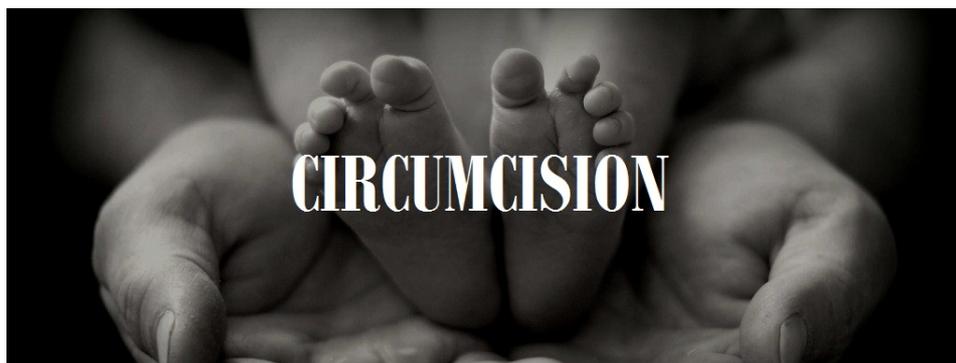


# Circumcision in the Second Temple Period

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## Salvation Halakhah in Acts 15:1

[I]n [Acts 15:1](#) and [5](#) we are confronted by two distinct *halakhot*, each reflecting Jewish concern for the boundaries of the people of Israel.<sup>[1]</sup> Though the text of verse 1 was altered by later scribes who seemed to believe both statements originated from believing Pharisees, a closer look at the Greek grammar of each passage will demonstrate some important differences.<sup>[2]</sup> The two *halakhot* are distinguished by the principles underlying their formulation. We will see that the first is a shockingly extreme position, offering neither conversion nor hope of salvation to the Gentile. It does not come from believers in Yeshua. The second comes, as Luke tells us, from the “believing Pharisee camp” and is a bit more lenient, asserting conversion as the necessary entry point into the fellowship of the Messiah.

[Acts 15:1](#) Καὶ τινες κατελθόντες ἄπ’ τῆς ἰουδαίας ἄδασκον τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ἅτι, ἢ ἢ μὴ περιμηθεῖτε τὸ ἔθι τῆς Μωϋσέως, ὃ δὲ νασθε σωθῆναι.

*Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” (NASB)*

There are two critical points to be made about this statement. First, the aorist passive subjunctive περιμηθεῖτε (*peritmethete*) can simply mean “you were circumcised” rather than “you are circumcised.” The grammar permits us to understand that these men “from Judea” were saying, “Unless you were circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you are not able to be saved.”<sup>[3]</sup> Second, the *halakhah* being taught here consists of what Greek grammarians call a third-class condition. Daniel Wallace cites Boyer’s largest category of this type of construction – “with no indication of fulfilment.”<sup>[4]</sup> In other words, this was not a “salvation invitation” to Gentiles on the condition of circumcision. As we shall see, it was an attempt to define “the saved,” that is, “true Israel,” as those who had been circumcised according to the custom of Moses. Taken together, we can see why this statement caused such a stir among the apostles who had been fruitfully preaching salvation to the Gentiles (v. 2). In their exclusivist nationalism the “men from Judea” were inconsiderate of the fact that God had given the Holy Spirit to non-Jews. Theirs was a different agenda.

## Circumcision on the Eighth Day: A Stringent Ruling

Most of us are very familiar with Genesis 17, but perhaps not the intricacies of the textual history of verse 14. The Masoretic Text reads as follows: “But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin,

that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (NASB). However, it is crucial that we recognize that this was not the only way the passage was known in Second Temple Judaism. In fact, it might not have even been the most widely recognized. The Septuagint adds a highly significant clause:

“And as for an uncircumcised male who shall not be circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin **on the eighth day**, that soul shall be destroyed from his kin, for he has scattered my covenant.” (NETS)

We do ourselves a disservice by dismissing this as an innocent variant, for we have other ancient textual witnesses that have “on the eighth day” as a condition for inclusion in Israel.<sup>[5]</sup> The Samaritan Torah concurs, as does the early Ethiopic translation: males who are not circumcised on the eighth day are cut off from Israel. Unfortunately, no fragment of this verse survives from Qumran. However, the book of Jubilees, yet another “BCE” witness to this doctrine, carries this same stringency. “And the uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin on the eighth day, that soul shall be cut off from his people, for he has broken My covenant.” (Jubilees 15:14, trans. by Charles). This was a wide-spread teaching with multiple attestations.

