

Was Paul Championing a New Freedom from—or End to—Jewish Law?

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The “Paul and the law” debate has been ongoing since the time of Paul, and there is no sign of it winding down. One person quotes Romans 10:4, “Christ is the end of the law,” while another responds with 1 Timothy 1:8, “We know that the law is good if it is used properly.” Back and forth, like a table-tennis game, the discussion continues. Is there anything new worth saying on the subject of Paul and the law? Many do not think so, and so commentaries recycle the same arguments that have been made for almost two thousand years.

While I cannot claim to have discovered some secret knowledge that will cause everyone to agree on the issue of Paul and the law, I do have an observation to share that I think has the potential to cut through the morass surrounding the specific question of whether Paul was championing a new freedom from—or end to—Jewish law for Jewish people.

Here is my little observation that actually makes a big difference. It is that among all the texts that address the issue of Paul and Jewish law, not all of these texts are equal. There are several texts that are weightier than the rest, and we should privilege these texts. To followers of Jesus, I realize this may sound highly unorthodox, since we are used to thinking of all Scripture being the same in value. After all, Paul himself says in 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God breathed.” While that is certainly true, I would argue that some parts of Scripture have greater weight than others when weighing in on the subject of Paul’s view of Jewish law as it applies to Jewish people.

The notion that some parts of Scripture have greater weight than others is not foreign to Jewish thinking. In fact, it is normative. The Torah is the foundational revelation of God, and the prophets and apostles of Israel consistently refer back to the five books of Moses in order to validate later revelation. Similarly, the four Gospels function as a kind of foundational revelation within the New Testament corpus. The Jewish authors of the apostolic writings regularly point back to the life, death, and resurrection of Yeshua—the life-giving story that is told in the four Gospels. As Jonathan Pennington concludes in his book *Reading the Gospels Wisely*:

I raise this issue of a “canon within a canon” and its unavoidability because in this concluding chapter I want to make a bold suggestion: namely, we should have a conscious canon within the canon, that is, a group of texts that guide and direct our overall reading of Scripture. And if you’ve read this far, you are probably not surprised that I believe this group of guiding texts is none other than the four-fold witness of the Gospels. I am suggesting not that the Gospels in any way exclude or mitigate against the witness of the rest of the Scriptures, but that they do hold a privileged place and controlling position. ... It seeks to recognize that not all writings are meant to be as comprehensive and universally applicable as others; some writings simply have more weight than others, and some texts and ideas provide guiding light to understanding other ideas.¹

If this is accurate, and I think it is, then the next logical question to ask is: What are the weightier texts that address the issue of Paul’s view of Jewish law in relation to Jewish people? And what should be our basis or criterion for deciding which texts are given this privileged status?

In answering the second question first, I propose that the criterion for identifying a weightier text should be that the text itself or the context of the text calls out for the text to be privileged. Let me put it in more personal terms. If your writings sparked controversy, and people were interpreting them in different ways, in some cases misinterpreting them,

1. Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 230, 249.

what would you say to communicate that you are now setting the record straight? How would you drive home the point that you are about to clarify everything and bring closure to the controversy? Maybe you would say, “I am now setting the record straight concerning this.” This would be the cue that what you are about to share has a special status, since it is your intention for this clarification to interpret your previous work. And even if there were to be further misunderstanding for whatever reason, the fact remains that by giving the clarification you have taken the initiative to set the record straight.

In the same way, there are Pauline texts, and texts about Paul, that essentially cry out with the words, “I am now setting the record straight.” These are the weightier texts. These are the closure texts. These are the final word texts, the full-stop texts. These are the texts that we should give special attention to in our discussion of Paul’s view of Jewish law in relation to Jewish people.

There are at least three texts in the Pauline corpus and Acts that, in my opinion, rise to the level of communicating the equivalent of the words: “I am now setting the record straight concerning what Paul teaches about Jewish law for Jewish people.” One of these texts lays down an apostolic “rule” for all of Paul’s congregations, another is the ruling of an apostolic council, and the final text describes a public testimony before witnesses on the level of an oath.

1. 1 CORINTHIANS 7:17–20

The first text, which represents an apostolic rule, is 1 Corinthians 7:17–20.² Here Paul writes: “This is my *rule* in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. ... Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called” (NRSV).

