

ACTS 15:21: MOSES IS PREACHED AND READ IN THE SYNAGOGUES

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Abstract: *The Jerusalem Council is one of the most significant events narrated in the book of Acts, presenting the interpreter with a variety of challenges including the meaning of James's rationale in Acts 15:21 for the apostolic prohibitions. This text has often been viewed as a crux interpretum, and an examination of over thirty commentaries from the last half-century suggests that this is still the case. This article provides a fivefold taxonomy of interpretive views of this perplexing and challenging text.*

Key words: *Acts, Torah, Jerusalem Council, Moses, James*

The Jerusalem Council is one of the most significant events narrated in the book of Acts, and it presents the interpreter with a variety of challenges.¹ One challenge is related to James's statement in Acts 15:21: "For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues" (ESV). Stephen Wilson has noted that this statement is notoriously obscure.² Richard Pervo decries it as lacking in transparent logic, and Jacob Jervell posits that it is one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament.³ An examination of over thirty recent and fairly recent commentaries suggests that this verse continues to divide interpreters and so merits further consideration.⁴ It is to this task that we now turn with an examination consisting of three parts: (1) an overview of Acts 15:1–35 in general and 15:21 in particular, (2) an examination of the scope and meaning of the rationale organized into five views, and (3) some brief concluding thoughts. It is hoped that this study will facilitate further discussion on the text at hand and the questions that it raises.

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¹ As F. J. Foakes-Jackson notes, "The conclusion of James's speech is very difficult, not so much to translate as to interpret." F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, MNTC (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1931), 141.

² Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, SNTSMS 50 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

³ Richard Pervo, *Acts*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 375. See also Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, KEK 3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 398–99; Yon Gyong Kwon, ed., *A Commentary on Acts*, ISG (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 131.

⁴ The goal here is not to provide a history of interpretation of this problematic text. For example, very little patristic or Reformation scholarship will be assessed. This comment regarding the survey of recent commentaries simply provides evidence that the meaning of Acts 15:21 is far from settled.

I. OVERVIEW OF ACTS 15:1–35 AND 15:21

1. *Overview of Acts 15:1–35.* The Jerusalem Council pericope can be divided into four sections (vv. 1–5, 6–21, 22–29, and 30–35). The first section establishes the setting for the Jerusalem Council, namely, a dispute in Antioch regarding the requirements for Gentile salvation and the travel of a delegation that includes Paul and Barnabas to address the issue in Jerusalem (vv. 1–5).⁵

The second section narrates the convening of the Council (v. 6) and how it addresses the dispute with speeches from Peter (vv. 7–11) and James (vv. 13–21). Peter’s speech begins with an affirmation of Gentile inclusion by recalling his role in the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10. Since Cornelius’s conversion occurred apart from circumcision or observance of the law, it would be wrong to place the “yoke” of the law upon the Gentiles, who are saved by grace (vv. 10–11). After a summary report from Paul and Barnabas (v. 12), James affirms Peter’s position and demonstrates that the salvation of Gentiles like Cornelius was foreseen in the prophets, most notably Amos 9:11–12 (vv. 13–18). The prophesied inclusion of Gentiles leads James to assert that they should be allowed to turn to God apart from circumcision and the law but observe four prohibitions (vv. 19–20). This is followed by the enigmatic rationale that is the focus of this study (v. 21).

The third section records the decision to accept James’s counsel and appoint messengers to take the so-called apostolic decree to the churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia with a letter (vv. 22–29). The letter includes a greeting, an explanation of the letter’s occasion, the prohibitions, an exhortation, and a salutation.

The fourth section records the dissemination of the Council’s decision and the positive response to it at Antioch (vv. 30–35). Acts 15:1–35 thus sets the stage for Paul’s second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22).

2. *Overview of Acts 15:21.*

“For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues” (ESV).

Μωϋσῆς γὰρ ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων κατὰ πόλιν τοὺς κηρύσσοντας αὐτὸν ἔχει ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς κατὰ πᾶν σάββατον ἀναγινωσκόμενος.

