

Does Acts 15:9 Refute Intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile Distinction?

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Abstract

This study examines Peter's comment in Acts 15:9, that God made 'no distinction' between Gentile and Jewish Jesus-believers in purifying their hearts by faith, to determine whether the text teaches that the ecclesia is composed of an undifferentiated mix of people from the two groups. Textual analysis shows that the comment could be interpreted at a lexical level as a denial of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction, but the context of Acts 15:1–29 demands a narrower interpretation: there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in terms of how they are saved, but they remain distinct in other respects. Both Peter's speech and James' verdict provide strong evidence that the leaders of the nascent ecclesia made distinction between its Jewish and Gentile members, upholding Jews' obligation to Jewish Law and faith tradition, whilst imposing only a few moral prohibitions on Gentile believers.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

While Acts 10:1–11:18 records the watershed event in which Gentiles are declared pure by God (Woods 2012), 15:1–29 describes a related and equally important event often called the Jerusalem council. The council ruled that Gentile believers are not subject to the Law (Torah) except for a few necessary rules (15:19–20; 28–29); the decision is variously referred to as the apostolic decree, James’ verdict, the Jerusalem council ruling, and so on. In 15:7–9, Peter retold the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about God’s work among the Gentiles, alluding to the Cornelius incident mentioned above, and claimed that God ‘made no distinction between us [circumcised Jews] and them [uncircumcised Gentiles].’² Here, as in 11:12, Peter used the word *diakrinō*. Previously, I discussed difficulties of translating it as ‘distinction’ in 11:12 (partly explaining diverse translations), and concluded that ‘dispute’ is a better translation there (Woods 2014a). In 15:9, there is strong interpretive agreement among English Bibles which translate it as to ‘make a distinction’, ‘put a difference’ or ‘discriminate’ between circumcised and uncircumcised believers in Jesus. Being preceded by a negative adjective, the text indicates that God made no such distinction. Acts 15:9 is thus used as a proof text in the case against making any distinction within the ecclesia³ between its members descended from

² Biblical quotes are taken from the Lexham English Bible unless otherwise specified.

³The problem of terminology continues to hinder communications (see Woods 2014b:101). By ‘ecclesia’ I mean *Christ’s community, whether Jew or Gentile*, since ‘church’ is generally seen as a non-Jewish (and often anti-Jewish) entity. (Even the term ‘Jew’ is problematic; see Mason (2007). It is also dubious as to whether Jewish Jesus-believers in the NT ever identified themselves using the label ‘Christian’, which similarly has a non-Jewish sense—hence terms like ‘Jesus-believer’, ‘Christ-follower’ etc. in my writing. See *Table 1* and surrounding discussion on labels in Woods 2014b:114–115.) I previously used the transliteration, *ekklesia* (from ἐκκλησία), but ‘ecclesia’ seems a better balance between the needs of readability and contrast with the (non-Jewish, Christian) church, notwithstanding the apparent Latin-ness (and hence Roman Catholic-ness) of the spelling.

Israel and those from the nations. However, to cease differentiating between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus creates difficulties in interpreting other biblical texts, especially prophecies relating to the nation of Israel (e.g. Rom 11). Therefore, a closer inspection of what Peter meant by ‘no distinction’ in 15:9 is warranted, which this paper sets out to do. However, a brief overview of distinction theory is needed first in order to frame the study.

Distinction theory—that of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction—says that Jewish Jesus-believers have a different role and responsibility within the ecclesia to Gentile believers, just as Israel was divinely elected for a special and unique service among the nations (Gen 12:1–3; Exod 19:3–6; Jer 31:31–37; Ezek 37:26–28; Rom 9:4–5; 11:1–5). A relatively small but growing proportion of scholars, several of whom I have cited, precedes me in developing this concept. Both *distinction theory* and *intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction* are my own labels for a biblical interpretation that others already pioneered using terms such as ‘bilateral ecclesiology’ (Kinzer 2005), ‘unity and diversity in the church’ (Campbell 2008), ‘Torah-defined ecclesiological variegation’ (Rudolph 2010) and ‘dual expression’ churches or congregations (Juster n.d.). For my research, I deliberately chose ‘distinction’ over less objectionable synonyms like ‘differentiation’ because so many English Bibles use ‘distinction’ to translate *diakrinō* in Acts 15:9 (and some in 11:12) and *diastolē* in Romans 3:22 and 10:12. By using ‘distinction’, I do not mean to imply superiority of Jewish believers over Gentile believers, but rather that Jews within the ecclesia should be distinguishable in theologically significant ways from Gentiles. This distinction is most visible in the response of Jewish Jesus-believers to Torah.

These texts (Acts 11:12; 15:9; Rom 3:22 and 10:12), together with Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 2:15 and Colossians 3:11, are the key texts of the NT which apparently deny that the ecclesia should distinguish between its Jewish and its Gentile members. They have been used together as a bulwark against distinction theory, though I have already argued that two of them (viz. Eph 2:15 and, to a lesser extent, Acts 11:12), have been misinterpreted in Christian tradition (Woods 2014b and 2014a respectively). I found that these two texts provide no obstacle to the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction.

Reverting from that overview of distinction theory, this paper seeks to answer the same question of another text: *Does Acts 15:9 affirm Christian tradition by teaching that the ecclesia is composed of an undifferentiated mix of Jewish and Gentile Jesus-believers?* A surface reading of the text suggests it is a substantial obstacle to distinction theory since it explicitly states that God ‘made no distinction’ between the two groups. However, the whole discussion revolves around the differing covenantal obligations of ‘us’ (from the speakers’ perspective, i.e. Jews) and ‘them’ (Gentiles). The Jewish apostles, elders and brothers (15:23) decided not to place on the Gentiles any greater burden (legal obligation, explained below) than a few ‘necessary things’ (commandments, 15:28). Subsequent events in Acts suggest that the *us-and-them* classification persisted; it did not fall into disuse after the Jerusalem council. Moreover, the narrative presupposes that circumcised Jewish believers remain bound to the Torah. In fact, Israel’s covenantal obligation to Torah is a foundation of distinction theory. From these observations, the continuation of Jew-Gentile distinction appears axiomatic in the early ecclesia described in Acts. Therefore, the application of Acts 15:9 as evidence against distinction theory needs investigation, which is the purpose of this paper.

The method used is simply to examine the key phrase in the Greek text of Acts 15:9 to see if ‘no distinction’ is an appropriate translation from a lexical perspective, and if there are any notable variant readings to consider. Thereafter, a study is undertaken of the immediate context of the Jerusalem council (15:1–29) to determine whether it supports the outcome of the textual analysis, or if the context presupposes a different sense of the word ‘distinction’. The conclusion reviews the findings of the textual and contextual analyses which seem to be inconsistent *prima facie*. It then discusses distinction theory as a possible solution, before making a final judgement on the key question. Reflection on the implications of the study is reserved. In another paper, I present an historical analysis of later events recorded in Acts (from 15:30 onwards) to determine whether or not they are consistent with the findings of this study (see Woods 2015).⁴

2. Textual analysis

Peter used the word *diakrinō* in an important statement in his speech to the council of apostles and elders who had gathered in Jerusalem over the question of whether Gentile believers needed to be circumcised. In Acts 15:8–9, Peter argued that ‘God, who knows the heart, testified to them *by giving them* the Holy Spirit, just as he also *did* to us. And he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing [purifying] their hearts by faith.’⁵ He concluded that Gentiles should not be subjected to the yoke of the Law (discussed in detail below), noting that ‘*we* [Jews]

⁴ The original version of the paper appears in my thesis (referenced above) and may appear in revised format in a future publication.

