

CHAPTER TWO
THE BOOK OF ACTS: GENTILES ARE ADDED
TO THE (JEWISH) CHURCH

Introduction

The transitions of the book of Acts dominate its structure. The geographical movement from Jerusalem to Rome and the movement of personalities from Peter to Paul are all recognized. They are often interpreted as a movement *away from* Jewish Jerusalem *to* pagan Rome or from Jewish Peter to Gentile Paul¹. In *this* type of meaning the Church, born at Pentecost has Jewish roots but quickly outgrows them as the Jewish people persistently reject their Messiah and He rejects them and their Law. With Acts 7 the rejection of Messiah is mirrored and confirmed in the stoning of Stephen and the Mosaic fortress begins to crumble. A major quake is felt in the abrogation of dietary laws (Acts 10) and by the Jerusalem council (Acts 15)² all that is left are a few aftershocks as the leadership admits that the Law always was a burden anyway and is no longer applicable. Paul only accommodates stubborn Jews when in Jerusalem (Acts 21), but even then they reject him as they do again in Rome. By Acts 28 Judaism is a thing of the ancient past; Christianity has shed the bondage of Moses and become Law-free.

This meaning is correct insofar as it sees the Church broadening to include Gentiles and expanding to Rome; an argument of this chapter, however, is that it is incorrect as it sees the displace-

¹“Judaism and Christianity; Legalism and Grace; the Kingdom and the Church; these are in contrast, at poles apart, and defy all attempts at reconciliation. Ishmael—‘the wild-ass man’—untamed and untamable, the son of the bond woman, is unalterably opposed to Isaac—‘laughter’—spontaneous and obedient, the son of the free woman. . . . In The Book of the Acts there is revealed the passing of Judaism, and the incoming of Christianity: wherein we see how the old wine-skins of legalism are without strength to restrain the expansive spirit of the new wine of grace,” Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 3.

²“The Jerusalem Council settled this matter early and clearly (Acts 15). Debating the question of whether or not circumcision was necessary for salvation, the council said an emphatic no. Peter described the Law as an unbearable yoke. When the leaders wrote to the Gentile believers to curb their liberty in matters which were offensive to Jewish believers, they did not try to place the believers under the Law (which would have settled the problem quickly), *for they realized the Law had come to an end*,” C. C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 304, emphasis mine.

ment of Israel and the Law as a logical prerequisite to the Gentile mission. In reality the Gentile mission is the result of God keeping his promises to Israel and the witness to the Gentiles actually comes through believing Israelites. Many Jews reject the message but the very fact that they are given the opportunity to reject demonstrates that God has not yet fully or finally rejected them. The destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 looms just over the horizon in A.D. 50, but before that fateful event believing Israelites proclaimed the message boldly to their own people and to Gentiles. The uniqueness of the Church in the middle of the first century and the message of Acts is that the Gentile mission includes not just ethnic Jews and Gentiles, but religious, Law-observant Jews and Gentiles.

At the same time it should be understood that this is an observation of human behavior drawn from the book rather than a theological statement. That is, the fact that Jewish believers continued in forms of Old Covenant worship does not imply that the Old Covenant was still in force. In the same way, speaking dogmatically about *what* Jewish believers did is much easier than proposing *why* they did it. Before even preliminary conclusions can be drawn about the book of Acts, however, the importance of *historical* interpretation should be emphasized. Exactly what revelation these believers had received surely would determine not only their behavior but also their motives as well. While we have argued that the book of Hebrews clearly and completely closes the door on the Old Covenant, particularly in its administration of worship, we have also noted that the date of the letter is relatively late (A.D. 65).³ Therefore, the actions of believers in Acts should not be *informed* by (what was to them) later revelation. While these believers may not have known the truths of Hebrews concerning the Old Covenant, they did in all likelihood understand the establishment of the New Covenant. Jesus' words to the Twelve at the Last Supper concerning the New Covenant are clear, and the promise of the Spirit (Acts 1; Ezek 36:26-27) was understood as the guarantee of New Covenant blessing.

The question which this information rightly provokes concerns how the Jewish believers perceived their (Old vs. New) covenantal obligations in the critical, transitional period represented by the book of Acts. It is often asserted the Jewish Christians of Acts understood that the New Covenant had replaced the Old and that obedience to the Old covenant was purely optional depending upon the principle of expedience. This explanation seems to dull the historical understanding of the period

³We have also argued that the form of argument in Hebrews concerning the end of the Law is unique in the New Testament. Cf. above on page 32.

however. If the revelation of the book of Hebrews was known to this generation then surely they could not have participated in Old Covenant worship for any reason. Additionally, theological statements within the book which are spoken to Gentiles are often misapplied to the situation of Jews resulting in further confusion. The proposal of this chapter is that although Jewish believers of the book of Acts rejoiced in their New Covenant relationship with God, they joyfully and consistently expressed their worship through the familiar means of obedience to the Moses, apparently seeing the New Covenant as the goal, rather than the end, of the Law.

In order to demonstrate this thesis we will now interpret and evaluate four stories in the book which are most relevant to the relationship of the Gentile mission to the nation of Israel and her Law. These four incidents include (1) the martyrdom of Stephen (6:1–8:2), (2) the salvation of Cornelius (10:1–11:18), (3) the Jerusalem Council (15:1–16:3), and the purification of Paul (21:19-26).