

In considering and bringing together all these issues, the most important interpretive decision respecting this context is how Paul and the Jerusalem elders conceived the Jewish believers' relationship to the Law of Moses. It is the only way to determine what the elders intended by their recommendation on the one hand (vv. 24-25), and what motivated Paul to comply with it on the other.

- If the elders did in fact believe that Jewish Christians have a continuing obligation to the Law of Moses as such, then their concern was that Paul publicly affirm his own agreement with that position by showing that he, too, was committed to keeping the Law (v. 24b).
- If, on the other hand, the elders were in substantial agreement with Paul that believing Jews are not bound to the Law, then the concern at hand pertained to their believing countrymen confusing Judaism and Jewishness. That is, Paul had been instructing Jewish Christians that they have no obligation to the Mosaic Law, but his position was being interpreted as him telling them to abandon their Jewishness altogether. In this case, the point of the elders' proposed remedy was to tangibly demonstrate to the Jewish believers that Paul was himself committed to maintaining and honoring his Jewish identity and heritage.

It's conceivable (though very unlikely) that the elders did in fact hold the former view, *but Paul clearly didn't*. And knowing that his compliance with their proposal would have signaled to them his agreement with their position, under this scenario there's no way Paul would have gone along with them. *Paul* recognized that he could come alongside the four men in their vow without affirming that Jewish Christians must obey the Law, but if the *elders* believed that this action would make that very affirmation, then he needed to refuse it – not because of what he believed, but because of what they believed. In such a case he needed to address and correct their conviction, not reinforce it.

Thus the fact that Paul complied with their request indicates that he believed that doing so wouldn't bear false witness respecting the gospel to either the Jewish-Christian community, the Gentile believers or the elders themselves. He evidently was convinced that the elders viewed the Law the way he did, and so regarded their request as a way for him to dispel the rumor that he encouraged Jews to forsake their Jewishness. That being their intention, he was all too eager to comply and remedy the misperception.

This interpretation and its support may be summarized as follows:

- 1) Paul's gospel ministry affirmed the Law's fulfillment in Christ. Jesus hadn't abolished the Law; He'd fulfilled it. And He had fulfilled it by being the true *Israel*. For the Law of Moses was the covenant by which God formalized His relationship with Abraham's covenant descendants as a corporate body. God made His covenant with Abraham and his "seed," which seed had attained its material fullness in Israel. Abraham had, in effect, become corporatized in the *nation of Israel*, which was the national extension of the *man* Israel. Thus God's covenant with Israel fulfilled with the corporate seed His promise to Abraham.

- 2) The Sinai Covenant (Law of Moses) defined and prescribed Israel's identity and calling as the covenant seed of Abraham. But from the outset the covenant nation consistently broke the covenant. And given the nature and role of the covenant, this "covenant-breaking" meant not the legal violation of a set of commands and laws, but Israel's failure to be Israel. Israel had failed in its calling as "seed of Abraham," "son of God" and "servant of Yahweh." Therefore, the Law of Moses looked to another Israel to come – One who would "fulfill the Law" by being the person – the "Israel" – the covenant identified and stipulated (Isaiah 40-55).
- 3) Jesus of Nazareth came as the promised covenant seed of Abraham – the true Israel (cf. Matthew 1:1; Galatians 3:15ff). Thus He fulfilled the Law, not by meticulous and flawless conformity to a list of directives as such, but by faithfully and fully fulfilling Israel's obligation as Yahweh's son and servant.
- 4) Like everything in the history of salvation, the Law of Moses bore witness to and served to prepare for the Messiah. The Law was prophetic, which means that it passed away when the true Israel of whom it prophesied arrived. This is the sense in which "the law was a pedagogue to lead us to Christ": It served as a guardian and instructor during the time of preparation so that the heir would be fully prepared to receive his inheritance when the day of maturity – the "fullness of the time" – finally arrived (Galatians 3:23-4:7).
- 5) Paul recognized that that day has dawned; the sons have "come of age" and are no longer under the tutelage of the pedagogue. The pedagogue hasn't been fired or assassinated; it has simply fulfilled – fully and faithfully – its appointed role. The Law has accomplished the role God appointed for it, and now it has passed away, not by abrogation, but by fulfillment (Matthew 5:17-20). But for this very reason it is a denial of both the gospel and Christ Himself for the Jews to continue under the obligation of the Law. *It is tantamount to the adult heir refusing to acknowledge his maturity and consequent direct relationship with his father, insisting instead upon continuing as a child under the oversight of the pedagogue the father appointed for his time of preparation.*

