

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

Too many of today's Messianic people refer to Acts 15, without a great deal of consideration for the context of the events as they took place in the First Century C.E. We often assume things we should not assume, and we overlook things we should not be overlooking. This study examines the scene of Acts 15 in detail, is engaged with current Acts scholarship, and tries to properly evaluate the intentions of the Jerusalem Council.

In the unique commentary *Acts 15 for Practical Messianic*, Messianic Apologetics editor J.K. McKee reviews some of the challenges many of today's Messianic people have, when examining the intentions of the Jerusalem Council. Many important factors regarding why the Jerusalem Council actually met, and how the salvation of the nations was placed within the context of Israel's restoration in Tanach (OT) prophecy, are weighed into the discussion. What do we need to learn from Acts 15? What have we assumed, which needs to be either adjusted or dismissed? What important lessons have we avoided for far too long?

ACTS 15

FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

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J.K. MCKEE

MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS
messianicapologetics.net

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ABBREVIATIONS AND SPECIAL TERMS

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

ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
 AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
 ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
 Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
 Ara: Aramaic
 ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
 ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
 b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
 B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
 BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
 BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
 C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
 CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
 CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
 CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
 CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)
 CJSB: *Complete Jewish Study Bible* (2016)
 DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
 DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
 EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
 EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*
 ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
 Ger: German
 GNT: Greek New Testament
 Grk: Greek

HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
 HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
 Heb: Hebrew
 HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
 IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
 IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
 ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
 IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
 Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
 JBK: *New Jerusalem Bible-Koren* (2000)
 JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
 KJV: King James Version
 Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)
 LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
 LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
 LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
 LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
 LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
 LXX: Septuagint
 m. Mishnah

MARV: Messianic Apologetics
Revised Version*

MT: Masoretic Text

NASB: New American Standard Bible
(1977)

NASU: New American Standard
Update (1995)

NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*

NEB: New English Bible (1970)

Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary
of Old Testament Words*

NETS: New English Translation of the
Septuagint (2007)

NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*

NIDB: *New International Dictionary of
the Bible*

NIV: New International Version
(1984)

NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic
(1985)

NJPS: Tanakh, A New Translation of
the Holy Scriptures (1999)

NKJV: New King James Version (1982)

NRSV: New Revised Standard Version
(1989)

NLT: New Living Translation (1996)

NT: New Testament

OT: Old Testament

REB: Revised English Bible (1989)

RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)

t. Tosefta

Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament

Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon
of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the
New Testament*

TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—
Tree of Life Version (2014)

TNIV: Today's New International
Version (2005)

TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old
Testament*

UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991
Hebrew New Testament revised
edition

v(s). verse(s)

Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository
Dictionary of Old and New
Testament Words*

Vul: Latin Vulgate

YLT: Young's Literal Translation
(1862/1898)

WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

* This is a modified and adapted edition of the public domain World
Messianic Bible (WMB).

PROLOGUE

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

People within today's Messianic sphere of influence, have a wide variety of competing visions and viewpoints as to what this phenomenon should become. Many think that the Messianic movement is only to be a group of Jewish Believers in Yeshua, who can be a part of a relatively cultural homogeneous community of Jews who express trust in Israel's Messiah. This group may have some intermarried couples and a few non-Jewish Believers, but not really anyone else, as the rest of the non-Jewish Believers should just remain a part of the greater Christian Church. Many think that the Messianic movement is to be a "Torah movement," where Jewish and non-Jewish Believers are all welcome, but where our primary emphasis is to study and enforce the Law of Moses, perhaps a bit strictly and rigidly. And there are many other competing, contradictory, and often divisive views out there, of what our faith community should emerge into.

Not enough, given the tenor of the Jerusalem Council, have probably sought the will of the Holy Spirit, which is blind to one's ethnicity, social status, or gender (Acts 15:8-9)—**and is to move forward God's plan at God's pace.**

Given all of the competing agendas which can be present in the Messianic sphere of influence, it should be no surprise that some people are very confused about how to view the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council. For quite some time I have known that a detailed examination of Acts 15 was going to be necessary. While I am of the conviction that the Torah is relevant instruction for all of God's people today, I have seen far too many teachers who share this view, haphazardly refer to a verse like Acts 15:21, with very little consideration for the context and the setting of what James the Just said. Sooner or later, I knew I would have to analyze Acts 15 verse-by-verse, not only because of how important the Apostolic Council was to the spread of the good news among the nations in the First Century—but so today's emerging Messianic movement can be effective for God's service in the Twenty-First Century.

We are presently involved in an uncertain phase of Messianic growth and development, and with this is going to come some theological shaking. Much of this involves one's approach to the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, the inclusion of Believers from the nations within the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-13), and the trajectory of salvation history via the "words of the Prophets" (Acts 15:15). A huge matter for today's Messianic movement, concerns whether the expectation of Israel's Prophets involved non-Jewish Believers from the nations, being educated in the principles of God's Torah (cf. Micah 4:1-3; Isaiah 2:2-4), via the power of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-24; Ezekiel 36:25-27).

The Jerusalem Council originally met to fairly address and decide what was to be done with new, non-Jewish Believers, who had been raised in Greco-Roman paganism. Understanding the broad cultural backgrounds, from the First Century Mediterranean, is imperative to properly interpreting not only the Apostolic Decree, but also applying it for a Twenty-First Century Messianic movement, whose non-Jewish and Jewish members were largely raised in a *significantly different* cultural environment (often in the West). How much might we see our theological orientation adjusted, by conducting a more detailed examination of Acts 15?

J.K. McKee
Editor, Messianic Apologetics

Since this study was originally conducted in late 2009-early 2010, our family and ministry have had a huge amount of new experiences. We relocated in late 2012, from Central Florida to North Texas, reintegrating ourselves into the Messianic Jewish community where we first got our start. We have had a significant number of interactions, both local and national, with leaders in the Messianic Jewish movement, including me being ordained as a Messianic Teacher.ⁱⁱ It is incorrect to assume that most Messianic Jewish congregations and synagogues, in North America, actively turn away non-Jewish Believers. Many Messianic Jews just want to make sure that non-Jewish Believers are genuinely called by the Lord, to be a part of the Messianic Jewish movement, and serve as co-laborers with Jewish Believers in the salvation of the Jewish people and restoration of Israel.

This updated edition of *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic* (2025) has taken into consideration new encounters and positive things, we have seen, in the Messianic movement. A few of the original 2009-2010 arguments have been diplomatically smoothed over in places. A significant issue of note involves the place of Acts 15:21 in the deliberations of the Jerusalem Council. A wide number of Messianic and Hebrew Roots readers of Acts 15, consider Acts 15:21 to be the most important verse of this scene. I have already had to clarify how I consider Acts 15:15 and its reference to “the words of the Prophets,” to be the most important verse of Acts 15.ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 15:21, regardless of how anyone interprets it, concerned a First Century C.E. situation; Acts 15:15 concerns God’s overarching plans for salvation history far beyond the First Century.

I trust that the updates made to *Acts 15 for the Practical Messianic*, will be well received, as we all desire to see the Tabernacle of David fully restored in our day (Acts 15:15-18)!

ⁱⁱ If necessary, consult the author’s article “My Family’s Messianic Experience: 1995-2022” (appearing in *Introduction to Things Messianic*).

ⁱⁱⁱ Consult the March 2023 issue of Outreach Israel News, “A Theological and Spiritual Refitting.”

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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