

WHO WERE THE JUDAIZERS?

The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15

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Christians who believe in keeping the 7th-day Sabbath are sometimes called "Judaizers" by their fellow Christians. While there were (and perhaps still are) real Judaizers, it should be noted that the word *Judaizer* does not even appear in the KJV Bible. The first known use of the word *Judaizer* in the English language did not occur until 1582,¹ and if one searches for the word in the Scriptures, it will only be found in recent translations of the Bible.² True, there were people in New Testament times whom we could correctly refer to as Judaizers. But before accusing a fellow-believer of Judaizing, the accuser should be sure he knows what a Judaizer is. Probably the best description of Judaizers is in Acts 15:1:

"And certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, and said, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you **CANNOT BE SAVED.**' (Emphasis mine)

The main question of the so-called Jerusalem Council was *not* "How Should Gentiles Behave?" The question was "What Do Gentiles Need To Do *In Order To Be Saved*?" Some of the believers from Judea said that if the Gentiles wanted to be saved, they had to be circumcised. This meant more than the mere physical removal of the foreskin. Circumcision performed for the purpose of being "saved" meant a full, formal conversion to Judaism, complete with a baptism into Judaism and an embracing of the rabbis' entire Oral Law (probably the law that Peter had in mind when he referred to "a yoke... which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear"³).

The Judaizers believed that this conversion process would turn the Gentile believer into a full-fledged Jew, and that without this the Gentile *could*



not be saved. Without a complete, formal conversion to Judaism, the Gentile believer could not become a full-fledged member of the saved Messianic Community, the Judaizers said.

Of course the Judaizers were mistaken. Simon Peter told the Council how the Roman Cornelius and his household of uncircumcised Gentile God-fearers had received the Holy Spirit without formally converting to Judaism.⁴ It was obvious, therefore, that full conversion to Judaism was not a prerequisite to being saved, for God would not fill "unsaved" people with His Holy Spirit. Paul and Barnabas reinforced Peter's argument by "declaring what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the [uncircumcised] Gentiles by them."

James then spoke and gave his judgment: "Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from things contaminated by idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood."

Many Christians stop reading at this point and say, These four things are the only parts of the Old Testament Law that Gentiles need to follow. We can ignore the Sabbath because the Sabbath is not specified here for Gentile believers." However, if this were the case, we would also have to

conclude that it is permissible for Gentile believers to covet, steal, dishonor their parents, and dabble in the occult, for none of the commandments forbidding these things are specified here. And to say that commandments against coveting, stealing, etc. appear on other pages of the New Testament is just evading the issue, for there was no "New Testament" book yet in existence to instruct these believers. The New Testament writings were not compiled and canonized until about 150 years later, long after this first generation of believers were in their graves. The only Bible the believers had at the time of the Jerusalem Council was what is now called the Old Testament.

Obviously James' words cannot mean that none of the Torah's commands are valid except for these four things, for the writers of the New Testament epistles, when writing years later, constantly quoted from the Torah to instruct Gentile believers. The confusion begins to clear up when the rest of James' statement is read:

"For Moses of old time has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogue every Sabbath day."

What does Moses being read in the synagogue every Sabbath have to do with Gentile believers? On the surface, this closing remark of James seems irrelevant to the topic being discussed, and makes the passage even more confusing. However, if the historical setting is taken into consideration, James' closing remark clears up the confusion and gives meaning to the passage. What is the historical setting?

At this point in history, the Gentile believers were still worshipping in the synagogues on the Sabbath, along with the Jewish believers, who were called Nazarenes. Therefore the implication of James' words, if I may take the liberty to paraphrase, is this:

"Begin by instructing the Gentiles about these four things [verse 20]. As they continue to attend synagogue with us every Sabbath, they will gradually learn the rest of the Torah, and put it into practice as they learn [verse 21]."

Of course James and the others did not foresee the then-future split between church and synagogue. The Apostles expected the Gentiles to continue learning Torah with the Nazarenes every Sabbath in the synagogues in every city.