⁵ The difficulty with ‘cleanse’ is its cognate relation to ‘clean’, which is used ambiguously in English Bibles as both the opposite of ‘impure’ (whether ritually or morally) and of ‘unclean’ (a term applicable to some animals and foods, but never to humans). This ambiguity reinforces a misinterpretation of Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9–16, as readers may view ‘unclean’ as the opposite of ‘pure’ (See Woods 2012).

will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus in the same way those [Gentiles] also *are*.' (15:11).

This text in Acts 15:9 is simpler to treat than its counterpart in Acts 11:12 because there are no notable variant readings; God '*outhen diekrinen metaxy hēmōn te kai autōn*'. (RP uses '*ouden*' instead of '*outhen*' but this has no impact on the translation since both mean 'nothing' in this context.) English translations are practically unanimous in their interpretation of *diakrinō* here as 'making a distinction,' or 'putting a difference.' Indeed, de Graaf (2005:739) points out that 'to make a distinction' is a 'well-attested' sense of *diakrinō*. The objects of the verb are explicitly identified ('us' and 'them'), unlike in 11:12. Also, the verb is in active aorist indicative form, a simple manner of recounting an event. On these grounds, it would appear that 15:9 refutes distinction theory, since God himself plainly made no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. Instead, he gave his Spirit to Gentiles who heard the message of the gospel and believed, thus testifying to them just as he had done for Jewish believers, and he similarly purified their hearts by faith (15:7–9). The doubting, wavering or hesitating sense of *diakrinō* (see Woods 2014a) cannot be considered in 15:9 for the sentence to be coherent. Regardless of the nuance, whether judging, differentiating or separating the two groups, the general sense is to make a distinction between two parties. Thus '*outhen diekrinen*' clearly indicates that God made no such distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in his gracious deeds to them.

The textual analysis is thus easily concluded. However, the immediate context and subsequent events recorded in Acts should be examined to determine whether Peter's statement in 15:9 has any applicability for the ecclesia. Did God remove Jewish particularity so that the ecclesia would become an undifferentiated mix of Jews and Gentiles—a non-Jewish Christian church—or did he merely disregard Gentile

strangeness (foreignness) in that he purified them by the same means as he did Jews?

3. Contextual Analysis

3.1. Narrative outline

The flow of the narrative describing the Jerusalem council follows, itemised by verse numbers in Acts 15:

Verse 1: Some men from Judea taught the brothers at Antioch that they cannot be saved unless they are circumcised according to the Mosaic custom.

Verse 2: Paul and Barnabas strove hard and debated against the men from Judea. Paul, Barnabas and other (possibly Gentile) representatives from the ecclesia in Antioch were appointed to take the issue to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

Verse 3: They travelled from Antioch through Phoenicia and Samaria, ‘telling in detail the conversion of the Gentiles [in Antioch]’ which brought great joy to all the brothers in those places.

Verse 4: The ecclesia in Jerusalem received the travellers and heard the same report.

Verse 5: Some Jesus-believing Pharisees objected, supporting the claim of the men from Judea in verse 1. Not all the believing Pharisees did so, but ‘*tines*’ (some).⁶

⁶ Note that Paul himself remained a Pharisee (Acts 23:6).

Verses 6–7: The apostles and elders met to discuss the matter and had a long debate. If the events of 15:22 followed immediately, then the whole ecclesia of Jerusalem was assembled. It appears likely that the objectors mentioned in 15:5 were present, as well as delegates from Antioch, and certainly Paul and Barnabas (15:12).

Verses 7–11: Peter gave a short speech in which he recalled God’s choice to bring the Gentiles to faith through the gospel, giving the Holy Spirit to them, and making ‘no distinction between us and them, cleansing [purifying] their hearts by faith.’ Peter rhetorically asked the motive for subjecting the Gentile disciples to the yoke (of the Law), pointing out that the means of salvation for Jews and Gentiles is the same for both: ‘through the grace of the Lord Jesus.’

Verse 12: Barnabas and Paul described ‘all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ to the whole group.

Verses 13–21: James responded. Referring to Peter’s testimony and citing the prophet Amos, he concluded that Gentile believers in Jesus only need to observe a few basic restrictions.

Verses 22–23: The whole ecclesia in Jerusalem decided to send Paul, Barnabas, Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas to the ecclesia in Antioch (and Syria and Cilicia, v. 23) with a letter recording the decision.

Verses 23–29: The contents of the letter: salutations; invalidation of the circumcision agitators of 15:1; endorsement of the four messengers; and a terse record of the council’s decision.

This brief outline suffices to support the following contextual analysis of Peter's claim that God had 'made no distinction between us and them' (15:9).

3.2. Background

3.2.1. A prevailing assumption

Those among the Pharisees in the Jerusalem ecclesia who believed it was necessary to circumcise Gentile believers and command them to observe the Law of Moses (15:5) were surely doing the same with their own sons, yet this was apparently of no concern to anyone at the meeting. It may even be surmised that all those present did so, since that was their Law and custom and Jesus had instructed them to 'do and observe everything' that the Jewish authorities determined (Matt 23:2–3)—even the seemingly trivial matters of the Law (23:23). Had they abandoned the Law themselves it would be very strange to debate at length (15:7) whether or not Gentile disciples of Jesus had to observe the Law.

If the Gentile brothers were becoming fully-fledged Jews there would have been no need for debate, but only the circumcision faction held that such conversion was required (Acts 15:1, 5).⁷ The brothers mentioned in 15:1 were Gentile believers, since otherwise the men from Judea would not have perceived the need for them to be circumcised. Gentiles were the subject of the conversation in Phoenicia and Samaria in 15:3, of the report in Jerusalem in 15:4, of the dispute in 15:5, and of

⁷ Unfortunately, the label 'circumcision faction' or 'circumcision party' may mislead readers into thinking that the other Jewish believers in Jesus, including the apostles, were opposed to circumcision and, by inference, Torah-observance in general. Rather, the label denotes a sub-group of Jewish Jesus-believers who insisted on *Gentile* believers being circumcised.

the council meeting in 15:6–21, as well as the addressees of the letter in 15:23–29. Finally, when the letter concerning the Gentile believers was read in Antioch, they were probably those who rejoiced the most over the ruling, and they were the most encouraged (15:31). The letter did not contain any encouragement specifically for Jewish believers in the ecclesia in Antioch. The ‘long message’ by Judas and Silas that further ‘encouraged and strengthened the brothers’ (15:32) surely explained the events and decision of the Jerusalem council in much more detail than the short letter itself.

Bauckham (2013:180) affirms the assumption that Jewish believers were to continue observing Torah after reminding his readers of biblical prophecies that produced an expectation for the nations to worship the God of Israel in the eschatological age (p. 178). The logic is very compelling, especially after dispelling the notion that Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9–16 meant that Jewish food laws were *passé* (see Miller 2002; Woods 2012). The oft-assumed abolition of Mosaic Law would have been a momentous occasion in biblical history, at least equal to the Sinai event.⁸ It would also be difficult to reconcile with some key texts (such as Matt 5:17–19; 23:23; Acts 21:20–24; Rom 2:13–16; 3:31; 7:12, 14; 10:16) and it would have obviated the need for the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, since no Jewish believers would be arguing for Gentile observance of the Law if they weren’t keeping it themselves (see Rudolph 2013:23; Wyschogrod 2004:209). Employing the biblical method of *kal v’khomer* (‘light and heavy,’ or *a fortiori*): if it was hard for the apostles and elders to avoid putting the yoke of the Law on Gentile disciples, how much harder it would be to remove the same yoke from the neck of the Jews on whom God placed it! It took ‘no little strife and debate’ (15:2) in Antioch and ‘much debate’ in

⁸ Acts 2, which records how God gave his Spirit to Jesus’ disciples, does not suggest any change in status of the Law. In the new covenant, the Spirit internalises the Law (Jer 31:31–33; Heb 8:10; 10:16), thereby affirming it.