This dynamic is central to the Hebrews writer's argument: The Jewish Christians to whom he was writing needed to understand that those who were pressuring them to return to some form of Judaism – whether by renouncing their faith altogether or by adding a Judaistic appendage to it – were actually pressing them to return to something that no longer exists. Judaism – Israel's life under the Law of Moses – has passed away in Christ; there is nothing left to return to. Therefore, to depart from Christ (by overt denial or addendum) is to enter into a spiritual no-man's land. If this wasn't yet obvious to the recipients of Hebrews, it would be when Yahweh destroyed the temple and leveled and evacuated Jerusalem. Judaism survived 70 A.D., but in name only; what emerged from that final desolation was a new Jewish religion. As He promised, God had, in Christ, made a new covenant with Israel and Judah, along with all whom He would bring to Himself from among the Gentiles (cf. Jeremiah 31:31ff; Isaiah 11:1ff, 49:1ff).

- 6) Paul understood the nature and scope of Christ's fulfillment and so did Luke. Jesus' fulfillment and the inauguration of the kingdom of God mean that Judaism, not Jewishness, has passed away. Gentile believers are not obligated to the Law of Moses, but neither are Jewish ones. The New Covenant in Christ has broken down the dividing wall of the Law and produced one new man in which there is no Jew or Gentile (Ephesians 2:11-22). *But the formation of a new humanity in the Last Adam doesn't mean the end of all national, ethnic, cultural, and personal distinction.* Quite the opposite, God's eternal intention is to produce a covenant household comprised of individuals from every tribe, tongue, nation and people. And this sort of compositeness isn't at all arbitrary; it is crucially important that God's household be composed in this way in order that it should have no earthly, natural point of unity. God's covenant house consists of living stones in the Living Stone, so that their sole point of unity is one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all; any and every other possible unifying feature renders the Church a human organization rather than a spiritual organism – the dwelling of God in the Spirit (cf. 1 Peter 2:4-10 with Ephesians 4:1-6).

Jesus has fulfilled the promise of His Father, and this means a radical transformation of the former order of things, but with a very real continuity between what was and what has come. This is the nature of the relationship between promise and fulfillment, type and antitype. Like his apostolic mentor, Luke understood this, and he also recognized the early Church's struggle to come to grips with Jesus' fulfillment and its implications for the sons of Israel, the Gentiles, and the Church of the New Covenant. Thus this struggle forms a central theme in his account, emerging as a focal issue in several contexts, including this one and the previous one involving the Jerusalem Council. In the earlier context Luke showed the implication of christological fulfillment for *Gentile* believers; in the present one he shows the implication for *Jewish* ones.

This, then, is the lens through which this passage should be viewed, including Paul's decision to come alongside the four men in the completion of their vow (21:26). The tendency is to focus on the type and circumstances of the vow and the particulars of Paul's involvement in it, but this distracts from Luke's concern. Luke didn't include this account to make a point about Jewish vows; rather, it contributes to his larger purpose in Luke-Acts of testifying to the Christ event as the fulfillment of the preceding salvation history and of God's promise of creational restoration – that is, the inauguration of the everlasting *kingdom of God*.

The Church is the focal point and beginning of that work of divine restoration, and “new creation” for the Church means the formation of a new humanity (“one new man”) in Jesus Christ, the Last Adam – a humanity composed of Jew and Gentile, *but as Jew and Gentile*. The issue behind this context and its circumstances is the universalizing of the “Israel of God” and what that means for Jews and non-Jews as they become one in Christ. This larger, salvation-historical perspective must frame and direct the interpretation; any other approach is doomed to “miss the forest for the trees” – perhaps to the point of doing grave injustice to Luke's meaning.