In light of the confused representations of circumcision from the time of the Maccabees (motivations stemming from fear or compulsion on one hand to political and material gain on the other), and with Jewish/Judean national identity in a general crisis, it is understandable that an “eighth-day doctrine” would be featured in zealous efforts to establish authenticity and to shore up “true Israel.” Redemption was at stake. This way, observant (at least second-generation) Israelites could be singled out from any “Judeans” whose ancestry was suspect; if you were an “eighth-dayer,” then we know that at least your father was observant and that you’re the “real deal”!

## Eighth-day Circumcision in Luke-Acts

Luke deliberately integrated this “eighth-day” theme into his narrative. John the Baptist was circumcised and named “on the eighth-day” (1:59), as was Yeshua (2:21). Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve patriarchs were also circumcised on the eighth day (Acts 7:8 <sup>L</sup>).<sup>[6]</sup> Prior to Acts 16, there is no mention of an individual circumcision in Luke-Acts where the “eighth day” is not specified.<sup>[7]</sup> Thus, any claims of illegitimacy to Yeshua’s ministry based upon this teaching has been anticipated by Luke and nipped in the bud.

This brings us back to the *halakhah* stated in Acts 15:1 <sup>L</sup>. “Unless you were (already) circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you are not able to be saved.” With the background we have covered so far, it is not a huge leap to suggest that “custom of Moses” here implies this group’s notion of legitimate “eighth-day” circumcision in the same tradition as the precedent-setting sources. Luke does not refer to these men as believers in Yeshua and neither should we. Rather, they were quite likely zealous Jewish nationalists looking for redemption through a specific conviction concerning Israelite purity, both genealogical and ritual. According to their doctrine, “conversion” was simply not an option. As the LXX, Samaritan Torah, and book of Jubilees had already ruled, salvation (that is, inclusion with true Israel) was exclusive to those circumcised on the eighth day.

## Conversion Halakhah in Acts 15:5

Permit me to restate my argument. In Acts 15:1 <sup>L</sup> and 5 <sup>L</sup> we are confronted by two distinct *halakhot*, each reflecting Jewish concern for the boundaries of the people of Israel. Though easily conflated as representing the same general position, a close look at the grammar of these two *halakhot* will help us discern differences in the principles underlying their formulation. I don’t believe Luke intended us to put these in the same category. In my analysis above, I argued that what we see in the first verse is a shockingly extreme position, offering no hope of salvation to the Gentile. It does not come from believers in Yeshua. The second comes from the “believing Pharisee camp” and is a bit more lenient, asserting something like “conversion” as the necessary entry point into the fellowship of the Messiah.

Acts 15:5 <sup>L</sup> Ἐξανσθησαν δὲ τινες τῶν πρὸς ἀρσενεως τῶν Φαρισαίων πεπιστευότες

λαγοντες τι δε περιμνειν αυτος παραγγειν τε τηρεν των νμον Μωυσως.

*But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." (NASB)*

Whereas the *halakhah* in verse 1 is essentially a non-“Yeshua-believing” Judean nationalist-oriented ruling (a Greek third-class conditional sentence, “Unless *x*, you cannot *y*”) clearly delimiting saved from unsaved, the *halakhah* in verse 5 seeks to build upon a faith demonstrated by the Gentiles who were now coming to Messiah in increasing numbers. This opinion is not conceived as a barrier to Gentile entry into the community. Rather, it is a requisite curriculum of rite and behavior, formulated by Pharisaic believers, for all who desire to walk with and worship the God of Israel in the name of His Son Yeshua the Messiah.

Up to this point in the Luke-Acts narrative, the verb “circumcise” is given only in the aorist tense stem, indicating a simple, one-time act in the past. Each time, it is associated with a key figure and specifically mentions “the eighth day.” In [Acts 15:5](#)  Luke introduces the present tense stem of the verb, indicating a present, ongoing action.<sup>[8]</sup> The phrase δε περιμνειν αυτος could be read “it is necessary to be circumcising them.” Individual males are not being addressed here, but a general policy to be instituted, along with the assumed authority to enforce it. In verse 1 we have the passive voice describing the individuals as circumcised or not; here we have the active, describing those who would be performing or enforcing the required circumcisions. In verse 1 we have simple, one-time past event; here we have a present and on-going policy to be implemented by leadership.

