

5. Paper Four: Testing intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction theory in Acts 15:30–28:31

Abstract

Acts 15:30–28:31 is examined for evidence that either supports or invalidates the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. Particular attention is given to Acts 21:17–26 which reflects the stance of Paul, James, and all the elders in Jerusalem. Without any exception, the evidence confirms distinction theory by demonstrating that the leaders of the ecclesia observed the Law and taught other Jews in the Jesus movement to do likewise, whilst teaching Gentile believers not to convert to Judaism but at least to abstain from four moral offences. These findings concur with those of my previous studies on the same topic, which falls in an emerging field called ‘Paul within Judaism’. Some questions are posed on implications of Jews and Gentiles jointly comprising the ecclesia.

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Author’s remarks: This was the easiest of the five papers. The textual analysis did not require solving difficult issues of translation or textual criticism. I sought to simply follow the narrative, not engaging deeply with differing scholarly interpretations nor consulting a great deal of literature. Though such activity would be valuable, the purpose of the paper and large span of text reviewed called for a different approach. Rather than doing exegesis of the selected text, I tested distinction theory along the historical path traced by the narrative, from one event and statement to the next. The study presupposes an accurate account of historical events in the selected text. (For further comment, refer to the Introduction (chapter 1).)

Disclaimer: The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

1. Introduction

This essay follows on from an analysis of Peter’s comment in Acts 15:9 that God made ‘no distinction’ between Gentile and Jewish believers in Jesus when he gave both parties his Holy Spirit (15:8) and purified their hearts by faith (Woods 2015). In that study, the immediate context of Acts 15:1–29 provided critical information that led me to conclude that God made no distinction between Gentile and Jewish believers *in soteriological matters*, yet other dimensions of Jew-Gentile distinction remained intact since Jews (including Jewish believers in Jesus) bore the yoke of the Mosaic Law whilst Gentiles did not (ibid).

Does the remainder of Acts support my prior finding that the scope of the comment in Acts 15:9, that God made no distinction between Gentiles and Jews, relates to soteriology only, and is not a termination of Jewish particularity? Or does it contradict this claim by testifying that the earliest leaders of the ecclesia⁵⁵ made no distinction in any regard between Jews and Gentiles in the Jesus movement? In other words, *does the text from 15:30–28:31 support or undermine the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction?* I described distinction theory previously in Woods 2014a; 2014b and 2015. In essence, it supposes that the distinction between Jews and Gentiles which existed prior to the Christ event, as established by Mosaic Law, should continue in the present era—even within the ecclesia. If distinction theory is valid, then one would expect evidence of Jewish Jesus-believers continuing faithfully in Jewish tradition, including Torah observance, whilst Gentile believers only adopt some elements of Jewish tradition, especially those stressed in the NT such as the commandment to love others (Matt 22:39; 2 John 5-6), but not those which distinguish Jews from Gentiles. Such distinguishing elements include those commandments known as ‘boundary markers’ or ‘sign laws’ such as circumcision and *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws).

My larger research agenda is to test the strength of the case against distinction theory biblically, and this article extends a study of what ‘distinction’ meant in Acts 15:9. It takes the form of a topical commentary, the topic being evidence of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction in Acts following the Jerusalem council in chapter 15. That is, I shall only discuss data in the second half of Acts that pertains to distinction theory in order to answer the

⁵⁵ By ecclesia I mean *Christ’s community, whether Jew or Gentile*. See Woods 2015 for further explanation on the difficulties of nomenclature.

research question framed above. These data include the teaching, words and behaviour of Paul and other leaders of the ecclesia, as presented by Luke. I acknowledge that Luke deliberately selected and wrote about events in Paul's life in order to convey a particular message, but my presupposition is that he did justice to 'the Paul of history' rather than merely using Paul for ulterior purposes. In fact, the great detail Luke provided in certain points of emphasis suggests that his source was Paul himself, who *wanted* Luke to stress these biographical details.⁵⁶ Due to the large swath of text to cover and the specific purpose as ancillary to the related analysis of Acts 15:9, interaction with scholarly literature is curtailed. The following section tracks Luke's narrative from 15:30 to the end of Acts, while section 3 returns to examine the first week of Paul's final visit to Jerusalem more carefully. The Lexham English Bible is used except where otherwise specified.