It seems apparent that the γάρ of Acts 15:21 signals some kind of grounds or rationale.⁶ (The question of what it seeks to explain or support will be addressed in

⁵ Whether Acts corresponds to first-century realities regarding Gentile salvation is a debated question. Among skeptics, some see Lukan invention; for example, in regard to James’s speech, see Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 448. Others find Lukan reshaping; see, for example, Gerd Lüdemann, *The Acts of the Apostles: What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church?*, trans. F. Stanley Jones (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2005), 190–92. Such issues make negligible difference here, since the focus of this study is the meaning and significance of verse 21 within the narrative. In other words, one would still need to address this verse even if the account were entirely fictitious.

⁶ This seems uncontroversial and even those who do not delve into the meaning of the verse seem to acknowledge as much. See Youngmo Cho and Hyung Dae Park, *Acts: A New Covenant Commentary*, vol. 2: *Chapters 13–28*, NCCS (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2019), 46.

greater detail later.) The reference to Moses is almost certainly a reference to the Mosaic law rather than the personage (cf. Acts 6:11, 14; 13:39; 15:1, 5; 21:21; 28:23; perhaps also 3:22; 26:22).⁷ Thus the proclamation (*κηρύσσω*) is of the Mosaic law rather than Moses himself. The antiquity, continuity, and universality⁸ of this proclamation is highlighted with the references to “ancient times” (*γενεῶν ἀρχαίων*),⁹ the fact that he is read (*ἀναγινωσκόμενος*)¹⁰ every Sabbath in the synagogues,¹¹ and that this occurs in “every city” (*κατὰ πόλιν*). It seems that any explanation must take into account these three points.

II. THE SCOPE AND MEANING OF ACTS 15:21

Keeping the previous overview in mind, the issue of the scope and meaning of Acts 15:21 will now be addressed. The question of scope asks whether 15:21 provides a rationale for verses 15–20, 15–18, 16–17, 19–20, or just verse 19 or verse 20. Though scope and meaning are separate issues, they are intimately linked. A decision regarding the scope greatly affects how one understands the meaning. And tied to the issue of meaning is the identity of the primary beneficiaries of the statement. Is verse 21 directed primarily toward Jewish or Gentile Christians?

Most explanations of scope and meaning can be grouped into one of five views.¹² (1) The verse is an affirmation of Jewish teachings and practices that remain unaffected or undiminished by the decision of the Council and the decrees. (2) The verse asserts that the decision and decrees are consistent with the Torah that has always placed certain expectations on the acceptance of Gentiles. (3) The verse explains that the decrees do not change the fact that Gentiles can continue to learn about Torah through the synagogue. (4) The verse relates to the effect that synagogue proclamation has had on the Gentiles. (5) The verse serves as a rationale for the decree, namely, sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities. Each of these views will be explained and evaluated and then the strongest view will be identified.

⁷ Luke's linkage of Moses to the law is not unprecedented, but it is significant and some expressions are distinctive. See Jacob Jervell, “The Law in Luke–Acts,” *HTR* 114 (1971): 24–25; Wilson, *Luke and the Law*, 2–3.

⁸ Luke Timothy Johnson posits a slightly different triad: “longstanding,” “widespread,” and “regular.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 267.

⁹ BDAG 193.

¹⁰ How this adverbial participle functions is uncertain. The most likely options would be temporal (when), means (by), or causal (since). Culy and Parsons argue that it is probably temporal or possibly means. Mikeal C. Parsons and Martin M. Culy, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, BHGNT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 296.

¹¹ For recent research on first-century synagogues and the application of that research to Acts, see Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research*, LNTS 363 (London: T&T Clark, 2007). Unfortunately, Catto discusses Acts 15:21 only briefly (178).

¹² Daniel Schwartz has a helpful summary of previous attempts to identify and list the various views. Daniel R. Schwartz, “The Futility of Preaching Moses (Acts 15, 21),” *Bib* 67.2 (1986): 276. The volume edited by Kwon identifies two views that correspond most closely to views 2 and 5 explicated in this study (*Acts*, 131).

