

In a Messianic Jewish framework—and read through David H. Stern’s **Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)**—**Acts chapter 15** (the Jerusalem Council) is not a story about Christianity breaking away from the Torah. Rather, **it is a monumental halakhic (legal/interpretive) ruling regarding how Gentiles enter the Commonwealth of Israel without stripping away the distinct national identity and responsibilities of the Jewish people.**

The text addresses a fundamental question: *What is required of a Gentile who places their trust in Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah?*

1.1. The Controversy at Antioch: Conversion vs. Salvation (Acts 15:1–5)

"But some men came down from Yehudah and began teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of

Moshe, you cannot be saved." (Acts 15:1, CJB)

- **The Theological Dilemma:** From a Messianic perspective, these men from Judea were not simply demanding minor surgery; they were arguing that in order to be saved, **a Gentile must undergo a full ritual conversion to Judaism.** In the first century, circumcision was the definitive sign of a Gentile taking the entire yoke of the Torah upon themselves to *become* a Jew.
- **The Pharisee Party's Stand:** Verse 5 reinforces this: *"But some of those who belonged to the party of the P'rushim (Pharisees) and had come to trust arose and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and command them to keep the Torah of Moshe.'"* Note that these were *believers* in Yeshua who retained their Pharisaic identity. They assumed the standard Second Temple view: to share in the

World to Come (*Olam HaBa*), one must be part of the Jewish covenant.

- **The Messianic Counter-Argument:** Sha'ul (Paul) and Barnaba (Barnabas) vehemently disagreed. They argued that through the *Ruach HaKodesh* (Holy Spirit), God had already declared the Gentiles clean and accepted on the basis of faith alone—not because they became Jews.

1.2. Kefa's Testimony and the Burden of the Yoke (Acts 15:6–11)

"Now then, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the talmidim a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have had the strength to bear?" (Acts 15:10, CJB)

- **Understanding "The Yoke":** Christian commentators often interpret Peter's (Kefa's) mention of a "yoke" as a statement that the Torah itself is an unbearable curse. In Messianic Judaism, this is understood differently. "The Yoke

of the Torah" (*O! Torah*) is a common rabbinic idiom for taking on the legal obligation of keeping all commandments.

- **The Misapplied Yoke:** Kefa is arguing that expecting **brand-new Gentile converts** to instantly take on the rigorous, comprehensive legal standard expected of lifelong, native-born Jews—including traditional stringencies—was unfair and unrealistic.
- **Salvation by Grace:** Kefa explicitly anchors **salvation in grace**: *"No, it is through the love and kindness of the Lord Yeshua that we trust and are saved, and it is the same with them."* (Acts 15:11, CJB). Both Jew and Gentile are saved identical ways: **by faith**.

1.3. Ya'akov's Judgment and Bilateral Ecclesiology (Acts 15:12–21)

Ya'akov (James), the head of the Jerusalem community, steps forward to issue the *p'sak*

din (legal ruling). He does not quote a brand-new doctrine; instead, he anchors his ruling in Hebrew prophecy.

The Tent of David (Amos 9)

"With this the words of the Prophets agree, just as it is written: 'After this I will return and rebuild the fallen tent of David... so that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, including all the Goyim who are called by my name...' (Acts 15:15–17, CJB)

Ya'akov quotes the Prophet Amos to prove a key prophetic reality: **The end-times restoration of Israel explicitly requires Gentiles to remain Gentiles.** If the *Goyim* (nations/Gentiles) all converted to Judaism, they would no longer be "the nations who are called by **My name**"—they would just be Jews. God's design is **bilateral**: a unified body made of two distinct parts (Israel and the Nations), worshipping the one true God together.

The Four Minimal Requirements

Because Gentiles do not need to convert to Judaism, Ya'akov rules that they should not be burdened with the full communal weight of the Torah right away. Instead, he mandates four specific restrictions:

Ya'akov's Decree (Acts 15:20)	Torah Context (Leviticus 17–18)	Purpose / Messianic Insight
Abstain from things polluted by idols	Leviticus 17:7–9	Completely breaks their alignment with pagan temple worship.
Abstain from fornication (<i>zenut</i>)	Leviticus 18	Rejects the sexually permissive behaviors normative in Greco-Roman pagan cults.
Abstain from what is strangled	Leviticus 17:13–14	Prohibits consuming meat where the blood has not been properly drained.
Abstain from blood	Leviticus 17:10–12	Reinforces the sanctity of life; blood belongs strictly to the altar.

