

Circumcision & Salvation

Kyle Matthews



This shouldn't need to be addressed as the text is self explanatory, all the details self contained and all the context self evident. Yet explain we must because Christians keep misreading this passage as a cornerstone of change, the moment when the Most High decides that everything He's ever done is different now. The old is gone. The new has come. No more rules. No more responsibility. All is love and hugs and cuddly fluffy stuff.

So let's take a look over this oft-overused and understudied passage in Acts and see if we can't help out our Christian friends to sort through the issues instigated here.

Remember, we are all reading more or less the same thing. None of us skipped over this chapter or book. And yet we each walked away with opposing views. So what is different then?

Only the perspective which we each brought to the Book before we started reading it. If we want cheap grace, faith opposed to works, and the "old law" abolished for a nonsense nondescript "new law" then we might read into this passage exactly what we want to find here. However,

if we instead read this portion as we do all other writings with the rules of records lacking any agenda but to keep to the innate grammatical, historical, and cultural context, we will likely find the exact opposite of the idea we were looking for.

So let's get into it...

(Scripture quotations are taken from the Word of YAHWEH version. Essentially the same as the KJV but without the replacement language of Lord, God and Jesus etc.)

Before we break into the Text we need to assess a number of issues most folks understand naturally when selecting their other reading, yet seem to be unable to recognize when regarding the Bible.

With any other book we select we ask, "Is it fiction or nonfiction"?

"Is this eyewitness testimony or second or third hand information"?

"Who is the author, what is his background, and how will that affect what I'm reading"?

"Am I reading a work written originally in my language or another"?

"What is the time period, country, language, and culture of the people and circumstances being discussed"?

All these questions and more are most often considered unconsciously and never pondered on, nor ignored. One need not know every last detail that impacted the making of the writing we are reading, but we must possess a working knowledge of the basic details before intaking the information. And of course the more we do investigate these matters the

better we will comprehend the composition of the Text. But the basics will suffice for simple study.

So, to the questions...

Is the book of Act a work of fiction or nonfiction.

It is purported to be a work of nonfiction, and we have no reasonable suspicion that it should be seen as otherwise.

Is the book of Acts eye witness testimony?

No.

Second hand information?

Again, no.

Third?

Yes.

The author records that he himself was not present for these events but diligently collected the testimony of those who were. The book of Acts is thus the report of a man who is recording the story from those who were present.

Who is the author, what is his background, and how will that affect what we are reading?

Lukos is the author. We generally anglicize that to Luke. He was reported to be the Disciple of Sha'ul whom most western folks would likely know as Paul. Luke was supposedly a doctor of some sort and assumed to be a born Greek though there's little real cause to believe he was actually Greek.

Are we reading a work written originally in our language or another?

What we are reading if we are in the West is almost always a translation, an English version of a Greek text, heavily influenced by Latin and French and colored by British bias. And there is great reason to believe the original is Hebrew rather than Greek, though, Greek manuscripts are the majority of what is available to us to date.

What is the time period, country, language, and culture of the people and circumstances being discussed?

This work is a record of the first century, originally in Israel but proceeding outward from there, written either in Greek (unlikely) or Hebrew and definitely reflective of Hebrew language, thought, and culture. As for the circumstances, this was a pivotal point not only in the early Movement of the Hebrew sect then known as HaDereck (The Way) or more widely as the Natzorim, but it was written for all the land of Israel, the people of that region, and the entire Roman world.

With these historical details in mind we now come to the Text to analyze...

(Keep also in mind that while we break down the Text into chapters and verses for ease of reading and memorization, neither set of divisions is original to this or any other book of the Bible. Chapters were added in the 13th century and verses in the 16th. So we mustn't get too attached to the breaks as they are unnatural to the material.)

And finally, to properly understand chapter 15, we can't rightly start with chapter 15. We must begin with 14. So much happened to lead up to the events of 15. It didn't just occur as it's own unrelated story, and so it must not be regarded as happening in a vacuum.

Chapter 14. Verse 1 And it came to pass in Iconium, that they went both together into the synagogue of the Jews, and so spoke, that a great multitude both of the Jews and also of the Greeks believed.

Verse 2 But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles, and made their minds evil affected against the brethren.

Much like his mentor, Shaul, Luke opens with a conjunction, which is letting us know that this part we are starting with is not the true beginning of the thoughts that are being conveyed. What follows is a result of what came before, but for our purposes of a succinct study, we will open here. For an even more in-depth study, go back further to a solid opener.