Jerusalem (15:7) even before Peter, and later James (after further evidence was presented, 15:12) reached a conclusion concerning Gentile believers' obligation to the Law. How much greater would have been the difficulty to cancel the Law for Israel? *The prevailing assumption concerning the Law at the time of the Jerusalem council, therefore, was that all Jews (including Jesus-believing Jews) were subject to it.* The *status quo* of the time is crucial for the exegesis of Acts 15:9a.

3.2.2. Derivation of the four prohibitions

The prohibitions for Gentile disciples in Acts 15:20 may be related either to the Law for resident aliens (e.g. Bauckham 2013:183; Dauermann 2012; Michael and Lancaster 2009; Skarsaune 2002:170) or to the Noachide laws (Flusser and Safrai 2012; Stern 1992:278 and 2007:154–156)—or both, whilst implying much more (Janicki 2012). In the first case, the same Law applies to the whole community, Jewish and Gentile, but it makes different requirements for different sub-communities. Gentiles dwelling among Israel ('resident aliens,' to use the Lexham English Septuagint translation) had the lowest level of legal obligation;⁹ women had some laws applicable uniquely to them; priests and Levites had their own laws too. Yet all of these regulations were contained in the same Torah, and all its subjects enjoyed similar benefits of legal protection and of blessing. Thus, according to the first view, when God purified Gentile believers in Jesus without their becoming Jewish proselytes they were expected to submit to the commandments for resident aliens. Since Paul described Gentile believers as 'fellow citizens of the saints [of Israel] and members the

⁹ Leviticus 17:10, 12, 13 and 18:26 specifically include resident aliens in their commandments.

household of God' (Eph 2:19), he may well have mentally classified them together with aliens dwelling in the midst of Israel.

Further to the prescriptions for aliens living among Israel, Judaism sees all humans as 'Noachides' (descendants of Noah) and hence subject to the commandments God gave in his covenant with Noah (Gen 9:1–17). Thus the Noachide laws were established from the Noachide covenant and are universally applicable, at least from the Jewish perspective. The rabbinic tradition, expressed in the Gemara (Sanhedrin 56a) distills these prohibitions to seven and presents them as the minimum standard for righteousness of Gentiles before God. The view that the four prohibitions in Acts 15:20 derive from the Noachide laws assumes an earlier, coarser, oral form of them which banned idolatry, sexual immorality, the consumption of blood (assumed to be the purpose of those who strangle animals)¹⁰ and murder. (*Tou haimatos* ('from blood') in Acts 15:20, may be taken as a ban on drinking blood or on bloodshed, i.e. murder.) For more information on the derivation of the Noachide laws and their possible use in the apostolic decree, refer to Neuhaus (2012); Flusser and Safrai (2012); Michael and Lancaster (2009:59); Payne (2013); Stern (1992:277). (Also see Lev 17:10–16 and Abodah Zarah 8:4–8 in the Tosefta.)

In a third option, Janicki argues that the situation of Gentile members of the new covenant was not as simple as that of resident aliens or of Noachides (2012:37, 49–72). Though the principles of both standards provided guidance for the apostolic decree in Acts 15, the legal derivation thereof was more complex, and the anticipated application of the Law to Gentile believers was much more extensive. 'Gentiles in Messiah have a status in the people of God and a responsibility to Torah that far exceeds that of the God-fearer of the ancient synagogue and that

¹⁰ In Jewish tradition, the prohibition against the consumption of blood derives from Genesis 9:4–5 which simultaneously prohibits consuming strangled animals.

of the modern-day Noachide’ (Janicki 2012:50). In any case, however the four prohibitions were derived, consensus is that the source was the Torah—the Law of Moses. *Therefore, the apostles and others at the Jerusalem council regarded the Law as applicable and authoritative.* This is an important point for understanding the background, or historical context, of the decision expressed in Acts 15:20.

3.3. Peter’s speech

3.3.1. Was ‘no distinction’ meant in a general or a restricted sense?

A key question to be addressed is whether or not the means of salvation mentioned in Acts 15:11 implicitly restricts the eradication of distinction in 15:9 to soteriological matters only. That is, does the fact that Gentiles are saved in exactly the same way as Jews really mean that *all* distinctions between them are removed or, at least, theologically inconsequential? Or did Peter simply mean that God made no distinction between them in terms of how they are saved?

According to the text, Gentiles heard the message of the gospel and believed (15:7), whereupon God ‘testified to them *by giving them* the Holy Spirit, just as he also *did* to us [Jews]. And he made no distinction between us and them, cleansing [purifying] their hearts by faith’ (15:8–9). Peter closed by stating that the faith and salvation of himself and his Jewish companions would materialise in the same way as for the Gentiles: ‘through the grace of the Lord Jesus’ (15:11). His conclusion (discussed further below) brought the central concern into sharp focus: the means of salvation. God’s equal treatment of the Gentiles meant that they were saved the same way that Jews were, without distinction. However, none of Peter’s words suggest the undoing of Jewish particularity in general.

3.3.2. *The example of Cornelius*

When considering God's salvation of the Gentiles, it is helpful to revisit the Cornelius incident in Acts 10 when the Spirit was first given to them, and Peter's report of it in 11:1–18. In 10:34–35, Peter said, 'God is not one who shows partiality, but in every nation the one who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to him.' Peter thus indicated that Jews have no advantage concerning acceptability to God, who gave Cornelius and his household his Spirit without requiring their conversion. Being Jewish was apparently not the criterion for receiving God's favour, but rather right attitude (fear of God) and conduct, as demonstrated by Cornelius. Nevertheless, at no point does the narrative of Acts imply, let alone state, that Jesus-faith cancels Jewish observance. Thus Peter said, 'To this one [Jesus] all the prophets testify, that through his name everyone [whether Jewish or Gentile] who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins' (10:43).

Similarly, the angel who appeared to Cornelius, a Gentile, said that Peter would speak words by which Cornelius and his household would be saved (11:14). Peter did *not* say, 'Surely no one can withhold *circumcision* for these [Gentile believers].' Instead, he spoke of withholding water for washing (baptizing) them (10:47). Gentile believers were to be washed from impurity to make them pure, but they were not to be circumcised to make them Jewish. Neither were Jewish believers told to forsake their faith tradition. The Jew-Gentile boundary apparently remained intact in Peter's view, in spite of God's surprising salvation of Gentiles who believed the gospel. The earlier Jerusalem conference (11:1–18) confirmed this in its climactic statement: 'God has granted the repentance *leading* to life to the Gentiles also!' The salvation that God had already provided for Israel was now also accessible to the nations without their becoming Israelites. Apparently, God's impartial treatment of all nations (10:34–35) was not a

revocation of Israel's particularity, but an affirmation of his fairness in issuing salvation.

3.3.3. *On the Law*

Returning to the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, Peter accused those who demanded Gentile circumcision of putting God to the test (15:10), as though God had not already made his acceptance of the Gentiles clear. In the same sentence, Peter referred to the Law as 'a yoke that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.' The verb 'have been able,' *ischuō*, appears in aorist active indicative form which need not be taken as a perfected action, as though Jewish believers no longer bore the yoke of the Law. To assume a past tense, 'were able,' which the ASV, KJV (1900), NCV, NKJV, NLT all do in following the tradition of the AV/KJV of 1873, is a theological imposition on Peter's generation since there is no hint in the text that Jewish believers had forsaken the Law. Accordingly, most modern translations opt for the more appropriate wording, 'have been able.'