## Theodotus on the Circumcision of Shechem: A Precedent for the Pharisaic Halakhah?

The Greek phrase behind “it is necessary to circumcise them” is not without precedent in earlier Second Temple era writings. We have a fragment from a text – possibly a hundred years earlier than Luke’s – of a Greek epic poem by the Jew Theodotus retelling the story of the rape of Dinah in Genesis 34.<sup>[9]</sup>

*But when Sychem the son of Hamor saw [Dinah], he loved her; and after seizing her as his own, he carried her off and ravished her. Then, coming back again with his father to Jacob, he asked for her in the partnership of marriage. Jacob said that he would not give her until all the inhabitants of Shechem were circumcised and became Jews.<sup>[10]</sup> Hamor said that he would persuade them. Concerning the necessity of their being circumcised, Jacob says, “For this is not allowed to Hebrews to bring sons-in-law or daughters-in-law into their house from elsewhere but, rather, whoever boasts that he is of the same race.”*

Many things can be said about this passage, but for our purpose here I will highlight two important features. The first concerns the phrase περι το δε περιμνεσθαι αυτος “concerning the necessity of them being circumcised.” We have the same combination of verbs that Luke uses in [Acts 15:5](#) : δε “to be necessary” and περιμνω “to circumcise.” Both Theodotus and Luke use the present tense stem for the two verbs, with the second in the infinitive.<sup>[11]</sup> I do not highlight this parallel literary construction to imply Lukan dependency. Rather, I suggest that at the very least the two separate instances reflect an idiomatic saying that held certain currency in a stream of Jewish-Greek “halakhic” thought. To put it another way, this shared construction can be viewed as evidence for an oral/folk tradition common to both Theodotus and the Acts 15 Pharisees.

Second, Theodotus’ Jacob says, “For it is certainly not lawful for Hebrews to bring sons-in-law or daughters-in-law in from elsewhere, to lead them into the house...” This quote resembles in some ways another passage from Luke, [Acts 10:28](#) : “And [Peter] said to them, ‘You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a man who is a Jew to associate with a foreigner or to visit him...’” The parallel here is obviously not as precise. For example, Theodotus reads Ο γορ δε θεμιον “It is *not* lawful (for a Hebrew),” while Luke uses the alpha privative

ἄθροιστον ἄστυ “it is *unlawful* (for a Jew)” in [Acts 10:28](#) <sup>L</sup>. Also, Theodotus reads “to lead/bring into the (presumably Jewish) house,” whereas Luke writes, “to associate with a foreigner or to visit him.”<sup>[12]</sup> Nevertheless, the resonances are evident. Luke was not inventing a straw “wall” only to have the Apostles tear it down. We have clear textual evidence that at least some zealous, educated Jews in the Second Temple era held to a tradition discouraging personal interaction with Gentiles, whether for simple visiting, table fellowship, or marriage.

## Both Halakhot Rejected

As we read on in Acts 15, we see that the *halakhic* traditions (or innovations) recorded in verses 1 and 5 were not of the Holy Spirit. Although, each statement is completely plausible within the worldview of their respective proponents. For the first, if the LXX, a Hebrew text like the Samaritan Torah, and/or the Book of Jubilees was the only text they knew, an insistence upon “eighth day circumcision” as a defining characteristic of true Israelite males is reasonable. For the second, the Epic of Theodotus encapsulates an anti-Gentile prejudice similar to that behind the hesitations felt by Peter and his colleagues among “the Circumcision” (as told by Luke) regarding fellowship with non-Jews. In this case, we even have a literary precedent and parallel to the requirement asserted by some of the believing Pharisees, “It is necessary to circumcise them.”

As reasonable as these *halakhic* solutions may have seemed from the perspective of Jewish nationalism and religious tradition, neither was workable within the framework of the expanding Kingdom of Messiah Yeshua. In the end, they were both relegated to mere human solutions, in actual opposition to the will of God. This is true even for the *halakhah* asserted by believers! Neither could function to guide and shape a unified community of Jews and Gentiles for the indwelling of the Spirit of Holiness. Neither represented the Torah of Moses as taught and lived by the Master Himself. And it is His Torah that His own should concern themselves with!