2. Paul in relation to Judaism and the Law following the Jerusalem council

2.1 Textual analysis of Acts 15:30–28:31

Paul is the figure in focus almost constantly in Acts following the Jerusalem council (15:30 onwards). Time and again, both explicitly and implicitly, Luke portrays Paul as a Torah-observant Jew—a fact to which his frequent evangelism in various synagogues testifies: in Thessalonica for three Sabbaths (17:1–3); in Berea (17:10–11); in Corinth for some time (18:4, 11), even persuading the synagogue ruler, Crispus, and his whole household to believe (18:8); in Syrian Antioch where he was invited to stay longer (18:19–20); and in Ephesus for three months (19:8). Luke even noted that it was Paul's custom to attend synagogue (17:2), and on some short visits to remain with his hosts for seven days; the latter might, I suggest, be Luke's way of saying Paul stayed long enough attend synagogue on Sabbath (20:6; 21:4; 28:14) rather than an accurate record of the duration of Paul's visit. Apollos also evangelized the synagogue in Ephesus (18:24) and publically refuted the Jews in Achaia (18:28). Yet surely Paul and Apollos would not have been admitted to the synagogue, let alone heard there, if they were known to have renounced the Law and departed from Judaism? Apparently other Jews—even opponents—never questioned Paul's or Apollos' Jewishness.

⁵⁶ Note Luke's use of first person plural pronouns in Acts 16:11–17; 20:6–8, 13–15; 21:1–18; 27:1–28:16.

Additionally, Acts 16:20 demonstrates that even pagans, the owners of a fortune-telling slave girl, identified Paul and Silas as Jews.

Paul retained his Roman citizenship (16:37–38; 22:25–29; 23:27). Therefore, if he had forsaken Judaism, he could have appealed to Rome against the judgements he received from the synagogue authorities. He did so on one occasion when Roman officials planned to flog him (22:25), but never when Jewish officials did. Instead, Paul endured the maximum beating permitted by Oral Law (keeping within the restriction of Deut 25:1–3; Stern 1992:516), thirty nine lashes, *five times* by the time he wrote 2 Corinthians (11:24). Sanders (1977, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, p. 1, in Nanos 2008:16) argued that this is evidence of Paul's willing submission to synagogue authorities. Instead of balking at their judgment, Paul yielded to it. Was Paul simply acting 'Jewishly' for the sake of the gospel? It seems not.

Moreover, Paul did not teach that Christ's atonement released Jews from their obligation to the Law (21:20–26, discussed further in the section below), which the Jerusalem council assumed to retain force (for Jews) indefinitely (15:1–29; Woods 2015). In fact, Paul steadfastly defended himself within the authority of Torah (24:12–14; 26:22–23; 28:17–19, where both written Law and Jewish *halakhah* and are implied; see Skarsaune 2002:174). His accusers could not find any specific commandment with which to charge him. In 17:6–7, Paul's accusers claimed that he had been 'acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar,' not Moses. In 18:13, Paul was accused of 'persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law' (NIV)⁵⁷ but no specific charges were laid. The falseness of the accusation is apparent in the unjust beating of Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler, *without trial*—even 'in front of the judgment seat' of the Roman proconsul of Achaia (18:17)!

In Acts 21:21–22, James and the elders in Jerusalem exhibited great concern about the *false* impression that very large numbers of strictly observant Jewish Jesus-believers had, that Paul taught Jewish believers to abandon the Law. (This occasion is discussed in more detail in the next section.) In 21:27–28, Paul was *falsely* accused of teaching against the (Jewish) people,

⁵⁷ Note that the text speaks of 'the people,' [*tous anthrōpous*], not just 'people' or 'men' as seemingly all other English translations choose. 'The people' is a common way for Jews to refer to the Jewish people in particular (e.g. Matt 4:23; Mark 14:2; Luke 24:19; John 11:50; Acts 2:47; 13:17; 26:17; Heb 2:17; 1 Peter 2:1; Jude 5). Though *tous anthrōpous* sometimes refers to all people in general, the context of Acts 18:13 makes clear that Jews are the referent, so the NIV translation is appreciated here.

the Law and the temple,⁵⁸ and of defiling the temple by bringing Greeks into it. Luke deliberately added a parenthetical explanation of how the accusers got the *wrong* idea that Paul had taken ‘Trophimus the [Gentile] Ephesian’ into the temple. Apparently, Luke wanted to emphasize that Paul did not in any way break the Law nor dishonour the temple. Furthermore, in 23:9, Paul was declared innocent by ‘some experts in the Law from the party of the Pharisees’—a surprising verdict from those generally viewed as his opponents, and thus most noteworthy. One may thus infer that he remained fully within Jewish tradition, living in accord with Jewish Law. Indeed, during his trial Paul could refer to the Sanhedrin ‘brothers’ in 23:1, 5 and 6. He had already addressed the Jewish crowd in 22:1 with the same term, and in 28:17, Paul also called the most prominent Jews in Rome ‘brothers’. Like James and the elders, Paul remained a Jew throughout his life—something his faith in Christ did not alter.

