turn back”. This is the same word that's used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew word *shuwb* which carries the primary meaning of returning. A good example is found in Deuteronomy 30:1-2 where Moses prophesied that Israel would turn away from God, be scattered among the nations, but when they realize their folly, will return to God -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Deuteronomy 30:1** "And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and return (*shuwb*) to the LORD your God . . .

What James recognized was that he was witnessing a *return* of corporate Israel; even though it was taking place one individual at a time. He was seeing prophecy being fulfilled, and He didn't want to get in God's way by burdening His people with unsubstantiated Jewish tradition. Since these people were already Israelites, why make them go through a conversion process so that they could become “Israel”? It just didn't make sense.

But James' decision to allow the non-Jews into the assembly would be meaningless if the Jews were still unwilling to accept the non-Jews into the greater Messianic community. Without the assurances of a minimum code of behavior that conversion to Judaism would bring, how could the Jews welcome the non-Jews into their homes, or vice-versa, visit their homes? James has the answer -

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:20** ". . . but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, *from* sexual immorality, *from* things strangled, and *from* blood.

In the first century Jewish community, fellowship over a meal (i.e. – table fellowship) was very important to a person's spiritual maturity. But most Jews were unwilling to share a meal with non-Jews. Why? Because of Jewish law . . . the Oral Torah.

The Jewish laws pertaining to eating with non-Jews were not pulled out of thin air . . . at least not completely. They do have scriptural basis – though not enough to trump the Torah. God was very particular in regards to what a person could or could not eat – especially when it came to blood. The Jewish people were thus very particular about how their meat was killed so that the blood would drain out properly – just as the Torah commanded. Because they assumed that the non-Jews were not as concerned, they (the Jews) had reservations when it came to eating with non-Jews. This, of course,

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<sup>29</sup> Amos 9:9; Ezekiel 11:16-17

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would be a problem if they were attending the synagogue (as James was getting ready to recommend) and sharing in an *oneg*<sup>30</sup> afterwards, or if they were to invite a Jew to their home (as in the case of Peter and Cornelius).

So James' solution was to impose a minimum set of standards that would not only allow for fellowship, but would also assure that the non-Jews learn more about Jewish customs and where they came from. James established as a minimum set of standards four things that should satisfy the Jewish that their non-Jewish brothers had moved away from their idolatrous practices. These were: 1) abstaining from being a part of the cult temple worship, which included 2) Temple prostitution, 3) abstaining from eating food that had not been properly bled, and finally 4) eating blood.

More than likely, James did not come up with this list of prohibitions on his own. According to Jewish sources, they were among those that were required of any "stranger" who wanted to live among the Jews. It appears that their purpose was to avoid what would cause offense to the Jews, for instance – plowing your field on the Sabbath.<sup>31</sup>

There is also a view that these four things described what is sometimes called "the Heart of the Torah", specifically Leviticus 17 and 18. These two chapters deal with sexual immorality as well as eating blood. Because they are near the center of the Torah, it is understood that all that came before as well as all that came after is just as relevant.

Though there is no way we can be assured of James' intent, it is clear that he did not intend for these things to represent the entirety of a non-Jews responsibility to the Law of God. Why? Because he went on to state what was expected of every believer in the God of Israel –

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<sup>NKJ</sup> **Acts 15:21** "For Moses has had throughout many generations those who preach him in every city, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."

James was referring to the Jewish practice of reading out of, and expounding on the Torah each week in the synagogue. This is precisely what was taking place when Yeshua, a noted rabbi in His day, was asked to read from Moses<sup>32</sup>. He was reading the words of Moses, the weekly *parasha*, the assigned reading for that particular Sabbath that was traditionally set up by Ezra and the Men of the Great Assembly. Because in the first century, the synagogue was the place to *study* whereas the Temple was the place to *worship*, Sabbaths were often filled with the study of God's written word. Thus, by attending the synagogue, the non-Jews would have ample opportunity to learn about God, His Torah, and quite probably, the root of many Jewish traditions. As a result, conversion to Judaism would not be necessary for fellowship as long as a person incorporated in his or her life what he had learned at the synagogue. This was James' solution to the problem, and it seemed to satisfy those involved.

The rest of this chapter talks about the letter that James sent out and continues with the acts of the apostles. In the letter, James clearly stated the decision he had made, but unfortunately, the King James translators have tried to clarify something that didn't need clarification. Though most texts omit it<sup>33</sup>, in verse 24, the words "You must be circumcised and keep the law" were inserted in order to make a point that the following four things were all that was expected of the non-Jews. Simply backing up a few verses to verse 20 clearly shows that James did not make that statement in his decision. Some translations, such as the English Standard Version, have made this correction.

Acts 21:25 is another place that some students use to show that the four prohibitions of Acts 15 were all that's required of the non-Jews. This passage is where James is chastising Paul based on rumors he had heard. Those who were spreading the rumors said that Paul was teaching that Jews did not have to be circumcised, nor that they had to circumcise their children. But circumcising Jewish children on the eighth day wasn't even part of the Acts 15 discussion. Never-the-less, the rumormongers were willing to say anything in order to indict Paul. James, of course, did not believe the rumors, but never-the-less

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<sup>30</sup> A fellowship meal

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6585-gentile> (under the heading "Stranger")

<sup>32</sup> Luke 4:16-22

<sup>33</sup> See the center margin of most King James Bibles



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admonished Paul that when teaching, be sure to clarify that the four prohibitions pertained only to the believing non-Jews who were beginning to return to the God of Abraham.

So what was the purpose of the Jerusalem Conference? Was it to do away with the requirement for non-Jews to follow the Torah? For Jews to follow the Torah? Was it to do away with circumcision? No – none of the above. Instead, this conference was convened to determine if a non-Jewish believer had to follow the traditional conversion process and become Jewish in order to be accepted into the believing community. It was determined that they did not have to. God set the requirements for fellowship in His code of law, the written Torah, and Jewish law did not supersede His sacred law.

Therefore, to answer the question poised at the beginning of this study – *Does God Change?* The answer, of course is No. He did not change or modify His law for the believing non-Jews, the “gentiles” that were being drawn from the four corners of the earth to carry a witness of Messiah Yeshua. Thus Israel will not be consumed!

Shalom Alecheim