

### THE BOOK OF ACTS

#### Lesson 33, chapter 15

In a typical English Bible translation the first 14 chapters of Acts contains about 12,400 words. Chapters 15 – 28 (the end of the book) usually contain about 12,500 words; so indeed where we sit today as we study this pivotal 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts is at the physical and literal center of the book. But more significant than that, this chapter is pivotal because it deals with the one thing that will cause Judeo-Christianity to explode onto the world scene in a way unrivaled in history: and that one thing is the question of gentile involvement in the Yeshua movement.

It is ironic that the subject of gentile involvement, which was decided at this Jerusalem Council that we'll spend considerable time with, was to debate how (or even if) gentiles could be included in this exclusively Jewish religion that at the time was but a branch of Judaism. But within 100 or so years the contentious issue became how (or even if) Jews could be included in (what had somehow become) an almost exclusively gentile religion. How did this amazing reversal happen? It all started here in Acts 15.

Many Bible commentators say that the issue was not if gentiles could be included but rather on what basis; that is misleading because at the heart of the matter of including gentiles in The Way was the issue of circumcision. And at the heart of the issue of circumcision was conversion. And at the heart of the issue of conversion was ritual purity. So the issue is far more complex as it regards gentiles than meets the eye. We'll re-read this chapter in its entirety momentarily but first lets define some important terms.

Circumcision was critical to Judaism because it was critical to inclusion in the Abrahamic covenant. Circumcision was the sign that a person wanted to be part of the terms of that covenant. And what made the Abrahamic Covenant so important was that it 1) divided the world into two groups and established one group as those people that God calls Hebrews. 2) It set apart a special land for this set apart group of people to inherit and dwell upon. 3) It set up a special relationship between God and the Hebrews by which Yehoveh would protect and favor them above any other people of the other group (called gentiles) by blessing those gentiles who blessed and comforted the Hebrews, but would also punish and harm any gentiles who cursed (that is, they troubled or opposed) the Hebrews. And 4<sup>th</sup>) in some special undefined way the Lord would bless all the families of all the people on the earth through certain of Abraham's Hebrew descendants. And for anyone who wished to sign on to the terms of this covenant, God instituted ritual male circumcision. Those males who underwent circumcision would be made part of God's set apart people; those who refused circumcision would be excluded from God's set apart people. So circumcision was a tangible, physical sign that males wore that they were indeed entitled to the benefits, and subject to the consequences, of the Abrahamic Covenant. Since this is central to the debate and decisions of Acts 15, let's revisit exactly where this requirement of circumcision was founded. Turn your Bibles to Genesis 17.

### READ GENESIS CHAPTER 17:1 – 14

The issue of circumcision is actually all about conversion. That is, a person converts from being one thing to another and different thing. Upon the establishment of the Abrahamic Covenant, all the human inhabitants on earth found themselves belonging to one of two groups: Hebrews or gentiles. So essentially the act of circumcision moves (it converts) a member from the gentile group to the Hebrew group. Male infants born to a Hebrew had to be circumcised at 8 days old in order for them to remain in the Hebrew group. But if a person was born as a gentile and wanted to become part of the Hebrew group they had to be circumcised in order to signify their conversion. Thus the debate of Acts 15 centered on whether or not a male gentile who accepted Yeshua as their personal Messiah had to convert; they had to leave the gentile group and move to the Hebrew group because belief in Yeshua belonged solely in the Hebrew religious sphere. And for males the mandatory outward sign and proof of this conversion was circumcision of the foreskin.

But behind this insistence by some members of The Way that gentiles had to convert to being Jews in order to worship Yeshua was the sensitive issue of ritual purity. In simple terms, the issue of ritual purity decided if a person was clean or unclean in God's eyes. But the issue of ritual purity is not dealt with in the Abrahamic Covenant; rather it is dealt with in the Covenant of Moses: the Law. Jews knew and practiced the ritual purity laws, but gentiles didn't. And since one of the underlying principles of ritual purity is that impurity can be transmitted through physical contact, then gentiles were considered as high risk for being impure and thus causing others to become impure. That made it a high risk matter for a Jew to associate with gentiles; or at least that's what Tradition said.