1. *The view that Jewish teachings and practices are unaffected*

a. *Explanation of the view.* In this view, Acts 15:21 affirms that Jewish teachings and practices (that is, the Mosaic law) remain unaffected or undiminished by the decision of the council and the decrees.¹³ This view therefore looks back to verses 19–20 and would presumably provide a kind of reassurance to the circumcision/law faction that for Jews nothing had changed. This view goes as far back as Chrysostom.¹⁴ James D. G. Dunn posits, “The knowledge and observance of the law was well sustained in the diaspora synagogues and not at all threatened by the compromise proposed.”¹⁵ Similarly, Craig Keener suggests that the point was “probably that ethnic Israel would preserve this custom no matter what and hence the practice was not endangered by the influx of Gentiles who would not follow all the precepts for Israel.”¹⁶ Furthermore, C. K. Barrett adds that Moses already had enough preachers, and so troubling the Gentiles was unnecessary.¹⁷ Clinton Arnold takes a slightly different approach, suggesting that James may have been acknowledging that Jews would continue preaching their law-oriented message and Christians their Christ-oriented message.¹⁸ This live-and-let-live approach leaves Jewish teachings and practices are unaffected.

b. *Evaluation of the view.* This explanation does seem to provide a reasonable explanation of the antiquity, continuity, and universality of the synagogue proclamation of the Mosaic law in Acts 15:21. All three points (antiquity, continuity, and universality) could be used to attest some kind of status quo regarding the law.

But this view does not seem to fit well within the broader narrative. First, the issue in Acts 15:1–35 is not primarily about adherence to the Mosaic law for Jewish Christians.¹⁹ Schwartz notes, “This interpretation of v. 21 leaves their position quite strange, as if they wanted Gentiles to accept Moses’ law for Moses’ benefit” rather than Gentile salvation.²⁰ Second, it seems to run contrary to the radical and momentous nature of the decision by ignoring the implications of the decision for

¹³ J. B. Lightfoot, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Newly Discovered Commentary*, ed. Ben Witherington III and Todd D. Still (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 200.

¹⁴ Paton J. Gloag, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1870), 2:79. Gloag also notes this was also the view of Neander, Whitby, and Wordsworth.

¹⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 206. See also Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 303–4.

¹⁶ Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary: Volume 3, 15:1–23:35* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 2279.

¹⁷ See C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 2:737.

¹⁸ Clinton Arnold, “Acts,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Commentary, Volume 2: John and Acts*, ed. Clinton Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 362.

¹⁹ Although his focus is a bit narrower, James Hardy Ropes suggests that the idea of Jewish fear over the law’s neglect is “an interpolation of the interpreter which is not expressed nor even hinted at in the passage.” James Hardy Ropes, “Acts 15.21,” *JBL* 15 (1896): 79. Ropes’s statement might be too strong, but it does spotlight the fact that the problem Acts 15:21 presumably seeks to address is not explicitly stated in the text.

²⁰ Schwartz, “The Futility of Preaching Moses,” 279.

Jews and Gentiles.²¹ Third, the view appears to be paradoxical. It seems to indicate that Jewish Christians had no reason for concern, but if such were actually the case, then why would it need to be said at all? It is like being told not to worry. The very fact that someone feels compelled to say it suggests that there might actually be something to engender worry.

2. *The view that the decrees are consistent with the teaching of Torah concerning Gentiles*

a. *Explanation of the view.* In this view, verse 21 looks back to verses 19–20,²² and it asserts that the decision and decrees are consistent with the Mosaic law, since it has always placed certain expectations on the acceptance of Gentiles.²³ Thus, “Luke regards these conditions as rooted in Torah, and that Torah’s own norms for proselytes and sojourners (Lev 17:8, 10, 13, 15) would be known already to Gentiles close to the synagogue such as had converted.”²⁴ This view can take two different forms.

