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CORNELIUS, THE ROMAN CENTURION AT CAESAREA

The conversion of the Roman centurion Cornelius (Acts 10:1–48) highlights two important issues within ancient Judaism: (1) the question regarding the status of Gentiles—do they have to convert to Judaism in order to be right with God, or can they remain as Gentiles and be right with Him; and (2) the mounting tensions between Jews and Gentiles, especially within the land of Israel. These issues affected the early followers of Jesus because Jesus' movement was a Jewish movement within ancient Judaism. Peter's encounter with Cornelius provides a pivotal moment within the book of Acts, as up to this point, the message of Jesus' movement had not come to the Gentiles. From this point on, Luke (the Gentile author of Luke-Acts) will trace the growth of Jesus' movement into the Roman Empire, particularly to the Gentiles. This was the core issue of Paul's activity within the Roman Empire. But often the modern reader assumes the challenge of the early church was theological, moving from the old covenant to the new one. This was simply not the case. The challenge of the early church was not theological, but sociological: how to incorporate two communities, Jew and Gentile, that did not naturally mix, into a community of faith.

The various positions regarding Gentiles represented within the book of Acts and the letters of Paul reflect the diverse opinions that existed within Judaism regarding Gentiles. The Gentile question became the primary issue facing Jesus' movement once Gentiles

began to join. The New Testament, however, assumed that Jews who believed in Jesus would continue to live as Jews, obeying the Torah, including offering sacrifices while the temple still stood (Acts 21:23–24). Cornelius' conversion offers a window into the cultural questions, challenges, and clashes between Judaism and the Gentile world. It also offers insight into how the New Testament dealt with Gentiles.

CORNELIUS, THE GOD-FEARER

Judaism has historically wrestled with a tension inherent within its two central beliefs: the God of Israel is the only God, and the Jewish people are His chosen people. The universality of the first confession seems in tension with the particular nature of the second. Judaism's struggle with the Gentile world, especially the pagan Gentile world of antiquity, led to a difference of opinion as to how Gentiles could interact with God, the Creator of the universe. Paul concluded that because God is universal and one (Deut. 6:4) and is the God of the Jew and the Gentile, for Jews to demand that Gentiles convert to Judaism compromised the oneness of God, saying, in effect, that God was only the God of the Jews (Rom. 3:27–31).¹⁸¹ Others within ancient Judaism came to different conclusions as they wrestled with the tension inherent within these two central confessions of Judaism.

Ancient Judaism divided the world into three categories: Jews and proselytes, God-fearers, and pagans. Pagans, of course, were idol worshippers and comprised most of the Roman Empire. They believed in many gods and goddesses, and lived a life foreign to the monotheistic faith of Judaism.

A Jew was someone born to Jewish parents, or to a Jewish mother (Acts 16:1–3), and, if he was a male, circumcised on the eighth

181 The heart of Paul's theology began with the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4–9). This has been greatly

overlooked within Christian readings of Paul. See the important work of Mark Naoos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

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FIGURE 59 Caesarea, the port city built by Herod the Great. Cornelius lived in Caesarea and had Peter brought to him as a result of his vision.

day (Luke 1:59–63; 2:21). A proselyte was a full convert to Judaism. A Gentile male who wanted to fully convert to Judaism underwent a three-step process: first he was circumcised, then he ritually immersed (baptized), and finally, while the temple stood, he offered a sacrifice (*Mekhilta de Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai* on Ex. 12:48; *b. Keritot* 9a). Once a Gentile converted and became a proselyte, Judaism considered that person as a native-born Jew. They had all the rights and privileges of any Jew. They could offer sacrifices in the temple; they could eat the Passover lamb. They also had the obligation and responsibility to live in obedience to the Torah.

Philo of Alexandria, a first-century Jewish author, reflects on this reality in his treatise *On the Virtues*.