Acts 15:11, which speaks of salvation, starts with the emphatic disjunction, *alla*, contrasting it to the previous sentence on responsibility to the Law. This contrast de-couples any perceived connection between Law and salvation, expressing that both Jews and Gentiles 'will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus.' However, the contrast does not convey any antinomian sentiment. It simply shows that salvation is by grace; it is not—as the circumcision proponents thought—by bearing the yoke of the Law. Thus Gentile disciples were not required to observe the Torah in the same way as Jews. Rudolph (2010:12–13 fn. 53) reaches a similar conclusion:

I interpret Acts 15:10–11 to mean that Jews experience soteriological blessing 'through the grace of the Lord Jesus' and not by Torah

observance according to the standards of Pharisaic halakhah (note the Pharisaic context of the demands in Acts 15:5). It does not follow from this statement that Peter considered Jesus-believing Jews exempt from the responsibilities of Jewish covenantal life stipulated in the Torah or that he considered these responsibilities necessary for salvation. He may have viewed them as commandments of God for Jews, the observance of which did not have a direct bearing on salvation. Similarly, the apostolic decree lists a number of ritual ‘requirements’ (ἐπιτάγαι) for Jesus-believing Gentiles (Acts 15:28–29) but there is no indication that they are necessary for salvation.

3.3.4. *Language and logic*

An additional contrast to the one made by the disjunction (‘but’) is also evident in the *us-and-them* language of 15:10–11. Peter clearly identified with Israel which bears the yoke of the Law, not with the Gentile disciples whom he said should not do so. Nevertheless, he said, ‘we’ (Jews) and ‘those’ (Gentiles) are both saved by grace. In other words, Peter distinguished between Jewish and Gentile believers in relation to Torah in 15:10, and 15:11 he contrasted this distinction with their common means of salvation. Far from refuting distinction theory, Acts 15:10–11 validates it firmly.

Similar validation is found in Paul’s writings. God’s salvation by grace is common to the circumcised and uncircumcised alike *as they are*; members of neither party are to alter that condition (1 Cor 7:17–24). Additionally, those who are circumcised are obligated to keep the whole Law (Gal 5:3). Combining these texts creates a syllogism with the ‘necessary conclusion: All those who are born as Jews are obligated to live as Jews’ (Kinzer 2005:73). By the same token, Gentile believers are to continue to live as non-Jews. Moreover, the mutual dependence of Jews and Gentiles on Jesus’ grace expels the notion that intra-

ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction is a distinction of priority (i.e. that Jews are superior) and demands that it has the sense of differentiation.¹¹ The theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction holds that the two groups are distinct from one-another in a theologically significant way, not that one group is superior to another (see Woods 2014b:102).

3.3.5. *Purity and sanctification*

Peter's speech, therefore, does not dismiss the distinction of Jews from Gentiles *in general* but only in a *soteriological* sense. A similar but more nuanced interpretation is presented by Bauckham (2013), who sees Acts 15:9 as referring to the end of Jew-Gentile distinction among all believers in relation to moral purity, which was a far greater concern than ritual purity. The type of impurity of concern late in the Second Temple period was that which resulted from the wickedest sins, particularly idolatry, sexual immorality and murder (p. 179), as we might expect from the Noachide commandments and from the Torah's regulations for aliens living among Israel. Jews were wary of being defiled by the widespread moral impurity of Gentiles and thus had to constantly avoid contact with them, most especially in table fellowship, which they regarded as intimate (p. 180). (Note the accusation that Peter ate with uncircumcised men in Acts 11:3.) The purification of hearts in Acts 15:9 is a reference to Ezekiel 36:16–36 in which God's people are purified and enabled to keep his commandments (p. 180). Peter said that Gentiles had been purified in the same way—not through circumcision but by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:8–9). Thus, among Jesus-believers, the distinction between pure Jews and impure Gentiles fell away because God had purified them all from moral impurities. Surely, the purification of Gentiles also enabled them to keep God's

¹¹ This differentiation is made public largely by Jewish observance of specific laws required of them but not of Gentiles, pre-eminently that of circumcision.

commandments too, but apparently the Law did not apply to Gentiles in the same way as to Jews. With the fulfilment of Ezekiel's prophecy, 'it became possible to envisage the messianic people of God as a community of both Jews and Gentiles, the former observing Torah, the latter not' (Bauckham 2013:180). Thus, in Bauckham's view, Jew-Gentile distinction was erased in regards to purity, but retained in regards to Torah-obligation.

In addition to God's purification of Gentiles, they were also sanctified by his gift of the Spirit (10:44).¹² Thus there is another sense in which the distinction between Jews as God's holy (set apart, or sanctified) people and Gentiles as common (not set apart unto God) was removed: God himself had sanctified Jesus-believing Gentiles just as he had done with the nation of Israel long before. The Gentiles' purification and sanctification, plus their close fellowship with Jews and unity with Israel (see Woods 2014b on Eph 2:15) are all elements of their salvation. Indeed, the purpose of the Jerusalem council was to determine the requirements for salvation of Gentiles (Acts 15:1, 5) which the previous passage hinted at in closing: God 'had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles' (14:27). Faith is the way of sanctification, purification and salvation for both Jews and Gentiles alike, without distinction (15:7–9, 11). Yet faith does not by any means nullify the Law (Rom 3:31, also notable in Israel's Torah-observant heroes of faith, Heb 11:32–40)—the very Law that distinguishes between Jew and Gentile, and that the apostles applied differently to Gentile believers.

3.3.6. Review of Peter's speech

Thus the evidence in Peter's speech all testifies that *the distinction which God did not make between Jews and Gentiles in Acts 15:9*

¹² Also see 10:28, 47 which allude to both sanctity and purity, the latter by mentioning water baptism and Spirit baptism.

pertained to how they were saved. Peter’s words do not suggest in any way that the Law no longer applied to Jews, nor that all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles had been erased. Acts 26:17–18 implicitly confirms the soteriological domain of Peter’s speech in 15:7–11 by way of parallel. In it, Paul recounted how Jesus had assured him that he would rescue him from both Jews and Gentiles (26:17) in order to bring them to repentance ‘*so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a share among those who are sanctified by faith in me*’ (26:18). Here we see that both Jew and Gentile may be forgiven of their sins through repentance and sanctified by faith in Jesus, equally together joining the fellowship of the saints. In this regard, there is no distinction—Jews and Gentiles are saved in the same way. As to Jewish customs and obligation to the Law, the *status quo* was assumed.

3.4. James’ verdict

3.4.1. Background

Though not beyond dispute, historical records and modern scholars indicate that James, the brother of Jesus who became the first leader of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, was known for his piety and strict observance of the Law, yet he was put to death on account of the false accusation by the high priest, Ananus, of breaking the Law (Josephus: *Antiquities* 20:199–203; Eusebius: *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1:2–3 (citing Clement); 2.23:*passim* (citing Clement, Hegesippus and Josephus); Woods 2012:196).¹³ Evidently James observed the Law until his death long after the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost in Acts 2:1–4. As shall be observed in his role in the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, James’ whole paradigm for Jesus-faith existed within the matrix of Torah.

¹³ Note similar false accusations made against Stephen (Acts 6:11–14) and Paul (21:21).

After calling attention of the assembly to himself, James began by extracting the key point of Peter's testimony, that 'God first concerned himself to take from among the Gentiles a people for his name' (Acts 15:13–14). This reminded the assembly that God's election was not limited to the people of Israel who, as Bauckham (2013:182) explains, were accustomed to being called by God's name (Deut 28:10; 2 Chron 7:14; Jer 14:9; Dan 9:19) in contradistinction from the nations who were not (Isa 63:19). In Acts 15:15–18, James appealed firstly to Amos 9:11–12 and then alluded to Isaiah 45:21 as evidence that it was God's—not man's—plan 'from of old' for all nations to 'seek the Lord'. That is, God had always intended for people from all nations, not only Israel, to honour him.