But now it gets a bit more convoluted because Judaism mainly looked to **Halakhah** (Jewish Law) for their instruction on ritual purity; not so much to the Law of Moses any longer. We have talked often about **Halakhah** but its definition bears repeating: **Halakhah** was a fusion of the Biblical Law of Moses, with manmade traditions that had been developed, and with Jewish cultural customs that had arisen over the centuries. The traditions were essentially commentary on Holy Scripture; but they became even more than that. The Traditions established firm doctrines (rulings that were made by Jewish religious authorities) that dictated every behavior of a Jew. And as one can easily imagine, the all important issue of ritual purity was front and center and thus many intricate rules about ritual purity were created. Even before the New Testament era, Tradition dictated that gentiles were inherently unclean and so Jews should not associate with them lest they become polluted. And yet even within Judaism the extent of uncleanness associated with gentiles, and how permanent or solvable this problem might be, was not universally agreed to.

In a famous dispute over **Halakhah** between Rabbi Eliezer of the School of Shammai versus Rabbi Joshua, we read this: **“Rabbi Eliezer says: all gentiles, they have no share in the world to come as it is said *the wicked will return to sheol, even all the nations who forget God (Psalm 9:17)*. However Rabbi Joshua said to him, Since the verse says *who forget God* this means that there are righteous among the nations who have a share in the world to come.”**

Thus various members of The Way would have held somewhat different perspectives on the matter of the inclusion of gentiles, as did their revered teachers and sages. So even at the Jerusalem Council, as they were debating about circumcision, conversion, and ritual purity, it was **Halakhah** that would be their primary guide; not the Law of Moses all by itself. And this is because just as it is in modern Christianity, in the minds of individual Christians, Church doctrines and what the Bible says are essentially considered as one in the same. They supposedly say the same thing, mean the same thing, and demand the same thing. In casual conversation Christians usually don't make a differentiation between Scripture and doctrine. And in the New Testament, the Jews didn't usually make a differentiation between the Holy Scriptures and their Traditions. So in the New Testament when the term "The Law" is used, most of the time (but not all the time) it is referring to **Halakhah**, and not only to the Biblical Torah, the Law of Moses. What is challenging for us is to discern when the use of the term The Law means the Law of Moses by itself, or when it means **Halakhah** in general. I realize how difficult this is for gentile Christians to wrap our minds around; it is simply not how we think and the terms seem foreign to us. But it is how the New Testament Jews thought, and it is how the writers of the New Testament thought. And until we can grasp this we will continue to misconstrue what is being said and as a result construct some strange doctrines that in no way reflect the Biblical intent or truth.

So to sum it up: circumcision is the God-ordained sign of the Abrahamic Covenant and it requires the physical removal of the male foreskin. Conversion is changing from one thing to another thing, and so circumcision was the requirement to signify that a change from being a gentile to being a Jew (a Hebrew) had occurred. According to the mindset of Jews and Judaism in the New Testament era, ritual purity (a requirement of the Biblical Torah and of **Halakhah**) could only be attained and maintained by Jews. Thus a gentile usually could not be ritually clean. Therefore contact with a gentile brought-on ritual impurity along with its consequences to a Jew (something no Jew wanted to contend with). However that was not the teaching of the Biblical Law of Moses; rather it was the teaching of the mainstream **Halakhah**, Jewish Law, that was a merging and mingling of the Law of Moses with manmade traditions, and with ancient Jewish cultural customs. So I promise you, the short and concise reporting of Luke about the Jerusalem Council consists of greatly abbreviated summations partly because he expects his readers to be mostly familiar with all that we've just discussed. Since we're not, we're going to take the time to pull this chapter apart piece by piece.

Let's read Acts chapter 15 together.

### RE-READ ACTS CHAPTER 15 all

The first verse of this chapter rather well sums up the dilemma and the cause of this meeting of the leadership of The Way in Jerusalem with Paul and the other visiting members of the Antioch congregation. It was that "some of the brothers", meaning Jewish Believers in Yeshua who lived in Judea, formed a contingent and traveled to Antioch of Syria to inform the gentile members of the synagogue at Antioch that Jewish Law required them to be circumcised if they wanted to be involved with the Jewish community, and especially if they wanted to join in the Jewish religion. To be clear: 1) these were Believing Jews who came with that message. It is regularly taught that these were not Believers, rather they were Pharisees and/or Judaizers

(meaning Jews who rejected the Gospel). Later in verse 24 James verifies that those who went to Antioch to demand circumcision indeed “went out from us but without our authorization”. 2) They were from the Jerusalem area; and 3) they were teaching that belief in Messiah Yeshua by gentiles required conversion, which was signified by having a circumcision. So essentially the idea was that while gentiles could learn about the Gospel, and about salvation, and about the Jewish Savior Yeshua, they could not complete the process of becoming saved except they become Jews. Thus salvation was for gentiles only in so far as receiving the Gospel as truth was the beginning of a process that culminated with their rejection of their gentile identity and the taking on of a new Jewish identity.

