

First-Century Judaism Seminar
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Presentation 4

Opening the Remnant: The Abolition of Separation

Note: The material in Presentation 4 was drawn from chapter 8 and the opening paragraphs of chapter 10 of the author's *Witnesses of the Messiah: On the Acts of the Apostles 1-5* (Emmaus Road Publishing, 2002). For further background on this material, see chapter 1 of *Witnesses*, available at

<http://stephenpimentel.com/books/witnesses/chapter1.html>.

- The Abolition of Separation

In Acts 10-11, Luke describes a series of events that were pivotal for the rapidly growing Church. The Jewish disciples were forcefully confronted with the question of whether it was permissible for them to eat foods declared unclean by the Deuteronomic Law. The answer to this question would determine whether the disciples could share in table fellowship with the uncircumcised, i.e., those not within the Deuteronomic covenant.

The question of unclean foods and table fellowship had an immediate bearing for the disciples on a second question: can the uncircumcised be baptized? The latter question follows from the first because Baptism admits one to Eucharistic communion, the most intimate form of fellowship. Through the actions and teaching of Peter, both questions are answered clearly in the affirmative. Baptism grants entry to the New Covenant, which is governed, not by the Deuteronomic Law, but by the New Law (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 9:21), the law of the Spirit (Rom. 8:2). The New Covenant creates a single People of God, embracing both Jew and Gentile: Israel restored by the Messiah through the Holy Spirit.

- The New Temple

Luke describes the Gentile mission as beginning with an encounter between Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius.

Acts 10:1-2

The “God-fearers” were Gentiles who, while not fully converting to Judaism and becoming proselytes, nevertheless believed in and worshipped the God of Israel.

Acts 10:3-4

Cornelius receives a vision from an angel at “the ninth hour of the day” (Acts 10:3), the hour at which the evening sacrifice is conducted in the Temple. The angel tells Cornelius that his prayers and alms “have ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4). The terminology of the ascending memorial is used in Leviticus to describe the fragrance of the burnt sacrificial offering rising to God.

Lev. 2:2, 9; 6:15

Hence, the angel’s message signifies that, although he is a Gentile, Cornelius’ prayer and alms have been accepted by God in place of the Temple sacrifices that would be offered by a Jew. The angel’s words thus foreshadow the incorporation of the Gentiles into the new Temple of the Body of Christ, fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy.

Is. 56:6-8

- Cleansing the World

Acts 10:5-13

God has instructed Peter to eat even those animals declared unclean and prohibited for eating in the Deuteronomic Law.

Acts 10:14-15

The concept of the “unclean,” first described in Leviticus 10 and developed in detail in Leviticus 11-15, is central to the Deuteronomic Law (Deut. 14:3-20). The concept does not pertain to moral evil but rather to a symbolic representation of physical evil. In particular, those things are “unclean” that reflect the fallenness of the world. Throughout Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the concern is to symbolically segregate Israel from the fallenness of the world in order to protect her fragile spiritual fitness to enter the presence of God in worship. The criterion of cleanness therefore regulates access to the Temple. Similarly, the term “common” refers to that which is unfit for the Temple.

- Fellowship with Gentiles

In his vision, Peter has been explicitly instructed that God does not wish him to be bound by the Deuteronomic dietary laws (Acts 10:15). However, Peter senses that the implications of such a command go well beyond matters of diet. He is therefore perplexed and ponders the deeper meaning of the vision.

Acts 10:16-20

When Peter is told to accompany the Gentiles without hesitation, he is given a crucial clue concerning the meaning of the vision: as a Jew, he would not normally accompany Gentiles anywhere.

Acts 10:21-22

In making their request, the messengers are fully aware that Jews such as Peter do not visit Gentiles in their homes, and so they try to make the request more palatable by relating that Cornelius is a “God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation” (Acts 10:22). Peter now realizes the import of his vision: not only must he no longer consider the foods prohibited by Deuteronomy 14 to be unclean or common, but he must no longer consider the Gentiles to be so, either. This is why the Spirit had commanded him to accompany the men “without hesitation,” even to the house of a Gentile. The apostle knows that he must no longer refrain from fellowship with Gentiles such as these men.

Acts 10:23-27

Standing in the house of a Gentile, perhaps for the first time in his life, Peter forthrightly conveys his new understanding to Cornelius’ household.

Acts 10:28-33

- Good News for the Gentiles

In response to Cornelius’ description of his angelic visitation, Peter preaches the gospel to the household, beginning with a remarkable statement of the ethnic universality of the New Covenant.

Acts 10:34-35

The criterion for acceptance by God is thus the same for those “in *every* nation,” implying that the restored Israel is not itself a nation but international. Peter then describes the ministry of Jesus in light of its universal significance.

Acts 10:36-37

Though Jesus Himself worked only among Jews, His ministry was oriented from the beginning toward all the nations. Hence, Jesus is the “Lord of *all*” (Acts 10:36).

Acts 10:38

Isaiah’s prophecy of liberation (Is. 61:1), fulfilled by Jesus, was meant not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles as well (Acts 10:38; cf. Lk. 4:17-19, 25-27).

Is. 61:1

Acts 10:39-40

The Jews put Jesus “to death by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 10:39), but this very act of rejection allowed Jesus to assume the Deuteronomic curse (cf. Deut 21:22-23), freeing both Jew and Gentile to receive the Spirit apart from the Deuteronomic Law.