One way is to see verse 21 as a message to Gentile believers that what they are being asked to abstain from in verse 20 is not novel but rooted in Scripture. For example, J. Bradley Chance argues that since the prohibitions were not new and come from the Mosaic law, Gentiles would already be familiar with them.²⁵

The other way is to see verse 21 as a message to Jewish believers that the prohibitions in verse 20 are contained in the Scriptures and so should be accepted. For example, Rudolf Pesch asserts that the prohibitions meet the demands of Leviticus 17–18, so they should not offend the Jews in the Diaspora who were still meeting in synagogues.²⁶ Similarly, Eckhard Schnabel argues that the reference to Moses (which includes the teaching of the prophets) is proof that Jews in the synagogue would have understood the prohibitions as part of the Mosaic law.²⁷

²¹ Arnold seems to recognize this tension by putting James’s statement in rather contrastive terms: “There will continue to be those who proclaim Moses in the synagogues throughout the empire, burdening the Gentiles with the requirements of the law for salvation (Acts 15:19), but we will preach a message of grace based on faith in the work of Christ (15:11)” (“Acts,” 362). But this suggestion does not seem to explain well the need for the prohibitions.

²² It is possible that James is looking as far back as verse 15 if one understands Moses as a reference to the Old Testament generally rather than Torah particularly.

²³ See Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 398–99; William S. Kurz, *Acts of the Apostles*, CCSS (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 239.

²⁴ Johnson, *Acts*, 267. So also Wilfried Eckey, *Die Apostelgeschichte: Der Weg des Evangeliums von Jerusalem nach Rom* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2000), 335. Eckey references Josephus in support (*Ag. Ap.* 166).

²⁵ J. Bradley Chance, *Acts*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 259. Similarly, Dean Pinter claims that the prohibitions were so basic and well known, having been proclaimed for centuries, that Gentiles should have been aware of them. Dean Pinter, *Acts*, SGBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 349–50. See also French L. Arrington, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 155.

²⁶ Rudolf Pesch, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (*ApG* 13–28), EKK 5.2 (Zürich: Neukirchener, 1986), 81. Bruce Malina and John Pilch likewise claim that “even assimilated Israelites should be sufficiently aware of the minimum that was required of resident aliens, since it was traditionally discussed in the community centers.” Bruce Malina and John Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2008), 109.

²⁷ Schnabel, *Acts*, 646.

b. *Evaluation of the view.* This view seems to provide a reasonable explanation for the affirmation of the antiquity, continuity, and universality of the synagogue proclamation of the Mosaic law in Acts 15:21 by positing that the prohibitions are consistent with the Mosaic law that has always placed certain expectations on the acceptance of Gentiles. So, this view seems to work best when used in conjunction with the argument that the prohibitions are derived from Leviticus 17–18.²⁸

However, this view is open to challenges on at least two fronts. First, it is debatable as to whether the origin of the prohibitions is to be found in Leviticus 17–18 particularly or the Pentateuch generally.²⁹ This point is important since in Acts, “Moses” is consistently used of the law (i.e., the Pentateuch), or in a few cases of the person but not of what is considered the Old Testament (see 3:22; 6:11, 14; 13:39; 15:1, 5, 21; 21:21; 26:22; 28:23), so earlier references to the prophets (vv. 16–17) would not seem to qualify. Second, as Mark Seifrid observes, it is the Holy Spirit and the Council and not the law that provides the authorization for the Decree (15:28).³⁰

3. *The view that Gentiles can still learn Torah*

a. *Explanation of the view.* The verse explains verse 19, namely that although Gentiles do not need to be circumcised or keep the law generally (excepting perhaps the prohibitions in v. 20),³¹ Gentiles can continue to learn about Torah through the synagogue. For example, F. F. Bruce offers that the decree would not keep Gentiles from learning the law of Moses, since it will continue to be preached.³² Two slightly different approaches are taken here. For some, verse 21 functions as an exhortation for Gentiles to take advantage of learning about the prohibitions by attending the synagogue where Moses is preached. For example, Simon Kistemaker contends that Gentiles should be familiar with the Mosaic precepts and could learn more if they wish in the synagogues, and Gentile Christians