He (Moses) holds that the incomers (proselytes) too should be accorded every favor and consideration as their due, because abandoning their kinsfolk by blood, their country, their customs and the temples and images of their gods, and the tributes and honors paid them, they have taken the journey to a better home,

from idle fables to the clear vision of truth and the worship of the one and truly existing God. He (Moses) commands all members of the nation to love the incomers, not only as friends and kinsfolk but as themselves (Lev. 19:34) both in body and soul; in bodily matters, by acting as far as may be for their common interest; in mental by having the same griefs and joys, so that they may seem to be the separate parts of a single living being which is compacted and unified by their fellowship in it (1 Cor. 12:12–26). I will not go on to speak of the food and drink and raiment and all the rights concerning daily life and necessary needs, which the Law assigns to incomers as due from the native born, for all these follow the statutes, which speak of the friendliness shown by him who loves the incomer even as himself (Lev. 19:34). . . . All these who did not at the first acknowledge their duty to reverence the Founder and Father of all, yet afterwards embraced the creed of one instead of a multiplicity of sovereigns, must be held to be our dearest friends and closest kinsmen. They have shown the godliness of heart which above all leads up to friendship and affinity, and we must rejoice with them, as if though blind at the first they had recovered their sight and had come from the deepest darkness to behold the most radiant light. (*On the Virtues*, 20.102–104; 33.179)

Proselytes had every privilege and responsibility of the natural-born Jew, and the mark of being a Jew or proselyte was circumcision. For this reason, Paul told the Galatians: “I testify again to every man who receives circumcision (i.e., becomes a Jewish proselyte) that he is bound to keep the whole Law” (5:3). The proselyte is a Jew before God according to Judaism, and Paul agreed that the proselyte must keep all the Law just like the natural-born Jew. Paul summarized his position with regard to Jews and Gentiles in 1 Corinthians 7:17–19: “Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised (i.e., a natural-born Jew or proselyte)? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision.”

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The pagan author Cornelius Tacitus, who hated Judaism, acknowledged Judaism’s acceptance of Gentiles into their midst and also the practice of circumcision as the mark among males of conversion to Judaism.

For Jewish wealth has increased because the very worst among other peoples, after spurning their ancestral religions, have channeled tribute and contributions to Jerusalem; further, because their (the Jews’) group loyalty is so strong, they are always quick to show compassion (towards one another) but towards everybody else they display only enmity and hate. . . . They decided to circumcise their genitals, so that by this difference they might be distinguished from other peoples. Those who go over to their ways observe the same practice and they are barely initiated before they start despising the gods, disowning their native lands, and holding cheaply their parents, children and brothers. (*Histories* 5.4–5)

Although Tacitus viewed Judaism and Gentile converts to Judaism very negatively, he corroborated Philo’s description of Jewish attitudes for the convert and the role of circumcision in identifying natural-born Jewish males and Gentile males who converted to Judaism.¹⁸²

Conversion to Judaism proved difficult for many proselytes. A proselyte could not dabble in Judaism. Being a convert to Judaism meant that one must live life as a Jew, under the Law. The nations of the world, i.e., Gentiles, did not receive the Torah (Law) on Mount Sinai. The Torah was only obligatory to Jews (and proselytes). Gentiles were not expected to live according to the Torah. Judaism accepted that God judged the Jew (and proselyte) according to the Torah, but He did not hold the Gentile responsible for the Torah. Paul states as much: “All who have sinned without the Law (i.e., Gentiles) will also

¹⁸² Whenever Paul mentions circumcision, it always refers to the physical act of removing the male foreskin, which was regarded as the sign of full-proselyte conversion to Judaism.

It was not, as Luther and the Reformers assumed, man’s inherent religious attempt to earn his salvation.

**FIGURE 60**

A portion of the inscription that was on the low wall separating the outer court of the Jerusalem temple from the sacred area. This inscription warned that any Gentile who passed could be put to death.

perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law (i.e., Jews and proselytes) will be judged by the Law” (Rom. 2:12).