Thus far, we looked at the grammatical issues that differentiate the *halakhot* proposed in [Acts 15:1](#) <sup>L</sup> and [5](#) <sup>L</sup>. Granting Luke’s inspired and masterful choice of words, I suggested that we take these differences seriously and adopt an approach that carefully avoids conflating them in our thinking. My assumption is that they originated from two distinct Jewish interest groups, only the second (v. 5) of which believed in Messiah Yeshua. Next, we will continue our close reading of this chapter with Peter’s testimony as the centerpiece of our exploration. We will discuss Luke’s use of the verb διακρίνω *diakrino* “to make distinction, render a judgement” as well as the controversial words of Peter concerning a “yoke on the necks of the disciples.”

## “Making a Distinction”

The verb *diakrino* occurs four times in all of Luke-Acts. Significantly, it only appears in the episodes surrounding Peter’s vision. We will have a quick look at each of these instances, but I encourage the reader to investigate the larger framework firsthand to get a good sense of the thread Luke is weaving for us. The first is in chapter 10, after the vision but still on the roof.

*While Peter was still thinking seriously about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Look! Three men are looking for you. But get up, go down, and accompany them **without hesitation**, because I have sent them.”* ([Acts 10:19-20](#), [NET](#) <sup>L</sup> Bible)

The Greek phrase behind the NET’s “without hesitation” is literally “making no distinction.” As we will see, the literal reading is preferable because it retains the issue confronting Peter: is he to continue preserving traditional distinctions and thereby maintain the social division between Jew and Gentile? If the sheet and animals are still a mystery to him, the Spirit’s command is unmistakably clear: Go with them... and make no distinction!

Still shaken up by the vision, Peter obeys; but this big step of faith is not without contention. Upon arrival in Jerusalem Peter is confronted by some very suspicious Jewish brothers.

So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers **took issue** with him, saying, “You went to uncircumcised men and shared a meal with them.” (Acts 11:2-3 )

The Greek verb *diakrino* appears again, this time along with the preposition *pros*. It is behind the NET’s “took issue,” which I think is a bit too light of an interpretation.<sup>[13]</sup> Luke jars the reader to feel that Peter’s behavior, and thus his very status as an authority in the community, was in question. This was not merely an eyebrow-raising act. Peter had broken with an accepted – though not universal – tradition maintaining Jewish separation from Gentiles. In the more “zealous” circles of religious observance, table fellowship with non-Jews (let alone Jewish outcasts such as “tax collectors” and “prostitutes”!) was frowned upon or prohibited altogether. In any case, Peter was being scrutinized for sharing a meal with uncircumcised men. He had some explaining to do!

*Diakrino* appears again in Peter’s recap of the vision (in this same chapter) and in Acts 15:9 , to which we now turn.

## Peter’s Testimony

Luke uses the verb *diakrino* for the fourth time in Peter’s testimony before the council in Jerusalem. After much dispute concerning the *halakhic* necessity asserted by Pharisees, namely, “It is necessary for us to circumcise the Gentiles and to order them to observe the Law of Moses,” Peter stood up, saying:

*Brothers, you know that some time ago God chose me to preach to the Gentiles so they would hear the message of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, has testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he **made no distinction** between them and us, cleansing their hearts by faith. So now why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? (Acts 15:7-10, NET )*

Peter says plainly to his Jewish brothers (having the Pharisees among them specifically in mind), “[God] made no distinction between them and us...” As mentioned before, this is Luke’s last use of the verb, again in Peter’s mouth and again concerning his obedience to the voice of the Spirit. Peter, who was told not to make a distinction where God was not making one, is not to be judged for that obedience. Just as Peter was not to declare unclean what God had cleansed (Ch. 10), so too the disciples were not to impose a distinction where God had not done so. Indeed, to make such a distinction was to tempt the Holy One Himself!<sup>[14]</sup> Peter counters by highlighting the power of preaching the simple message of the Gospel... that’s it! The Gentile hearers believed and their hearts were transformed by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Herein is exposed an enormous gap between commandments of men and the will of God. Men want to enforce separation where God sees none. God’s inclusion of Gentiles as “fellowheirs” gradually forced believing, tradition-minded Jews to reassess the inherited practices that relegated Gentiles to positions of marginality or irrelevance. In a way, they had to start at the beginning and ask, “OK. If our received traditions contain some extra-Torah elements, what is and what is not Torah, in light of the revelation of Yeshua the Messiah?” Answers to this question are still a hot topic today.