Since Jeremiah 12:16 and Zechariah 2:11 (LXX) both speak of Gentiles dwelling in the midst of Israel during the messianic age (Bauckham 2013:183), these prophecies presumed future application of the four prohibitions (in Acts 15:20) for aliens in the midst of Israel. Thus, Bauckham concludes, the Torah made provision in advance for these messianic-era Gentiles 'who are not obliged, like Jews, by the commandments of the Torah in general, but are obliged by these specific commandments.' That is, Gentiles whom God was to call to himself in the messianic era were only to be subjected to these few commandments of Mosaic Law—the four prohibitions that James specified in Acts 15:20.

Moreover, Leviticus 18:24–30 (referring to offences identified in Lev 17–18) shows that the Canaanites defiled themselves and the land by practising the four things James prohibited. If such behaviour even defiled the moral purity of Gentiles who did not acknowledge Israel's God, surely Gentiles whose hearts God 'cleansed [purified] their hearts by faith' (Acts 15:10) should refrain from it! In fact, 'the moral imperatives and ethical authority of the Torah were not a part of the

discussion in Acts 15,' not because they were irrelevant but quite the opposite: 'these were already well understood as essential' for Gentiles (Michael and Lancaster 2009:53). James identified these requirements as implications of Peter's position based on his (James') exegetical connection of the prophets with the Law: because Gentile believers 'are members of the messianic people *as Gentiles*, they do not require circumcision and other requirements that the Torah makes on Israelites in order to become or remain morally pure, but they are obliged by these specific prohibitions of the Torah against morally polluting practices' (Bauckham 2013:183).

3.4.2. A legally binding decision

James' words in Acts 15:19 ('Therefore I conclude...') seem to indicate that he took authority and made the final ruling regarding Gentile's obligations to the Law. Context supports this: at the conclusion of a long debate (15:7), James made a final decision. Yet James' decision was the apostles' decision and the council's decision; it was apparently even God's decision (15:28). This is shown by the unanimity of 'the apostles and the elders, together with the whole church [in Jerusalem]' (15:22) expressed in 15:22; 25, and by the consensus between the council members (namely 'the apostles and the elders, brothers,' 15:23) and the Holy Spirit (15:28). Thus terms like the 'apostolic decree' and 'James' decision' may be treated as synonyms. Yet it was more than a consensus ruling which the council claimed to have God's stamp of approval; the decision bore legal authority.

The term Luke used for James' decision, *krinō*, indicates something stronger than just an opinion. Whilst interpretations differ from one English translation to another, the most conventional use of *krinō*, 'to judge', appears most justifiable. Jesus had given authority to the apostles to set *halakhah* for the Kingdom (Matt 16:19; 18:18–20; Juster

2009; Kinzer 2005:249; Stern 1992:54, 56–58), and the Jerusalem council functioned as ‘a kind of Messianic *Sanhedrin*’ (Stern 2007:156). It was within this Jewish legal context that James issued a *halakhic* verdict—a judgement on the matter for how life in the ecclesia is to be ordered: Gentile believers are not to be subjected to the Law but must observe a few rules in order to preserve the purity of their hearts (i.e. moral purity) and to enable them to participate in table fellowship with Jews (Bauckham 2013:184).

Since the decision to be taken was *halakhic*, that is, pertaining to interpretation and application of the Law, it likely had to be based on the Hebrew scriptures regardless of the miracles to which Peter, Barnabas and Paul testified (Bauckham 2013:181–182). This explains James’ use of Amos and Isaiah. Bauckham also links James’ quotes to Hosea 3:5 and Jeremiah 12:15–16. James’ method was *halakhic midrash* (Shulam 2008:40)—a Jewish hermeneutical approach to resolve a legal question. Janicki (2012:141 endnote 22) explains it as a *ma’aseh* (‘it once happened’): ‘a halachic ruling based on the occurrence of an actual event.’ That event was the purification of uncircumcised Gentiles when Peter visited Cornelius’ home and ate with them (Acts 10), as shown by Peter’s speech (15:7–11) and James’ reference to it (v. 14). James’ decision was *legally binding* for all Gentile initiates of the new covenant; it was an application of the Law to be enforced in all ecclesia indefinitely. From this, it is apparent i) that the Law was still in full force for Jewish believers (with no hint that it would be abolished at any time); and ii) that Gentile believers need not be circumcised and subjected to the whole Law, but only to a few restrictions (15:20). In other words, Jew-Gentile distinction was re-affirmed, not only for society in general, but particularly within the ecclesia.

3.4.3. Affirmation of prophecy and apocalypse

The quote James drew from Amos 9 stated that the Lord would restore ‘the tent of David’ (i.e. the kingdom of Israel), ‘so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord’ (Acts 15:16–17). Note the marker of purpose, ‘so that’ (*hopōs*), serving as a conjunction between God’s restoration of Israel (recall Acts 1:6–8) and the salvation of the nations. The Lord’s restoration of Israel was a prerequisite for the other nations, ‘even all the Gentiles’ (15:17), to seek himself. James quoted from the LXX in which ‘humanity’ (*anthrōpos*) parallels ‘all the Gentiles’, whereas the Hebrew text (both MT and DSS) speaks of ‘Edom,’ not ‘humanity’. (‘Edom’ is spelled very similarly to ‘Adam’ in Hebrew, and the latter may be understood as humanity.) Bauckham (2013:182) assumes there was a Hebrew textual variant which the LXX followed (rather than a poor translation to Greek) and he explains that the LXX says ‘the rest of humanity will seek’ the Lord, unlike the MT in which ‘they will possess the remnant of humanity’. His point is that ‘the dwelling of David’ is an eschatological temple where all nations will go to seek God’s presence (see Isa 2:2–3; Zech 14:16), even though James was referring to the physical temple in the messianic era (pp. 182–183). Because the nations already are called by God’s name, that is, they belong to God, they ‘do not have to become Jews in order to belong to the messianic people of God’ (p. 182).

Since it was always God’s plan to choose from the nations a people for himself, James decided that the council should not ‘cause difficulty for those from among the Gentiles who turn to God’ (15:19). In other words, Gentile believers should not be obligated to be circumcised and obey the Law of Moses. In 15:28, this ‘yoke’ (*zygos*, 15:10) or ‘difficulty’ (*parenchleō*, 15:19) is called a ‘burden’ (*baros*): ‘it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us to place on you no greater burden...’.

Flusser and Safrai (2012) noted that the same word is used by Jesus in a similar expression in his message to the ecclesia in Thyatira: ‘I do not put upon you any other burden’ (Rev 2:24). Moreover, two of the four prohibitions mentioned in Acts 15:29 are mentioned in the letter to Thyatira and similarly in the letter to Pergamum, namely, sexual immorality and consumption of food sacrificed to idols (Rev 2:14, 20).¹⁴ It would appear, therefore, that Jesus upheld the apostolic decree for the Gentile-dominated church in Thyatira almost half a century after the events of Acts 15, supporting the notion that the decree applies indefinitely to all Gentile Christians. (Note also Rev 9:20–21 and 22:15 in which idolaters, murderers, and sexually immoral people are judged, together with those who practise various other heinous sins.)

3.4.4. *Four prohibitions in writing*

James’ proposal to put the council’s decision in writing (Acts 15:20) should not be overlooked. Assuming he was confident that the decision would be conveyed by trustworthy men, as indeed happened (15:22; 30), why would he require it to be recorded in writing? The answer is surely that a written ruling has a certain fixedness and bears the writer’s authority, offering greater surety than an oral report. The letter was very brief, yet the written medium gave its contents the weight of legal authority and fixedness. (See Matt 4:4–10; 21:13; 26:24, 31 for some examples where the phrase ‘it is written’ is used in this way by Jesus.) The *halakhah* for Gentiles in the new covenant was set, and Luke’s written volume has ensured its permanence.