In 24:1–8, before the Roman governor Felix in Caesarea, an attorney for Paul’s opponents, Tertullus, moderated the initial accusation against Paul, presumably due to lack of evidence to support it. Tertullus said that Paul had *attempted* to desecrate the temple, but added that Paul was ‘a public menace and one who causes riots among all the Jews throughout the Roman Empire and a ringleader of the sect of Nazarenes’ (24:5–6). However, Paul’s accusers were unable to prove any of the ‘many and serious charges’ against him (25:7), and he denied having done anything ‘against the law of the Jews nor against the temple nor against Caesar’ (25:8), adding that he had ‘done no wrong to the Jews’ (25:10). Thus Paul insisted that he kept Jewish Law without compromise.

At one point Paul did sin in ignorance (23:3), though he repented immediately, citing the Law against his own actions (Acts 23:5. See Exod 22:8.) He clearly did not see himself as free from the Law even if the Sadducean authorities were illegitimate and corrupt. In fact, Paul’s accusation of Ananias (23:3) appears to be based on the Oral Law (Sanhedrin 3:6–8) which specifies the proper process for cross-examination (see Anonymous 2006), in which case it is evidence that Paul perceived the whole of the Jewish tradition as still having authority.

⁵⁸ Similarly, Stephen was accused by false witnesses of ‘speaking words against the holy place and the law’ (Acts 6:13).

Alternately, he may have been appealing to Leviticus 19:15 which demands just judgement, but the point is the same: the Law remained in force.

In keeping with Jewish tradition, Paul also sought to keep the feasts. In Acts 20:6, Paul and Luke apparently observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread since they waited in Philippi until it was over before sailing to Troas. In 20:16, Paul bypassed Ephesus in his haste to get to Jerusalem by Pentecost (to worship, 24:11). In Acts 20:22–24, Paul said he was ‘bound by the Spirit’ to travel to Jerusalem. Indeed, he was determined to do so in spite of warnings in 21:4, 10–15 and in spite of his having been sent ‘far away’ from the temple to other nations by none other than Jesus himself (22:17–21). Paul’s on-going affinity for Jerusalem and the temple is evident, congruent with his keeping the feasts of Israel.⁵⁹ Luke even mentioned the Fast (Day of Atonement) as a marker of time in Acts 27:9, which might imply Paul’s observance of it (see Stern 1992:320).

Paul identified as a Jew in other ways too. He shaved his head at Cenchrea in completion of a vow (to the Lord, Acts 18:18) which may have been a Nazirite vow (Anonymous 2006; Barry *et al.* 2012). In 21:23–26, Paul purified himself at the temple and paid the offering for the completion of the Nazirite vows of four Jesus-believing Jewish men.⁶⁰ The text does not specify why Paul needed purification. It may have been because Paul had touched the corpse of Eutychus (Rudolph 2002:64); see Acts 20:9–10; 21:26–27 in relation to Numbers 19:11–13. Also, Paul (together with other diaspora Jews celebrating Pentecost in Jerusalem) may have sought formal purification because of his travels in Gentile lands (Crossway Bibles 2008:2132), since Gentiles often buried their dead close to home—close enough potentially to cause ritually impurity (Rudolph 2002:64⁶¹). Finally, those paying for Nazirite offerings may have had to undergo ritual purification themselves (*ibid.*) Regardless of the reason Paul needed purification, his undertaking is evidence of his commitment to Torah and to Judaism.

⁵⁹ Note also Paul’s instruction in 1 Cor 5:8, ‘let us celebrate the feast’, and his comment in 16:8, ‘But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost’.

⁶⁰ I shall return to Acts 21:17–26 to make a more detailed assessment later.