Proselytes often found themselves with political, social, cultural, and religious challenges that made things difficult for them to live fully as a Jew. Roman law provided exceptions for Jews in order for them to live within the Empire, but these exceptions do not seem to have been extended to Gentile proselytes. This created a very real dilemma. From the standpoint of Judaism, however, the problem was that once a Gentile converted to Judaism they could not simply “go back” to their old way of life. You cannot go from “darkness to light” and then back to darkness. Conversion was permanent, and falling away posed problems for proselytes. Josephus described this reality:

From the Greeks we are severed more by our geographical position than by our institutions, with the result that we neither hate nor envy them. On the contrary, many of them have agreed to adopt (εἰσελθεῖν; *eiselthein*; literally “to enter”) our laws; of whom some have remained faithful, while others, lacking the necessary endurance, have again seceded (ἀρτέσταν; *aprestasan*). . . . To

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all who desire to come and live under the same laws with us, he (Moses in the Pentateuch) gives a gracious welcome, holding that it is not family ties alone which constitute relationship, but agreement in principles of conduct. On the other hand, it was not his pleasure that casual visitors should be admitted to the intimacies of our daily life. (*Against Apion* 2.123, 210)

The challenge proselyte conversion posed to Gentiles and the potential ramifications if they fell away led Jesus to rebuke those Pharisees who “traversed sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him a child of hell” (Matt. 23:15). Although Rome did not view proselytes as Jews, Judaism did, so if they fell away from Judaism, according to Judaism, they were still judged as Jews. Jesus’ statement criticized those who sought to make Gentiles convert to Judaism in order for them to come to God because of the unnatural, difficult, and potentially damning situation in which it placed the Gentile.

The God-fearers represent a class of Gentiles mentioned in Jewish (including the New Testament) and pagan sources. They are also referred to as God-worshippers (Acts 16:14; 17:4, 17; and 18:7). Luke identified Cornelius as “a devout man (εὐσεβής; *eusebes*) who feared God (φοβούμενος; *phoboumenos*)” (10:2), i.e., he was both a God-worshipper and a God-fearer. This group comprised Gentiles attracted to Judaism at various levels. They had begun to embrace the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the faith of Judaism, but they remained Gentiles, which meant that the male God-fearers were not circumcised. Judaism considered them Gentiles.

They could not enter into the sacred courts of the temple in Jerusalem. They were restricted to the outer court that had a low wall, the balustrade, separating it from the sacred enclosure. On the wall were inscriptions in Greek and Latin that warned Gentiles not to pass beyond that point or they would forfeit their lives (*War* 5.193–94; *Ant.* 15.417). Paul was arrested due to a riot that broke out in the temple because it was believed he took Trophimus the Ephesian past the

barrier (21:26–36; see also Eph. 2:14). Archaeological excavations in Jerusalem in 1871 and 1935 uncovered two copies of the Greek inscription from this wall, which begins “No foreigner (ἀλλογενής; *allogene*) is to enter within the balustrade.”¹⁸³

Josephus tells how God-fearers contributed to the Jerusalem temple even though they were not permitted into the sacred area of the temple and could not participate in the temple ritual:

But no one need wonder that there was so much wealth in our temple, for all the Jews throughout the habitable world, and those who worshipped God even those from Asia and Europe, had been contributing to it for a very long time. (*Antiquities* 14.110)

Tacitus also acknowledged Gentile contributions to the Jerusalem temple (*Historiae* 5.4). Although Cornelius could not participate in the daily sacrifice within the temple, his morning prayer occurred at the same time as the morning offering: “About the ninth hour of the day” (Acts 10:3). The angel’s message to Cornelius, “Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God,” describes Cornelius’ actions using sacrificial vocabulary.

God-fearers could not eat the Passover lamb, which was only permitted for those who had been circumcised (Ex. 12:48). Yet, God-fearers often adopted Jewish practices, like Sabbath observance and dietary customs, although they were not obligated to keep them like a natural-born Jew or proselyte.