¹⁴ Combining these observations leads me to propose that the implicit object of Revelation 2:25 is the set of prohibitions in Acts 15:20 and 29, and that Jesus’ instruction to the church in Thyatira could be paraphrased: ‘Nevertheless, keep what you have—the four prohibitions specified by James—until I come.’ Such a proposal cannot be justified here.

Acts 15:20 continues by listing James' decision that Gentile believers should 'abstain from the pollution of idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood.' Luke's manner of emphasising the importance of these prohibitions was to record them three times in Acts, in 15:20, 29 and 21:25.¹⁵ As explained above, the four prohibitions may have been derived from an early form of the Noachide laws, or from the commandments for aliens living among Israel, or both. Regardless, the four prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were drawn from the Torah, thus demonstrating it still to be in force. Yet this is the same Law which differentiates between Jews and Gentiles—even Gentiles living within the community of Israel and worshipping the God of Israel. The question thus arises of how such distinction could be entirely erased when God made 'no distinction' in Acts 15:9, since the Holy Spirit and the whole Jerusalem council affirmed the Law (15:25, 28). By restricting the disregard of Jew-Gentile distinction to matters of salvation, a more consistent reading of the text emerges.

Some writers, including myself, have sought to explain James' decision as purposing to remove any obstacles to Jewish believers having table fellowship with Gentile believers (e.g. Skarsaune 2002:170, quoted in Woods 2012:197 in my own case to support this view, pp. 197–199.) After all, no Torah-observing, Jesus-believing Jew would dine with Gentiles who practised idolatry, even if these Gentiles proclaimed faith in Jesus. However, Bauckham (2013:184) argues that table fellowship is not the primary reason for the four prohibitions; rather, 'they are prohibited primarily because they are pollutions of which all the people of God, Jewish and Gentile, must be free.' Bauckham presents 'close association of Jews and Gentiles,' which includes table fellowship, as a

¹⁵ Note 10:1–48; 11:1–18; 15:7–9 where Luke records the gift of the Spirit to Cornelius' household three times; and 9:43; 10:6, 32 in which Simon the tanner's occupation is mentioned three times.

secondary reason for James' prohibitions (p. 184); his argument for moral purity based on connecting the prophecies and the laws for the resident alien have already been presented. I yield to Bauckham's claim; my paper centred on the interpretation of Peter's vision in Acts 10:9–16 whilst Bauckham's chapter is a condensed version of three much greater studies undertaken by him (2013:178). Not that commensality was irrelevant as a motive for the ruling, but it was surely less significant than moral purity. Regardless, the four prohibitions of Acts 15:20 were Torah-determined bare essentials for Gentiles, whilst Jewish believers still bore the full yoke of the Law. Thus the prohibitions conveyed a distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia.

3.4.5. Moses is read

The following verse, Acts 15:21, has led to much puzzlement and conjecture among commentators. David Stern (1992:279) identified six ways to interpret it. Of these, two appear most plausible in context. The first is that interaction between Gentile believers and Jews is inevitable (presumably desirable), so Gentile believers should not ruin the possibility of fellowshiping (especially at meals) with Jews. The discussion on table fellowship above concluded that it was a secondary motive for the four prohibitions, but it was nevertheless important. Jewish contact with Gentiles was unavoidable because of the Jewish dispersion 'in every city,' not merely temporarily but 'from ancient generations', as shown by the fact that Moses is read in synagogues every Sabbath in such places. Moreover, Acts 15:20–21 (among other NT texts) implies that Gentiles ought to seek fellowship with Jews.

The other most sensible interpretation, in my view, of Acts 15:21 is that Gentile Christians would attend synagogue on Sabbath for instruction, and that they would not be accepted into the synagogue if they did not

keep the most basic commandments—those James identified in 15:20. This interpretation can be used together with the one pointing to close fellowship, even table fellowship. The purpose of Gentiles attending synagogue relates to their becoming ‘fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God’ (Eph 2:19) which would naturally require an orientation to the writings of Moses that the synagogue would provide. Yet all Jews, believers in Jesus or not, are obligated by Torah to separate themselves from idolaters, from the sexually immoral and from those who consume blood. So James’ comment in Acts 15:21 explains the need for the prohibitions in 15:20, as implied by the conjunction *gar* (because) linking the two verses.

In anticipating that Gentile believers would attend synagogue each Sabbath to hear Moses proclaimed, James affirmed the validity of the synagogue, the Sabbath and the Law of Moses (15:21), and he expected that these Gentiles would honour all three, yet without any obligation to become proselytes (15:20). One should not read this with subsequent events in mind as though James anticipated the changes to come in the ecclesia following the destruction of the temple; he expected his ruling to apply until Christ’s return and indefinitely thereafter. In fact, Jeremiah (12:16) prophesied of a coming age in which God’s consent for Gentiles to live among his people was contingent on their diligence to ‘learn the ways of my people’. Perhaps this condition was behind James’ comment in Acts 15:21. Yet Jeremiah 12:17 clarifies that even in that age, God will distinguish between the Gentiles living among Israel and the people of Israel.

By James’ reference to Moses, the synagogues and the Sabbath, and possibly also to Jeremiah’s prophecy, Acts 15:21 undermines the case against intra-ecclesial distinction of Jews and Gentiles, which hinges on the abolition of the Law. By implication, ‘no distinction’ in Peter’s

speech (15:9) should not be interpreted as a complete, or general, eradication of Jew-Gentile distinction.

Finally, Michael and Lancaster (2009:55–56) comment that the apostles' intention for Gentile believers to learn Torah in the synagogue likely reflected an anticipation that they would begin to observe the Torah's commandments; however, the apostles refused to *require* this of the Gentiles. Nor did the apostles specify any time-limit for Gentile believers to become thoroughly Torah observant. Nevertheless, the option of observing Torah was 'open' for Gentiles who wanted to do so—except for legal conversion through circumcision (p. 57). In other words, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles must remain in place, but Gentiles may otherwise take on as much of the Jewish faith tradition as they wish; indeed, it is a privilege for them to do so (p. 61–62). Michael and Lancaster suggest six 'compelling reasons for Gentile Torah observance' (p. 62–66) as a 'divine invitation' to Gentiles who might wish to surpass the minimum requirements of them, even as Jewish Nazirites did. Acts 15:21 illustrates the assumption that Gentiles would participate in synagogue meetings, including worship and instruction in Torah, yet without converting to Judaism; thus the Law, with its distinction between Jews and Gentiles, remains in place both in the synagogue and among Jesus-believers (i.e. the ecclesia).

3.4.6. Comments on James' verdict

James' tersely worded prohibitions in Acts 15:20 were for Gentiles who turned to God, in order for them to live in a manner acceptable to God and to their Jewish counterparts. This explains why James extracted the rules from the Law. He did not spontaneously think up some solutions to objectionable behaviour; rather, he derived his ruling from Torah and its requirements for Gentiles according to traditional Jewish interpretation. Since James based his verdict on Torah, it is illogical that

the Torah was abolished by the same verdict. Jews who came to faith in Jesus clearly remained under the yoke of the Law, whilst Gentiles were only required to observe a few essentials. Therefore, as Michael and Lancaster (2009:54) write, ‘The very existence of Acts 15 insists that the apostles recognised a legal differentiation between Jewish and Gentile believers’. Similarly, Jewish theologian, Michael Wyschogrod (2004:209) notes, ‘The verdict of the first Jerusalem Council, then, is that the Church is to consist of two segments, united by their faith in Christ.’ So, not only did James’ verdict validate the applicability of Torah for the ecclesia, it simultaneously formally established boundaries between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia, as reflected in the differing responsibilities of Jewish and Gentile believers to the Law.