Approaching the passage from this vantage point, the following considerations come to the forefront:

- 1) First and foremost is the crucial distinction between *Jewishness* and *Judaism*. And the central issue in this distinction is how each is affected by christological fulfillment. When defined in terms of ethnicity, culture and custom, “Jewishness” is seen to be untouched by Christ’s fulfillment. *In Christ, Jews continue to be Jewish even as Gentiles retain their ethnic, national and cultural identities.*

This is precisely the import of the Jerusalem Council’s decision: Gentiles do not need to become Jewish in order to become bona fide members of the covenant community; *they do enter through Israel as God decreed*, but not in the way that they did throughout the preparatory salvation history. Gentiles enter through the True Israel who is Christ Himself (Galatians 3:15-29). They are members of God’s household by being members of Jesus, and this is why the Jerusalem Council prohibited only those practices that contradict their unqualified devotion to Him as Lord and Christ. The Gentiles under David’s rule submitted to his lordship, but they didn’t become Jews or bind themselves to Israel’s covenant; so it is in the kingdom of the New David, as James reminded his fellow elders from the words of the prophet Amos (ref. 15:13-20).

But for the same reason Jews also retain their Jewish identity in Christ: They, too, are members of God’s household (Abraham’s true covenant household) strictly by virtue of their union with Abraham’s Seed. Their Jewish identity – including their circumcision and ownership of the Law – contributes nothing to their covenant status. Therefore, like Gentile believers, Jewish Christians are perfectly free to continue the customs and traditions associated with their ethnicity and culture. At the same time, they are equally free to set them aside as they see fit.

*“Truly emancipated souls are not in bondage to their emancipation. Paul conformed to the customs or departed from them according to the company, Jewish or Gentile, in which he found himself from time to time, making the interests of the gospel the supreme consideration.”* (F. F. Bruce)

This was Paul’s perspective and practice and it was his instruction to the believing Jews he ministered to throughout his missionary labors. It’s understandable that many Jews would interpret this as him forbidding circumcision and all adherence to Moses, but their conclusion entirely missed his point.

Paul recognized and upheld Jewish believers’ liberty with respect to *Jewishness*, but he acknowledged no such liberty when it came to *Judaism*. Precisely because belief of and conformity to Christ’s gospel is the issue for Jew and Gentile, Jews are *not* free to continue in Judaism; the entirety of the Old Covenant and its administration have been fulfilled in Christ and therefore passed away. To perpetuate any facet of Judaism is to deny the substance in favor of the shadows (Colossians 2:1-17; Hebrews 6:13-10:18). It is to separate oneself from Christ.

- 2) Thus Paul had no problem with Jewish Christians preserving and expressing their Jewishness – or setting aside any or all of their former customs – as long as they viewed themselves and their practice through the lens of the new creation in Christ and their own new identity and covenant status in Him. That perception would enable them to distinguish and draw the lines clearly between their Jewish identity and practice and the Judaism they were obligated to renounce.

Paul, like F. F. Bruce, recognized that emancipation doesn't impose a new form of bondage. He was as comfortable with Jewish Christians upholding their Jewish traditions as he was with them living like their Gentile counterparts; they had no obligation whatsoever in either direction. *And apparently many Jewish believers in Gentile communities did embrace their local Gentile culture and practice, in that way happily embracing the liberty in Christ which Paul insisted upon.*

- 3) In this sense the things being charged to Paul were not without basis. Some Jewish Christians were indeed setting aside their Jewish customs, and this drove the accusations and sentiment expressed in this context. But again, this perception of Paul ultimately missed the mark; among the unbelieving Jews, but also by some within the Jewish Christian community, Paul was regarded and portrayed as a man who had rejected his Jewish identity and obligation and encouraged his countrymen to do likewise. Unable – or unwilling – to distinguish between Jewishness and Judaism, these individuals interpreted Paul's instruction as a tacit (if not overt) repudiation of the God of Israel and His demands upon His people.