So "they" went into the synagogue of the Jews.... Who's "they"? Shaul and Barnabah. Who were they? They were both Jews. So two Jews enter the Jewish synagogue. So far nothing odd. And we must take caution here not

to read this in our modern sense where “synagogue” is the name of an official building for Jewish worship, comparative to a Christian church or a Muslim mosque or Buddhist temple etc. In those days a synagogue was simply a Greek word for a place of assembly, literally meaning “a bringing together.” The Greek translators used *synagogue* for the Jewish assembly as a distinguishing term from *ecclesia* which they elected in reference to so-called “Christian” assemblies, though *ecclesia* was an inappropriate term here and as we will see, there were no Christians in existence as of yet. Over time the term synagogue has suffered from semantic narrowing becoming officially the term for a Jewish worship building and no one else’s. In those days however, they were gatherings that took place most often in people’s homes rather than official structures exclusive to worship services. Very few Jewish communities in fact were wealthy enough to build a structure exclusively for this purpose alone.

So Shaul and Barnabah entered the assembly of the Jews (likely in someone’s home) as Jews among other Jews. In this assembly as was so often the case there were people from the Greco-Roman world called *Sebomenoi*, a word lazily and poorly rendered as “god fearers” but literally meaning “those who stay and respect, adore, or worship”. In other words, this is a Jewish assembly that is open to those of the nations to attend (but not join) if they are those who respect the Torah and the Elohim of Israel, and worship Him.

Both Shaul and Barnabah spoke to this assembly and a great multitude of both Jews and Greeks (that is people native to the message and those *sebomenoi* who respect that path) believed. So what were they preaching? Unless we are to adopt the odd notion that the emissaries of the Messiah

changed their message every time they addressed a different city, then the answer to this is in the previous chapter...

Acts 13:16 Then Sha'ul stood up, and motioning with his hand said, "Men of Israel, and you sebomenoi, listen..."

Then beginning with the calling of Abraham he recounted the history of how YHWH, the Most High Elohim delt with His people all The Way down to the coming of Messiah.

Acts 13:26-30 "Men and brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and sebomenoi, to you the word of this Salvation (Yeshua) has been sent. For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. Now when they had fulfilled all that was written concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. But Elohim raised Him from the dead...."

This is the Word that caused no small division in the assembly in Antioch in chapter 13. Not a call to disobey the Torah or to nullify the commandments. Not an interpolation of "fulfill" to mean "destroy". None of that. Sha'ul's simple message was that at long last, the culmination of the ages had come to pass. His message to his *fellow* Jews was that the *Jewish* Messiah had finally come. And that was all it took to cause division. But what sort of division? Jew against the new religion of Christianity? No. *Jew against Jew*....and the Greek sebomenoi were interested but still not joining anything new.

But wait. Luke goes on to say that the gentiles were stirred up by the Jews against Shaul and Barnabah, right? Doesn't that mean that the Jews in the synagogue riled up the gentiles in the synagogue? No. That view results from a preconceived idea of there being a new religion of Christianity already in existence being preached by Shaul whom we were taught to rename, Paul.

The traditional view is that Shaul is Paul, and he's a Christian at this point trying to convert Jews and gentiles into Christians, but the Jews are having none of it, and the gentiles are interested but riled up by the Jews to oppose Paul. It's an interesting fiction...but nevertheless a fiction.

The trouble is there are two terms here often colloquially used interchangeably but each are speaking of different people. "Hellenas" meaning the people we call Greeks, though that term comes from the word the Romans used for that people. And "ethnos" which is peoples or nations. Usually used to refer to non-Jews. The term gentile is an anglicization of the Latin word "gentilis" meaning "of the gens". It's a word spoken from a Roman perspective to say "one of us". As Christianity conquered the Roman Empire (or was conquered by it) they adopted much of the Roman terminology as well as her customs. And thereafter gentilis or gentile underwent a divergence of meaning to become "someone who is not Jewish."

So here in verse 2 of chapter 14, Luke is telling us not that Shaul is a Christian teaching a new religion, and the Jews didn't want to hear and sicked the gentiles on him as we were trained to believe, but rather that Shaul and Barnabah are speaking *as Jews* telling the *other Jews* that the promises of the *Jewish* prophets of Israel have finally come true. And that

created a *Jewish schism*. One sect of Jews against the sect of Judaism that Shaul and Barnabah are teaching about. And the Jews who opposed these two Jewish emissaries went out from the assembly and stirred up the Greek people of the city, *not* the sebomenoi Greeks of their own congregation.

3 A long time therefore they abode speaking boldly in YHWH, Who gave testimony unto the Word of His grace, and granted signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

4 But the multitude of the city was divided: and part held with the Jews, and part with the emissaries.

Again this Word of grace is not new, as church doctrine would suppose and propose, presenting the idea that grace appeared in Messiah and never preceded His advent into the world. The bold preaching of Sha'ul and Barnabah was in YHWH and was the Word of grace....*the same* unchanging Word from *the same* unchanging One from the beginning. *The same grace*. And great signs and wonders were done verifying their word.