²⁸ This is probably argued most persuasively by Richard Bauckham, “James and the Gentiles,” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 172–78. See also Haenchen, *Acts*, 469; I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980), 253; J. T. Townsend, “The Date of Luke–Acts,” in *Luke–Acts: New Perspectives from the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar*, ed. C. H. Talbert (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 50; Philip Francis Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke–Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*, SNTSMS 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99; Jack T. Sanders, *The Jews in Luke–Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 5; Dunn, *Acts*, 204–6; Lüdemann, *Acts of the Apostles*, 189; Robert W. Wall, “Acts,” in *NIB* 10:220; William J. Larkin, *The Gospel of Luke and Acts*, CBC 12 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2006), 517–18.

²⁹ See Charles H. Savelle, “A Reexamination of the Prohibitions in Acts 15,” *BSac* 161.644 (2004): 460–61. Mark A. Seifrid notes, “In short, there is nothing in the context of Acts 15 which requires that the Decree be understood as a direct obligation to the Law, and there is a good deal to suggest that it is not to be so understood.” Mark A. Seifrid, “Jesus and the Law in Acts,” *JNTS* 30 (1987): 50.

³⁰ Seifrid, “Jesus and the Law in Acts,” 50.

³¹ This would be especially true for those who think the prohibitions find their origin in Leviticus 17–18.

³² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 296. See also Chalmer E. Faw, *Acts*, BCBC (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1993), 165.

should show respect for Jews who still observe the Mosaic ordinances.³³ For others, the issue relates to the Jewish Christian desire for Gentiles to continue to receive instruction in Torah. Bruce suggests, “This observation was perhaps intended to calm the apprehensions of the believing Pharisees, in whose eyes it was specially important that the Torah should be taught among the Gentiles.”³⁴

b. *Evaluation of the view.* This view does seem to provide grounds for the affirmation of the antiquity, continuity, and universality of the synagogue proclamation of the Mosaic law in 15:21, but it seems to be a scratch without an itch. The issue raised by the pro-circumcision/law party was not over *learning* but *doing*. If present instruction were in view, then why would James stress the antiquity of synagogue gatherings (γενεῶν ἀρχαίων)? Pervo also raises the objection that had the Gentiles attended the synagogue they would have heard more than the prohibitions, including circumcision, the very thing rejected at the Jerusalem Council.³⁵ Finally, in the letter composed to send to the Gentile believers in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, synagogue attendance is not mentioned either as an option or as a suggestion.

4. *The view regarding the historical effect of synagogue proclamation upon Gentiles*

a. *Explanation of the view.* Acts 15:21 relates to the effect that synagogue proclamation has had on Gentiles. This view has two different expressions, though they both involve Gentiles and the synagogue.

One expression was put forward by James Hardy Ropes.³⁶ He posits that γὰρ provides a rationale for verse 19 and that the κηρύσσω in verse 21 best applies to Gentiles in the synagogue who had heard Moses preached. Further, he argues that since believing Gentiles are declared to be the people of God according to James’s quotation of Amos 9:12 (“all the Gentiles who are called by my name” in Acts 15:17) then there must have been some way that God could claim the “Greek” (or Gentile) world. This claim is established by Moses having “in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues.” In this way, the Gentiles all over the world have had Moses preached to them and verse 21 shows how the reference to Gentiles in Amos 9:11–12 could be fulfilled.

Another expression of this view is provided by Daniel Schwartz who asserts that, “long and widespread Jewish experience shows that Gentiles will not (by and large) accept Mosaic law” so any “Christian attempt to impose it upon Gentiles (whether already converted or contemplating it) would be futile.”³⁷ Schwartz supports his interpretation with three lines of evidence: (1) The Jewish inability to keep the law is affirmed elsewhere in Acts (7:53; 13:38; 15:10). (2) The only other time in Acts where the regularity of the Sabbath reading of the law is referenced also shows

³³ Simon Kistemaker, *Acts*, NTC (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 557. Kistemaker actually offers a combined view including Jewish sensitivities and the idea that the prohibitions derive from Torah.