⁶¹ Rudolph quotes from Raymond Brown (1966, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 1, New York: Doubleday, p. 445) and also cites Kalervo Salo (1991, *Luke’s treatment of the Law: A redaction-critical investigation*, Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, p. 262).

Paul's defence in Acts 22:1–21 shows his self-identification as a Jew. Speaking in Hebrew,⁶² he began by stating 'I am a Jewish man' (22:3). Later (23:6), he said that he was a Pharisee. Paul kept his conscience clear and practised 'charitable giving and offerings' to his people (24:16). Shortly after the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, Paul even required Timothy to be circumcised (and thus to take on the whole Law, see Gal 5:3) on account of his partially Jewish heritage (Acts 16:3), and near the end of his life (28:20) his Jewish kin remained at the heart of his self-sacrificial messianism: 'for because of the hope of Israel I am wearing this chain!' It is thus difficult to interpret Paul's behaviour as ethnically-neutral, as though he did not see any special purpose remaining for the sons of Israel in the new covenant era.⁶³

2.2 Summary

This section concludes that the book of Acts portrays the apostle Paul as continuing in his Jewish identity and practice throughout his life. In particular, the text from 15:30–28:31 reveals Paul as a synagogue worshipper, submitted to synagogue authorities, innocent of breaking Jewish Law, a keeper of Israel's feasts, devoted to piety and to ritual purity, competent in Hebrew and the Hebrew scriptures, cleaving to Jewish identity and committed to his Jewish compatriots. In order to relate this evidence to the key question on making distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia, it must be contrasted with Paul's teaching of the apostolic decree by which Gentile believers were exempt from the bulk of the Jewish Law (Acts 15:13–35; 16:4). Doing so makes a strong case for distinction theory. However, before reflecting further on the ecclesiological implications—what these findings mean for Jewish identity and practice within the ecclesia, especially *vis-à-vis* those of Gentile Christians—a more thorough review of Paul's last visit to Jerusalem is warranted. The portion of the narrative in Acts 21:17–26 contains crucial evidence for the distinction debate.

⁶² Most English Bibles translate *tē Hebraidi dialektō* (lit. 'in the Hebrew dialect') as 'in Aramaic' in Acts 21:40 and 22:2. (Also see 26:14.) The widespread use of Aramaic at the time makes this extremely improbable because Luke stressed the point of the language twice in quick succession, and noted that the Jewish crowd 'became even more silent' when they heard him speaking it (22:2). Why would the crowd be surprised by Paul speaking the common language? Rather, Paul deliberately spoke Hebrew in order to demonstrate his authentic Jewishness and his competence in the language of the Torah and temple liturgy. (See 22:3 for Paul's own claim to be qualified in Jewish Law).

⁶³ See Paul's own writings on the status of Israel, which climax in Romans 11.

3. Paul, James, and all the elders in Jerusalem

3.1 Further textual analysis of Acts 21:17–26

The account of Paul’s final stay in Jerusalem begins in Acts 21:17. Paul arrived there some years after the council meeting of Acts 15, long enough for consequences of the ruling of 15:6–29 to have surfaced. (The Jerusalem council is dated at 48/49 AD and Paul’s arrest at 54 AD or perhaps 57 AD, Crossway Bibles 2008:1806–1807; Rusten and Rusten 2005:83, 88.) The narrative is especially important because it not only records Paul’s views but also those of ‘James, and all the elders’ of the ecclesia in Jerusalem (21:18). Notably, the pericope starts by mentioning that Paul and his companions received a glad welcome by ‘the brothers’ in Jerusalem (21:17). This is important in disarming any proposition that Paul was at odds with the other apostles, as might otherwise be inferred from Galatians 2:11–14. To the contrary, Luke’s comment expresses the warm sentiment felt for Paul by the brothers in Jerusalem.

James, together with all the elders in Jerusalem, glorified God on hearing of Paul’s work among the Gentiles through Paul’s ministry (21:19), and then they responded by noting how many *myriades* (myriads) of Jews had come to faith in Jesus, all of whom were *zēlōtai tou nomou*: ‘zealous adherents of the law’ (21:20).⁶⁴ Rudolph (2002:68) draws attention to force of these words as ‘a direct allusion to Maccabean Torah faithfulness in an era marred by compromise.’ Zeal for the Torah appears six times in 1 Maccabees 2. In Acts 21:20, Luke uses it in juxtaposition with *apostasia* (apostasy) in 21:21, a term also found in 1 Maccabees 2:15 (Rudolph 2002:68). Throughout the discussion (21:19–25), the making of distinction between Jesus-believing Jews and Gentiles is strongly evident in the language of the apostles.