- Paul insisted upon the *irrelevance* of physical circumcision (cf. Galatians 5:1-6 and 6:12-16 with Romans 2:28-29, 4:1-13; 1 Corinthians 7:17-19; Philippians 3:1-3; Colossians 2:8-12, 3:1-11); his detractors understood him to be absolutely *forbidding* Jewish Christians (and so also Gentiles) to circumcise their children. But were that the case, he could have never circumcised Timothy (ref. 16:1-3).
- So Paul preached against the continuing *obligation* of the Law of Moses as such, but he upheld the believer's *proper relation* to the Law as it had found its true referent, fulfillment and transformation in Jesus (cf. Romans 8:1-4 with 13:8-10; cf. also Galatians 3:19-4:31 with Matthew 11:13). His detractors heard the former while missing the latter.

The way the Jerusalem elders explained the charges being directed against Paul indicates that at least some Jewish Christians did indeed believe that he was forbidding circumcision and calling believing Jews to renounce Moses. The above discussion shows how they misjudged Paul's instruction: His message was one of christological fulfillment and transformation, not abolition. To Jew and Gentile alike Paul preached that circumcision and the Law of Moses have been fulfilled in Jesus; many Jews, however (believers as well as unbelievers), heard in his words the abrogation of Moses. *In this respect, too, Paul showed himself to be a faithful disciple and ambassador of Jesus and His gospel* (Matthew 5:17-20).

- e. This groundwork allows for the proper understanding of the elders' request and Paul's compliance with it (21:23-26). Luke is silent regarding the elders' perception of Paul's teaching and their personal convictions respecting the Law; however, Paul's response to their request is helpful in that it indicates *he* believed they shared his understanding. Paul's perception, then, is the framework for interpreting their statement that, by complying with their proposal, Paul would demonstrate that he also "*walked orderly, keeping the Law*" (21:24b).

Whatever the elders meant by these words, Paul clearly didn't understand them to be calling him to affirm Jewish Christians' continuing obligation to the Mosaic Code. Paul's intention in agreeing to their request was to set the record straight concerning his gospel and instruction (Luke records him repeating his defense throughout the balance of the Acts account), and so he obviously viewed this particular action as an effective way to show that he wasn't in any way calling Jews to forsake their Jewishness in light of their faith in Jesus.

If Paul understood the elders' statement in this way, it clearly implies that their language can reasonably support such an interpretation. The only other possible conclusion is that it was so ambiguous or Paul was so dense that he missed their meaning. In fact, the language does support Paul's understanding.

- First of all, the phrase "walk orderly" speaks of one conducting himself in harmony or agreement with a thing as it really is.
- Secondly, the phrase "keeping the Law" has the basic sense of guarding or protecting it. It can refer to compliance with the Law's demands, but always within the larger meaning of upholding or honoring it.

When interpreted in context, these phrases are well suited to Paul's interpretation (and what was probably the elders' intended meaning): The concern at hand was the perception that Paul had renounced his Jewish identity and practice and was encouraging his fellow Jewish Christians to do the same. By coming alongside these men – themselves Christian Jews – in completing their vow Paul would show that this wasn't at all the case. He, too, conducted his life in agreement with his Jewish heritage and didn't in any way denigrate the Law. In the truest sense, he *upheld* it by recognizing and embracing its true meaning and function as they have now been realized in Jesus Christ. Far from his proclamation of the gospel of Christ and faith in Him nullifying the Law, it actually upheld and honored it (cf. Romans 3:31 with Galatians 4:21-31). *Honoring and obeying the Law means believing in the One it portrayed, prophesied of and points to as its fulfillment.*

Ever committed to the cause of the gospel, Paul embraced the elders' request and joined the men the following day as they presented themselves at the temple in preparation for the completion of their vow. (Paul didn't bind himself to the vow, but he had to be ritually clean in order to stand with them.) Ritual or expense, he would do whatever was necessary to assuage his brethren's consciences.