The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances: and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread, and where the fasts and the

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lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed. (Josephus, *Against Apion* 2.282)

The God-fearer lived within an “in-between” reality where on the one hand they could not participate in the totality of Jewish life yet they often adopted certain practices that identified with the Jewish community. At the same time, their connection to Judaism and the God of Israel separated them from the pagan Gentile world around them.

Rabbinic sources discuss a Gentile, Antonius, who was a God-fearer, but because of his behavior in which he identified very closely with Judaism there was some question.

He (Antonius) was seen going out on the Day of Atonement wearing a broken sandal (meaning he adhered to the strictness of the day). What can you deduce from that? Even “fearers of heaven” go out wearing such a sandal. Antonius asked Rabbi (third century AD): “Will you let me eat of Leviathan in the next world (i.e., participate in the messianic banquet)?” Rabbi answered: “Yes.” But Antonius objected: “You will not let me eat of the Paschal (Passover) lamb, how then will you let me eat of Leviathan?” Rabbi replied: “What can I do for you, since it is written, ‘no one that is uncircumcised may eat thereof’” (Ex. 12:48). When Antonius heard this, he went and circumcised himself. (*y. Megillah* 3.2.74d)

Antonius could not eat the Passover lamb because the Law of Moses forbade Gentiles from eating it. Rabbi, however, accepted that Antonius as a God-fearer could participate in the messianic banquet in the world to come, without becoming a proselyte. In other words, Antonius did not have to become a Jew in order to inherit eternal life. Nevertheless, this tale introduces the challenge of the God-fearer. Caught between the pagan world and the Jewish world, the God-fearer fit in neither. The God-fearer was drawn to Judaism, but they could not fully participate within Judaism. They were outsiders. This produced a myriad of feelings, but one prominent feeling was the

183 Cotton, Di Segni, Eck, et al., eds., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaeae/Palaestinae. Volume 1, Jerusalem, 42–45.*

desire to fully convert, which is what Antonius did. He could not participate in eating the Passover lamb because he was not circumcised. This led him to be circumcised and fully convert to Judaism.

Pagan authors also recognized the socio-religious pull that Judaism had on God-fearers, and how often becoming a God-fearer was the first step to full conversion. The philosopher Epictetus noted this tendency among Gentiles.

Why, then do you call yourself a Stoic, why do you deceive the multitude, why do you act the part of a Jew, when you are a Greek? Do you not see in what sense men are severally called Jew, Syrian, or Egyptian? For example, whenever we see a man halting between two faiths, we are in the habit of saying, "He is not a Jew, he is only acting the part." But when he adopts the attitude of mind of the man who has been baptized and has made his choice, then he both is a Jew in fact and is also called one. (*Discourses* 2, 9.19–21)

Epictetus mistakenly identified baptism and not circumcision as the point of entry into Judaism, an understandable mistake for a pagan. He did accurately characterize the reality of the God-fearer as "halting between two faiths" and acting like a Jew. He also noted that many who began to act the part of a Jew (i.e., God-fearers) eventually adopted all of Judaism and became a Jew.

The Roman poet Juvenal likewise noted that Gentiles who became God-fearers often progressed to become full Jews.

Some who have had a father who reveres (*metuentem*; worships) the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating swine's flesh from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been wont to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practice and revere the Jewish law and all that Moses handed down in his secret tome, forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites, and conducting

none but the circumcised to the desired fountain. For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life. (*Satires* 14.96–106)

Juvenal clearly hated Judaism and its uniqueness within Roman society. But he also described the pull, even within families from father to child, of being a God-fearer to full conversion to Judaism. He attested to the God-fearers' tendency to observe aspects of a Jewish life.