2. See David J. Rudolph, “Paul’s ‘Rule in All the Churches’ (1 Cor 7:17–24) and Torah-Defined Ecclesiological Variegation,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 5 (2010): 1–23; Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2011), 75–88.

What is a rule? The Greek word *diatassomai* in 1 Corinthians 7:17 refers to “detailed instructions as to what must be done.”³ Rules are made to avoid misunderstandings and ambiguities. A rule is an authoritative bottom line. In the biblical context, a rule can be a single text of Scripture that is given a special status in the canon because it serves as a guide for interpreting other passages of Scripture. For example, the golden rule, which echoes Hillel’s rule (b. Shabb. 31a), helps us not to miss the forest for the trees in our understanding of God’s word. It states, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matt 7:12 NLT).

Another example is how the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Torah) and the Nash Papyrus introduce the Shema (Deut 6:4-5) with a verse that is not found in the Masoretic Text, “These are the laws and the rulings which Adonai commanded Israel in the desert when they left Egypt,” thus ascribing special weight to the Shema. Jesus does something similar when he says: “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt 22:37-40 NRSV). In the first century CE, various Jewish sects had rules that established community norms, such as Serekh ha-Yakhad, also known as 1QS (Community Rule) at Qumran.

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul’s bottom line, his rule in all the churches, is that the circumcised are to remain circumcised and not become uncircumcised. Here “circumcision” is a metonymy for Jewish identity and lifestyle. Paul is saying, “If you are Jewish, stay Jewish, and do not stop being Jewish (i.e., don’t assimilate).” This is Paul’s rule, not just in Corinth, but in all of his congregations.

Why does Paul refer to Jews as “the circumcised”? It is because circumcision “was not merely a single act of law-keeping. It was the first act of full covenant membership and obligation. ‘Circumcision’ could stand

3. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 33.325; Frederick W. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 237.

metonymically for a whole people precisely because it characterized a people's whole existence, a complete way of life."⁴

Romans 2:25 and Galatians 5:3 confirm that Paul linked circumcision to law observance. He writes in Romans 2:25—"Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision" (NRSV). In Galatians 5:3, Paul makes the same point in more explicit language—"Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the *entire law*" (NRSV).

Paul's peculiar wording in 1 Corinthians 7:18—"Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision"—is a Jewish idiom in the Greek that points back to the Maccabean period, when many Hellenistic Jews rejected their Jewish identity, even to the extent of surgically altering their bodies so that they appeared to have a foreskin. First Maccabees 1:11–15 describes Jews who removed the marks of circumcision as "those who abandoned the holy covenant."⁵

As a first-century Jew, Paul would have celebrated Hanukkah. During this festival, the story of 1 Maccabees was recounted and Jews were reminded to follow the example of the Maccabees, who remained faithful to God's Torah, in contrast to the apostate Jews who removed the marks of circumcision. This is the imagery that Paul is invoking in 1 Corinthians 7. He also describes Jewish identity as a God-given "calling" (*klēsis*) in 1 Corinthians 7:20.⁶ In sum, Paul's bottom line, his rule, is that Jews who follow Jesus, like Paul himself, should remain in their calling as Jews and not assimilate.

4. James D. G. Dunn, "Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but ... (Gal 5.2–12; 6.12–16; cf. 1 Cor 7.17–20)," in *La Foi Agissant par L'amour (Galates 4,12–6,16)*, ed. A Vanhoye (Rome: Benedictina, 1996), 86. See 1 Macc 1:48, 60–61; 2:46; 2 Macc 6:10; Josephus, *Ant.* 13.257–58, 318; Jub. 15.25–34.

5. "In those days certain renegades came out from Israel and misled many, saying, 'Let us go and make a covenant with the Gentiles around us, for since we separated from them many disasters have come upon us.'" This proposal pleased them, and some of the people eagerly went to the king, who authorized them to *observe the ordinances of the Gentiles*. So they built a gymnasium in Jerusalem, according to Gentile custom, and *removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant*" (1 Macc. 1:11–15).

6. See Paul's use of *klēsis* in Rom 11:28–29, where he here links the irrevocable *klēsis* of Israel with the reception of God's "gifts." Most commentators agree that Paul here alludes back to Rom 9:4–5, where he lists (in the present tense) the gifts of God to Israel, which include the law and covenants.