- **Why these four?** Messianic scholars point out that these four prohibitions perfectly parallel the laws in **Leviticus 17 and 18**, which the Torah explicitly applies not just to native Israelites, but also to the **"stranger (Ger) who dwells among you."** These were the absolute baseline rules required for a Gentile to co-exist in clean, tableside fellowship with Torah-observant Jews without causing ritual defilement.

The Growth Plan: Verse 21

"For from the earliest times, Moshe has had in every city those who proclaim him, with the Torah being read in the synagogues every Shabbat." (Acts 15:21, CJB)

This is perhaps the most misunderstood verse in the chapter. Far from sweeping the Torah aside, **Ya'akov** is establishing a **discipleship model**. The **four baseline prohibitions** were a point of entry to allow immediate fellowship. The clear expectation was that as these Gentile believers attended the synagogues every *Shabbat* (Sabbath), they would continue to learn the rest of Moses' teachings and naturally grow into deeper righteousness over time.

1.4. The Letter to the Nations (Acts 15:22–35)

The council sends a letter to Antioch confirming that the Gentiles do not need to be circumcised for salvation.

- The letter states: *"For it seemed good to the Ruach HaKodesh and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things..."* (Acts 15:28).
- The result was joy and encouragement among the Gentile believers (Acts 15:31). They were validated as full members of God's family, keeping their identity intact without having to **cross ethnic boundaries**.

Summary of the Messianic Perspective

Acts 15 establishes that **Torah-observance is not a mechanism for earning salvation**.

Instead, the Jerusalem Council preserves the unique, calling-specific distinctions within the Body of Messiah:

1. **Jewish Believers** remain under **covenantal obligation** to live out their unique calling as Jews, walking out the Torah as an expression of identity and sanctification.

2. **Gentile Believers** are **saved** identically **by faith in Yeshua**, released from the requirement of ritual conversion to Judaism, but invited into a lifelong journey of learning God's righteous standards (the Torah) through the Holy Spirit.

When we examine how **Sha'ul (Paul)** applies the Jerusalem Council's decree in his letters—specifically regarding **meat sacrificed to idols** (*idolot hoveh*) in **1 Corinthians 8 and 10**—the Messianic lens reveals a brilliant masterclass in **halakhic flexibility** driven by *ahavah* (love) and community cohesion.

To the untrained eye, Sha'ul might seem to contradict Acts 15. The Council strictly said: *"Abstain from things polluted by idols."* Yet Sha'ul tells the Corinthians that an idol is nothing, and eating the meat is technically permitted under certain conditions.

From a Messianic Jewish perspective using the **Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)**, Sha'ul is not overturning the Council's decree. Rather, he is functioning as a seasoned Rabbi, providing nuanced **halakhic rulings for unique local contexts** out in the Diaspora.

1. Knowledge vs. Love: The Reality of Idols (1 Corinthians 8:1–6)

"Now about food sacrificed to idols: we know that, as you say, 'We all have knowledge.'... We know that an idol has no real existence in the world, and that there is no God but one." (1 Cor 8:1, 4, CJB)

3. **The Halakhic Baseline:** Sha'ul agrees with the theological premise of the mature believers: an idol is just a piece of wood or stone. There is only **one God**, the Father, and **one Lord**, Yeshua the Messiah (8:6). Therefore, the meat itself is not inherently altered or spiritually

"poisoned" on a molecular level by a phony god.

4. **The Messianic Insight:** However, Sha'ul immediately pivots from *knowledge to relationship*. Having the correct *theology* does not give a believer the right to destroy a brother or sister with less mature faith.

1. **The Stumbling Block: Protecting the "Weak" (1 Corinthians 8:7–13)**

"However, not everyone has this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat this food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled." (1 Cor 8:7, CJB)

5. **Who are the "Weak"?** In this context, the "weak" are not people with fragile emotions; they are **new Gentile believers** freshly rescued out of pagan idolatry. For them, eating meat associated with a pagan temple feels like a direct return to their old demonic life.