The status of God-fearers also raised questions within Judaism. Simply, can God-fearers inherit eternal life, or must they first convert to Judaism? A debate between two second-century AD sages articulated this debate:

Rabbi Eliezer says: "All Gentiles are excluded from a share in the world to come." . . . Said Rabbi Joshua to him: ". . . but there are righteous people among all the nations who do have a share in the world to come." (*t. Sanhedrin* 13.2)

Rabbi Eliezer believed that only those Gentiles who converted to Judaism would inherit the world to come. Rabbi Joshua, however, felt that righteous Gentiles (God-fearers) existed and that they would inherit the world to come. In the story we looked at earlier with Rabbi and Antonius, Rabbi believed that Antonius could join in the messianic banquet (i.e., inherit eternal life) and remain a Gentile, God-fearer. This debate already existed within the first century.

Josephus relates the conversion of the royal house of Adiabene, which is in today's northern Iraq.

Now during the time when Izates resided at Charax Spasinu, a certain Jewish merchant named Ananias visited the king's wives and taught them to *worship God* after the manner of the Jewish tradition. It was through their agency that he was brought to the notice of Izates, whom he similarly won over with the cooperation of the women. . . . It so happened, moreover, that Helena

(Izates' mother) had likewise been instructed by another Jew and had been brought over to their laws. . . . When Izates had learned that his mother was very much pleased with the Jewish religion, he was *zealous to convert to it himself, and since he considered that he would not be genuinely a Jew unless he was circumcised, he was ready to act accordingly*. When his mother learned of his intention, however, she tried to stop him by telling him that it was a dangerous move. . . . He, in turn, reported her arguments to Ananias. The latter expressed agreement with the king's mother and actually threatened that if he should be unable to persuade Izates, he would abandon him and leave the land. For he said that he was afraid that if the matter became universally known, he would be punished, in all likelihood, as personally responsible because he had instructed the king in unseemly practices. *The king could, he said, worship God even without being circumcised if indeed he had fully decided to be a devoted adherent of Judaism, for it was this that counted more than circumcision*. He told him, furthermore, that God Himself would pardon him if, constrained thus by necessity and by fear of his subjects, he failed to perform this rite. And so, for the time, the king was convinced by his arguments. Afterwards, however, since he had not completely given up his desire, another Jew, named Eleazar, who came from Galilee and who had a reputation for being extremely strict (ἀκριβής; *akribes*; see Acts 22:3; 26:5) when it came to the ancestral laws, urged him to carry out the rite (circumcision). For when he came to him to pay him his respects and found him reading the law of Moses, he said: "In your ignorance, O king, you are guilty of the greatest offence against the law and thereby against God. For you ought not merely to read the law but also, and even more, to do what is commanded in it. *How long will you continue to be uncircumcised? If you have not yet read the law concerning this matter, read it now, so that you may know the impiety it is that you commit*." Upon hearing these words the king postponed the deed no longer. Withdrawing into another

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room, he summoned his physician and had the prescribed act performed. (*Antiquities* 20.34–46; emphasis added)

This story highlights the first-century debate within Judaism regarding whether or not Gentiles could remain God-fearers and be right with God or if they had to convert to Judaism, which meant circumcision for men. This debate penetrated into Jesus' movement because, as a Jewish movement, it reflected the contemporary realities of ancient Judaism.

Ananias represented the position that Gentiles can remain as such and worship God without being circumcised: "The king could, he said, worship God even without being circumcised if indeed he had fully decided to be a devoted adherent of Judaism, for it was this that counted more than circumcision." His words to Izates parallel Paul's position articulated in 1 Corinthians: "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. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God" (7:17–19). Ananias and Paul both believed that Gentiles should remain as such because what really mattered, even more than circumcision, was obedience to God.

Eleazar, however, maintained the alternate position that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to be right before God. And Izates' response to Eleazar's rebuke shows the tension in which God-fearers often found themselves trying to live between two worlds. The paganism inherent within the Roman world raised the legitimate question to many Jews: Can Gentiles truly disassociate themselves from paganism without fully converting to Judaism? Judaism's history offered warnings for allowing pagan influence into the faith of Israel, so in that respect, Eleazar's position is understandable.