## Is the “Yoke” on Us?

If we understand “disciples” (v. 10) to mean the new believing Gentiles, then the unbearable yoke must refer to the Torah *as represented* by the Pharisaic “traditions of the elders.” After all, Peter’s testimony is a response to the Pharisees’ hard-line position concerning the right way forward with respect to the inclusion of the Gentiles. Since in the end their stance was rejected by the Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we know that this position must have been motivated by their traditions rather than their grasp of the Torah of the Messiah. The Spirit, though correcting our presumptions, will never contradict His Torah! In support of this reading is the fact

that Peter's own expectations had just been challenged (ch. 10), though he affirmed his faithful adherence to the Torah's dietary instructions. Additionally, throughout Luke's Gospel the Pharisees are shown to have very specific – and wrong – expectations concerning Torah observance that conflict with Yeshua's teaching at almost every turn.[15] Read all the accounts concerning "Pharisees" in Luke and you'll get the picture. It is not Torah, but the hypocritical, traditional readings of Torah that are the issue.

There is another possible reading here. Up to this point in Luke-Acts, the term "disciple" has been reserved for Jewish believers in Yeshua. Would not the males among them already be circumcised? Would they not already be keeping the commandments? How else might we think about Peter's characterization "yoke on the disciples' necks"? It's worth considering that the "yoke" may refer to the Pharisaic *halakhah* given in v. 5. Its formulation is that of a mandate for Jews, not Gentiles. That is, the directive can be understood as a type of marching order or mission statement for Jewish believers. The Pharisees envisioned the Jewish disciples taking the Gospel to the Gentiles and demanding the circumcision and "Torah obedience" of new believers. Not only is this a tall order for the Jewish disciples, but the real message behind such a mission then becomes that Messiah is not enough; believing Gentiles are incomplete or less-than-full members until they obey this *halakhah*. From the perspective of these Pharisees, before such a "conversion" was realized, membership status would be ambiguous and problematic. The mission in this case, then, is not about Messiah Yeshua at all! The *halakhah* would advance their agenda rather than Yeshua's.

Why would this yoke be unbearable? As we saw above, enactment of the *halakhah* of 15:5 necessitates the institution of an authority structure to enforce the circumcisions and regulate the Torah observance.[16] Peter knew from general experience in "Judaisms" how an institutionalized hierarchy can become a burdensome bureaucracy (though he wouldn't have used these terms), making simple, practical matters quite difficult. Apparently in a variety of situations, only if one adhered to a prescribed manner of Torah observance could they avoid scrutiny or shame.[17] The Pharisees might be watching! In this context, any genuine desire to interact with a Gentile, especially for the Gospel's sake, would be highly problematic and grounds for worry. Intensity tended to increase with proximity to the Land of Israel and even more so in Jerusalem, as some diaspora synagogues welcomed Gentile worshipers and supporters.[18] Nevertheless, Peter is right to describe any tradition or expectation contrary to God's word as an unbearable yoke!

So whether by "disciples" Peter meant new Gentile believers or Jewish evangelists, the problem is evident. If this *halakhah* was put into place, compliance (outward at least) would be completely governed by an external authority and subject to approval according to the Pharisees' interpretations of Torah. While this program might have been right up the Pharisees' alley, it was not of the Holy Spirit. Baruch Hashem! Jewish disciples were not to become "compliance officers" and Gentile believers were not to gather under the wings of the Pharisees for acceptance in Messiah. "Non-Jews" were not to "become Jewish." [19] On the contrary, the terms of the New Covenant hold that God writes His Torah on the hearts of His people. He circumcises hearts. It's about the message of forgiveness and redemption – for the whole world – through the faithfulness of YHWH's Messiah, Yeshua of Natzeret. It's about the obedience that comes from faith working through love in a new community of Jews and Gentiles, humbly seeking to walk together in God's commandments. It's *not* about men (en)forcing other men to conform to their short-sighted expectations. *Neither* is it about "outsiders" changing their status and appearance in order to be seen differently by "insiders." It's *not* about keeping believing Jews and Gentiles separate from one another. And finally *it is most certainly is not* about 613 commandments for one group of God's people and 7 commandments for the rest... but we'll have to save that discussion for another time.

