

## Acts 21:17–26 notes (an introduction to “works of law”)

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*All passages from the New American Standard version of the Bible unless otherwise noted.*

### Acts 21:17–22 — Paul comes to Yerushalayim and the council rejoices in the “tens of thousands” of believers in Yeshua as Messiah in the Diaspora but warns about a faction of Jewish believers who think Paul is teaching Diaspora Jews to disregard the Torah.

- “Tens of thousands” were out of an estimated 8 million Jews in the Roman empire just before the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, with up to a few hundred thousand in centers such as Yerushalayim and Alexandria.<sup>1</sup>

### Acts 21:23–24, 26 — The Yerushalayim Council gives a solution to the controversy: Paul sponsors four congregants in the ending of their Nazarite vows and participates with them in the ceremony.

- Some have accused Paul of a moment of weakness here in going along with this directive, while he had been teaching, according to this view, believers from the nations and Diaspora Jews that the “ceremonial law” in the Torah was obsolete after the death and resurrection of Yeshua.
  - For example, Seventh-day Adventist author Ellen G. White wrote in a commentary on *Acts*:  
“Many of the Jews who had accepted the gospel still cherished a regard for the ceremonial law and were only too willing to make unwise concessions, hoping thus to gain the confidence of their countrymen, to remove their prejudice, and to win them to faith in Christ as the world’s Redeemer. Paul realized that so long as many of the leading members of the church at Jerusalem should continue to cherish prejudice against him, they would work constantly to counteract his influence. He felt that if by any reasonable concession he could win them to the truth he would remove a great obstacle to the success of the gospel in other places. But he was not authorized of God to concede as much as they asked. When we think of Paul’s great desire to be in harmony with his brethren, his tenderness toward the weak in the faith, his reverence for the apostles who had been with Christ, and for James, the brother of the Lord, and his purpose to become all things to all men so far as he could without sacrificing principle — when we think of all this, it is less surprising that he was constrained to deviate from the firm, decided course that he had hitherto followed. But instead of accomplishing the desired object, his efforts for conciliation only precipitated the crisis, hastened his predicted sufferings, and resulted in separating him from his brethren, depriving the church of one of its strongest pillars, and bringing sorrow to Christian hearts in every land.”<sup>2</sup>
    - According to this view, Paul:
      - Was acting tenderheartedly but without God’s direction, i.e. without the direction of the Spirit.
      - Brought upon himself his sufferings, trial and execution, depriving the nations of a great evangelist.
    - However, Scripture presents a different picture:
      - Luke records in Acts that the Spirit repeatedly told Paul he would suffer because of the message.
      - Messiah said He would not change one bit of the Torah and the Prophets and they would remain until the renewal of all things in the future (Matt. 5:17–19).
        - Scripture needs to be read in context, and the context of all Apostolic teachings on the Torah is this statement from Messiah. All lessons gleaned from servants of Messiah — Paul, Peter, Ya’akov (James), etc. — must be weighed against His own promise. They wouldn’t be true witnesses of God if they were going against Messiah’s words.
        - Messiah said anyone who takes away from the “yoke” of the Torah in his teachings will be “considered least in the kingdom” of God.

### Acts 21:25 — The council reiterates its ruling on requirements for new believers from the nations.

“‘But concerning the Gentiles who have believed, we wrote, having decided that they should abstain from [1] meat sacrificed to idols and [2] from blood and [3] from what is strangled and [4] from fornication.’ ” (Acts 21:25)

- This is a direct quotation of the council’s ruling recorded in Acts 15:  
“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole assembly, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas — Iudas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter by them, ‘The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls, it seemed good to us, having become of one mind, to select men to send to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we

<sup>1</sup> Stern, David H., *Jewish New Testament Commentary: a Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament*. Clarksville, Md: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992. Citing the article “Population” in Encyclopedia Judaica on a census by emperor Claudius.

<sup>2</sup> White, Ellen G. *Acts of the Apostles*. p. 405.

have sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain [1] from things sacrificed to idols and [2] from blood and [3] from things strangled and [4] from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.’ ” (Acts 15:22–29)