These were the social and religious issues that faced Cornelius and Peter. Within the book of Acts, Jesus' movement had not confronted the Gentile question prior to Cornelius, so Cornelius provided the

introduction to how Gentiles would be dealt with in the early church. Peter went to Caesarea and the home of Cornelius because of a vision that he saw while in Joppa (Acts 10:9–16).

“I HAVE NEVER EATEN ANYTHING COMMON OR UNCLEAN”

Prior to going to Cornelius’ home, Peter saw a vision of a sheet let down from heaven filled with all kinds of animals (Acts 10:11–12). A heavenly voice then commanded him to kill and eat, but Peter resisted proclaiming, “No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean” (10:14). The importance of Peter’s statement for understanding the position of the New Testament towards Judaism cannot be over-emphasized.

We do not know how long after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension Peter’s vision occurred, but Peter’s statement indicates that he continued to live as a Jew, observing strict obedience to Jewish Law, including the dietary laws. The New Testament assumes that a Jew who believes in Jesus will continue to live their life as a faithful Jew (1 Cor. 7:17–20). Once the message of Jesus began to spread outside the land of Israel and the house of Israel, the issue of the New Testament became dealing with Gentiles and the Gentile question. Judaism was never at issue. We should not forget that the Messiah and belief in Him was a Jewish hope and expectation. Jesus’ movement was a messianic movement within Judaism throughout the first century. Paul routinely identified himself at the end of the book of Acts as a faithful Jew within the party of the Pharisees (Acts 23:6; 26:5–7; 28:17–20; see also 18:18–22), and he was accepted as such by his Jewish contemporaries.

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem for the festival of Pentecost, he visited James. James reported to Paul that it had been rumored among the Jews that Paul taught Jews living among the Gentiles “to forsake (the Law of) Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs” (Acts 21:21). In response to this misrepresentation of Paul’s position (1 Cor. 7:17–20), James instructed Paul to



FIGURE 61 Peter was staying in Joppa when he had his vision and was summoned by Cornelius to Caesarea.

Jesus, continued to live their lives as faithful devout Jews observing the Law of Moses.

Peter came to understand that his vision had nothing to do with breaking Jewish dietary laws; rather, it pertained to God’s acceptance of Gentiles without requiring their conversion to Judaism: “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:34–35). Peter’s statement agrees with Paul and Ananias, the Jewish merchant who spoke to Izates: God accepts Gentile God-fearers who obey His will.

THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

Peter’s experience with Cornelius did not resolve the question of Gentiles within the early church. The spread of the faith of Jesus among the Gentiles brought the issue to a head. Luke relates that Jews from Judea came down to Antioch and began to teach the Gentiles, “Unless you are

take four men from within the Jerusalem church to the temple in Jerusalem, purify himself along with them, and pay for their Nazirite vow to demonstrate that Paul lived “in observance of the Law” (Acts. 21:24). Paul did not hesitate, but carried out James’ instruction. Again the issue for Paul and the New Testament was not what to do with the Jews, but rather how to handle the Gentiles.

Paul makes another Nazirite vow in addition to this one within the book of Acts (18:18–22). He, and the other Jewish followers of

circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas opposed them, and journeyed to Jerusalem in order to have the apostles in Jerusalem determine the matter. Some in Jerusalem, who were members of Jesus’ movement and belonged to the party of the Pharisees, demanded that Gentiles must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (15:5). This led to the Jerusalem Council, which sought to resolve the Gentile question for Jesus’ movement.