6. **Applying the Spirit of Acts 15:** The goal of the Acts 15 decree was to draw Gentiles *out* of paganism and create clean fellowship space. Sha'ul realizes that if a mature believer flaunts their freedom and eats idol-meat in front of a new convert, they might entice that new believer back into actual idolatry.

7. **Sha'ul's Radical Conclusion:** *"Therefore, if food is a snare to my brother, I will never eat meat again, so that I won't cause my brother to trip."* (1 Cor 8:13, CJB). Sha'ul subordinates his personal freedom to the spiritual safety of the community.

1. **The Marketplace vs. The Pagan Temple (1 Corinthians 10:25–30)**

In **chapter 10**, Sha'ul provides highly practical, case-by-case halakhic instructions on where and how this meat is encountered. He draws a sharp line between buying food in the

public market and participating in pagan rituals.

Where is the meat being encountered?



Scenario A: The Shûq (Market) and Private Dinners

"Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for the earth belongs to Adonai, and everything in it." (1 Cor 10:25–26, CJB)

8. **Don't Ask, Don't Tell:** In the Roman world, leftover meat from pagan sacrifices was routinely funneled into the local butcher shops (*shûq*). Sha'ul rules that you do not need to interrogate the butcher. Food is just food, and Psalm 24:1 applies.

9. **The Dinner Party Rule:** If a pagan neighbor invites you to dinner, eat what is set before you (10:27). *But, if someone explicitly says, "This was offered in sacrifice,"* Sha'ul mandates: **Do not eat it** (10:28). **Why?** Not because the food is bad, but for the sake of the person who told you—to show them that believers do not compromise with idolatry.

Scenario B: The Demonic Fellowship of the Temple

"No, what I am saying is that what the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. And I don't want you to become partners with demons!" (1 Cor 10:20, CJB)

10. **The Hard Line:** While Sha'ul allows leeway in the marketplace, he draws an absolute, unyielding boundary when it comes to the **pagan temple itself**. Sitting down at an idol's feast to network or socialise is a direct violation of the covenant.

11. Here, Sha'ul completely aligns with the literal execution of the **Acts 15 decree**. You cannot drink the cup of Yeshua and the cup of demons (10:21).

Conclusion: Harmonizing Acts 15 and Sha'ul

Through a Messianic lens, Sha'ul did not change or relax the Jerusalem Council's ruling; he **contextualised it**.

The Jerusalem Council prohibited "things polluted by idols" to prevent Gentile believers from slipping back into pagan worship and to allow them to eat safely with Jewish believers. Sha'ul unpacks the *heart* of that law: **do nothing that compromises your exclusive devotion to Adonai, and do nothing that destroys your brother or sister.**

For Sha'ul, *halakha* (how you walk out the commandments) must always look like *ahavah* (love) in action:

"So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Try not to cause offense to anyone—whether Jews or Gentiles or God's Messianic community." (1 Cor 10:31–32, CJB)

When we look through a Messianic lens using the **Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)**, Sha'ul's actions regarding circumcision (*b'rit milah*) can seem deeply contradictory on the surface.

In **Galatians 5:2**, he delivers an alarming warning: *"If you undergo circumcision, the Messiah will be of no advantage to you at all!"* Yet, in **Acts 16:3**, just moments after the Jerusalem Council, Sha'ul takes **Timotheos (Timothy)** and personally *circumcises him*.

Is Sha'ul talking out of both sides of his mouth? Far from it. As a Pharisaic Rabbi, Sha'ul is operating with perfect consistency

based on a fundamental Messianic concept:
the distinction between identity (who you are) and justification (how you are saved).

1.1. **The Galatian Crisis:** Circumcision for Justification

To understand Sha'ul's fierce anger in Galatians, we must look at the specific error he was fighting. A group of legalistic teachers (often called "Judaizers") had infiltrated the Gentile Messianic communities in Galatia, echoing the exact faction from Acts 15:1:

"Unless you are circumcised... you cannot be saved."