- All four of these instructions related specifically to pagan temple rituals, so the instructions were for God-fearers to demonstrate that they had left their pagan practices.<sup>3</sup>
  - **meat offered to idols:** *eidolothotos* in the Apostolic Writings always refers to eating food in a pagan temple.
  - **blood:** Greek and Roman priests are known to have drunk the blood of sacrificial offerings, and possibly worshippers did too.
  - **things strangled:** Pagan sacrifices were supposed to retain blood for drinking, while God in the Torah called for no eating of blood and for blood of the sacrifice to be removed. This may have played into some of the other Pauline instructions about whether to eat meat from the marketplace if its origin is unknown.
  - **fornication:** In ancient Canaan and in Greek and Roman temples, prostitution was part of the worship.
- Some compare these four instructions to the seven so-called Noachide laws for God-fearers from the nations aren’t in the earliest rabbinical writings, collected in the *Mishna*, but start appearing in rabbinical writings in A.D. 400–600 in the *Babylonian Talmud*.<sup>4</sup>
  - The Mishna includes comments about the world to come only being for Israelites and prostlytes.<sup>5</sup>
  - The Noachide laws appeared at a time when Diaspora Jews were threatened with assimilation.<sup>6</sup>
  - The apostles noted that God saves Israelites and God-fearers by faith, not by performing a rite of conversion (Acts 15:11).
- The original council letter did not include the phrase *humon legontes peritemnesthai kai terein ton nomon* “You must be circumcised and keep the law,” which is in the *King James Version* and some older translations. “Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:24 KJV)
  - The KJV and older English translations use versions of Greek manuscripts called *Textus Receptus*, which has the phrase about circumcision and observance.
  - Older Greek manuscripts don’t have that phrase, which first started appearing in manuscripts dated to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, according to the United Bible Society.<sup>7</sup>
    - Ἐπειδὴ ἠκούσαμεν ὅτι τινὲς ἐξ ἡμῶν [ἐξεληθόντες] ἐτάραξαν ὑμᾶς λόγοις ἀνασκευάζοντες τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν οἷς οὐ διεστείλάμεθα (Acts 15:24, NA24 Greek version)
    - “‘Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with their words, unsettling your souls....’ ” (Acts 15:24 NAS)
- Was the Torah the “yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear” (Acts 15:10)?
  - Apostle Ya’akov, head of the Yerushalayim Council, wrote this about the Torah: “But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does.” (Jas. 1:25)
  - Yeshua spoke about His “yoke,” which from His words in Matt. 5:17–19 would follow that His yoke was consistent with the “yoke of Heaven,” i.e. the Torah. “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS [Jer. 6:16]. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:29–30)

### “works of [the] law” (Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Rom. 3:20, 28)

- The traditional views of these uses of *ergon nomou*, translated literally as “works of law” are:
  - Seen in the New International Version’s “observing the law,” i.e. works required by the Mosaic law.
  - “The quest for a righteousness obtained as a result of one’s own efforts and works,” i.e. legalism.<sup>8</sup>

3 Hegg, Tim. “Acts 15 and the Jerusalem Council.” *TorahResource.org*: 2001, 2008. pp. 10–13.

4 *Ibid.* pp. 6–7.

5 *Ibid.* p. 7. Quoting m. *Sanhedrin* 10:1.

6 *Ibid.*

7 McKee, J.K. “Frequently Asked Questions: Acts 15:24.” *TNNOnline.net*: Nov. 21, 2006. Some consider Aramaic to be the original language of much of the Apostolic Scriptures. Because this phrase from *Textus Receptus* also is in the Aramaic *Peshitta*, this suggests the *Peshitta* is a translation from a newer Greek version, according to McKee. Also the *Peshitta* for Acts 15:24 uses נְמוּסוֹ *nomuso* for “law,” which is a transliteration of the Greek *nomou*, as seen in the Aramaic דְמוּשָׁא נְמוּסוֹ *nomuso dumushey* and Greek νόμον Μωϋσέως *nomon Mouseous* for “law of Moses” in Acts 15:5. *Nomos* is how the *Septuagint* translates תורה *torah* (see Lev. 26:46).

8 Kaiser, Walter C. *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983. p. 309. Quoted by McKee in “What are ‘works

- Since the late 1970s there has been a changing view among scholars on whether Paul was teaching about abolishment of the Torah. This perspective is called the New Perspective on Paul.<sup>9</sup>
  - In a 1983 article by British scholar James Dunn, he wrote that the use of *ergon nomou* in Galatians 2 can be best interpreted “as badges: they are simply what membership of the covenant people involves, what mark out the Jews as God’s people; given by God for precisely that reason, they serve to demonstrate covenant status.”<sup>10</sup>
  - This interpretation has gained momentum with the 1994 release of English translation of Dead Sea Scrolls document 4QMMT (4Q394-5), with scholars making a connection between *ergon nomou* and מעשה התורה *ma’aseh ha-torah*, or “works of the Torah.”<sup>11</sup>
    - There are many examples of not mixing the holy with the profane.
    - These works of the Torah weren’t “macro-Jewish identity markers such as the Sabbath, appointed times, dietary laws, or circumcision” but “micro-Jewish identity markers, specific to the group or sect that held them to be important.”<sup>12</sup>
      - The writers of 4QMMT saw judgment as imminent.
      - The New Perspective of Paul sees use of *ergon nomou* in Galatians and Romans as “a style of Torah observance that likely impeded or made more difficult the spread of the gospel, and the Lord’s plan of bringing salvation to the larger world.”<sup>13</sup>

**What “works of law” are present among the “Hebrew roots” movement today, seeking to separate groups of believers Yeshua from each other rather than unite?**

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of law’?” *TNNOnline.net*: May 11, 2009. p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> McKee, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, James D.G. *The New Perspective on Paul*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. pp. 99-120. Quoted by McKee, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> McKee, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.