2. ACTS 15

A second text that sets the record straight on the matter of Paul's view of Jewish law in relation to Jewish people is the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council decision. The weightiness of this text derives from its being the ruling of a first-century apostolic council. Luke writes:

Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to send men chosen from among them, Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, leaders among the brothers, to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent this letter with them:

“From the apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, greetings! Since we have heard that some have gone out from among us with no orders from us and have confused you, upsetting your minds by what they said, we have unanimously decided to choose men to send to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas who will tell you these things themselves in person. For it seemed best to the Holy Spirit and to us not to place any greater burden on you than these necessary rules: that you abstain from meat that has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what has been strangled and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from doing these things, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15:22–29 NET)

While the significance of the Jerusalem Council decision for exempting gentile believers from proselyte circumcision and full Torah observance has long been recognized in New Testament studies, the implications for Jewish believers in Jesus has only recently become a topic of discussion in Acts scholarship. As F. Scott Spencer points out, “The representatives at the Jerusalem conference—including Paul—agreed only to release Gentile believers from the obligation of circumcision; the possibility of nullifying this covenantal duty for Jewish disciples was never considered.”⁷ Moreover, if the Jerusalem leadership had viewed circumcision as optional

7. F. Scott Spencer, *Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 159.

for Jesus-believing Jews, there would have been no point in debating the question of exemption for Jesus-believing gentiles or delivering a letter specifically addressed to these gentiles. Michael Wyschogrod rightly notes that “both sides agreed that Jewish believers in Jesus remained obligated to circumcision and the Mosaic Law.”⁸ A growing number of New Testament scholars now concur with Wyschogrod that an important implication of the Jerusalem Council decision is that Jesus-believing Jews were to remain practicing Jews. It is notable that Paul not only participated in the council’s deliberations but also delivered its ruling, the apostolic decree, to the gentile churches (Acts 15:30–31; 16:4).

While the historical reliability of Acts is a debated question in New Testament studies today, the historic church from the earliest times has included Acts in the church’s canon of Scripture, with the framers of the canon intentionally placing it before the letters of Paul. Ecclesial theology, therefore, marches to the beat of a different drummer than many in New Testament studies. *Ecclesial theologians, above all, should recognize the weight of this first church council, which was convened by the apostles to set the record straight regarding the role of Jewish law in the life of the church.* The Jerusalem Council, which preceded the First Council of Nicaea by almost three hundred years, should have a unique authority in ecclesial theology to weigh in on the question of Paul’s view of Jewish law in relation to Jesus-believing Jews.

3. ACTS 21:17–26

The third weighty text is Acts 21:17–26. This passage does not represent a rule or a ruling but a public testimony before witnesses, on the level of an oath, to set the record straight concerning Paul’s view of Jewish law.⁹ Luke writes:

8. Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 194.

9. See David J. Rudolph, “Luke’s Portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17–26,” in *The Early Reception of Paul the Second Temple Jew: Text, Narrative and Reception History*, ed. Isaac W. Oliver and Gabriele Boccaccini with Joshua Scott (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 192–205; Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews*, 53–73.

When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. After greeting them, he related one by one the things that God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry. And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.” Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them. (Acts 21:17–26 ESV)

This passage is the most explicit statement in the New Testament that Paul lived as a Torah-observant Jew and taught fellow Jews to remain faithful to Jewish law and custom. Luke included this narrative to resolve controversy over this matter in the *ekklēsia* of his day and to provide a crucial frame of reference for how Paul’s teachings should be interpreted.¹⁰

10. Scholars who question the historical reliability of Acts 21:17–26 typically do so because Luke (1) depicts Paul as a Torah-observant Jew and (2) describes the rumors in Acts 21:20–21, 24 as *false*, not true. Luke’s Paul is regarded as an invention in light of the allegedly law-free Paul of the letters. Notably, the dismissal of Luke’s portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17–26 for these reasons indirectly attests to the reading of Luke’s narrative proposed in this essay: Paul remained a Torah-observant Jew and taught in a way consistent with these convictions. If Acts 21:17–26 is reliable, and this narrative reading is accepted, then the passage has significant interpretive value, since Paul’s testimony that he remained law-observant took place after he wrote Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Romans. Modern exegetes often view Paul’s position