In Acts 21:21, a great concern of James and all the elders emerged: among the Jewish believers in Jerusalem, Paul was rumoured to be ‘teaching all the Jews *who are* among the Gentiles *the* abandonment of Moses, telling them not to circumcise *their* children or to live according to *our* customs.’ Often overlooked is the question of how this rumour arose, especially since Luke recorded nothing to indicate any truth in it. The answer is surely that Paul taught *Gentiles* not to take on the Law, not to circumcise their children and not to live

⁶⁴ Note that, even after years of discipleship under Jesus and years of leading the *ekklēsia*, Peter’s commitment to keeping Jewish dietary laws (i.e. eating *kosher*) was unwavering (Acts 10:14). I already argued that his vision in 10:9–16 did not compromise the dietary laws at all (Woods 2012).

according to Jewish customs. This would be in keeping with the ruling of the Jerusalem council (15:20, 29), and is implicitly confirmed in 16:4. As Paul taught in synagogues in the diaspora, it would be no surprise if Jews deliberately or accidentally recounted his instructions to the Gentiles as though he had issued them to Jews. Another important point to note in 21:21 is that the elders expressed no concern that Paul was instructing Gentiles not to keep the Law. In this, we see both that they made a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus regarding their obligation to the Law, and that they did not require Gentile believers to observe it. Thus, this verse strongly supports the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction.

The narrative continues to tell how James, Paul, and all the elders in Jerusalem found it important for Paul to refute the rumour by a public demonstration of Paul's devotion to the Law and tradition of the Jews. The tone of 21:22 is that of alarm: 'What then is to be done? Doubtless they will all hear that you have come!' The elders were concerned especially since misinformed Jewish believers would hear that Paul was in their holy city (21:22) for Pentecost (20:24. The fact that these events probably took place around the time of Pentecost serves to heighten the climax, firstly because Jewish tradition asserts that Pentecost was the time when the Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, and also because many devoted Jews from the diaspora would have made pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the feast.) The elders' solution in 21:23–24 suggests that there were currently four members of their messianic community who had taken Nazirite vows. According to Rudolph (2002:65), Nazirite vows were voluntary, pious and regarded as surpassing the maximum requirements of the Law. Therefore these vows 'served as incontrovertible proof of his devotion to Torah in word and deed' against Paul's critics (ibid.). As the elders said to Paul, his purification and payment would let everyone know that 'you yourself also agree with observing the law' (21:24). Thus even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 15:22–23; 16:4; Rom 1:5; 11:13; Gal 2:7–9; Eph 3:1–8; 1 Tim 2:7), agreed with James and all the elders on the importance of Jews keeping the Law.

In Acts 21:25, James and all the elders in Jerusalem told Paul of their decision years earlier (even though Paul had been present at the time): Gentile believers 'should avoid food sacrificed to idols and blood and *what has been* strangled and sexual immorality'. The context of that decision (15:1–29) makes it clear that Gentile believers were not to be subjected to the Law as a whole, but these four prohibitions were unavoidable. (Note

especially 15:10, 19–20, 28–29.) The reiteration of this ruling in 21:25 confirms that the apostolic decree applied to all Gentile believers indefinitely, not just those in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia at the time of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, as Rudolph (2010:12) also observed. Surely Paul could not have forgotten the ruling, given his role in the council, his part in delivering the council’s letter, and its centrality to his mission to the Gentiles! Indeed, Acts 16:4 records that Paul and Timothy taught congregations in all the towns they went through ‘to observe the rules that had been decided by the apostles and elders *who were* in Jerusalem.’⁶⁵ So, why did James and the elders recount to Paul details of the letter containing the apostolic decree as though he didn’t already know about it, and why did Luke opt to reiterate it in favour of presenting other material or reducing redundancy?

