Were circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses two separate issues in Acts 15?

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No. Acts 15 presents circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses as closely connected aspects of the same controversy: whether Gentile believers needed to come under the Mosaic covenant. Some interpreters argue that Acts 15:1 concerns circumcision for salvation while Acts 15:5 raises an entirely separate question about Torah observance after salvation, but the narrative itself does not make that distinction. Paul likewise explicitly connects receiving circumcision with becoming obligated to keep "the whole law" (Gal. 5:3).

The Controversy in Acts 15

The chapter begins when certain men from Judea arrive in Antioch teaching Gentile believers:

> "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).

Paul and Barnabas have "no small dissension and debate with them," so the church sends them to Jerusalem to consult the apostles and elders "about **this question**" (Acts 15:2).

When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem, some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees state:

> "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses" (Acts 15:5).

At first glance, someone might argue that these are two different claims. The teachers in verse 1 explicitly connect circumcision with salvation, while the Pharisaic believers in verse 5 speak more broadly about circumcision and Torah observance. On this interpretation, the Council rejected only the first proposition—that circumcision was necessary for salvation—while leaving intact the expectation that Gentile believers should subsequently keep the Law of Moses.

But that reading imposes a distinction that Luke never makes.

One Controversy, Not Two

Notice how Luke frames the narrative. Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem concerning "**this question**" (Acts 15:2). After the Pharisaic believers state that Gentiles must be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses, Luke tells us:

> "The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider **this matter**" (Acts 15:6).

The Greek expressions are similarly singular. Acts 15:2 refers to *to zētēma touto* (τὸ ζήτημα τοῦτο), "this question/dispute," while Acts 15:6 refers to *tou logou toutou* (τοῦ λόγου τούτου), "this matter." Luke does not announce the introduction of a second controversy in verse 5. Rather, verse 5 clarifies the larger covenantal implications of the circumcision controversy introduced in verse 1.

This also explains why the Council's discussion that follows does not divide into two separate debates—one about salvation and another about post-conversion Torah observance. Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James all address the status of Gentiles who have turned to God (Acts 15:7–19), and James ultimately concludes, "We should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God" (Acts 15:19).

Circumcision Was Not an Isolated Command

To understand the controversy, we need to understand what circumcision represented.

God originally gave circumcision to Abraham as the sign of His covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:9–14). It subsequently became incorporated into Israel's covenant life under Moses (Lev. 12:3). A foreigner who wished to participate in Israel's Passover was required to have the males of his household circumcised; he could then "come near and keep it" and would be regarded "as a native of the land" (Exod. 12:48–49).

Thus, in the first-century Jewish context, requiring a Gentile man to be circumcised was not comparable to asking him to obey one additional moral command. It carried covenantal significance.

Paul makes this connection explicit in Galatians:

> "I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law" (Gal. 5:3).

That statement is particularly important for interpreting Acts 15. Paul does not treat circumcision and Torah obligation as two unrelated subjects. Accepting circumcision in the controversy he was confronting meant assuming an obligation to the Mosaic Law as a whole (Gal. 5:2–4).

This is precisely the connection expressed by the Pharisaic believers in Jerusalem: “It is necessary to **circumcise them** and to order them to **keep the law of Moses**” (Acts 15:5).

What Did Peter Mean by the “Yoke”?

After “much debate,” Peter addresses the assembly (Acts 15:7). He reminds them that God had already demonstrated His acceptance of Gentile believers by giving them the Holy Spirit and cleansing their hearts by faith (Acts 15:7–9). He then asks:

> “Why are you putting God to the test by placing a **yoke** on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10).

In context, the yoke cannot reasonably be reduced merely to the physical act of circumcision. Circumcision itself is a brief procedure; Peter is speaking about the larger religious burden being proposed for Gentile disciples. The immediately preceding proposal was that they be circumcised **and commanded to keep the Law of Moses** (Acts 15:5).

Nor is Peter saying that God's Law was evil. Paul likewise describes the Law as “holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). The problem was sinful humanity's inability to attain righteousness through the Law (Rom. 3:19–20; 7:7–13). Peter therefore contrasts the proposed yoke with the basis on which both Jewish and Gentile believers are actually saved:

> “But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (Acts 15:11).