According to the text, Paul arrives in Jerusalem, where he is informed about a rumor that he taught diaspora Jews not to circumcise their children or keep Jewish customs. While Pauline scholars today often echo this law-free image of Paul,¹¹ Luke portrays James and the Jerusalem elders as rejecting the rumor. These leaders attempt to clarify everything by asking Paul to purify himself in the temple among four Nazirites and to pay for the sacrifices the Torah requires to complete their vows (Num 6:1–21).¹² The purpose of this public testimony in James' words is to demonstrate that (1) "there is nothing in what they [the members of the community] have been told about you" (Acts 21:24b)—that is, the rumor that Paul taught Jews not to keep Jewish law was *false*; and (2) "you yourself *also* live in observance of the law" (21:24c), that is, Paul himself remained a Torah-faithful Jew like those "zealous for the law" in Jerusalem (21:20). The prearranged testimony was to communicate this negative and positive message.¹³ Without objection, Paul follows the plan.

This is a lodestar text. To begin with, the presence of James and the elders in Acts 21:17–26 communicates to the reader that this is a "setting the record straight" text. James is the brother of the Messiah, a pillar apostle, head of the Jerusalem Council, leader of the mother congregation,

on the law in these letters as consistent with the rumor described in Acts 21:20–21. See, e.g., N. T. Wright on Rom 14: "Paul did not himself continue to keep the kosher laws, and did not propose to, or require of, other 'Jewish Christians' that they should, either." Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 359. However, if Luke's portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17–26 is reliable and Paul *ipso facto* kept the Jewish food laws because he remained a Torah-observant Jew, then such readings of Rom 14 need to be reassessed, as I have argued elsewhere. See David J. Rudolph, "Paul and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Romans 14:14, 20," in *Paul the Jew: A Conversation between Pauline and Second Temple Scholars*, ed. Carlos A. Segovia and Gabriele Boccaccini (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 151–81. Given Luke's emphasis on how Paul's *teachings* have been misunderstood, Acts 21:17–26 seems to be aimed in part at prompting such reassessments. See Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 164–65.

11. E.g., Michael F. Bird, *An Anomalous Jew: Paul among Jews, Greeks, and Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 7–8.

12. See Roger Tomes, "Why Did Paul Get His Hair Cut? [Acts 18:18; 21:23–24]," in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays*, ed. C. M. Tuckett (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 191–92.

13. "Rather than resorting to a *textual* (letter) solution with its attendant risks of mis-handling both in terms of delivery and interpretation, James proposes a *ritual* (Nazirite) confirmation of Paul's loyalty to the Jewish law (21:23–24, 26). As interpreters of Paul well know, letters can be 'hard to understand' (2 Pet 3:16); acts often speak louder and clearer than words" (Spencer, *Acts*, 200).

and known as “the Just” (according to Hegesippus; see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.3–4). Luke brings James into Acts when there is a need to resolve a major controversy.¹⁴ In early Christian tradition, James is a Nazirite (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 2.23.5), a Jew set apart for the Lord who maintains a level of Torah observance that is beyond reproach. “James, whose authority as a law-abiding Jew is not questioned in the early church, can serve as witness to Paul’s faithfulness to the law.”¹⁵

Similarly, the elders represent, next to the apostles, the highest level of ecclesial authority in the community of Jesus believers. This is the case in Acts 15 and 16 where Luke identifies “the apostles and elders” as the halakhic decisors who drew up the apostolic decree, a ruling binding on all gentile believers (Acts 15:22; 16:4; 21:25). By bringing the elders into Acts 21:17–26, Luke communicates that it is a matter of utmost importance with implications for the whole church. The elders’ support for Paul attests to his covenant fidelity.¹⁶

The four Nazirites in Acts 21:17–26 also serve a narrative role in corroborating that Paul is a Torah-faithful Jew and does not preach a law-free gospel to Jews. Bart Koet notes:

After the accusations in Acts 18:12–13 about Paul not being lawabiding enough, this vow and the suggestion that it is a Nazirite vow, shows the reader that Paul is even more than lawabiding, he is doing more than what is strictly necessary. ... By connecting Paul twice with the phenomenon of Naziritism as an answer to critics on his attitude towards the Law, Luke demonstrates the importance of Paul fulfilling even supererogatory rituals to show his lawabidingness.¹⁷

14. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 185–87, 195–96, 199.

15. Kalervo Salo, *Luke’s Treatment of the Law: A Redaction-Critical Investigation* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1991), 266.

16. This section is partially adapted from David J. Rudolph, “Luke’s Portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17–26,” in *The Early Reception of Paul the Second Temple Jew*, 192–205. See Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews*, 53–73.