³⁴ Bruce, *Acts*, 296. See also Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 419.

³⁵ Pervo, *Acts*, 378–79.

³⁶ Ropes, “Acts 15.21,” 75–81.

³⁷ Schwartz, “The Futility of Preaching Moses,” 279.

that the Jews still rejected God (13:27).³⁸ (3) Luke's linkage of the law to Moses allows the rejection of the law to be a rejection of Moses rather than God, seeing it as being set aside by the "prophet like Moses" (Jesus).³⁹ Schwartz notes that his view was argued in the nineteenth century but that it had not been taken seriously or adopted.⁴⁰ This lack of adoption has continued, though Joseph Fitzmyer is one who has embraced the view.⁴¹ Fitzmyer reiterates, "James refuses to impose Mosaic law on Gentile converts to Christianity because he knows from experience that only a few would agree to believe in the living God under such conditions."⁴²

b. *Evaluation of the view.* Both expressions of the synagogue view are innovative attempts to resolve the interpretive gridlock of a very difficult passage. They both seek to make sense of the affirmation of the antiquity, continuity, and universality of the synagogue proclamation of the Mosaic law in Acts 15:21.⁴³

However, synagogue proclamation of Moses to Gentiles in the past (and also the present) seems an unlikely proposition. The language in 15:21 lends itself most naturally to a Jewish context. Not that Gentiles were entirely absent from Jewish synagogues, but the relative paucity of their participation seems unable to provide sufficient grounds to support either expression of this view.

Furthermore, Ropes's view has several additional problems. The *γάρ* would need to be pushed all the way back to at least verse 16 if not verse 14. While not impossible, this seems improbable. Also, most who see a first-century fulfillment of Amos 9:11–12 do not see a need for a prior proclamation to the Gentiles.⁴⁴ Finally, this explanation seems to skip verse 20 altogether.

Schwartz's proposal is also problematic. If past experience teaches that Gentiles would not embrace the Mosaic law, then why should the council expect the Gentiles to embrace the four prohibitions in verse 20? This is even more problematic if one concludes that the prohibitions are based on the Mosaic law, namely, Leviticus 17–18.⁴⁵ This view also seems to ignore the fact that in Acts, Cornelius (10:1–8) and to a lesser degree the Ethiopian eunuch (8:27–28) are characterized by piety. While this piety should not be equated to full Torah observance, it seems to suggest that Gentiles would be capable of keeping Torah. At the very least, Pharisaic believers seemed to think that Gentiles were capable of it; otherwise, why would they argue for law observance in 15:5?

³⁸ However, it should be noted that Acts 13:27 refers to the reading of the prophets, not Moses or the law.

³⁹ Schwartz, "The Futility of Preaching Moses," 279–81. But in Acts, references to the law are not exclusively associated with Moses, and it seems unlikely that Luke would hold that the law of Moses was not also the law of God.

⁴⁰ Schwartz, "The Futility of Preaching Moses," 277. Schwartz also notes that the earliest and only proponent of the view is J. K. L. Gieseler, "Ueber die Nazaräer und Ebioniten," *Archiv für alte und neue Kirchengeschichte* 4 (1818–1820): 311–12.

⁴¹ Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke 10–24: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 28 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 558.

⁴² Fitzmyer, *Luke 10–24*, 558.

⁴³ Indeed, Ropes is especially straightforward in his desire to do so.

⁴⁴ In a forthcoming article, I will argue that we do not have a "fulfillment" of Amos 9:11–12 at all.

⁴⁵ I do not hold the Leviticus 17–18 view but many interpreters do.

5. *The view that Jewish sensibilities are a rationale for the decree*

a. *Explanation of the view.* In this view, Acts 15:21 serves as a rationale for the decree, namely, sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities. It relates particularly then to verse 20, although verse 19 could also be included.

