Research on: The Jerusalem Council

“The **Council of Jerusalem** or **Apostolic Council** was held in [Jerusalem](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_centers_of_Christianity#Jerusalem) around 50 AD. . . The council decided that [Gentile](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentile) converts to Christianity were not obligated to keep most of the [Law of Moses](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Moses), including the rules concerning [circumcision of males](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumcision_controversy_in_early_Christianity). The Council did, however, retain the prohibitions on eating [blood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taboo_food_and_drink#Blood), [meat containing blood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taboo_food_and_drink#Blood), and meat of animals not properly slain, and on [fornication](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Porneia) and [idolatry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idolatry_and_Christianity), sometimes referred to as the Apostolic Decree or Jerusalem Quadrilateral” (Wikipedia)

“Much was at stake in the decision of this gathering of the Church. If the Jewish party triumphed, Christianity sank to the level of a Jewish sect. The question brought up for decision was difficult, and there was much to be said for the view that the Mosaic law was binding on Gentile converts. It must have been an uprooting of deepest beliefs for a Jewish Christian to contemplate the abrogation of that law, venerable by its divine origin, by its hoary antiquity, by its national associations. We must not be hard upon men who clung to it; but we should learn from their final complete drifting away from Christianity how perilous is the position which insists on the necessity to true discipleship of any outward observance” (MacLaren’s Expositions on the Bible, www.biblehub.com).

Acts 15:1, 2, 7-12

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

“The immediate occasion for the Jerusalem Council was the visit to Syrian Antioch of some Jewish Christians from Jerusalem and their teaching that circumcision was essential to salvation. These became known as “Judaizers,” and their comrades were promoting similar teaching among Paul’s converts in Galatia.

“Both James and Peter were interested in minimizing conflicts between Judaism and Jewish Christianity. The “Judaizers”, on the other hand, while probably first justifying their legalism on practical grounds, were arguing as a matter of principle for the necessity of circumcision and a Jewish lifestyle” (EBC.9.442).

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

“With the issues highlighted by the ‘sharp dispute and debate’ that followed, Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with certain others from the Antioch congregation, to go up to Jerusalem to meet with ‘the apostles and elders’ about the matter.

“The church at Antioch was concerned with the “Judaizers’” challenge to the legitimacy of a direct ministry to Gentiles and to the validity of the conversion of Gentiles to Christ apart from any commitment to Judaism” (EBC.9.443).

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

“Much disputing - Or rather, much inquiry or deliberation. With our word disputing we commonly connect the idea of heat and anger. This is not necessarily implied in the word used here. It might have been calm, solemn, deliberate inquiry; and there is no evidence that it was conducted with undue warmth or anger.

“Peter rose up and said - Peter was probably the most aged, and was most accustomed to speak, [Acts 2:14](http://biblehub.com/acts/2-14.htm), etc.; [Acts 3:6](http://biblehub.com/acts/3-6.htm), [Acts 3:12](http://biblehub.com/acts/3-12.htm). Besides, there was a particular reason for his speaking here, as he had been engaged in similar scenes, and understood the case, and had had evidence that God had converted sinners without the Mosaic rites, and knew that it would have been inexpedient to have imposed these rites on those who had thus been converted.

“That the Gentiles - Cornelius, and those who were assembled with him at Caesarea. This was the first case that had occurred, and therefore it was important to appeal to it” (Barnes Notes, www.biblehub.com).

“Peter was no longer the chief figure of the Jerusalem church. James had at some time earlier assumed that role. But Peter was dominant in the Jewish Christian mission and responsible to the Jerusalem church. And it is as a missionary not an administrator, that Peter spoke up and reminded the council that God had chosen to have the Gentiles hear the gospel from him and accept it. He argued that since God had established such a precedent within the Jewish Christian mission some ten years earlier – though it had not been recognized by the church as such – God has already indicated his approval of a direct Gentile outreach. . . Peter had evidently completely recovered from his temporary lapse at Syrian Antioch. Now he saw matters more clearly and was ready to agree with Paul’s position that there is ‘no difference’ between Jews and Gentiles and that the Mosaic law was a ‘yoke”’ (EBC.9.443).

8And God, which knoweth the hearts, bare them witness, giving them the Holy Ghost, even as *he did* unto us;

“And God, which knoweth the hearts - [Acts 1:24](http://biblehub.com/acts/1-24.htm). God thus knew whether they were true converts or not, and gave a demonstration that he acknowledged them as his.

Giving them the Holy Ghost ... - [Acts 10:45-46](http://biblehub.com/acts/10-45.htm)” (Barnes’ Notes, [www.biblehub.com)](http://www.biblehub.com))

“God, which knoweth the hearts—implying that the real question for admission to full standing in the visible Church is the state of the heart. Hence, though that cannot be known by men, no principle of admission to church privileges which reverses this can be sound” (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown, [www.biblehub.com)](http://www.biblehub.com)).

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

“And put no difference ... - Though they had not been circumcised, and though they did not conform to the Law of Moses. Thus, God showed that the observance of these rites was not necessary in order to the true conversion of people, and to acceptance with him. He did not give us, who are Jews, any advantage over them, but justified and purified all in the same manner.