What does the Torah say about those who teach a new doctrine contrary to the Torah? What does it say about those who speak against the Torah and teach others to do contrary? It says that even if they prophecy and work miracles that we are to reject them *because* YHWH has not spoke through them.

But here we see that it says they are speaking the Word of grace boldly in YHWH and doing signs and wonders besides. So apart from there being

no reason to believe this message runs contrary to the Torah, we see that it literally conforms to the exact specifications of the Torah.

It didn't make a difference though as far as the reception of their message however as it still only divided the people further and further. The translation says part held with the Jews and part with the emissaries. That sure sounds like two different religions doesn't it? Sure, if we took that verse in isolation and read it in light of a later Christian context. But we can't do that if we are doing our job justly.

Though Christianity adopted the Greek term "apostle" and placed it as a title for the emissaries of the Messiah in after years, in the first century it would not yet be their common designation and wouldn't be a title at all for approximately a century. Each of these men would be known not as an "apostlos", a Greek designation, but by the Hebrew term "sheliach" designating them each as a "sent one" or "messenger". A messenger of who? Sent from who? *The Jewish Messiah*.

Once again when we set everything back in its context and don't superimpose upon it later interpolations we find that everything fits quite nicely with no need of explanation or embellishment. *This is a Jewish spiritual civil war*. Two sects of Judaism vying for dominance. This war is one of ideology and identity, the war for what Jewish identity was going to be. Those referred to in this passage as "the Jews" represent predominantly the Pharisaic sect, and this designated as "emissaries" represent the Natzarim, the Nazarene sect *of Judaism*.

And rather than the Jews stirring up the gentile believers in the synagogue against the Christian apostles, the Pharisaic Jews who ran the

synagogue were riling up the pagan Greek populous of the city to oppose these other Jewish emissaries. One side of this spiritual Jewish war was utilizing their pagan neighbors to aid in antagonizing these other Jews.

Verse 5 And when there was an assault made both of the Greeks, and also of the Jews with their rulers, to use them despitefully, and to stone them,

Verse 6 They were ware of it, and fled unto Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and unto the region that lay round about:

Verse 7 And there they preached the good news.

This Jewish civil war was exclusively spiritual on the part of the Nazarene sect, but sadly the Pharisaic sect refused to keep this a matter of ideals. They turned violent very fast going to physical war with the other Jewish sect. It should not be surprising, however, since Sha'ul, who was himself a Pharisee, even at this time and forever after unto the end of his life, while still being a member of the Nazarene sect, had himself begun his spiritual journey with comparative violent action against the Nazarenes he later joined. And even though not all the Pharisees were evil, it was from this sect that the hostilities against Messiah and His disciples principally came, and it was this sect that our Messiah chiefly targeted for criticism, both because they were so near the truth (yet so far away), but also because they were the dominant sect in charge of most of Judaism of the first century.

We see here that the Pharisees were going to war with the Nazarenes for telling them the good news that they did not want to hear. And the Pharisees of Antioch enlisted the help of their pagan neighbors to attack Sha'ul and Barnabah to try to stone them to death. Rather than go to physical war with *their fellow Jews*, as well as the populace of the city, both emissaries fled the region for foreign parts. And what did they do where they arrived? They preached the good news.

Again we must ask, are we referring to the modern Christian gospel here when we say “good news”? Did they just tell the people to walk the Romans road? Did they tell them to repent of their sins without explaining what sins are? Did they tell the people they need to believe in their hearts and have faith in their heads? Did they tell the people that they need to invite “Jesus” to come live in their hearts? No. These Jewish emissaries of the Jewish messiah were preaching the Jewish good news. As Sha'ul says elsewhere that the good news is *first* to the Jew, and *then* to the Greek.

There was no epistle to the Romans yet. There was no telling people to repent of sins when they did not know what sins are. There was no fluffy notion of inviting the Messiah to rent an apartment space in our hearts. All that nonsense was for later centuries. To these emissaries, the good news was as they had proclaimed already in Antioch, that the long-awaited Jewish Messiah had finally arrived, that the prophets spoke true, and that their words had finally *come to pass*, *not that the words of the prophets had passed away*, were abolished, or nullified, or were no longer to be adhered to, and obeyed. Instead, the message was that we finally have the full story. We finally know what it was all for and what it was all leading to.

8 And there sat a certain man at Lystra, impotent in his feet, being a cripple from his mother's womb, who never had walked:

9 The same heard Paul speak: who steadfastly beholding him, and perceiving that he had faith to be healed,

10 Said with a loud voice, "Stand upright on thy feet". And he leaped and walked.

11 And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, "The mighty ones are come down to us in the likeness of men".

12 And they called Barnabah, Jupiter; and Paul, Mercury, because he was the chief speaker.

13 Then the priest of Jupiter, which was before their city, brought oxen and garlands unto the gates, and would have done sacrifice with the people.