Interpreters relate these sensitivities to either Jews inside Christ-following communities (ecclesiological) or those outside it (evangelistic). Darrell Bock identifies the latter in suggesting that verse 21 is motivated by missionary concerns.⁴⁶ So the prevalence of Jewish communities means that Gentile believers should respect their scruples.⁴⁷ Robert Tannehill concurs: “The underlying point would be that Gentile Christians need to find ways of living with people deeply committed to Mosaic law.”⁴⁸

On the other hand, other commentators see the rationale as primarily an internal concern for good relations within the Christian communities. The focus is on “the coexistence and intimate fellowship of Jewish and gentile Christians.”⁴⁹ David Peterson emphasizes that since Torah-observant Jews were everywhere, Gentiles should know why the prohibitions have been suggested and should be sensitive to their scruples.⁵⁰ And if better understanding of the scruples is necessary, Gentiles could learn by listening to Moses being proclaimed in the synagogues.⁵¹ R. C. H. Lenski appeals to the love of Gentile Christians, while David Williams appeals to fairness.⁵² Since Jewish Christians were willing to make concessions to Gentile Christians, Gentile Christians should make some concessions to Jewish scruples.⁵³ Immanuel is concerned about the potential damage to the church: “Just as circumcision would break the church, so also would continuing with these prohibitions.”⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 507. See also Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 140.

⁴⁷ Richard Longenecker, “Acts,” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 949. Foakes-Jackson comes to a similar conclusion but focuses on the issue of table fellowship (*Acts of the Apostles*, 141).

⁴⁸ Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke—Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2: *Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 190. Pervo finds Tannehill's explanation to be “reasonable” (*Acts*, 379). Similarly, Charles Talbert argues that “Gentile Messianists” should show sensitivity to Jewish scruples to promote social interaction. Charles Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 133. Mikeal Parsons quotes Talbert with approval. Mikeal Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 215. See also John Polhill, *Acts*, NAC 26 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 332; Jürgen Roloff, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, NTD 5 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 233. Daniel Marguerat has a slightly different emphasis, finding verse 21 to highlight deference being shown to the antiquity of the Mosaic Law. Daniel Marguerat, “Paul and the Torah in Acts,” in *Torah in the New Testament: Papers Delivered at the Manchester-Lausanne Seminar of June 2008*, ed. Michael Tait and Peter Oakes, LNTS 401 (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 111.

⁴⁹ David Bauer, *The Book of Acts as Story: A Narrative-Critical Study* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 190.

⁵⁰ David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 435–36.

⁵¹ Bock, *Acts*, 507. See also Marshall, *Acts*, 254.

⁵² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934), 618. David Williams, *Acts*, NIBC 5 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1985), 266–67.

⁵³ Williams, *Acts*, 266–67.

⁵⁴ Babu Immanuel, *Acts of the Apostles: An Exegetical and Contextual Commentary*, ICNT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 168.

b. *Evaluation of the view.* There is much to commend this view. The γάρ of verse 21 is tightly tied to the closest referent, verse 20. It provides a reasonable explanation for James's affirmation of the antiquity, continuity, and universality of the proclamation of the Mosaic law in verse 21 by indicating why the prohibitions might be necessary, namely, the longstanding practice of Jewish synagogue gatherings. This explanation also fits the focus in Acts 15:1–35 on Gentile believers and provides a reasonable rationale for the prohibitions that seem to beg for one. Overall, this view seems to be the strongest of the five.

However, Ropes offers four criticisms of this view.⁵⁵ First, it does not do justice to the phrase “from ancient generations” (ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων). Second, Ropes understands the “preaching” (κηρύσσω) in the synagogues to be directed to Gentiles and not Jews. Third, it is not clear that the four prohibitions in verse 20 would have been satisfactory to synagogue-attending and Torah-observant Jews. And fourth, the prohibition against sexual immorality (πορνεία) is not more of a concern in the Mosaic law than other moral issues. So, Ropes concludes, “Thus from nearly every point of view this favorite interpretation is unhappy.”⁵⁶ And to these critiques one could add a fifth, namely, that this view is somewhat (if not entirely) speculative. The narrative gives little indication that Jewish sensibilities are a concern, though one could reasonably expect it to be an issue. Furthermore, the official decree in verses 23–29 makes no direct mention of Jewish sensibilities.