Rudolph (2010:13) suggests that ‘James [assumed to be the speaker in Acts 21:20–25] anticipates Paul’s concern that a public testimony of Torah faithfulness may be misinterpreted by Jesus-believing Gentiles to mean that they too should be Torah observant.’ Therefore, James’ reminder of the letter was to reassure Paul that the risk of Gentiles misinterpreting Paul’s actions was already mitigated. Such a concern would indicate that the ecclesial leadership was averse to Gentile Christians converting to Judaism even (or especially) as they continued in faith in Jesus. This aversion is also marked in the account of the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15:1–29) and in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, most climatically in 5:2: ‘if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing!’ Yet 5:3 obligates those who are circumcised to keep the whole Law, which is *also* in keeping with James’ and all the elders’ view expressed in Acts 21:20–24. As for Luke’s editorial decision to reiterate the decree at this point, it may have been to emphasize its gravity—he stated it *three times* in Acts (15:20, 29; 21:25), just as he did some other notable points.⁶⁶ Luke intentionally repeated the record for the same reason that James did; he did not want his audience—whether Jewish or Gentile—to think that Paul’s surpassing Torah-observance in the same text (Acts 21:17–26) was intended for Gentile believers to emulate.

Paul began his ritual purification the day after his meeting with the elders (Acts 21:26) and purified himself two days later (see Num 19:11–12). Thereafter, he entered the temple

⁶⁵ Note: *krinō* (to decide, or make a verdict) is used in both 16:4 and 21:25, just as James had used it in 15:19.

⁶⁶ E.g. Peter’s refusal to kill and eat unclean animals in his vision (10:14–16); the giving of the Holy Spirit to uncircumcised Gentiles at Cornelius’ home (10:44–46; 11:15–16; 15:8); and the occupation of Simon, a tanner (9:43, 10:6, 32).

precinct to announce ‘the completion of the days of purification until the time the offering would be presented behalf of’ himself and the four others (21:26). At the end of seven days Paul would again be pure, though he was arrested before that (Acts 21:27 and following). His consent to purifying himself at the temple, and his payment for the others’ offerings, was not arbitrary. Paul did so *in order that everyone would know that the allegations of his teaching Jews in the diaspora to abandon the Law were nothing, and that he himself behaved in obedience to the Law* (21:21, 24). In other words, Paul was demonstrating his conviction that Jews must not forsake the Law, and that he remained a Jew regardless of his faith in Christ. Noteworthy is the irony in Luke’s narrative: Paul’s purification and payment for the others’ vows led to his arrest on charges of (previously) breaking the Law and defiling the temple (21:27–28)—the very charges he sought to disarm. His attempt to clear his name was thus exploited as an opportunity to accuse him falsely of the same guilt from which he sought to vindicate himself.

3.2 Summary

Acts 21:17–26 tells of Paul’s return to Jerusalem, reunion with the ecclesia and its leadership there, and his purification in the temple with four other Jesus-believing Jews. The contrast between Jewish and Gentile members of the ecclesia in terms of their obligation to the Law is starkly portrayed in this text. Myriads (literally, tens of thousands) of Jews were reported to have believed the proclamation about Jesus, and they were *all zealous adherents of the Law* (21:20); they were *not apostates from Judaism*. Indeed, the juxtaposition of zeal for Torah with apostasy appears to be an allusion to 1 Maccabees 2 (Rudolph 2002:68)—rhetoric intended to promote faithful Torah observance and condemn apostasy from it. Meanwhile, Paul was rumoured to have taught against Torah-observance by Jews in the diaspora (21:21)—a fallacy that urgently needed rectification. The elders in Jerusalem requested that Paul purify himself, and pay for four others from their messianic community to be purified. In this way, everyone would know that the rumours were ‘nothing’ and that Paul himself agreed with the community on the importance of Torah-observance, so Paul willingly consented (21:24, 26). There is no hint that this was a temporary, transitional period in or after which the Law would be phased out; Jewish practice and even identity were unchanged.

However, James and all the elders in Jerusalem made it clear that they did not expect Gentile Jesus-believers to become Jews or to observe the whole Law. This is most evident in the

elders' words of 21:21, which explicitly concerns *Jewish* believers among the Gentiles, and 21:25, which reiterates the apostolic decree that specified just four commandments for Gentile Jesus-believers as an assurance to Paul that they will not be misled into thinking they should emulate his stringent adherence to the Law. Luke was very careful to document the obligations for Jewish and Gentile Jesus-believers separately, as the following quotes confirm. Rudolph (2010:13) referred to 21:17–26 as 'the mirror text of Acts 15,' making explicit the view that 'the Jerusalem council decision presumes that Jews will (and should) remain Jews in keeping with the "covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7:8; Gn 17:9–14).' Remarking on 21:24–25, Michael and Lancaster (2009:56) rightly state, 'The passage unambiguously illustrates that the apostles did not preach that Gentiles had a mandate to keep the Torah in the same manner as the Jewish people.'

