

The Words of the Prophets.

Acts 15:12-21.

Sunday morning, February 20, 2011.

I. Review.

The church in Acts 15 is meeting in Jerusalem to discuss the place of the ceremonial law of Moses in relation to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

1. Did the Law of Moses anticipate, foreshadow and reveal the necessity of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ? In that event the Person and work of Christ would eclipse and replace the ceremonial law of Moses.
2. Or did the Mosaic ceremonies and the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ complement each other? In this case a Christian was duly bound to embrace both, and both would continue to exist side by side in the Christian era. This was the position of a faction of Jewish believers. They wanted to subject all Gentile converts to circumcision and Mosaic customs. Acts 15:1,5.

Following much discussion Peter would speak first, addressing the assembly as a whole, he reviewed what God had done through him in bringing the gospel to the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius, purifying their hearts through faith in the Person and work of Christ alone, and freely giving the Holy Spirit to them Peter dropped two bombshells in the assembly:

1. He called the ceremonial law of Moses “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.” (Because of the hopelessness it left the worshipper with unless he realized that these ceremonies anticipated and foreshadowed the coming Person and work of Christ who would bring the real solution to the sin problem.
2. Secondly Peter stated (the significance of the Person and work of Christ having been revealed): “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we (Jews) will be saved in the same manner as they (Gentiles). That is through humble faith in the significance of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ alone, and apart from the Mosaic ceremonies which it fulfilled and replaced.

II. Barnabas and Paul.

Peter’s words paved the way for the anecdotal material Barnabas and Paul would share regarding their first missionary journey; how many signs and wonders God had worked through them among the Gentiles, thus confirming what Peter had said about what God had done through him in the household of Cornelius. All this God did for and among the Gentiles without subjecting them to Mosaic customs and ceremonies.

It is of interest that, just for once, Barnabas is mentioned here ahead of Paul, indicating that he was the chief speaker. Perhaps this was for two reasons:

- A. Barnabas was known to the Jerusalem church since its beginning, and he had a sterling reputation, being respected by all.
- B. Paul, because of his past persecutions of the Church in Jerusalem, desired to maintain a low and humble profile before these brethren rather than putting himself forward as “the great apostle to the Gentiles.”

III. James.

James takes the things related by Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and puts them in a Biblical framework, quoting from the prophet Amos. Amos 9:11,12.

A. Who was this James?

1. This was not the disciple / apostle James, as he already had been beheaded.
2. This is James the (half) brother of the Lord Jesus Christ.
3. He is first mentioned as a leader in the Jerusalem church when Peter is brought out of prison by the angel and goes to the praying church saying: "Go and tell these things to James and to the brethren." Acts 12:17.
4. Paul met with him when he returned to Jerusalem as a Christian. Gal.1:19.
5. He was a pillar in the Jerusalem church along with Peter and John. Gal. 2:9.
6. Not a believer during the earthly life of the Lord Jesus, John 6:5, the Lord appeared to James following His resurrection. 1 Corinthians 15:7.
7. Linguistic analysis shows that this James is the author of both the letter this assembly sent to the Gentile churches, and of the book of James in our NT.

B. The fallen tabernacle of David.

1. God had promised David that one of his descendents would sit enthroned over God's people forever. Psalm 89:35-37.
2. King Zedekiah had been the last king in the line of David, leading up to the Babylonian captivity. With him the tabernacle, or house, of David fell down, for never again did Israel regain its independence.
3. Yet did Amos foresee a time when God would restore David's house. This God did in raising up the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and seating Him on the throne of His people in Jerusalem above, the mother of us all.
4. Amos foretold that this restoration would involve "the rest of mankind... even all the Gentiles who are called by My Name." Acts 15:17.

C. In conclusion...

1. Let us not trouble the Gentiles who turn to God with Mosaic customs.
2. Let us tell them to abstain from idolatry, immorality, and things strangled and from blood. This seems a contradiction to the former statement.
Two solutions have been proposed:
 - The assembly is asking the Gentile converts to limit their Christian liberty by abstaining from eating animals which had been strangled and thus had their blood still in them, and so to preserve and enhance the unity of the church. Virtually all older commentators take this position in light of Vs.21. Moses' teachings have been spread far and wide; why cause offence to the Jews?
 - Recent commentators believe that the whole of vs. 20 refers to the practice of idolatry. Fellowship with these idols (demons) was entered into by way of temple prostitution and the eating of strangled sacrifices. The assembly is saying to the Gentile converts: "You do not have to become Jewish, and follow Moses, to become a Christian, but neither can you remain a pagan."
3. The reason for the assembly's conclusion:
Moses has been preached for generations in all major cities of the empire, and God has not gathered the Gentiles, nor rebuilt the fallen house of David under Moses' banner. Now God is doing so through the Lord Jesus Christ; so let the nations come and devote themselves to Him. Vs. 21.