Ropes raises legitimate objections to this view, so a brief response seems warranted. First, the phrase ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων is merely an acknowledgment that Mosaic sensibilities are chronologically ingrained. Second, understanding κηρύσσω as preaching to Gentiles in synagogues seems a bit of a stretch. While there are good reasons to believe that Gentiles did attend synagogues, there is little evidence that it was a widespread practice. Third, for the view in question, it is not necessary to hold that the four prohibitions in verse 20 would have been satisfactory to synagogue-attending and Torah-observant Jews. Ben Witherington and others are likely correct in holding that these prohibitions were related to specific practices associated with idolatry and thus were especially abhorrent to Jewish sensibilities.⁵⁷ Fourth, while it is true that the prohibition against sexual immorality (πορνεία) is not a unique moral concern in the Mosaic law, other moral issues were not tied as directly to pagan idolatry as πορνεία, which in verse 20 relates more narrowly to ritual sexual activity. Fifth, regarding the speculative nature of the view, one could argue that Jew-Gentile relations would be expected to be part of the decision, even if left

⁵⁵ Ropes, “Acts 15.21,” 76–77.

⁵⁶ Ropes, “Acts 15.21,” 77.

⁵⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 462–67; Witherington, “Not So Idle Thoughts about *Eidolothuton*,” *TynBul* 44.2 (1993): 237–54; Witherington, *What's in the Word: Rethinking the Socio-Rhetorical Character of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 96–101. See also Savelle, “A Reexamination of the Prohibitions in Acts 15,” 464.

unstated, or that the purpose of the prohibitions would be explained by the bearers of the letter (vv. 22, 30).⁵⁸

III. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study has sought to examine Acts 15:21 briefly and identify, explain, and evaluate five views related to its scope and meaning. The primary contribution has been to provide a taxonomy for examining the various views.

In the process of evaluation, it has been suggested that the view highlighting Jewish sensibilities as a rationale for the decree is most likely correct. However, dogmatism seems unwarranted given the inherent interpretive challenges of the passage. It might also be admitted that one could potentially embrace this view along with one or more of the other options as well even though this seems unlikely.⁵⁹ In any case, as with most cruxes of interpretation, a consensus interpretation will likely prove elusive.

One might ask whether this one verse merits all the effort expended on it. After all no major doctrines are at stake regardless of which of the five views is embraced. In response, one could simply say that all Scripture merits careful consideration and interpretation. But perhaps more importantly, a number have concluded that the Jerusalem Council episode in general, and verse 21 in particular, might provide helpful insight on how increasingly diverse Christ-following communities can better the navigate thorny theological, cultural, and ethnic challenges before them today.⁶⁰ The fact that good interpretation is needed for proper application and that proper application is helpful for the church provides at least some incentive for further study of Acts 15:21. It is hoped that this study will draw attention to the most significant questions to ask and will provide categories of thought that might encourage this worthy interpretive endeavor.

⁵⁸ Reading between the lines should be done with great caution, but the Jew-Gentile issues that run throughout Acts might provide sufficient warrant for doing so here.

⁵⁹ It is possible that the ambiguity in Acts 15:21 that has bedeviled interpreters was intentional and in some interpersonal conflicts, ambiguity can be more friend than foe. However, this seems unlikely since explanatory conjunctions (γάρ) rarely if ever involve intentional ambiguity.

⁶⁰ For example, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Decision Making in the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). More specifically see Michael Enyinwa Okoronkwo, *The Jerusalem Compromise as a Conflict-Resolution Model: A Rhetoric-Communicative Analysis of Acts 15 in the Light of Modern Linguistics*, Arbeiten zur Interkulturalität (Bonn: Borengässer, 2001); Lyle Story, "Luke's Instructive Dynamics for Resolving Conflicts: The Jerusalem Council," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research* 3 (2011): 99–118. Story asserts, "For Luke, the story [Acts 15] is a 'lived theology' that is instructive for the community as it seeks the will of God in changing circumstances, in new geographical areas with new ethnic groups, pressing issues and conflicts" (100).