

There is some shifting going on in today's Messianic world as it concerns the unity that Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are to experience in Messiah Yeshua, and whether or not non-Jewish Believers are really called to obey God's Torah. Much of this controversy is not based in an objective, historically conscious reading of the Scriptures—but instead in shifting ministerial alliances and religious politicking. The answer is not going to be found in evaluating who-said-what, but will be found in going to the Biblical text and in accurately evaluating what the trajectory of God's Word is.

Around two decades after the ascension of Yeshua into Heaven, the message of salvation began being spread to the Mediterranean world outside the Land of Israel, and many from the nations eagerly embraced it. Was this just a bi-product of the message going to the Jewish people in the Diaspora, or was it the Father's Divine plan? What was to take place with the new, non-Jewish Believers? Did they have to be circumcised and become Jewish proselytes? Or were all of the Believers, regardless of their ethnicity, to come together in a new environment rooted in the completed work of God's Son? The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 assembled to consider these issues, and it fairly ruled on what was to be done.

Too many of today's Messianics refer to Acts 15 without a great deal of consideration for the context of the events as they took place in the First Century C.E. We often assume things that we should not assume, and we overlook things that we should not be overlooking. This study critically examines Acts 15 in detail, is engaged with current Acts scholarship, and tries to properly compare and contrast the ancient setting of the Jerusalem Council with some of what we see going on in the emerging Messianic movement today. What can we learn from all of this? What important lessons have we avoided for far too long?

ACTS 15

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

ACTS 15

FOR THE PRACTICAL
MESSIANIC

J.K. MCKEE

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.net

ACTS 15

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

© 2010 John Kimball McKee

All rights reserved. With the exception of quotations for academic purposes, no part of this publication may be reproduced without prior permission of the publisher.

Cover imagery: J.K. McKee/personal photo

ISBN 978-1468169478 (paperback)

ISBN 979-8740892894 (hardcover)

ASIN B006T8LF6K (eBook)

Published by Messianic Apologetics, a division of Outreach Israel Ministries

P.O. Box 516

McKinney, Texas 75070

(407) 933-2002

outreachisrael.net / outreachisrael.blog

messianicapologetics.net / messianicapologetics.blog

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, The Lockman Foundation.

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from the Apocrypha are from the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), © 1952, Division of Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Fair Use Notice: This publication contains copyrighted material the use of which has not always been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We make use of this material as a matter of teaching, scholarship, research, and commentary. We believe in good faith that this constitutes a “fair use” of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law, and is in accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107. For more information go to: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/17/107>

Outreach Israel Ministries is a non-profit 501(c)3. All prices listed on the publications of Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics are suggested donations.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE.....	xi
INTRODUCTION	1
ACTS 15 COMMENTARY	41
THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE APOSTOLIC DECREE AND ACTS 21:17-26	149
THE REVELANCE OF THE APOSTOLIC DECREE WITHIN THE PAULINE EPISTLES	160
COMMENTARY ON ACTS 21:17-26 THE FALSE RUMOR ABOUT PAUL	184
THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL AND TODAY'S MESSIANIC MOVEMENT	217
EPILOGUE	255
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	259
BIBLIOGRAPHY	261

ABBREVIATION CHART AND SPECIAL TERMS

The following is a chart of abbreviations for reference works and special terms that are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

Special terms that may be used have been provided in this chart:

ABD: <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>	eisegesis: "reading meaning into," or interjecting a preconceived or foreign meaning into a Biblical text
AMG: <i>Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament</i>	EJ: <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)	ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament	exegesis: "drawing meaning out of," or the process of trying to understand what a Biblical text means on its own
Ara: Aramaic	EXP: <i>Expositor's Bible Commentary</i>
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)	Ger: German
b. Babylonian Talmud (<i>Talmud Bavli</i>)	GNT: Greek New Testament
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.	Grk: Greek
BDAG: <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)	halachah: lit. "the way to walk," how the Torah is lived out in an individual's life or faith community
BDB: <i>Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i>	HALOT: <i>Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> (Koehler and Baumgartner)
BECNT: <i>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</i>	HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
BKCNT: <i>Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament</i>	Heb: Hebrew
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.	HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
CEV: Contemporary English Version (1995)	ICC: <i>International Critical Commentary</i>
CGEDNT: <i>Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words</i> (Barclay M. Newman)	IDB: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i>
CHALOT: <i>Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>	IDBSup: <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement</i>
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)	ISBE: <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i>
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition	IVPBBC: IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls	
ECB: <i>Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible</i>	
EDB: <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i>	

- Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
- JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
- JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- KJV: King James Version
- Lattimore: *The New Testament* by Richmond Lattimore (1996)
- LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
- LS: *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell & Scott)
- LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
- LXX: Septuagint
- m. Mishnah
- MT: Masoretic Text
- NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
- NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
- NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
- NEB: New English Bible (1970)
- Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
- NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
- NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
- NIGTC: *New International Greek Testament Commentary*
- NICNT: *New International Commentary on the New Testament*
- NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
- NIV: New International Version (1984)
- NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
- NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
- NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
- NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
- NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
- NT: New Testament
- orthopraxy: lit. "the right action," how the Bible or one's theology is lived out in the world
- OT: Old Testament
- PreachC: *The Preacher's Commentary*
- REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
- RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
- t. Tosefta
- Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
- Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*
- TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
- TEV: Today's English Version (1976)
- TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
- TNTC: *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*
- TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
- UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition
- v(s). verse(s)
- Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*
- Vul: Latin Vulgate
- WBC: *Word Biblical Commentary*
- Yid: Yiddish
- YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)

PROLOGUE

When many of our evangelical Christian brothers and sisters read the New Testament, they often struggle with applying it in the Twenty-First Century. The Church of today is not the First Century *ekklesia*, a relatively infant group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, trying to determine the eschatological purpose and plan of God, and how all people are to unite as one in the Messiah. Today's Messianic movement, on the other hand, has little difficulty relating to the struggles of the First Century Body of Messiah, because like them we are a steadily-growing group of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers, united in common cause around the salvation of Messiah Yeshua (Christ Jesus), similarly trying to determine the purpose and plan of God. We do, however, have some issues with trying to interpret and properly apply the teachings and rulings of the Apostles, so we can mature into all of the things that the Lord wants us to be.

Today's Messianic movement has a wide variety of competing visions and viewpoints as to what it should become. Many think that the Messianic movement is only to be a group of Jewish Believers in Yeshua, who can be a part of a relatively cultural homogeneous community of Jews who express trust in Israel's Messiah. This group may have some non-Jewish Believers, who have married a Jewish spouse, but not really anyone else, as the rest of the non-Jewish Believers should just remain a part of the greater Christian Church. Many think that the Messianic movement is to be a "Torah movement," where Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are all welcome, but where our primary emphasis is to study and enforce the Law of Moses, perhaps a bit strictly and rigidly. Others think that the Messianic movement is going to bring about the restoration of Israel, and that just about all non-Jewish Believers led into it are part of the scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim. Not enough, given the tenor of the Jerusalem Council, have probably sought the will of the Holy Spirit, which is blind to one's ethnicity, social status, or gender (Acts 15:8-9)—**and is to move forward God's plan at His pace.**

Given all of the competing agendas that are present in the broad Messianic world, it should be no surprise that some people are very confused about how to view the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council. For quite some time I have known that a detailed examination of Acts 15 was going to be necessary. While I am of the conviction that the Torah is relevant instruction for *all* of God’s people, I have seen far too many teachers who share this view, haphazardly refer to Acts 15:21—“For Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath”—with very little consideration for the context and the setting of what James says here. Sooner or later I knew I would have to analyze Acts 15 verse-by-verse, not only because of how important the Apostolic Council was to the spread of the gospel among the nations in the First Century, but so the emerging Messianic movement can be effective for God’s service in the Twenty-First Century.