3.5. Paul’s role

Noteworthy in the narrative describing the Jerusalem council is that Paul does not argue his case. He was evidently willing to submit to the ruling the council would make. Apparently, Barnabas and Paul only testified by ‘describing all the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles’ through them (15:12) and said no more. Luke switched the order of Barnabas’ and Paul’s names (c.f. 15:2, 3), from which one might infer that Barnabas did most of the talking. If so, it would seem that Paul was confident the leading apostles would support his case. His confidence stemmed not only from Peter’s vision and encounter with Cornelius’ household (Acts 10:1–11:18), nor only on stipulations of Torah (for Noachides and for resident aliens among Israel), but also on the basis of Christ’s atonement. Skarsaune (2002:174) writes, ‘the only good reason to impose circumcision and the law on Gentiles would be that salvation came from the law, and in that case “Christ died for nothing” (Gal 2:21)’. This reasoning is in complete harmony with the

final statement of Peter in Acts 15:11 concerning the common means of salvation. To impose the Law on Gentiles who had already been saved would be to detract from the sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice. Meanwhile, Torah-observance by Jesus-believing Jews was assumed; it was not even tabled for discussion at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15.

Bauckham's (2013:181) view is that Paul and Barnabas had previously met with the three 'pillars' of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, Peter, James and John, to discuss the question of Gentile believers taking on the Law. This occurred even before Paul's and Barnabas' mission to south Galatia (Acts 13–14), and thus before the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. Their meeting with the senior apostles in Jerusalem is presumed to be the one mentioned in Galatians 2:1–10. This would further explain Paul's confidence in the Jerusalem council—since they had already discussed the matter and made a provisional ruling—as well as James' readiness on the day of the council with a *halakhic* ruling that entailed advanced hermeneutics combining multiple texts.

3.6. The letter from the council

The Jerusalem council concluded by writing a letter to send with Paul, Barnabas, Judas (Barsabbas) and Silas 'to the brothers *who are* from among the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia' (Acts 15:22–23). This opening address maintains the prevailing paradigm of Jew-Gentile distinction by labelling its recipients as *ex ethnōn* ('from among the Gentiles'). The address did not mean that those believers had *exited* their ethnic status, but that they, as Gentiles, were equal members ('brothers') of God's people as the Israelites. The council continued by dissociating itself from Jewish believers who had supposedly—but not—been sent by it in (15:24). These false delegates had caused confusion by upsetting the Gentile believers' minds (literally, 'souls'). In most text traditions, the reader is left to infer from 15:1 that this

disturbance was induced by telling the Gentile believers that they need to be circumcised in order to be saved. The Robinson-Pierpont edition of the Greek text states explicitly what the unauthorised men from Jerusalem had said to unsettle Gentile believers in Antioch: *'You must be circumcised and keep the law'* (15:24 NKJV).

According to the letter, the council had reached a 'unanimous decision'. They affirmed Barnabas and Paul (15:25–26), and indicated that Judas and Silas would orally report the decision (15:27), which it then summarised (15:28–29). Acts 15:28 expresses that the decision seemed to have the approval of the Holy Spirit, not just the council members. Thus the council decision bore divine authority. It was to lay 'no greater burden' (of Torah-obligation) on the Gentile brethren than the four prohibitions already explained. A closing comment notes that abstaining from the stated prohibitions was sufficient to 'do well' (15:29). However, there is no comment in the letter corresponding to 15:21 regarding Moses being read in the synagogues every Sabbath, perhaps because the synagogues of Antioch might seek to proselytise Gentile Jesus-believers.

The implications of the letter are very clear. Since it was addressed explicitly to the Gentile believers in the congregations in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, Jewish believers were not affected by the ruling. The Jewish believers referred to in 15:24—those insisting on Gentile circumcision—were overruled in their attempt to impose the Law on Gentile believers, but they were not reprimanded for their devotion to the Law. The lack of reference to Jewish believers in the congregations to whom the letter was addressed strongly confirms the underlying assumption that they are to keep the Law throughout their generations, passing it down to their children (Num 15:37–41; Deut 6). Thus, the letter from the Jerusalem council implicitly affirms the theory of

distinction; Jewish believers are assumed to be bound by Torah, whilst Gentile believers are only subject to a few ‘necessary things’ (Acts 15:28).

4. Subsequent Events

Much other data may be presented regarding the distinction made by the apostles and the early ecclesia between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. The book of Acts itself is a key source. In a subsequent paper (Woods 2015), I have examined the life of Paul following the council in Jerusalem described in Acts 15. There I found good agreement with the findings of the contextual analysis above: Luke presents Paul as a paragon of Torah-observance who, at the prompting of James and all the elders of the ecclesia in Jerusalem, took decisive action to disprove rumours that he taught Jews in the diaspora to abandon the Torah and Jewish customs (Acts 21:18–26). The remainder of Acts follows Paul’s life following his arrest under the false accusation of teaching and acting contrary to Torah (21:28). From this and the analysis above, it is clear that Paul himself kept the Law and taught other Jews to do so, whilst instructing Gentile believers ‘to observe the rules that had been decided by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem’ (16:4), that is, ‘to abstain from the pollution of idols and from sexual immorality and from what has been strangled and from blood’ (15:20). In other words, Paul’s life and teaching provide a context which constrains our interpretation of Peter’s statement in 15:9—in giving his Holy Spirit to Jews and Gentiles alike, and equally purifying the hearts of both by faith, God was not erasing Jewish particularity. Rather, God was demonstrating his impartiality, saving both groups by grace. Subsequent events in Acts clearly demonstrate that the apostles differentiated between Jewish and Gentile Jesus-believers, especially by the differing requirements they made on Jewish and Gentile believers regarding the

Law. By his life and teaching, Paul endorsed the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. God's impartiality in 15:9 (reflecting the start of Peter's address in 10:34–35) pertained to matters of salvation; it did not signal a revocation of Israel's election.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Research aspects

This paper set out to determine whether or not Acts 15:9a refutes the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. The text reports direct speech of the apostle Peter saying that God made 'no distinction' between Jews and Gentiles in giving his Spirit to both groups and purifying their hearts by faith. Was Peter's statement intended to convey a new, general norm for the ecclesia by which all distinctions between Jews and Gentiles should be disregarded? If so, then Jewish believers should abandon their faith tradition (including Torah-observance), or else Gentile believers should convert to Judaism. The study examined both of these options in the context of Acts 15:1–29, and considered an alternative: that Peter's statement about distinction pertained to soteriology and should be limited to that theological domain.

5.2. Findings

A brief textual analysis affirmed that the text could be taken to refute the theory of distinction if viewed from a purely lexical perspective. On the surface, the phrase '*outhen diekrinen*' does appear to deny intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. The contextual analysis was much more complex, however, and demanded a more nuanced interpretation. After a sketching the narrative, two interpretive keys were presented.

Firstly, the first-century assumption that Jews were indefinitely bound by Torah should not be overlooked—something Christians looking back in time do too easily. Secondly, the four prohibitions of the apostolic decree for Gentile believers derive from Torah, whether from the laws for resident aliens (Gentiles living among the Israelites) or from the Noachide laws, or as an extension of both. This would appear to demonstrate the applicability rather than annulment of the Law. The bulk of the contextual analysis considered Peter's own words and James' verdict, followed by some observations on Paul's role in the council and the council's letter to the Gentile congregations concerned.