The answer to the controversy is therefore Christ and His grace, not bringing Gentile believers under Israel's covenantal obligations.

The Council's Decision Confirms the Point

James ultimately concludes:

> “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19).

The apostles then send a letter to the Gentile believers explaining their decision (Acts 15:22–29). Significantly, the letter identifies the problem that prompted the Council:

> "We have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, **unsettling your minds**, although we gave them no instructions" (Acts 15:24).

The Council then gives Gentile believers four specific requirements and says:

> "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you **no greater burden than these requirements**" (Acts 15:28).

That conclusion would be very difficult to explain if the Council had actually decided that Gentiles remained obligated to keep the Law of Moses after conversion. The proposal of Acts 15:5 was that Gentiles be circumcised and commanded to keep the Law of Moses. The Council's letter neither requires circumcision nor commands Torah observance. Instead, it explicitly limits what is being imposed upon them (Acts 15:28–29).

Key Scriptures to Study

- **Acts 15:1–6** — Introduces the controversy and connects circumcision with the requirement to keep the Law of Moses.
- **Acts 15:7–11** — Peter argues that Gentiles are cleansed by faith and saved through the grace of Jesus rather than by taking on the proposed yoke.
- **Acts 15:19–29** — The Council declines to impose the Law of Moses and gives Gentiles four specific requirements.
- **Genesis 17:9–14** — Circumcision is established as the sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants.
- **Exodus 12:43–49** — Circumcision was required for a foreign male who wished to participate fully in Israel's Passover.
- **Galatians 5:2–6** — Paul explicitly connects accepting circumcision with obligation to keep the whole Law.
- **Romans 3:19–24** — The Law reveals guilt, while justification comes freely through God's grace in Christ.

Objections & Misconceptions

Acts 15:1 is about salvation, while Acts 15:5 is about obedience after salvation.
Luke never identifies two separate controversies. Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem concerning “this question” (Acts 15:2), the Pharisaic believers state their position in verse 5, and the apostles gather to consider “this matter” (Acts 15:6). The proposed requirement includes both circumcision and keeping the Law of Moses (Acts 15:5).

The Council only ruled that circumcision wasn't necessary for salvation.
If that were the Council's only ruling, we would expect its letter to say so while affirming the obligation to keep the rest of the Torah. Instead, the letter neither requires circumcision nor commands Gentiles to keep the Law of Moses. It imposes four requirements and explicitly says “no greater burden” (Acts 15:28–29).

Circumcision is part of the Abrahamic covenant, not the Law of Moses.
Circumcision does originate with Abraham (Gen. 17:9–14), centuries before Sinai. But it was subsequently incorporated into Israel's Mosaic covenant life (Exod. 12:43–49; Lev. 12:3). More importantly, Paul himself connects accepting circumcision in this first-century controversy with becoming “obligated to keep the whole law” (Gal. 5:3).

Peter's unbearable yoke cannot be God's Law because Scripture calls the Law good.
God's Law is indeed holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12). Peter's point is not that the Law was defective, but that sinful human beings could not bear it as the means of establishing righteousness before God. His contrast is explicit: rather than placing that yoke upon Gentile disciples, “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:10–11).

Why This Matters

Separating Acts 15:1 from Acts 15:5 can fundamentally change the meaning of the Jerusalem Council. If verse 1 concerns salvation while verse 5 introduces an entirely separate question about Christian discipleship, one could argue that the apostles rejected circumcision for salvation while still expecting Gentiles to become Torah-observant afterward. But Luke gives us no textual indication that this is what happened.

The Council was wrestling with the larger question of **Gentile covenantal status**. Must Gentiles come under Israel's Mosaic covenant obligations in order to belong fully to God's people? The apostles' answer was no. God had already demonstrated His acceptance of Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit and cleansing their hearts “by faith” (Acts 15:8–9). Jews and Gentiles alike are

saved “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11).

This does not eliminate Christian obedience. It establishes its proper foundation. Christians obey God because they belong to Christ and have received His Spirit, not because they have been placed under the Mosaic covenant (Rom. 7:4–6; Gal. 5:18).

Recommended Resources

- F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*
- David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*
- Thomas R. Schreiner, *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*
- Douglas J. Moo, *The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses*
- R. L. Solberg, *Torahism: Are Christians Required to Keep the Law of Moses?*