As verse 2 says, this raised a ruckus between Paul and Barnabas and that group of Believers who were part of the Circumcision faction who came demanding circumcision of the gentiles. Both sides of this argument had reasonable and educated positions. This was not the mean people against the nice people or an issue of ethnic bigotry. This was not the intolerant versus the tolerant. And it was not the ignorant against the educated, nor was it the Pretenders against the actually saved. Remember, no such thing as a New Testament existed at this time to provide guidance over this sticky issue, and wouldn't for another 150 years. As these various thorny theological and cultural disputes arose for The Way, they had to think about them, pray about them, debate over them, wrestle with them and then come to some conclusions because each case required an answer. While we have the benefit of the inspired conclusions that they eventually reached about important matters of living out our faith, they were making it up as they went along and it was a rocky process.

The resource they relied on the most to make their decisions (outside of the Holy Spirit) was **Halakhah**. That might sound odd to us; but what else was at their disposal? They fully intended on operating within the long understood and mostly settled matters of Jewish religious doctrines because much had already been written and discussed about the issue of gentiles. But also recall that it had not been all that long ago that God went to great lengths to get the Apostle Peter straightened out about the issue of fellowship between Jews and gentile God-fearers by means of that strange vision and even stranger conversation between Peter and God. This incident amounted to new revelation to Peter and the Believing community, even though it was actually the Lord taking Peter (and Judaism) to task for ignoring His Holy Scriptures on this matter and inventing their own doctrines. That one incident indeed was useful for doctrinal decisions for The Way however by no means did it explicitly address or settle every doctrinal matter about gentiles being included in the faith, nor especially about how Jews and gentiles were to relate to one another. Much more development of doctrines on these delicate issues was needed.

Jewish Believers appeared by now to generally accept that the Gospel could be taken to gentiles. And that perhaps, with proper precautions, Jews could associate with gentiles and not be made ritually unclean. But that didn't settle the matter to many of them about the most fundamental principle within Judaism; circumcision. So the congregation of the Antioch synagogue decided that the best course of action was to send Paul, Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to consult with the leadership of The Way to decide how to proceed, no doubt assuming that those representatives of the Circumcision faction who came to Antioch had been sent with the blessings of the Jerusalem leadership.

Let me also interject that while to us it might seem as though we have here some extraordinary event about to occur (the Jerusalem Council) that has little precedence in Judaism, it was not. These sorts of disputes over doctrinal matters were an ongoing happening in Judaism and did not represent anything out of the ordinary. In fact what we see happening here is quite typical of the kinds of proceedings we find recorded in the Talmud when there is genuine doubt in ascertaining the proper Halakhic ruling on some subject or another. Those in the lower echelons of the religious leadership would take their issues to the higher leadership, and then the higher leadership discussed it amongst themselves and set down rulings. The rulings became laws and precedents that were meant to be followed on all similar cases in the future.

The distance from Syrian Antioch to Jerusalem was around 350 miles following the route that Paul and Barnabas took; it would have taken from 3 to 4 weeks depending on traveling conditions. Clearly their intent was to stop in and visit some Believing congregations along the way, which they did, so they weren't in a terrible hurry. The general reaction of these congregations in Samaria and Phoenicia was joy at hearing the great success that Paul and Barnabas were having among the gentiles. So at every turn we hear of a welcoming attitude of Jews towards gentiles who come to faith in Yeshua; of course what that looked like and how it would evolve was likely not very clear to them. In verse 4, when they arrived in Jerusalem they were greeted with enthusiasm and welcomed by both the lay Believers and the leadership of The Way who were anxious to hear their stories of evangelizing the gentiles. However some Pharisees among them spoke out that it was necessary that these new gentile Believers were circumcised. Obviously this didn't catch Paul by surprise since this was the very reason he had come to Jerusalem.

So that we are not confused by terms: these Pharisees spoken of here are Believers. Just as in Christendom a person can identify with a particular denomination, and separately with a certain political party, and even more identify what level they see themselves on the social scale (middle class, upper class, and so on) that doesn't necessarily affect whether they are still a Christian. Paul was a Pharisee and a Believer; he did not stop being a Pharisee because he became a Believer. These two designations were not mutually exclusive. Many Pharisees became Believers, but of course they brought with them a predetermined set of beliefs and perspectives through which they viewed the Scriptures and their trust in Christ and what it meant concerning any number of theological and ritual issues. And there were numerous schools of thought within the Pharisee party so it is not like they all held the same viewpoints.