The above explanation still leaves one question unanswered, namely, Why did the Apostles specify these four particular areas of Torah (things contaminated by idols, fornication, things strangled, and blood)? Some writers and Bible teachers have stated that the Apostles were prescribing the so-called Noahide Laws which the rabbis formulated as the minimum basic requirements for Gentiles to be accepted by God as Gentiles. While the four things listed in Acts 15 bear some similarity to the Noahide Laws, they are not identical to the Noahide Laws. The Noahide Laws are seven, not four.⁵

Why did the Apostles decide to begin the Gentiles' instruction with these four commandments? Why not begin by teaching them some of the weightier matters of the Torah, such as laws against murder and theft? I believe the answer to that question lies in the fact that even idolatrous Gentiles had civil laws against such things, so they already considered such things wrong. Gentiles did *not* have civil laws against all forms of sexual immorality, however. On the contrary, sexual immorality was very common and considered quite acceptable by the Gentile culture of that time. Therefore the Apostles wanted to make sure that the Gentiles who were turning to God understood that sexual immorality is wrong.

It is interesting that the other three commandments prescribed by the Apostles were dietary restrictions. The Gentiles were told not to eat: 1) food that had been offered to idols, 2)

meat from a strangled animal, and 3) blood. Why begin the instruction of new believers by telling them about dietary laws? That is a rather strange place to start. Or is it?

I believe the Apostles were simply following the teaching pattern that is set forth in Leviticus. Leviticus is the third book of the Torah, but for Jewish children it was always the first book of the Bible that they studied. The first ten chapters of Leviticus detail the duties of the priests as they offered sacrifices in the Tabernacle. At the end of this section, in chapter 10, the priests' duty to the people is stated:

"And that you may put a difference between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean: and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken unto them by the hand of Moses."

The rest of Leviticus, beginning in chapter 11, contains commandments for daily living, which the priests were to teach the people. What is *the very first thing* that the Lord tells the priests to teach the people about? The dietary laws, which make up the entire content of chapter 11.⁶

Thus the Apostles, consciously or unconsciously, were simply following this pattern of teaching "a difference between holy and unholy and between unclean and clean" by beginning with the dietary laws, and with the expectation that these new members of the Messianic Community would, from Sabbath to Sabbath, eventually be taught "all the statutes which the Lord had spoken by the hand of Moses." "For Moses of old time has in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day."

The historical setting of Acts 15 must not be ignored. There are many parts of the Bible which can be understood and enjoyed with no knowledge of the historical setting. But if we deliberately divorce a passage such as Acts 15 from its historical setting, we misunderstand and twist the Scriptures to our own ruin. By looking at the passage in its

entirety and in its historical setting, we see that the Judaizers were those who insisted that Gentiles needed a full, formal conversion to Judaism in order to be saved. (This was also the problem Paul was dealing with in Galatians.) There may still be Judaizers in existence today, but I am certainly not one of them.

NOTES

¹ *Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1986), 653. ² al. 2:14, 'lou5ai£a>, translated "to live as do the Jews" in KJV; "to judaize" in the 1979 KJV. ³ No Scripture-loving Jew could describe the written Torah as an unbearable yoke. See Psalm 19 and Psalm 119.

⁴ It is important to note that "God-fearers" were Gentiles who were already observing Sabbath, feast days, and dietary laws. They were already living what could be described as a "Jewish" lifestyle. They just had not taken the final steps of conversion (i.e., circumcision and baptism) and they were not required to pay the Temple tax or offer sacrifices in the Temple. See Joseph Good, *Prophecies in the Book of Esther* (Hatikvah Ministries, 1995), 90f and Patrice Fischer, *Modern-Day God-Fearers: A Biblical Role Model For Gentile Participation in Messianic Congregations*, an unpublished paper in the author's possession. ⁵ The seven Noahide Laws as formulated by the rabbis consisted of six prohibitions (against theft, murder, sexual immorality, idolatry, blasphemy, and eating a limb torn from a living animal) and one positive precept (establish courts of justice). These seven laws actually provide only an outline for a total of 66 laws that the rabbis came up with for Gentiles. See Aaron Lichtenstein, *The Seven Laws of Noah* (New York: The Rabbi Jacob Joseph School Press, 1981). ⁶ It makes sense that instructions for daily living should begin with things that are very much a part of daily life. Eating is more a part of daily life than almost any other activity.