17. Bart J. Koet, “Why Did Paul Shave His Hair (Acts 18, 18)? Nazirate and Temple in the Book of Acts,” in *The Centrality of Jerusalem: Historical Perspectives*, ed. M. Poorthuis and Ch. Safrai (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 141. See Stuart D. Chepey, *Nazirites in Late Second Temple*

The Nazirite exceeded the standards of God's law and was a symbol of Torah-observant Israel (Amos 2:11–12; 1 Macc. 3:49).¹⁸ As Koet puts it, James “(who himself is depicted as a lifelong Nazir and as an example of lawabidingness in Eusebius’ *Church History*; see Book II XXIII 4–6) suggests to Paul to pay for four Nazirites as a proof of his lawabidingness. By paying for the expenses of the sacrifices of those men Paul associates himself with their lawabidingness.”¹⁹ In the context of Acts 18:18—where Paul takes a Nazirite vow²⁰—and Acts 21:17–26—where Paul pays for four men to fulfill their Nazirite vows²¹—Luke portrays Paul as a Messiah-

Judaism: A Survey of Ancient Jewish Writings, the New Testament, Archaeological Evidence, and Other Writings from Late Antiquity (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 66, 173–74.

18. Cf. Num 6:1–2; Judg 13:7; 16:17; 1 Sam 1:11; Luke 1:15. See Markus Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 36–48.

19. Koet, “Why Did Paul Shave His Hair (Acts 18, 18)?,” 139.

20. Neusner argues that Paul himself was under a Nazirite vow in Acts 21 and that James advised Paul to fulfill his obligations with four other Nazirites (Jacob Neusner, “Vow-Taking, the Nazirites, and the Law: Does James’ Advice to Paul Accord with Halakhah?,” in *James the Just and Christian Origins*, ed. Bruce Chilton and Craig A. Evans [Leiden: Brill, 1999], 81). While the scenario is possible, Luke’s narrative indicates that Paul had already concluded a Nazirite vow in Cenchreae (Acts 18:18) and presented Nazirite offerings during a prior trip to Jerusalem (Acts 18:21–22). This conclusion is supported by the Western text of Acts 18:21 and Luke’s use of *anabainō* in Acts 18:22. For this reason, the NRSV translates Acts 18:22, “When he had landed at Caesarea, he went up to Jerusalem and greeted the church, and then went down to Antioch.” In Acts 18:21, Codex Bezae and the majority of Byzantine manuscripts insert, “I must at all costs celebrate the coming feast day in Hierosoluma” (Josep Rius-Camps and Jenny Read-Heimerdinger, *The Message of Acts in Codex Bezae: A Comparison with the Alexandrian Tradition III* [London: T&T Clark, 2007], 384). The case for the Codex Bezae insertion is defended in J. M. Ross, “The Extra Words in Acts 18:21,” *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992): 247–49. Against the Western addition, see Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1975), 465; W. A. Strange, *The Problem of the Text of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47, 163. It would appear that Paul was only in need of ritual purification in Acts 21.

21. The four in Acts 21:24, 26–27 were in need of purification, perhaps due to corpse defilement which necessitated the seven-day purification ritual described in Num 19:1–13 (cf. Num 6:9–12; 31:19; m. Naz. 7:3; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.205; Acts 20:9–10). Josephus mentions that Jews ritually purified themselves to enter the enclosure of the temple and that it was required of pilgrims who came to offer sacrifices (*Ant.* 12.145; *J.W.* 1.229; cf. Lev 23:17–19; Acts 20:16; 24:17–18; John 11:55). For a discussion of the possible reasons for purification in Acts 21:17–26, see Roy E. Gane, “The Function of the Nazirite’s Concluding Purification Offering,” in *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible*, ed. B. J. Schwartz, et al. (London: T & T Clark International, 2008), 9–17; David E. Aune, “Paul, Ritual Purity, and the Ritual Baths South of the Temple Mount (Acts 21:15–28),” in *Celebrating Paul: Festschrift in Honor of Jerome Murphy-O’Connor and Joseph A. Fitzmyer*, ed. P. Spitaler (Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2011), 290–318.

confessing Jew who is both law-abiding and encourages fellow Jews to be law-abiding.