It is a sad mistake in Christian circles to shake our heads in disgust at the mention of the Pharisees. We usually have a bit of an unfair mental picture of who they were, what they believed, and how they were regarded by the people. Josephus in his book Antiquities insists that the Pharisees were admired for living modestly, for the respect shown to their religious elders, for their knowledge and wisdom, and as such they were very influential among the townspeople. The Pharisees were known for teaching and practicing the highest ideals of Judaism. In fact Dr. David Flusser says that there were 7 well defined and named types of Pharisees; some were known for their hypocritical behavior and super critical attitudes; others for their willingness to be reasonable and helpful for even the most menial of tasks and for the benefit of the lowliest of people. And for the most part, they were the synagogue authorities. The lesson for us is that it is never wise to define an entire group according to the behavior of a

few (whether that behavior is positive or negative).

So this Believing Pharisee says that the new gentile Believers must be circumcised and must begin obeying the Law of Moses. But don't be fooled; this is not at all saying that Believers should specifically follow the Law of Moses, but not have to follow the Traditions and customs. Every group of Jews, just like every group of Christians, follows the Bible according to their group's interpretations of the Scriptures. Every denomination of Christians and every sect of Judaism is given its distinct identity due entirely to their varying interpretations of the Bible. Within Judaism, HOW they follow the Law of Moses is reflected and defined in their Tradition. Within Christianity, HOW we follow the Bible is reflected and defined in our doctrines.

Beginning in verse 6, the debate on this serious matter of **Halakhah** as it applies to Believers and gentiles begins. After discussion went on for some time, Peter stood up to speak. What we find in the next few verses is that essentially Peter, Paul and Barnabas form one side of the argument, while these Believing Pharisees of the Circumcision faction form the other. James, the supreme leader of The Way, is the moderator and tries to guide the council towards a solution. Peter, having had the mind-changing experience with God where he became persuaded that gentiles were not inherently unclean (as Jewish Tradition says they were), and then went to the God-fearer Cornelius's house and was amazed as the Holy Spirit descended upon a group of gentiles, relates the meaning of this experience in view of the subject at hand. He says that in his view the entire matter of gentile inclusion was settled some time ago as a result of this experience, and that as a leader of the group, and as the disciple who went to the gentiles with the Good News, it is only logical that it would have been to Peter that God revealed His will on the matter. And by God sending the Holy Spirit to the gentiles it indeed revealed to Peter that the Lord sees no distinction between gentiles and Jews, and that these gentiles' hearts were cleansed not by rules of **Halakhah**, but by their trust in Messiah.

Peter is not saying that God no longer sees the world in terms of Jews and gentiles; rather he is saying then when it comes to the means of salvation, God makes no distinction. Later, in the Book of Romans, Paul will express the same thought this way:

<sup>CJB</sup> **Romans 3:1** *Then what advantage has the Jew? What is the value of being circumcised? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! In the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God.*

Yet (as concerns circumcision and thus conversion to being a Jew), Peter says in verse 10 that even though God has eliminated any distinction for salvation between Jews and gentiles that it would be wrong for this council to put a yoke on the neck of these new gentile disciples, which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear. The part about the Good News of salvation being equally for gentiles and for Jews is not difficult for us to understand. But the statement about a yoke upon the necks of the gentiles that was too much for the Jewish people to bear is going to take some explanation. And let me begin by telling you that because we are Western Christians, we instantly view this statement in a negative light. But Jews would have understood it quite differently.

Rabbi Joseph Shulam puts it this way: "The metaphor of the yoke is typically employed in

rabbinic literature to indicate Torah observance as a sign of acceptance of God's covenant". In the Torah we'll find the term yoke (**ol** in Hebrew) used in a few settings such as the yoke of Heaven, the yoke of the Commandments, and the yoke of the Torah. Due especially, I think, to the sadistic style of slavery that we used in our past, the metaphor of the yoke conjures up people as beasts of burden, and a yoke as a rough, uncomfortable, back breaking instrument of brutality. But that is not how Peter means it, or how the Bible means it, nor is that what it meant to the Jews. A yoke is a device that connects and directs. The yoke harnesses the labors of the creature to the direction of his master. It is not meant to harm or to oppress; it is meant for two wills to act as one. Thus a person who is yoked to Heaven is connected to Heaven and directed by Heaven; they aren't oppressed by Heaven. A person who is yoked to the Torah is connected to the Torah and directed by the Torah; they aren't oppressed by the Torah, and so on and so forth.