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## References

[1] Transmitted independently of Scriptural support, these legal formulations are like early forms of *mishnah*. However, unlike the early *mishnayot* that circulated before Rabbi Judah the Prince edited what came to be called "The Mishnah," the authority of these *halakhot* lies in the ideology of the groups promoting them rather than any one particular teacher. I recognize the risk of anachronism using the term *halakhah* when Luke does not.

[2] The scribal additions are found in 9th, 10th, and 13th Century manuscripts. Cf. *Novum Testamentum Graece*

(NA27) apparatus ad loc.

[3] The Greek word behind “custom” here is ἦθος, *ethos*. Lawrence Schiffman states that ἦθος was used by Josephus for what latter rabbis would call *halakhah*. See his book, *Who Was A Jew?* (Ktav, 1985), pp. 12-13.

[4] Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Zondervan, 1997), p. 696, n. 29.

[5] See Matthew Thiessen, “The Text of [Genesis 17:14](#) ,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128, no. 4 (2009), 625-642.

[6] Most English translations miss Luke’s emphasis here by providing a paraphrase. The text is best read: “And [God] gave him the covenant of circumcision; and so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day, as did Isaac Jacob, and Jacob the twelve patriarchs.” There is an ellipsis here, where the verb “he circumcised” is implied for the second and third direct objects, Jacob and the twelve (as indicated by the successive accusative articles in Greek).

[7] Paul was clear to point this out as well: “Circumcision on the eighth day...” ( [Philippians 3:5](#)  )

[8] In a forthcoming work I argue that the Apostles’ use of the present tense stem περιτομῶ is consistent with that of rabbinic use of the participle מלין in Mishnaic Hebrew. The Greek present tense, like the Hebrew participle, refers to *halakhic* policy or procedure generally, not to instances of actual circumcision.

[9] Epic of Theodotus, Fragment 4, translated by F. Fallon, in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha Volume 2* (Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985) 792. John J. Collins dates the poem to early first century BCE and suggests the author to be “a militant and exclusivist Jew.” See his analysis in “The Epic of Theodotus and the Hellenism of the Hasmoneans,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 91-104.

[10] ἰουδαῖσαι – literally, “to Judaize,” an obvious anachronism put in the mouth of the patriarch!

[11] I know of no other examples of this construction in Hellenistic Jewish literature. An insignificant difference for the parallel is that whereas Luke used the active voice “to circumcise,” Theodotus has the middle. Perhaps more interesting is Theodotus’ use of “Hebrew” in contrast with Peter’s “Jew.”

[12] Compare the confrontation of Peter in 11:3, “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (NASB).

[13] The LXX of Ezekiel 20 (35-36) uses this same *diakrino pros* phrase twice to render the Hebrew את שפט ( *nif'al* of *shafat* with a definite direct object), meaning “bring judgement against.”

[14] Luke’s narrative makes it clear that to test God is to be on the wrong team. See [Luke 4:2](#)  , [11:6](#)  , and [Acts 5:9](#)  .

[15] Did Yeshua ever break the Sabbath? Well according the Pharisees, He did ([Luke 6:2](#)  ). They also didn’t approve of the people with whom Yeshua would often eat (5:30, 15:1). Yeshua warned His disciples about the “yeast” of the Pharisees (12:1).

[16] There were many “volunteer-based” Jewish communities (i.e., “Judaisms”) in the late Second Temple era, each with their own localized authority structure, hermeneutical framework, and practices.

[17] Elsewhere Luke describes how Pharisees would “watch” the observance of others in order to find reason of accusation. Also, recall how Yeshua explained that many of their “traditions” were in fact against the commandments of God (e.g., [Mark 7:6–9](#)  ).

[18] It was not until the Gospel was brought to these diaspora synagogues, however, that Gentiles were finally commanded to abandon idolatry. This marks a huge difference between the Apostles’ Message and the “Torah teaching” provided to Gentiles in the more complacent Jewish communities of the Mediterranean, among whom were Jews that included local pagan deities in their worship of the God of Israel!

[19] Conversion to Judaism was a very foggy issue in the first place, and for some it wasn’t even a legitimate

possibility. In the more zealous Jewish scribal circles the only way to be a Jew was to be born one. See Matthew Thiessen's excellent study, *Contesting Conversion* (Oxford University Press, 2011). The thesis of this book undermines Messianic Jewish theologies that defend a Gentile "conversion" procedure as if founded on the Apostolic Writings or "1st Century Judaism" in general.

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