The location also serves to validate Paul's testimony. The temple was regarded in Israel as a "holy place" where people took oaths to resolve controversy.²² In Acts 21:26, Paul publicly testifies in the temple, before God and altar, that the rumors about him are unfounded and that he remains a Torah-observant Jew. His ritual actions in this sacred place are the equivalent of a sworn testimony to set the record straight on this issue once and for all.

The timing of Acts 21:17–26 is key. It is the third month of the Torah's calendar and the Jewish world is celebrating the pilgrimage festival of *Shavuot* (Pentecost).²³ Josephus records that on the "arrival of Pentecost ... a countless multitude flocked in from Galilee, from Idumaea, from Jericho, and from Peraea beyond the Jordan" to present festal offerings (*J.W.* 2:42–43). Paul was one of these Jewish pilgrims "in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost" to "offer sacrifices" (Acts 20:16; 24:17). In Acts 21:17–26, Paul (surrounded by Nazirites who drew crowds because of their piety and lion-like appearance) bore witness in the temple on Pentecost that he remained a Torah-observant Jew, and Jewish pilgrims from around the world, including many of Paul's detractors, witnessed this public declaration (Acts 21:27–28). James' plan was for this picture of Paul to be widely seen and shared: "Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law" (Acts 21:24).

The rumor that Paul taught Jews to abandon Jewish life spread to Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean world and resulted in numerous occasions like Acts 21:21, where Paul had to defend himself. Acts 21:17–26 may be seen as the center of a trajectory of seven defenses in Luke's narrative aimed at responding to this false rumor and convincing the reader that Paul remained a Torah-observant Jew (Acts 16:3; 18:18; 21:17–26; 23:6; 24:14, 16; 25:8; 28:17). This is a major theme of Acts. As Isaac Oliver puts it, "It seems likely that Acts was written precisely to counter the rumors

22. Acts 6:13; 21:28; 1 Kgs 8:31–32; 2 Chron 6:22–23; Neh 5:12; cf. Matt 23:16.

23. Acts 20:16; cf. Lev 23:15–21; Deut 16:9–11, 16.

circulating among Jewish followers of Jesus and Jews in general that Paul was an apostate.”²⁴

Leading up to Acts 21:17–26, Luke informs his audience that Jews in Corinth accused Paul of “persuading people to worship God in ways that are contrary to the law” (Acts 18:13). The narrator addresses the false charge by placing it between Paul’s circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:3 and Paul taking a Nazirite vow in Acts 18:18—two sacred rituals that demonstrate Paul not only observed the Torah but went above and beyond the call of duty to the Torah.²⁵ Acts 21:17–26 then puts the nail in the coffin of the slander.

In the chapters following Acts 21:17–26, Paul confirms four times that he keeps the Torah and that he has done nothing against the law or the customs of his people:

Confirmation 1: “Brothers, I am [present tense] a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” (Acts 23:6 *ESV*; see Acts 26:5).²⁶

Confirmation 2: “But this I admit to you ... I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets. ... I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people” (Acts 24:14, 16 *NRSV*).

24. Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 4.

25. Paul’s circumcision of Timothy implements the implication of the Jerusalem Council decision, that Jews should be circumcised in keeping with the “covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7:8; Gen 17:9–14). From a literary perspective, Paul’s circumcision of Timothy informs the reader in advance that the later accusations leveled against Paul, that he taught diaspora Jews not to circumcise their sons (Acts 21:21), are false. The context of Acts 15–16 suggests that Luke’s explanatory statement (“because of the Jews who were in those places”) does not mean that the *act of circumcision* was an expedient, but that the *timing of the circumcision* was an expedient. See Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews*, 23–27; Christopher Bryan, “A Further Look at Acts 16:1–3,” *JBL* 107 (1988): 293; Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE*, 433; Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120–22.

26. “The RSV is probably correct in translating the aorist *ezēsa* by ‘I have lived,’ instead of by the past tense as in AV, RV, NEB. Not merely would there have been little point in stressing to King Agrippa what he had done, if he no longer did it, but in addition it hardly brings out the force of the *καὶ νῦν* that follows, which implies not a contradiction but rather an intensification.” See H. L. Ellison, “Paul and the Law—‘All Things to All Men,’” in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and R. P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 199.

Confirmation 3: “I have in no way committed an offense against the law of the Jews, or against the temple, or against the emperor” (Acts 25:8 NRSV).