We are entering into a new decade of Messianic growth and development, and with this is going to come some redrawing of the map, and some theological shaking. There are some who once advocated that the Torah was relevant instruction for all of God’s people, but are now saying that Jewish people have a more privileged status before God than everyone else, and that non-Jewish Believers *can* follow the Torah if they want to. Like all Messianics, I very much believe in honoring the Jewish people and our faith heritage from the Synagogue (cf. Romans 11:29), but the vision of the Jerusalem Council was not to produce two sub-peoples of God. The Jerusalem Council was intended to meet and fairly address what was to be done with new, non-Jewish Believers, who had been raised in Greco-Roman paganism. Understanding the broad cultural backgrounds, from the First Century Mediterranean, is imperative to properly interpreting not only the Apostolic decree, but also applying it for a Twenty-First Century Messianic movement whose non-Jewish and Jewish members were largely raised in a *significantly different* cultural environment (mostly in North America).

In the past decade, I have witnessed too much of a sub-standard level of engagement on the part of various Messianic Bible teachers and some of our “leaders” in applying the Scriptures. *There has not been enough critical thinking.* This not only includes people who conclude that the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council required the non-Jewish Believers to go to the local synagogue and learn from Moses’

Teaching, but also those who conclude that they did not have to learn from it. This is ultimately the reason why in this interesting season we have witnessed some theological flip-flopping. While this Acts 15 study has been planned for almost a year now (since late 2008), current events only intensify its need. I realize that this is a unique study, per the fact that there presently is no *Acts for the Practical Messianic* commentary written (even though this is a long-term goal), but we will still all be able to learn quite much. It would be my hope that we can learn to critically engage not only with the opinions of scholars and interpreters, but make sure that our maturing Messianic movement is really in touch with the will and trajectory that God has laid out in His Word. This will require us, just as the Apostles did, to recognize how the unique work of the Holy Spirit in this post-resurrection era, has changed some of the dynamics (Acts 15:12).

I hope that if you share the same conviction as I—that the Holy Spirit is to write God’s Law onto the hearts of all His people (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—that it will be confirmed. It is my goal to give you a much more detailed answer to your questions, than those who are not concerned with a socio-historical reading of the text, those who prefer to cut corners with their exegesis, or those who shift their positions because of entangling ministerial alliances.

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Acts is certainly monumental for any of us to understand the growth and expansion of the First Century Messianic movement out into the Mediterranean world. Not only did many Jews eagerly embrace the good news that the Messiah had come, but many from the nations were also freed from their sins by hearing that the true Savior of humanity had arrived. But how these two distinct groups of people were to relate to one another, and whether they were to really come together and be united around their common hope of salvation, was a great debate that we are affected by even today. How do we come to a proper balance of recognizing the origins of the gospel in Ancient Israel and First Century Judaism, and also its worldwide implications?

Acts 15:1-35 covers the Jerusalem Council, also known as either the Jerusalem Conference or Apostolic Council, and is considered by many interpreters to be the main transition point within the Book of Acts. The leadership of the *ekklēsia* at the home base of Jerusalem, notably including the Apostle Peter (cf. Matthew 16:18) and James the brother of the Lord, came together with Paul and Barnabas, and ruled on what was to take place concerning the nations' salvation. How were the new, non-Jewish Believers to be admitted into the assembly of faith? What were they required to do? Was their salvation something that was a bi-product of the Jews' salvation, or something anticipated in the Hebrew Scriptures all along? Were all Believers equal in the Lord Yeshua, or did God plan on having two sub-peoples? In the estimation of F.F. Bruce, "The Council of Jerusalem is an event to which Luke plainly attaches the highest importance; it is...epoch-making,"¹ especially how it directly related to the mission of the Apostles in the years to come.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Book of the Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 298.