Peter's concluding remark in Acts 15:11 provides important context for interpreting 15:9; he emphasised that the means of salvation for Gentiles was the same as for Jews—'through the grace of the Lord Jesus'. This suggests that God's making 'no distinction' between the two groups pertained to soteriological matters. A prior incident in which the Gentile, Cornelius, and his household were given the Spirit (10:1–11:18) supports this hypothesis, especially considering Peter's remark in 10:34–35 that God shows no partiality; ethnicity is not a criterion of acceptability to him. Some technical and logical argumentation followed, including a challenge to the translation of *ischuō* in 15:10, the flaw in thinking that salvation by grace undermines the value of keeping the Law, the Jew-Gentile distinction Peter continued to make in his language (15:10–11), and a scriptural syllogism that reinforces the need of Jews (including those who follow Jesus) to observe the Law. Bauckham's view that the sense of 'no distinction' in 15:9 related to moral purity was found helpful. Further to purification, sanctification was identified as an area in which God made 'no distinction'; both purification and sanctification are components of God's salvation, however, and neither requires nor implies a termination of Jewish particularity, an end to Jew-Gentile distinction.

James' ruling provided many insights into the distinction debate. James himself was reputedly a strictly observant Jew, and his decree was wholly based on the Torah and the Prophets. In James' eschatological view, the messianic era had broken in, so it should be anticipated that all nations would acknowledge the One God of Israel and abide by the four prohibitions for Gentiles, yet *without becoming Israel*. Naturally, Gentiles who joined God's people through faith in Israel's Messiah would have to live morally pure lives, but James emphasised that the council should 'not cause difficulty' for them by imposing the same legal requirements on them that Jews bear. The decision was unanimous and legally binding. James set *halakhah* for Gentile members of the ecclesia by using the Cornelius incident as a precedent and by employing Jewish hermeneutical methods on Israel's prophetic scriptures. I proposed that Jesus implicitly endorsed the apostolic decree half a century later, in Revelation 2:24, thereby establishing its catholicity and permanence.

In order to ensure the decree was recognised as a fixed, authoritative ruling, the council followed James' request to put it in writing. This provided Luke an opportunity to reiterate the four prohibitions, which he would do yet again for special emphasis later (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25). The context provided by James' ruling makes very clear that Gentile Jesus-believers are not required to undergo a full conversion to Judaism as part of their Christ-faith, whilst Jewish Jesus-believers remained obligated to Torah observance. Nevertheless, a final, somewhat enigmatic, comment by James required special attention.

James closed with a deliberate mention of Moses (i.e. Torah) being proclaimed 'in every city from ancient generations' by means of synagogue readings every Sabbath (Acts 15:21). This likely indicated the need for Gentile believers to avoid impure behaviour in order that

they may commune, dine, and worship with Jews, who were presumed to live in purity themselves. Readers should not overlook James' implicit affirmation of Sabbath worship in the synagogues, which includes the reading of Torah. While James and the elders in Jerusalem specified minimum requirements for Gentile behaviour in the form of the apostolic decree, it seems that Gentiles were free to explore Jewish practice further and that James anticipated their spiritual development through Torah study in local synagogues every Sabbath. However, James did not cancel out differences between Jews and Gentiles in terms of obligation to the Law; rather, his words upheld the prevailing Jew-Gentile distinction, applying it even among members of Christ's body. (See Acts 21:20–25; Woods 2015.)

Paul's apparent quietude throughout the council suggests he was completely confident in an outcome that would vindicate his stand against the agitators for circumcision (Acts 15:1–2), likely based on the work God had already done among the Gentiles (without converting to Judaism) in the Cornelius incident and his own experience (15:12), plus his prior meeting with Peter, James and John in Jerusalem (Gal 2:1–10).

The letter from the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:22–29) was written to assure Gentile believers that they did not need to be circumcised or take on the yoke of the whole Law, but only to abstain from four particularly offensive practices. It thereby sustains the making of distinction between Jews and Gentiles (as suggested even in its address) by imposing different requirements on Gentiles to those that were applicable to Jews, including the Jewish leaders of the ecclesia. The remainder of the book of Acts contains further clear evidence of distinction-making by Paul especially, and also by James and all the elders in Jerusalem, as portrayed most graphically in 21:17–26. This evidence is presented in the subsequent paper.

5.3. Intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction as a possible solution

The immediate context, from Acts 15:1–29, of Peter’s statement that God made no distinction between Gentiles and Jews (15:9), strongly contradicts the idea that the apostles terminated all prevailing distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. The contextual evidence is consistent: it all weighs in favour of making such a distinction, even among members of the ecclesia. In the discussion of the Jerusalem council, Jewish believers in Jesus were assumed to remain under the jurisdiction of Mosaic Law, whilst it was determined that Gentile believers were not to be subjected to it, except for four universal prohibitions. Thus, Peter’s observation in 15:9 cannot mean that God removed *all* distinctions between Jews and Gentiles.¹⁶ Another explanation of Peter’s statement is necessary; in what sense did God make no distinction between Jews and Gentiles?

The answer I have already presented is found in Peter’s speech itself. Several key aspects of salvation are found therein: the giving of the Holy Spirit, the purification of hearts by faith, and the grace of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:8–9, 11). His closing words in 15:11 strongly suggest that God’s non-differentiation of Jews and Gentiles pertained to the common means of their salvation: grace. This notion is evident in other texts in Acts such as 10:1–11:18 and 26:16–18. It explains the continued Torah-observance of the Jewish leaders of the ecclesia found in the contextual analysis above, covering 15:1–29, and in the

¹⁶ The possibility of a ‘third race’ that is neither Jewish nor Gentile in nature was not discussed since it is not suggested by the text. In a related paper on the ‘one new man’ of Ephesians 2:15, I addressed this topic and argued that the ecclesia is a corporate entity comprising Jews and Gentiles united in Christ, not *former* Jews and Gentiles (Woods 2014b:113–122; 125). Unlike the Gentiles’ ‘former way of life, the old man’ (Eph 4:22), the faith tradition of Jewish members of Christ’s body is not to be cast off upon their spiritual regeneration.

accompanying paper, covering 15:30–28:31. Given that tension—between God making no distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers, and the ecclesia doing the opposite—the explanation makes sense: God made no distinction between the two *in terms of how they are saved*, but he did not abolish the existing distinction *in general*.

Restricting the scope of the ‘no distinction’ phrase to matters of salvation unlocks the possibility of an ecclesiological structure that has generally been dismissed in the history of the Christian church. A new theological vista is revealed when one views the ecclesia as a community comprised of Jews *as Jews* and Gentiles *as Gentiles*, united in Christ yet distinct in practice. In this perspective, both groups are entirely dependent of Jesus’ grace for their salvation, yet Jews retain the distinctive practices of their faith tradition in accordance with the Law, so that the ecclesia is visibly a twofold entity. Each member of Christ is to remain in his calling, whether as a Jew or as a Gentile (1 Cor 7:17–24 and see Rudolph 2010, 2011; Tucker 2011). I posit that such duality is the realisation of God’s plan, portrayed in the prophets, to incorporate all nations in his kingdom, faithful Gentiles becoming ‘fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God’ (Eph 2:19), no longer ‘alienated from the citizenship of Israel’ (2:12). The sense is that of accompaniment, not replacement; it speaks of unity with humility, not triumphalism of one over the other; it requires reconciliation, not competition.

5.4. Concluding statement

In the context of Acts 15:1–29, Peter’s comment in 15:9 that God made ‘no distinction’ between Gentile and Jewish believers in Jesus cannot be taken to mean that he abolished Jewish particularity altogether, blending the two into a homogenous, non-Jewish community. Rather, Peter meant that there is no difference between Jew and Gentile in

terms of how they are saved, since both depend entirely on the grace of the Lord Jesus. Yet even within the ecclesia, each person was regarded either as a Jew or as a Gentile, and was expected to live accordingly; Jewish believers in Jesus were expected to observe the Law and Jewish tradition, whilst Gentile believers were only required to observe the four prohibitions of James' decree and were not required to become Jews.

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