14 Which when the emissaries, Barnabah and Paul, heard of, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out,

15 And saying, "Sirs, why do you do these things? We also are men of like passions with you, and preach unto you that you should turn from these vanities unto the living Elohim, Who made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein:

16 Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.

17 Nevertheless He left not himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.

18 And with these sayings scarce restrained they the people, that they had not done sacrifice unto them.

How can we possibly tell people to repent of their sins when they have a completely contradictory idea of right and wrong? Here in Lystra we see Sha'ul and Barnabah working as before and performing a miracle for a lame man, only to have these pagan peoples declare them to be deities and decide to worship them. These are not the seibomenoi seeking to serve the Hebrew Elohim. No. These are full on pagan Greeks actively serving their idols and trying to view the miracle of the One True Elohim as the work of their own deities. And contrary to later Christian tradition, Sha'ul and Barnabah didn't try to make it okay. They didn't adopt the pagan practices of the nations as acceptable if only they could be done for Messiah. No. They called the foreign deeds vanities and called the people to turn from them to the Living Elohim Who made all that is living above and below. The emissaries never went out of their Way to tell the pagans to repent or to tell them about Yeshua. But once those pagans turned the good deed of charity into a terrible act of their own understanding, then and only then did the disciples of Yeshua speak out against their behavior. And did the heathen hear them? No.

Really should we be surprised? After the deaths of the emissaries everything went sideways because the goal was changed from calling seibomenoi to become part of Israel and the Lost Tribes to return home

again, to instead calling all people everywhere to accept a version of the message that best suited their own existing ideas of a Savior and of their own cultural notions of sin and of holiness. Following the first century, the Faith was taken over by people just like this, who took the miracles and message of the Most High, interpolated it into their own image and foreign understanding, and passed it out to the nations. In Sha'ul's own day, and own personal experience, they did it. And even with him telling them to their face their ways were vain and not to twist the truth to their own understanding... still they did stubbornly all the same. What hope was there ever of corruption not setting in in subsequent centuries?

19 And there came thither certain Jews from Antioch and Iconium, who persuaded the people, and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing he had been dead.

20 Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabah to Derbe.

21 And when they had preached the good news to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,

22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of Elohim.

23 And when they had ordained them elders in every assembly, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Master, on whom they believed.

How ironic...the Jews refuse the message that should be native to them and the pagan Greeks want to accept it so long as they can reinterpret it according to their own understanding. Here we see the same violent behavior of Sha'ul's fellow Jews hostile to the message of Messiah. Not hostile to the good news because it's a new religion or abolishing the old. No. Simply hostile because if the message of Yeshua is true then their own personal version of the *same religion* is automatically false.

In this Civil War of the Jewish religion predominantly between the sect of the Pharisees and the sect of the Nazarenes, both sides agreed that Torah observance is The Way of Life. But both sides disagreed on what Torah observance looked like and was leading to. Neither side believed it was The Way to *eternal* life or salvation. The major difference between the two was over the identity of Israel and Judaism.

Until Yeshua, Jews were the only ones left of the original nation of Israel and therefore all of Israel... a fact that neither sect disagreed on. But with the arrival of Yeshua as the Messiah, The Way was made for the Lost Tribes scattered among the nations to return and rejoin Israel. But the Pharisees for the most part did not believe that Yeshua is the Messiah, and therefore could not accept that the Lost Tribes can return any other way, then, by converting to Judaism, since without the arrival of Messiah, there was no other way for anyone to become part of Israel. They could

become sebomenoi, faithful pagans, but they could not cross over just cause they wanted to.

If Yeshua is the Messiah, then these people can become part of Israel without becoming Jewish, but if Yeshua is not the Messiah, then these people have no chance, but only the choice to either stay faithful pagans, or convert to Judaism. Essentially the difference is that the Pharisees wanted Judaism to be not just a remnant of Israel, intent upon restoring all the rest of Israel, but because they were a remnant, to remain all of Israel and the only ones ever.

The argument of the Nazarenes was that, since the Messiah had come, and made The Way of return possible, that the message should go out to the Lost Tribes to restore Israel, as it once was by bringing them, not into Judaism, but into their own inheritance, the inheritance of their ancestors of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. From the Nazarene perspective, the message is not one of universal eternal salvation from fiery damnation, but a universal offer to the Lost Tribes mixed in among the nations, whose ancestors were Israelites, an offer of salvation, *from being lost*, cut off, and forever forsaken. The Jewish sect of the Nazarenes, contrary to the sect of the Pharisees, saw themselves as Jews and a remnant of Israel purposed to *restore* all of Israel, rather than to be content *being* all that remains.