“Purifying their hearts - Thus, giving the best evidence that he had renewed them, and admitted them to favor with him.

“By faith - By believing on the Lord Jesus Christ. This demonstrated that the plan on which God was now about to show favor to people was not by external rites and ceremonies, but by a scheme which required faith as the only condition of acceptance. It is further implied here that there is no true faith which does not purify the heart” (Barnes’ Notes, www.biblehub.com).

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

“Why tempt ye God? - Why provoke him to displeasure? Why, since he has shown his determination to accept them without such rites, do you provoke him by attempting to impose on his own people rites without his authority, and as against his manifest will? The argument is, that God had already accepted them. To attempt to impose these rites would be to provoke him to anger; to introduce observances which he had shown it was his purpose should now be abolished.

“To put a yoke - That which would be burdensome and oppressive, or which would infringe on their just freedom as the children of God. It is called in [Galatians 5:1](http://biblehub.com/galatians/5-1.htm), "a yoke of bondage." A "yoke" is an emblem of slavery or bondage [1 Timothy 6:1](http://biblehub.com/1_timothy/6-1.htm); or of affliction [Lamentations 3:27](http://biblehub.com/lamentations/3-27.htm); or of punishment [Lamentations 1:14](http://biblehub.com/lamentations/1-14.htm); or of oppressive and burdensome ceremonies, as in this place, or of the restraints of Christianity, [Matthew 11:29-30](http://biblehub.com/matthew/11-29.htm). In this place those rites are called a yoke, because:

(1) They were burdensome and oppressive; and,

(2) Because they would be an infringement of Christian freedom. One design of the gospel was to set people free from such rites and ceremonies.

“Which neither our fathers ... - Which have been found burdensome at all times. They were expensive, and painful, and oppressive; and as they had been found to be so, it was not proper to impose them on the Gentile converts, but should rather rejoice at any evidence that the people of God might be delivered from them.

“Were able to bear - Which are found to be oppressive and burdensome. They were attended with great inconvenience and many transgressions, as the consequence” (Barnes’ Notes, [www.biblehub.com)](http://www.biblehub.com)).

11But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they.

“But we believe - We apostles, who have been with them, and have seen the evidences of their acceptance with God.

“Through the grace ... - By the grace or mercy of Christ alone, without any of the rites and ceremonies of the Jews.

“We shall be saved, even as they - In the same manner, by the mere grace of Christ. So far from being necessary to their salvation, they are really of no use in ours. We are to be saved, not by these ceremonies, but by the mere mercy of God in the Redeemer. They should not, therefore, be imposed on others” (Barnes’ Notes, www.biblehub.com).

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

“*kept silence*] The authority with which he could speak through whom God had first opened the door of faith to the Gentiles must have silenced opposition. For he like themselves had had prejudices to overcome before his mission to Cornelius” (Cambridge Bible, www.biblehub.com).

“Luke’s reference to the silence of the assembly after Peter spoke implies that the turning point had come. Though resisted at Jerusalem for almost a decade, the precedent of Cornelius’s conversion had opened the way for Barnabas and Paul’s report of God’s validation of their missionary policy through ‘miraculous signs and wonders’” (EBC.9.445).

“. . . after the impressive hush following his eager words, Barnabas and Paul tell their story once more, and clinch the nail driven by Peter by asserting that God had already by ‘signs and wonders’ given His sanction to the admission of Gentiles without circumcision. Characteristically, in Jerusalem Barnabas is restored to his place above Paul, and is named first as speaking first, and regarded by the Jerusalem Church as the superior of the missionary pair.

“The next speaker is James, not an Apostle, but the bishop of the Church in Jerusalem, of whom tradition tells that he was a zealous adherent to the Mosaic law in his own person, and that his knees were as hard as a camel’s through continual prayer. It is singular that this meeting should be so often called ‘the Apostolic council,’ when, as a fact, only one Apostle said a word, and he not as an Apostle, but as the chosen instrument to preach to the Gentiles. ‘The elders,’ of whose existence we now hear for the first time in this wholly incidental manner, were associated with the Apostles {[Acts 15:6](http://biblehub.com/acts/15-6.htm)}, and the ‘multitude’ {[Acts 15:12](http://biblehub.com/acts/15-12.htm)} is most naturally taken to be ‘the whole Church’ {[Acts 15:22](http://biblehub.com/acts/15-22.htm)}. James represents the eldership, and as bishop in Jerusalem and an eager observer of legal prescriptions, fittingly speaks. His words practically determined the question” (MacLaren’s Expositions on the Bible, [www.biblehub.com)](http://www.biblehub.com)).

“*and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul*— Who confirmed Peter’s reasoning, by *declaring what miracles God had wrought among the Gentiles*— By their ministry; of which, the chief miracle was, that he had amply conferred the gifts of the Holy Spirit on the believing Gentiles, although they were uncircumcised. *After they had*done speaking, *James,*the son of Alpheus, one of the apostles, *answered*those who were for subjecting the Gentiles to the law, by adding, in supplement to Peter’s reasoning, that the prophets had foretold the conversion of the Gentiles; so that it was always God’s purpose to make them his people” (Benson Commentary, www.biblehub.com).