Paul and Barnabas bore witness to the signs and wonders God performed through them to the Gentiles. Peter pointed to his experience with the God-fearer Cornelius as evidence that God had accepted Gentiles as such by giving them the Spirit. James the brother of Jesus concluded, “We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols (see *m. Shabbat* 9.1) and from unchastity and from blood (i.e., the shedding of blood: murder)” (Acts 15:20; see also 15:29).¹⁸⁴ From this, the council concluded that Gentiles were only

¹⁸⁴ Most manuscripts of Acts 15:20, 29 list four stipulations for the Gentiles: (1) the pollution of idols, (2) unchastity, (3) what is strangled, and (4) from blood. The Western textual tradition preserves only three and not four stipulations, omitting “what is strangled,” as well as appending the negative form of the Golden Rule to the list: “And whatever you do not want done to you, do not to others.” The three stipulations preserve the oldest version and moral code of the laws of the sons of Noah, which, according to Judaism, were required of all Gentiles. On one occasion, when the great sage Hillel was approached by a Gentile who asked to be taught all the Torah while he stood on one foot, Hillel responded, “What ever is hateful to you, do it not unto your fellow. This is the essence of the Torah, the rest being just its corollary: now go and study that” (*b. Shabbat* 31a; see also Matt. 7:12). Judaism derived the Golden Rule from Leviticus 19:18, which was viewed as the great commandment of the Torah (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Leviticus 19:18; Tobit 4:15; *Letter of Aristeas* 207–208; *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* B, 26; *Sifra Kedoshim* 45; see Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8; *Didache* 1:2). The three stipulations reflect a moral code. The addition of “what is strangled” probably entered into the manuscript tradition as Christian scribes tried to understand the command “to abstain from blood,” which is a shorthand way in Hebrew of saying “murder.” The addition of the fourth stipulation introduces into the list dietary restrictions instead of a moral code. The form of the three stipulations reflects the most primitive form of the list and most certainly reflects the original stipulations given by the Jerusalem church to the Gentiles in Acts 15:20 and 29.

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required to observe three things: abstain from idolatry, fornication, and murder. These three sins represent the three sins that a Jew cannot commit under any circumstance (see *b. Berachot* 19a; *y. Peah* 15d; *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Gen. 49:9). They are described as three actions that a person does in this world that cause judgment and punishment in the world to come (*t. Peah* 1.2). These three also represent the first three (and most ancient formulation) of the laws of the sons of Noah, i.e., those commandments given to Noah and his family after exiting the ark, which according to Jewish tradition were binding upon all humanity. A Jew could, under no circumstances, violate any of these prohibitions, but non-Jews must also abide by these if they wanted to participate in the redemption of Israel. These three prohibitions served as foundational ethical principles for both Jews and non-Jews, a common set of behaviors required by both in order to obey God.

The Apostolic Decree adopted the three prohibitions—idolatry, fornication, and murder—that ancient Judaism established for non-Jewish God-fearers. All three represent foundational ethical behavior required of Gentiles who wanted to enter into the Jesus movement. They also reflect the essential behaviors abhorred by Judaism; in effect, they were the essence of Judaism. Gentiles, therefore, had to abide by these ethical obligations if they wanted to establish and maintain a relationship with the believing Jewish Jesus community. These prohibitions formed foundational principles for both Jews and non-Jews that enabled them to join together in a religious community.

JEWIS AND GENTILES AND THE GREAT REVOLT

Jewish attitudes towards Gentiles in the first century cannot be separated from the historical reality and growing tensions between the Jewish community and the Roman Empire. The Jewish community within the Empire, including the land of Israel, found itself under Roman domination. The tensions already inherent within Judaism’s claims of the oneness of God and Israel’s unique status as His chosen

people were exacerbated by Roman rule.¹⁸⁵ Roman rule, as well as Roman anti-Jewish attitudes influenced how some Jews viewed Gentiles, particularly with relationship to Gentiles participating in the redemption of Israel.