This cannot be stressed enough: *there was no new religion. There was no church. There was no Christianity. There was only Judaism.* Two opposing sects of the *same religion* arguing over what the future of *their shared faith* was supposed to be, and would become... the Pharisees were not opposed to preaching of the Gospel because it was a new religion. They were

opposed to this preaching, because it was a threat to their power, it undermined their worldview, and it relegated them to a remnant of a larger body, a piece of a bigger picture, the leftovers of a lost civilization.

And it was that threat of facing the facts that made the Pharisaic sect hostile and even violent toward the sect of the Nazarenes, violence we see again here against Sha'ul. Certain ones of the Pharisees followed Sha'ul and convinced the people he was preaching to to convict him and stone him to death... but apparently he survived and returned into the same city before moving on to yet another place to preach the good news there.

Once again, it cannot be said enough, the good news is not that the Messiah died for your sins, and that you need to accept Him into your heart to be your Saviour, a generic message that has no meaning to anyone who is not already familiar with the prophets foretelling the coming of the Messiah, to anyone who is not already familiar with the standard of righteousness in Torah, and the standard of wickedness defined by the same Torah, which is translated as sin. The good news is that the long awaited and prophesied Messiah, has come to save Israel, and take away from her all her violations of the Torah, to restore the lost tribes of Israel once more, and to open The Way for those pagans born to the nations, who are trying to forsake their own vain ways, to enter in and become part of Israel. *That* is the good news... Not a generic savior to rescue all people in general from eternal hellfire that he decided we needed to suffer for a vague sense of naughtiness. No. It's the same old story told from the dawn of time, throughout the Torah and all through the prophets, and now reiterated through the disciples.

And in these subsequent cities Sha'ul visits on his journey, we see him setting up the assemblies and establishing leadership, which Christianity tells us is him planting “churches” and appointing “pastors”. The typical picture is of the tent revival gospel being preached to pagan Greeks who accept it, and then are put in charge of a brand new assembly of fellow converts, who thereafter go on to preach the watered-down message called the gospel. But the reality is that Sha'ul is preaching the same message as always, and forming assemblies in the same manner as ever they had been, choosing, as always, people who are already well-trained in the Torah and the prophets, and who now have accepted that the Messiah, who was foretold in them, had finally arrived.

These are Jewish assemblies, teaching the Torah and the prophets, and learning The Way of the Messiah, Whom they have accepted as being Yeshua. Nothing new. Nothing different. *These are Hebrew people carrying on the Hebrew tradition and teaching the Hebraic message in a Hebraic way...* and accepting the sebomenoi, the faithful converts from paganism as full members.

24 And after they had passed throughout Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia.

25 And when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down into Attalia:

26 And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of Elohim for the work which they completed.

27 And when they were come, and had gathered the assembly together, they recounted all that Elohim had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the nations.

28 And there they dwelt a long time with the disciples.

So Sha'ul and Barnabah made the rounds from city to city before returning to Antioch and recounting to the Jewish Nazarene assembly there all that had transpired on their journey. And in that revelation came the explanation of how the Most High had opened The Way to the nations also. Christianity misunderstands this verse immensely, because they have rebranded themselves differently than the first century. In the first century, the *Jewish outsiders* called the sect that followed Yeshua “Natzarim” and the name stuck. The *Greek outsiders* called the Jewish sect of the Natzarim, Christianismos. But the Jewish sect of the Natzarim called itself “HaDerech” meaning “The Way”.

When Sha'ul says to the assembly of the people of The Way that The Way has been opened unto the nations, it's not bestowing permission upon people to try to “save” pagans by giving them the piece of the good news the modern church calls the “full gospel” while really missing most of it. And it's not an invitation to turn from the other Jews who reject Yeshua to go give the power and authority, control and responsibility over to pagan born people to run off with it and run contrary to The Way. No. This is an invitation first to the Lost Tribes to return and secondly for any who are willing to leave their heathen half-life and enter into Israel to join and become a part of that people.

This is the background to chapter 15 and the so-called “first church council”. We say “so-called” because it is an anachronistic interpretation of events. Until the 10th century no such concept as a “church” existed on planet earth. The term wasn't in the first century, nether does it refer to anything in that time period nor any element of the people of Israel. In

the first century, there was the *kahal* or assembly of the people. In the 2nd century the secular Greek term *ecclesia* exclusive to political gatherings was adopted in its stead as the majority of the Natzarim became Greek converts, and those folks used the Septuagint translation of the Bible as their primary Scripture, its terminology be to interpret their own identity and reinterpret themselves as Christianos. In the 4th century, Christianismos or Christianity developed two separate colloquialisms for what came to be called *ecclesia* - *basilica* and *kuriakon*. Kuriakon was eventually rendered into German as Kirke and in Old English as Churche and eventually finalized as church.