Confirmation 4: “Brothers, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our ancestors, yet I was arrested in Jerusalem” (Acts 28:17 NRSV).

In literary context, each of these four confirmations point back to Acts 21:17–26.²⁷ One may ask what more Luke could have included in his narrative to express that Paul was a Torah-observant Jew. Acts is replete with statements that describe Paul as faithful to Jewish law and custom; statements to the contrary are consistently identified as false rumors.

A more detailed examination of the text of Acts 21:17–26, the chief defense, adds lexical and contextual support to the above conclusions:

1. James maintains that Paul “observes the law” (*phylassōn ton nomon* [Acts 21:24]). The language (in the present active tense) refers to careful observance of the law as a whole (see Gal 6:13; Rom 2:26):

Many NT occurrences of *phulassō* speak of *observing* the law or commandments (used thus also in the LXX). The basic idea of “keeping a law, etc. from being broken” (BAGD s.v. 1.f) yields the meaning *observe, follow, keep*. Initially this refers to observance of the Torah, the law as a whole (*nomon*: Acts 7:53; 21:24; Gal. 6:13), the commandments (*entolas*: Mk. 10:19; Mt. 19:17; Lk. 18:20), or individual provisions among them (*dikaiōmata*: Rom. 2:26). In the Synoptics as in Acts and Paul this usage is linked with criticism of Jewish observance of the law (a significant exception is Acts 21:24, where Paul is presented as being in agreement with the Jewish Christians).²⁸

27. David L. Balch, *Contesting Ethnicities and Images: Studies in Acts and Art* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 103–4; Bart J. Koet, “Purity and Impurity of the Body in Luke-Acts,” in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*, ed. M. J. H. M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 104.

28. R. Kratz, “*Phulassō*,” in *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. H. Balz and G. Schneider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:442.

Phulassō ... serves esp. to express the divinely required attitude of man to the divine covenant, Exod. 19:5 etc., and to the cultic statutes, laws, commandments, admonitions and warnings; in this sense it becomes a tt. [*terminus technicus*] in the legal traditions from Exod. to Deut.²⁹

Phulassō ... to continue to keep a law or commandment from being broken.³⁰

2. Luke's use of covenant imagery—zealous for the law, Moses, circumcision, Nazirites, ritual purification, temple, sacrifice, Pentecost season (when the law was given)—adds to the covenant-keeping connotation of *phyllassōn ton nomon* in Acts 21:24.³¹

3. The *kai* in *alla stoicheis kai autos* (Acts 21:24) is emphatic,³² as in the ESV (“you yourself also [*kai*] live in observance of the law”), and identifies Paul with the antecedent—the thousands of Jesus-believing Jews in Jerusalem who are “zealous for the law.” Paul’s identification with *frum* Jews is also vividly expressed in the picture of him leading the four Nazirites (the most zealous of the zealous) into the temple (“Then Paul took the men ... he entered the temple *with them*” [21:26 NRSV]). Here Paul is numbered among the “zealous for the law.”³³ James’ plan is for the Jewish world to know that Paul, whom Luke describes as “a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees” in the present tense, continues to “observe the law” like the “zealous for the law” and teaches in a way consistent with these convictions (Acts 21:20, 24; 23:6).³⁴ Luke’s positive emphasis on Paul being “zealous for the law” may

29. G. Bertram, “*Phulassō*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 9:237.

30. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1068. See Louw and Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1:468.

31. See Balch, *Contesting Ethnicities and Images*, 116.

32. “The conjunction is emphatic (‘you also’).” See Mikeal C. Parsons and Martin M. Culy, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 412. Most English translations of Acts 21:24 leave the *kai* untranslated; exceptions include the NRSV, ESV, NJB, NASB, ASV, KJV. See John 7:10.

33. Chepey, *Nazirites in Late Second Temple Judaism*, 174.

34. See Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 14; Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 71; Jervell, *Luke and the People of God*, 159, 163, 169;

explain why the Muratorian Canon (ca. 170 CE) comments that “Paul had taken [Luke] with him as one zealous for the law.”³⁵

4. The use of *stoicheis* in Acts 21:24 (see Rom 4:12; Gal 5:25) suggests a consistency of lifestyle.³⁶ It can be variously translated: “live in” (ESV) or “live in conformity with” (NET). James’ point is that Paul *walked the walk* of a Torah-faithful Jew.