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary and concluding statement

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the events following the Jerusalem council, narrated in Acts, support or undermine the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. That is: Does the text provide evidence that Paul and other leaders of the ecclesia made a distinction between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus with regard to obligation to Jewish tradition, including Torah-observance and Jewish practice?

The investigation proceeds in two stages, both of which presuppose that Luke's account accurately records 'the historical Paul'. The first stage scans Acts 15:30–28:31, extracting for comment any indication of Paul either making or abolishing distinction between Jews and Gentiles, especially within the body of believers in Jesus. Paul was shown to observe Torah carefully himself whilst, at the same time, teaching that Gentile disciples did not need to shoulder the yoke of the whole Law, though they did have to abstain from a few 'necessary things' (15:19–20, 28–29; 16:4). Thus, *Paul propagated intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction by strictly observing Jewish tradition, including Torah, himself yet teaching that Gentile believers should not do so.*

The second stage of the investigation focuses in much greater detail on the first week of Paul's final visit to Jerusalem in Acts 21:17–26, including his meeting with James and all the

elders of the local ecclesia, as well as his temple ceremonies. In this text, Luke stressed that James and the elders were unanimously in accord with Paul's devotion to Judaism and the Law, insisting that he make a public demonstration of it to dismiss rumours to the contrary. These findings are perfectly congruent with other events recorded in Acts, discussed in section 2. There is no mention of believers as 'former Gentiles' or 'former Jews' in Acts. Rather, *the language used, and the behaviour exhibited by the ecclesial leaders, continued to identify believers as either Jews or Gentiles; this classification apparently determined one's responsibility to Jewish Law, regardless of an individual's faith in Jesus.*

To conclude, then, *Acts 15:30–28:31 strongly supports the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction.* All the evidence—every relevant statement in this part of Luke's narrative—weighs in favour of making distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia. There is no discontinuity in Acts with the previous era in regard to making distinction between Jews and Gentiles. At no point are Jewish believers relinquished of Jewish Law, nor Gentiles required to take on the whole Law, but quite the contrary—Jewish believers are expected to keep the Law whilst Gentile believers are instructed not to become Jews but only to refrain from a few major moral offences identified in the Law. By this one may conclude that a sharp distinction was consistently made between Jewish Jesus-believers and Gentile Christians in the very early ecclesia.

4.2 Cohesion with my related studies

This paper accompanies and extends another (Woods 2015) in which Peter's comment in 15:9, that God made 'no distinction' between Jews and Gentiles in purifying their hearts by faith, was analysed in the context of 15:1–29. Additionally, I previously examined Acts 11:12 which, in some English translations, also suggests that the era of differentiating between Jews and Gentiles came to an end when Gentiles received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Woods 2014a). Both other studies concluded that the text does not cancel the prevailing biblical distinction between Jews and Gentiles, or Israel and the nations, even *within* the body of believers in Jesus Christ. However, a review of the rest of Acts (following the Jerusalem council in chapter 15) was essential to establish whether such a conclusion is sustained in the subsequent narrative. This paper has established complete agreement between the finding of the previous studies and the evidence in Acts 15:30–28:31, without a single exception. Moreover, my exegesis of Peter's vision in 10:9–16 (Woods 2012) found that it bore no

relevance to the applicability of Jewish Law (to Jews, whether Jesus-believers or not), which should therefore not be regarded as annulled. (The concept of clean and unclean foods found in the Law was simply used for a metaphor to convey a message.) Indeed, as this paper has shown, the words and actions of Paul, James, and all the elders in the Jerusalem ecclesia demonstrably upheld the Law with great zeal.

But what of Paul's letters? In a paper published last year, I explained that the 'one new man' Christ created in himself from Jews and Gentiles (Ephesians 2:15) did not produce a raceless people, but rather a new humanity comprising spiritually regenerated Jews and Gentiles who retain their ethnic identities and, for Jews, their faith tradition too (Woods 2014b). Further research on Paul's letters is recommended below.