What was taking place in this first century assembly, however was not a “church council” but the gathering of the *Beit Din*, the House of Judgment. The Jewish leaders of the sect of the Natzarim had run into a conundrum and therefore, a meeting was called for to present both sides, assesses the situation and render a ruling which would be binding on all the followers of The Way.

This was a unique situation, because never before had so many pagan both peoples been entering into the community of Israel, whether returning or joining for the first time. These circumstances therefore being unprecedented and requiring an authoritative ruling as different teachers were requiring different disciplines of there disciples and their students were receiving contradicting treatment in the community depending upon one person’s preference or any other, the meeting was held.

Now that we have the backstory to this Beit Din and the discussion that was being raised there, let’s take a look at the event itself in chapter 15.

Verse 1 And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.

Verse 2 When therefore Paul and Barnabah had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabah, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the emissaries and elders about this question.

We are told that “certain” men came down from Judea preaching circumcision. And here is where Christian theology jumps the curb and drives off the cliff. Interpretive tradition demands the law of first mention be the defining requirement at all times even when clearly incorrect. And it’s the habit of interpreters to do their job with monotone literal renderings. One such verbal victim and the worst possibly is *sodzo*, universally rendered as “save”. But *sodzo* means oh so much more. Rescue. Aid. Restore. Make whole. It’s a very complex term. And treating it as simply “save” has manufactured in Christian minds a misunderstanding of Jewish thought, in turn fabricating a false theology opposing the original function.

And what are the people being *saved* from anyway? Same thing christendom is always trying to save people from - the *Hell* they created and the *sins* of their own devising. The Christian misconception of this issue is that circumcision prior to the arrival of Messiah *used to* save souls, *becoming* no longer necessary since Calvary. And the misunderstanding of the issue being debated is the belief that these “certain” Jews were trying to bind pagan-born Christian converts to the “old law” now abolished, that they wanted people to trust in this religious “surgery” *for eternal*

salvation instead of Yeshua's work on the Cross at Calvary. But this notion could not be more revisionistic and nonsensical.

There was *never* a time in Jewish history in which circumcision *granted* redemption for the soul. It didn't save from sin or damnation or anything else. So why should we assume that anyone would be suddenly arguing that circumcision saves souls now, out of nowhere? We shouldn't. It would be a non sequitur. What we should do however is take the term *sodzo* and utilize one of the other possible meanings that is in keeping with the commandments, that has a historical precedent, and also conforms to prophecy.

Torah commands every male of Israel to be circumcised on the 8th day... and requires every male of Israel to be circumcised, creating the conundrum and posing the question: What do men do who were born pagan and convert to become part of Israel? They *must* be circumcised because the circumcision is the *sign* of the *eternal* covenant. But since they can not have it done on the 8th day of their life, what then should they do? How must they move forward? This was the question being addressed. *Sodzo* was not properly rendered here as "saved" but as *restored* or *made whole*.

The men who came from Judea declared that these newcomers had to be circumcised *immediately*, not in order to be *saved* but to be *made whole*, to be restored to full status as Israelites. The prophetic goal was always as Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah had said, that the Lost Tribes would return, and Israel would be *restored*... they just never mentioned *when* or *how*. And with this in mind the men from Judaea, wanted the pagan's joining Israel to be circumcised *right away*. This was not a question of *circumcision* verses

no circumcision but a question of *timing*. Do sebomenoi becoming Israelites undergo circumcision *and then* learn the Torah, or do they learn the Torah *and then* get the circumcision, the sign they know and understand and accept the awesome responsibility personally.

3 And being brought on their way by the assembly, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles: and they caused great joy unto all the brethren.

4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the assembly, and of the emissaries and elders, and they declared all things that Elohim had done with them.

5 But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying that it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter.

Here we go. The background is established and the foundation laid. Sha'ul is not a convert to a new religion called Christianity. He has not been teaching rebellion against the Torah. And He has not been telling people to refuse circumcision. Sha'ul is a Jew, an emissary of the Jewish Messiah, and has been teaching the Jews that their own Messiah has come, and he's been calling the sebomenoi to join Israel through the Jewish sect called Natzarim or HaDerechk, meaning The Way. And now the issue arises on how those sebomenoi can come into the assembly as full, restored, members.

We see those “certain” men who had come down from Judaea are here too, and they were infact Nazarenes of the Pharisaic sect. In most instances the Pharisees were one sect and the Natzarim were a separate and rival sect, but in the instance of people like Sha’ul, there were those belonging to both. These were Jews who lived by the oral traditions which they called the “Law of Moses” and *also* put their faith in Yeshua as the Messiah.

While the situation of mass conversion of the pagan-born into faith in the Messiah of Israel was itself a new phenomenon, nevertheless, it was not heretofore an unknown situation for a sebomenoi to forsake his pagan faith and family and former life to convert fully over to Judaism. And the Pharisees already had a tradition on how this was and should be done. Their tradition followed rules not written in or required by Torah but held precedence. And they required a convert to first undergo circumcision and then thereafter be taught all things in accordance with Moses and the customs of the elders.