The story is told of a Gentile who approached the two great sages Shammai and Hillel and asked them to teach him Torah while he stood on one foot (*b. Shabbat* 31a). Shammai took the measuring stick in his hand and ran the Gentile off. Hillel, however, responded, “Whatever is hateful to you, do it not unto your fellow. This is the essence of the Torah, the rest being just its corollary; now go and study that” (*b. Shabbat* 31a; see also Matt. 7:12)! The difference between these two sages depicts the tensions that existed within Jewish views regarding Gentiles. The House of Shammai adopted a tougher position toward Gentiles than did the House of Hillel. Prior to the destruction of the temple (AD 70), the House of Shammai was more prominent than the House of Hillel, and the anti-Gentile attitudes of Shammai and his disciples influenced many of the Jews, including the Zealot movement, which had strong ties to the House of Shammai.¹⁸⁶ At a time when the House of Shammai outnumbered the House of Hillel, they enacted eighteen decrees against Gentiles (*m. Shabbat* 1.4; *t. Shabbat* 1.16; *y. Shabbat* 1.3c; *b. Shabbat* 17a, 153b). Some traditions indicate that at this meeting the disciples of Shammai shed the blood of the House of Hillel.¹⁸⁷

The rigidity of the House of Shammai towards the Gentiles also stands behind the debate we cited earlier between Rabbi Eliezer, who said, “All Gentiles are excluded from a share in the world to come,” and Rabbi Joshua, who allowed for righteous Gentiles who would be redeemed (*t. Sanhedrin* 13.2). Rabbi Eliezer was a disciple of Shammai, who expressed a strict anti-Gentile attitude (*m. Hullin* 2.7; *t. San-*

hedrin 13.2; *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* A, 36), and despite the stringency of the House of Shammai regarding the Sabbath, he allowed the carrying of weapons on the Sabbath (*m. Shabbat* 6.4; see also 6.2), which indicates a Zealot inclination. Rabbi Joshua, however, belonged to the House of Hillel, and his opinion expresses the tolerant attitude of Hillel and his disciples. The opinion of Eliezer and Joshua appear within the opinions of the early Jesus movement regarding Gentiles, and we can assume they grew from the same tensions and questions that existed within the broader Jewish movement, including the political tensions between Judaism and the Roman Empire.

It is a bitter historical irony that at Caesarea, where Peter observed, “Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:34), and where Gentiles first received the Holy Spirit, that, in the year AD 66, the First Jewish Revolt broke out (Josephus, *War* 2.279–300). Tensions grew between Jews and Gentiles in the land of Israel throughout the first century. The tipping-point came in Caesarea, where after the Roman authorities sided with the Gentiles of the city, on a Sabbath, a Gentile ceremonially sacrificed birds outside the synagogue as the Jews gathered in the synagogue. This anti-Jewish act ignited a riot that spilled over into the First Jewish Revolt.

A myriad of factors contributed to the revolt, but at the forefront stood social and ethical tensions between Jew and Gentile. The early Jesus movement wrestled with these same tensions because Judaism wrestled with them. The conversion of the house of Cornelius at Caesarea offered a solution for Jews and Gentiles joining together in a community of faith, in which Gentiles remained as Gentiles and were acceptable to God as they sought to do His will. The history of the church and the synagogue, however, demonstrates that by the latter half of the first century, the tensions that led to the eruption of the First Revolt had likewise begun a process that led to the separation of Jew and Gentile among the followers of Jesus. And its subsequent historical consequences have stained the pages of Christian and Jewish history.

185 See “The Census of Quirinius and Luke 2” “Whose Image?” and “The Kingdom of Heaven” within the present volume.

186 Tomson, *Paul and the Jewish Law*, 173–76; Ben-Shalom, *The School of Shammai and the Zealots’ Struggle against Rome*.

187 Tomson, *Ibid.*, 173–76; Safrai, *The Literature of the Sages*, 191–94.

The social-ethnic tensions that challenged the followers of Jesus threaten our world today. Too often, however, we read the problem of Jesus' movement as theological—highlighting a fundamental problem with Judaism. We miss the fact that the New Testament, outside of the Gospels, really addressed a sociological challenge—how do you bring two different ethnic communities together into a single community of faith without compromising the uniqueness of each one? By understanding the cultural world of the New Testament and its challenges, we provide an opportunity for the New Testament to impact our world uniquely within the twenty-first century.