Another reason (other than cultural) that modern Christians see the metaphor of the yoke as negative and bad is because it is typically compared to Yeshua's statement that His yoke is easy and His burden is light from Matthew 11. My point is that in Judaism the term yoke doesn't mean anything oppressive any more than Yeshua's own yoke was seen as oppressive. Listen to the context of Yeshua's statement:

### **Matthew 11:28-30 CJB**

<sup>28</sup> ***"Come to me, all of you who are struggling and burdened, and I will give you rest.***

<sup>29</sup> ***Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.***

<sup>30</sup> ***For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."***

What are the struggles and burdens? The struggles and burdens of life; the heartaches, the uncertainties of tomorrow, our afflictions, the guilt we bear for our past deeds, the knowledge of our inability to measure up to God's standard.

Notice how Yeshua says to take His yoke upon yourself. Again, the yoke is meant in a positive light, as a typical Jewish metaphor meaning to connect yourself to Him so that you take your direction from Him. Connect to Yeshua and allow Him to steer you. Yeshua says to yoke (connect) yourself to Him and learn from Him, and that in this connection you will find rest. Everyone knew what it meant, it was a customary Jewish expression, and Jews thought of it as something pleasant and desirable. Yeshua is merely employing a standard, recognizable, every day part of Jewish thought and language to make an illustration. I do that every week when I teach you; I employ sayings and word pictures that we all understand within our culture to make a point. Yeshua is saying to come and connect yourself to Him; that He will release you from your current struggles and not give you new ones. Many of the several Messiahs who came and went during His day wanted a following and demanded loyalty and obedience. What He was NOT doing (and it is present nowhere in the context of this passage) is comparing His yoke to the Torah, or to the Law of Moses. That is, the source of the struggles and burdens He wants to free us from isn't the Law of Moses. That thought is simply not present in Judaism

and it is not present in Matthew 11. But Christians have for centuries read that into the passage.

Let me tell you something: Jews then and now do not think of Torah observance as a burden; they think of it as a privilege and a joy. It is Christianity that has created this image of Torah observance as some type of primitive, ugly, oppressive weight that brings people low. But let's talk a bit more about the term burden. Burden of course can speak of a heavy load, but in common speech it also means to hamper, or to impede. So when Peter speaks of avoiding placing a yoke on the neck of the new disciples that is too much to bear, the idea is to not hamper the new gentile Believers with too much too soon. And, by the way, as we get further in Acts 15 and hear the council's conclusion and read the letter that was sent to the Antioch congregation, it bears out this interpretation.

And then Peter once again speaks of the main thrust of the Gospel message in verse 11:

**Acts 15:11 CJB <sup>11</sup> No, it is through the love and kindness of the Lord Yeshua that we trust and are delivered- and it's the same with them."**

So the thought is not that the Torah Law is just too hard to keep for Jews, so it will be impossible to keep for gentiles. Rather in relation to the subject of Salvation for gentiles it is that it is **only** through the love and kindness of the Lord Yeshua that we trust and are thus delivered (saved). And, says, Peter, it is like that for us (Jews) and so it is like that for them (the gentiles).

Let me also point out that it is little more than common sense to not expect a gentile who was born and raised as a pagan; a person who until recently knew nothing of the God of Israel, or of the Torah, or what sin is or what a Messiah is; to accept a Jewish Savior (a miracle in itself) and then to just suddenly have to begin to apply to their lives everything that it took Jews all their lives to learn. It would be too daunting and discouraging and unfair. It would be setting them up for failure. In fact the Rabbis of Peter's era had essentially the same view he held about not hampering gentile proselytes when they converted to Judaism. As found in tractate *Yevamoth* of the Talmud we read this:

***Our Rabbis taught: "If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions? If he replies: I know and yet I am unworthy, then he is accepted forthwith and is given instructions in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. And as he is informed of the punishment of transgression of the commandments, so is he informed of the reward granted for their fulfillment. He is not, however, to be persuaded or dissuaded too much."***

The point is that it was the position of Jewish Law, *Halakhah*, that a gentile proselyte to Judaism was to be brought along slowly and not have too much expected of him other than for a few minor and major commandments, which the community leadership felt was minimum and fundamental. These he would have to understand and do immediately. The rest would come in



time, being taught and disciplined by the community, and he would be expected to grow at the best rate each individual could. His requirements to adhere to all the commandments of the Torah was not abolished; rather it was postponed until he reached sufficient maturity to be able to comprehend and do without being completely confused and overwhelmed.

We're soon to find out that Peter's advice in this regard would be heeded, no doubt because it fit right in with the current mindset of mainstream Judaism of their day. The issue then for the Jerusalem Council would be which minor and major commandments should the new gentile Believers have to follow immediately. But also, how would these new converts then learn about the remaining commandments?

We'll continue with Acts 15 next week and see how those questions were decided.