The Perversion of the Good News

"Look! I, Sha'ul, tell you that if you undergo circumcision, the Messiah will be of no advantage to you at all! Again I warn every man who undergoes circumcision that he is obligated to keep the entire Torah." (Galatians 5:2–3, CJB)

- **Circumcision as a Legal Contract:** Sha'ul is not saying that circumcision itself is an evil mutilation. He is warning **Gentiles** that if they undergo ritual conversion (*milah*) as a *prerequisite for salvation*, they are declaring that Yeshua's sacrifice was insufficient.
- **The Yoke of Conversion:** If a Gentile enters the covenant via ritual conversion to become a Jew, they legally obligate themselves to the entire scope of the national Torah (*halakha*) meant for Israel. They have abandoned the path of *avraham* (Abraham), who was declared righteous by faith *before* he was circumcised (Genesis 15:6).
- **The Ultimate Verdict:** *"You who are trying to be declared righteous by God through legalism have severed yourselves from the Messiah! You have fallen away from God's grace!"* (Galatians 5:4, CJB). For a Gentile, turning circumcision

into a ticket to heaven renders the work of Messiah useless.

1.2. **The Case of Timotheos:** Circumcision for Identity and Identity Preservation

Right after the Jerusalem Council concludes, Sha'ul travels to Lystra and meets Timotheos. Look at how Sha'ul handles his situation:

"Sha'ul wanted this man to travel with him; so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews living in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek." (Acts 16:3, CJB)

- **Timotheos's Heritage:** Timotheos had a **Jewish mother** (Eunice) and a Greek father. According to **historic Jewish understanding, identity follows the mother. Timotheos was ethnically Jewish**, but because his father was a Gentile, he had never received a *b'rit milah* (circumcision) on the eighth day. He

was effectively living in a state of covenantal limbo.

- **Why Sha'ul Circumcised Him:** Sha'ul did not circumcise Timotheos to *save* him. Timotheos was already a committed *talmid* (disciple) **saved by faith**. Sha'ul circumcised him to **regularize his Jewish identity** and remove a massive barrier to ministry.
- **Halakhic Wisdom:** If Timotheos remained uncircumcised, he would be viewed by the local Jewish communities as a son of Israel who had abandoned the covenant of Avraham. By circumcising him, Sha'ul **validated Timotheos's Jewish identity**, allowing both of them to enter synagogues and proclaim Yeshua to the Jewish community without unnecessary scandal or distraction.

1.3. **The Rule in All the Congregations:** Staying in Your Calling

Sha'ul sums up his entire halakhic position on this identity token in his first letter to the Corinthians. He lays down what Messianic scholars call the "Principle of Identity Preservation":

*"Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He shouldn't try to remove the marks. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He shouldn't undergo circumcision. Being circumcised means nothing, and being uncircumcised means nothing; what matters is keeping God's commandments."
(1 Corinthians 7:18–19, CJB)*

Through a Messianic lens, this table illustrates Sha'ul's dual approach to circumcision based on a person's calling:

The Status of the Believer	Sha'ul's Halakhic Instruction	The Theological Reasoning
Born a Jew	Remain Circumcised <i>(Do not erase your identity)</i>	Israel's calling is eternal. Jewish believers should live as Jews, keeping the covenantal signs given to Avraham.
Born a Gentile (Goy)	Remain Uncircumcised <i>(Do not seek ritual conversion)</i>	Gentiles are full members of the commonwealth through Yeshua. Converting to Judaism implies faith in Yeshua is not enough.

Conclusion: The Harmony of Sha'ul's Actions

Sha'ul's actions with Timotheos and his letters to the Galatians form a beautifully unified theology:

1. **For the Gentile (Galatians):**
Circumcision is rejected as a tool for *justification*. Gentiles must remain Gentiles to fulfill the prophetic destiny of the nations worshipping God alongside Israel.
2. **For the Jew (Timotheos):** Circumcision is embraced as an expression of *sanctification and identity*. Jews must remain Jews to show God's faithfulness to

His irrevocable promises to the seed of Avraham.

In the end, Sha'ul perfectly walks out the spirit of Acts 15. He fiercely protects the Gentile from legalistic burdens, while fiercely honoring the covenantal distinctions of the Jewish people—all for the sake of the *Besorah* (Good News) of Yeshua the Messiah.