Gal. 3:13-14

Acts 10:41

After His Resurrection, Jesus “ate and drank” with His disciples (Acts 10:41), making Himself known to them in Eucharistic communion, just as He would soon make Himself known to men of all nations, participating in the Messianic feast.

Lk 24:30-31

Lk 13:29

Is. 25:6-7

God offers forgiveness to men of *every* nation who believe in Jesus, who will in turn be the judge of all.

Acts 10:42-43

Peter concludes by noting that “all the prophets bear witness” to Jesus’ Messianic ministry (Acts 10:43). The prophets depicted salvation as coming in two phases: first, a remnant of Israel would be restored, and then the restored Israel would draw men from all nations into herself (Is. 2:2-4; 49:5-6; Zech. 8:23; 14:8-9). Jesus’ earthly ministry was primarily concerned with the first phase (cf. Mt. 15:22-28), and He charged His apostles to carry out the second (Acts 1:8).

Acts 1:8

Now, in the last days of the Deuteronomic covenant, the Spirit has been poured out on all flesh (Acts 2:17), making clean all that was unclean and thus making possible the incorporation of the Gentiles into the restored Israel. The presence and action of the Holy Spirit therefore abolishes the Pharisaic program of separation from the Gentile world. Although the Pharisees knew the prophecies of the Gentiles’ entry into Israel, they had misinterpreted them to mean that the Gentiles would one day embrace the Deuteronomic covenant and its Law. The Pharisees did not imagine that God would act in a far bolder way to bring about a “new thing” (cf. Is. 43:19).

- The Sovereign Spirit

Before Peter can finish speaking, the gift of the Spirit is poured out on all present, “even on the Gentiles” (Acts 10:44-45).

Acts 10:44-47

The Holy Spirit visibly incorporates the Gentiles into the People of God and thereby serves as an unquestionable sign to Peter that the Gentiles must not be denied Baptism. So definitive is this sign that Peter will repeatedly appeal to it as the justification for his unprecedented actions when they later come under attack (Acts 11:17; 15:8-9).

Acts 10:48

Without hesitation, he commands the Jewish disciples to baptize Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:48). In doing so, he affirms that one is brought into the New Covenant not by circumcision but by Baptism and the Holy Spirit. God is acting to fulfill His promise to bless the nations, but not within the boundaries of the Deuteronomic covenant. Peter has inaugurated the mission to the Gentiles, and he will subsequently remain active in that mission (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3; 1 Cor 1:12; 3:22), in no way restricting his apostolate to the circumcised.

After the Baptism of Cornelius and his household, Peter remains with them as a guest “for some days” (Acts 10:48), showing that he has not only baptized these Gentiles but established complete fellowship with them.

- Covenantal Confusion

News of the conversions travels quickly to Jerusalem, and, upon Peter’s return to the city, he is criticized by the “circumcision party” (Acts 11:1-2).

Acts 11:1-2

Luke later relates that the circumcision party consisted of Pharisees who had become disciples of Jesus while continuing to advocate strict adherence to the Deuteronomic Law (cf. Acts 15:5).

Acts 11:3

The circumcision party criticizes Peter not for preaching to Gentiles and baptizing them, but for visiting and eating with them (Acts 11:3). In other words, the central issue for the circumcision party is table fellowship and its implications for the maintenance of the Deuteronomic covenant.

Defending his actions, Peter recounts the story of his encounter with Cornelius, beginning with his own vision in Joppa and concluding with the bestowal of the Holy Spirit on the

Gentiles (Acts 11:5-16). The gift of the Spirit is the definitive proof that the mission to the uncircumcised, including fellowship with them, is in accordance with the will of God.

Acts 11:17

The Holy Spirit both compels and legitimates the abolition of separation between the Jewish and Gentile disciples.

Acts 11:18

- Conflict in Antioch

Acts 11:20-21

The Church of Antioch was the first to have a large number of Gentile disciples, and in the liturgical practice of that Church, the incompatibility of the Deuteronomic and New Covenants was first sharply experienced. Whereas the New Covenant enjoins Eucharistic communion among all disciples, Gentile or Jew, the Deuteronomic covenant prohibited such fellowship. As a result, it soon became apparent that the Deuteronomic covenant could not be preserved within the New.

Peter had previously baptized and eaten with uncircumcised Gentiles (cf. Acts 10-11), and the Jerusalem Church had ultimately given its consent to such fellowship (cf. Acts 11:18). Nevertheless, table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile disciples continued to be a source of conflict because the Jewish disciples continued to adhere to the Deuteronomic Law, according to which the uncircumcised were unclean. During the forty-year period of the “last days,” the Jewish disciples were permitted (though not obliged) to continue living according to the Deuteronomic Law, which had not yet completely fallen away, as it would after the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D.

Many Jewish disciples who continued to adhere to the Deuteronomic Law desired to bring the Gentile disciples under that Law as well. The “circumcision party” among the disciples (cf. Acts 11:2-3) therefore adopted a fall-back position, asserting that, while the uncircumcised could be baptized, they must *subsequently* be circumcised and follow the Deuteronomic Law.

This claim of the circumcision party ignites the most contentious theological conflict of the apostolic Church and leads to the Council of Jerusalem, where the issue is debated and decided. The conflict addressed at the Council is not one between Gentiles and Jews. On the contrary, both the circumcision party and its strongest opponents consist of Jews. Indeed, Luke mentions not a single Gentile disciple as even being present at the Council. What is in dispute at the Council is not whether the Old Testament should be abandoned, but the manner in which it is being fulfilled.