4.3 Further research opportunities

This section provides suggestions for further research on the topic of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. Firstly, I recommend a comparison of the life of Paul, as portrayed in this paper, with Paul's letters. In particular, statements he made in Romans 3:22; 10:12; Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 9:11 appear to deny any room for making distinction between Jews and Gentiles within the ecclesia. I posit that the first three of these texts relates to how people are made right with God—by faith in Christ—rather than signalling a termination of Jewish particularity (and election). This would concur with my prior conclusion that 'no distinction' in Acts 15:9 relates to soteriology, nothing more (Woods 2015). As for Colossians 9:11, I propose that Paul's point is not a cancellation of Jew-Gentile distinction, but that their differences are overcome by the unity of membership in Christ, who is 'all, and in all.'

Therefore, I suspect a review of the seeming contradictions in Paul's words and behaviour could be resolved in the light of distinction theory, especially when paying careful attention to the reason for Paul's writing and to the identity of his intended audience (majority Gentile). Already, a number of scholars have gone beyond the new perspective on Paul; they interpret his letters as works written from 'within Judaism'—see Nanos and Zetterholm (2015); Mattison *et al.* (2014) for current developments. Accordingly, Paul remained a Jew all his life and understood the ecclesia to be bilateral in composition—Jews and Gentiles as distinct categories. Nevertheless, a study focused on the abovementioned texts of Paul in relation to Luke's presentation of Paul may have great value.

Furthermore, I recommend a discussion of the findings in this paper in relation to commentary on the same text by scholars with a traditional (opposing) perspective on Jewish practice within the ecclesia. (Recall that herein I curtailed interaction with scholarly literature on account of the large swath of biblical narrative to review.) I anticipate that opponents would rely on the notion that Jewish observance in the time of the apostles was being phased out, but I think one would have difficulty establishing this from the biblical text.

Finally, I propose that extra-biblical sources be examined specifically for evidence of the early ecclesia making distinction between Jews and Gentiles. There are some particularly illuminating sources that help in this regard, including, for instance in Eusebius' listing of fifteen successive bishops in Jerusalem, starting with the apostle Peter, 'all of them belonging to the circumcision' (Schaff and Wace 2014:390–391/*HE* 4:5:2–4.)⁶⁷ Indeed, 'their whole church consisted then of believing Hebrews' (p. 391).⁶⁸ Moreover, the anti-Jewish rhetoric which emerged in Christian literature of the second century (pre-eminently in 'Barnabas', Justin and Irenaeus),⁶⁹ and climaxed in the Latin Fathers (most especially John Chrysostom), likely indicates the survival of an authentically Jewish expression of Jesus-faith in those times. Intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction is even evident in some ancient artwork, as the mosaic in the Church of Saint Sabina exemplifies (see Skarsaune and Hvalvik 2007:216).

The findings of this paper, together with the potential avenues of investigation just identified, lead naturally to the question of application for the ecclesia today. If intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction was normative in the days of the apostles, then we might assume that distinction theory is still applicable. That would require a change in ecclesiology and, for some, a major eschatological review plus a fresh look at Jewish-Christian relations. Indeed, the Christian church's relation to Israel would need re-evaluation—at least from an evangelical perspective. In particular, the modern Messianic Jewish movement would need to be reconsidered. Is Messianic Judaism a valid, biblical expression of Jewish Jesus-faith,

⁶⁷ Here Eusebius did not identify his source, but only that he had 'learned this much from writings' (Schaff and Wace 2014:390/*HE* 4:5:2).

⁶⁸ Later, Eusebius quoted Hegesippus (p. 454/*HE* 4:12:3): 'In every succession [of three bishops in Rome], and in every city that is held which is preached by the law and the prophets and the Lord.' This peculiar statement appears to affirm that the ecclesia 'in every city' equally valued the teaching of the Law, the prophets and the Lord Jesus.

⁶⁹ I deliberately omit Ignatius of Antioch, whose work I believe can be read differently and much more neutrally than the others.

alongside which the (Gentile) Christian church ought to operate? Can the two function in unity whilst making distinction between their members with regard to Torah-obligation and faith practice? Can mixed congregations of Jesus-believing Jews and Gentiles harmoniously and practically exist? How would the dual traditions be expressed in a single congregation?

My research suggests that such ‘unity with distinction’ is just what the apostles, especially Paul, sought to establish, and a growing number of congregations worldwide are answering these questions strongly in the affirmative. The field lies open for innumerable further studies to pursue, following the pioneers, some of whom I have cited in this and previous publications.

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