Again the issue is not salvation but citizenship and fully participation in the congregation. Circumcision is beyond question a *requirement* of the Torah for all males of Israel. The only question was whether it must be done to converts *before* or *after* they were taught the Torah which required it if them and of which it is the sign of commitment thereto. But moreover we see here another element added in aswell. And that is the tradition of the elders. Up until that time of the dying and rising of Messiah to renew the covenant of old, the pagan-born could only become part of Israel by becoming part of Judah (that is to say, becoming a Jew). But with the sacrifice of the Savior to restore the covenant and restore the legitimacy of the Lost Tribes, now those sebomenoi and all new

comers from the foreign nations no longer had to become Jews to become Israelites. They could take their rightful place as members of Ephraim, the Northern Kingdom. Yet they needed to be *taught* by Jews. So did they need be circumcised in the manner of the Jews first and learn The Way after? Or could they learn The Way *first* and *then* become circumcised after learning all that new life requires? This was the whole question here addressed in the assembly. Not the assembly of all the Nazarene people but of their leadership, the Beit Din, the House of Judgment.

7 And when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up, and said unto them, Men and brethren, you know how that a good while ago Elohim made choice among us, that the nations by my mouth should hear the word of the good news, and believe.

8 And Elohim, which knows the hearts, bearing them witness, giving them the Holy Spirit, even as He did unto us;

9 And put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith.

10 Now therefore why tempt Elohim, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?

11 But we believe that through the grace of the Master Yahshua the Messiah we shall be saved, even as they.

As we read in the text there was much debate in the Beit Din and great disputation among the elders and emissaries. We should ask ourselves why we have been so quick to know in Christendom what exactly is taking place here without all the backstory of chapter 14 and without a complete understanding of the history of these matters and the meaning and functionality of circumcision with the beliefs that were being had in

those days about it and the real argument the Pharisees had for trying to force this practice on the newly converted. We see it and say it was a defunct means of salvation replaced by Yeshua with His own shed blood, and now it's a moot issue not required any longer...some even blaspheming by going as far as to state that obedience to this Divine Instruction is tantamount to a denial of the sacrifice our dear Savior made. Why so quick to determine meaning when those most closely present and directly involved did not agree and could not come to an easy agreement?

It was not till Kefa, the one later generations would call Peter, himself stood up to address the assembly of his fellow emissaries with his own experience that people present began to arrive, as it seems, at a single mindset about it. And even here, later Christian perspective slaughters the emissary's message by misrepresenting again the word *sodzo* with the singular monotone definition of "saved".

Knowing that Torah requires circumcision of all males of Israel and that they themselves be completely cut off from the community if not circumcised, and knowing that circumcision never held any merit of salvation at any time in all the history of the holy people, we should be approaching this entire disputation with an understanding that the argument is not over *whether or not* men must be circumcised but *when* they must be...*before* learning The Way or *after*. And as a more subtle nuance, whether or not they need be subjected to the specific circumcision requirements of the Pharisaic tradition. That is all. And on this basis Kefa speaks...

The emissary relates how he was sent by a heavenly vision to speak with the sebomenoi about Yeshua and their need to put their trust in Him, which He did and they accepted and the Holy Spirit fell upon them showing they were accepted without circumcision. Does that mean ipso facto, that they need *never* become circumcised? No. They *must* be at sometime as Scripture expressly states... but must they submit to surgery in order to be accepted as members of the community of Israel? No. That was Kefa's point and purpose in speaking.

Yes, Kefa speaks of burdens which neither they nor their fathers could bear, and at this Christian theologians salivate, still trying to study the subject only in an effort to support their long held assumptions. They see this and say, "See! Peter said that keeping the Torah is a burden no one can bear! See! See!" Is that what he said? Or is that what the Christian implied, without regard to the scenario and context of the scene? Kefa said that they should not put burdens on those turning (doing teshuva) to the Elohim of Israel, burdens which neither they nor their fathers could bear...do the words of the emissary of Messiah sound familiar here ? They should, as they are an echo of the Messiah's own words accusing the Pharisees of making up their own rules, falsely attributing them to Moses and forcing the people to comply with them or be rejected as if disobeying Moses. Yeshua called those man-made rules burdensome things which neither they nor their fathers could bear... but of the Torah, what did the Master say? He said that the commandments are not burdensome, and that His yoke (a Hebraic euphemism for the Torah) is easy and light.