5. Acts 21:17–26 is the mirror text of Acts 15. James anticipates Paul’s concern that his public testimony may be misinterpreted by gentile believers to mean that they too should be fully Torah observant. He reassures Paul that the Gentile believers will not misunderstand because “as for the Gentiles who have become believers, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication” (Acts 21:25 NRSV).³⁷ Here James restates the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council decision that exempted Jesus-believing gentiles from circumcision and other Jewish-specific requirements of the Torah: “James parallels the necessity of Jews keeping the law with the necessity of Gentiles to keep the Apostolic decree (21:25).”³⁸ This mirroring between the Jerusalem Council decision and Acts 21:17–26 is reinforced by Luke’s reference to Moses in Acts 15:21 and 21:21. There is also a parallel use of *phyllassō* in Acts 16:4 and 21:24.³⁹ Matthew Thiessen sums up the significance of Acts 21:17–26 in relation to Acts 15, “While both Paul and the Jerusalem assembly believe that Jews ought to

David B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 288.

35. Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 305.

36. Chris A. Miller, “The Relationship of Jewish and Gentile Believers to the Law between A.D. 30 and 70 in the Scripture” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1994), 141–42.

37. Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 269.

38. Miller, “Relationship of Jewish and Gentile Believers,” 142. See Daniel Marguerat, “Paul and the Torah in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *Torah in the New Testament: Papers Delivered at the Manchester-Lausanne Seminar of June 2008*, ed. Michael Tait and Peter Oakes (London: T&T Clark International, 2009), 111; Richard Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Community,” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 75; Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 464, 475.

39. Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews*, 53–59. See also Zachary K. Dawson, “The Book of Acts and Jubilees in Dialogue: A Literary Intertextual Analysis of the Noahide Laws in Acts 15 and 21,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 13 (2017): 9–40.

continue in their observance of the law, both agree that gentiles should not, a decision of the Jerusalem Council that Luke reiterates here (21:25). ... Not only does God not require Jewish Christ followers to abandon law observance, he actually requires them to continue in law observance.”⁴⁰ Paul’s testimony in the temple in 21:26 confirms that he is in accord with this view.

In sum, Luke’s portrait of Paul in Acts 21:17–26 makes clear that Paul remained a Torah-observant Jew after becoming a follower of Jesus and taught in a way that was consistent with these convictions. The text represents Luke’s attempt to (1) resolve controversy over this important matter in the *ekklēsia* of his day and (2) provide a vital frame of reference for how Paul’s teachings on the law in relation to the Jewish people should be interpreted.⁴¹ There is no evidence that Acts 21:17–26 is an example of Paul becoming a Jew to the Jews to win the Jews, as some scholars suggest.⁴² Rather, Paul’s actions were intended to set the record straight that he lived as a Torah-observant Jew and taught fellow Jews to remain faithful to Jewish law and custom. His attempt to settle the matter once and for all was the equivalent of a sworn testimony given in the temple courts, before God and altar, and before myriads of strictly Torah-observant Jews who understood the meaning of his actions.

CONCLUSION

The “Paul and the law” debate has been going on since the first century. On the one hand, some have maintained that Paul viewed Jewish law as something that was superseded, ended, and made superfluous in Christ. On the other hand, some have held that Paul regarded Jewish law as a matter of indifference, expediency, and freedom in Christ. This essay has argued for a third possibility—a Paul who regarded Jewish identity and law

40. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 167. See also Mark S. Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 108–22; George P. Carras, “Observant Jews in the Story of Luke and Acts,” in *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, ed. Joseph Verheyden (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), 693–708. Gentiles should not, that is, in the sense of gentiles taking on circumcision and full Torah observance (Acts 15:5–10, 19, 24, 28; see 1 Cor 7:17–18) as Thiessen confirmed in personal correspondence, 5 January 2017.

41. Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise*, 193–95, 209, 234.

42. Rudolph, *Jew to the Jews*, 67–72.

observance as a matter of calling and covenant fidelity. Moreover, I have proposed that this is the perspective of the three weightiest texts in the New Testament that address the issue of Paul and Jewish law: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 (Paul's rule); Acts 15:22-29 (the Jerusalem Council ruling); and Acts 21:17-26 (Paul's public testimony before God and witnesses in the temple courts). These passages cry out to set the record straight that Paul lived as a Torah-observant Jew and taught fellow Jews to remain faithful to Israel's law and custom.