And in one final effort to uphold their own antinomian theories, the Christian theologians latch on to the horrible translation of sodzo in the

last verse as “save”. Kefa is recorded as saying that we believe that both Jew and Greek are “saved” through the grace of the Master Yeshua. But if we don’t need to ignore the totality of the meaning of sodzo we will do well to read this as before as “restored” or “made whole” not as “saved”. What was the goal of all the prophets as spoken of through Ezekiel and Isaiah and Jeremiah? That Israel, which was once divided into two Kingdoms and one of those cut off completely and lost among the other nations would both be brought back and brought back together, restored and made whole. Restored and made whole how? Through faith in Yeshua the Messiah and by the grace. Not by circumcision but by mercy...And according to the Torah, what is the *sign* of the mercies of the Most High? What is the *symbol* of saving grace? What is the *action* that is done in *proof* of our saving faith? ...*circumcision*.

12 Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul, declaring what miracles and wonders Elohim had wrought among the nations by them.

13 And after they had held their peace, Jacob (James) answered, saying, “Men and brethren, listen unto me:

14 Simeon has declared how Elohim at the first did visit the nations, to take out of them a people for His Name.

15 And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

16 ‘After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

17 That the residue of men might seek after the Sovereign, and all the nations, upon whom My Name is called,’ says YHWH, who does all these things.”

18 Known unto Elohim are all His works from the beginning of the world.

19 Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the nations are turning (doing teshuva) to Elohim.

20 But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from promiscuity, and from things strangled, and from blood.

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

Once Kefa had the assembly more or less silenced on the debate front and inclined to hear more, Sha'ul and Barnabah spoke up to lead the gathering further in this line of thinking. Kefa gave the one example of sebomenoi expressing faith in the Savior and experiencing Heavenly approval of them without circumcision. But Kefa didn't take a long journey around the Roman world from city to city seeing this same phenomenon repeated over and over again with signs and wonders supporting the sebomenoi being accepted as full members without their members being surgically adjusted. Only Barnabah and Sha'ul could speak to this scenario being duplicated and that over and over again as they alone were there. And in keeping with the Torah they are two faithful witnesses presenting their personal testimony.

Once again this can not be taken as an argument against ever needing to be circumcised since this is a Torah court, and the proceedings are in accordance with the Torah requirements; and the matter is about the status of these new people entering Israel, all males of whom *must* be circumcised at some point. The proof based on the testimony of Sha'ul and Barnabah backing up the words of Kefa is that the *acceptance* in the

community by signs and wonders from Heaven was demonstrated without circumcision. This says *nothing* about the need to submit to the sign of the covenant *thereafter*. They were accepted without the sign like their father Abraham, on the basis of faith, *but on the basis of that same saving faith, they were required thereafter to be circumcised*.

Finally we see Jacob (most often known now as James) the brother of Yeshua our Savior who was the leader of the Jewish sect of The Way in Jerusalem, after having heard all the testimony and considered it, stood up to make his ruling which would be mandatory on the Natzorim people thereafter. And this is where the four requirements are implemented. Pagan converts to The Way, had to avoid, idolatry, promiscuity, strangled meats, and consumption of blood.

Christian theology argues that no more was ever expected or required of converts. The entire discourse is about qualification of entry and reception by the community to be reconned restored to Israelite status for the Lost Ones and being made a whole and complete citizen for those forsaking their pagan heritage for the first time. These four things were firsts *not* the full measure of the men of Israel they were expected to become. How do we know? Firstly because we have not recast this scenario in late Christian perspective to decide that different deeds are happening than those that always had been happening in Hebrew settings. We don't need these people to be Greco-Roman Christians in this time and place. We don't need this to be rebranded as a "church council" in the first years of the Faith. We don't need this to be an issue of salvation by grace verses salvation by works. And we don't need to decide the Torah was being done-away-with or destroyed by these people who keep demonstrating their adherence to it over and again.

Moreover, this is the culmination of prophecy as Jacob calls our attention to in citing his reasons for his decision. He cites three reasons actually... These four requirements for entry to the Israelite community were because he didn't see a reason to overburden beginners who were trying to turn to the Truth, because he believed the prophecies of old were being fulfilled in this, and because as he cites in the last verse here, that "Moses is preached in every city every Sabbath". It is clear from this call-out that Jacob was fully expecting three other things to follow: that these new disciples would be fine starting with the basics of four entry points because they would be called to the assemblies to learn the rest later, that these assemblies would be held on the Sabbath, and that what they would learn there was the words of Moses, the Torah.

Salvation was never at issue and circumcision never in question. Only fellowship and a matter of timing. Nothing has ever been removed of all that our Heavenly Father ever instituted as eternal truth. No covenant ever overturned in favor of another. No detail undone or otherwise destroyed. And never was any "new way" introduced to the nullification of the "old". The Way was simply opened to allow the pagan-born to enter in as unheard of before and for the Lost Tribes to return as not yet realized unto that time.



templecrier.com