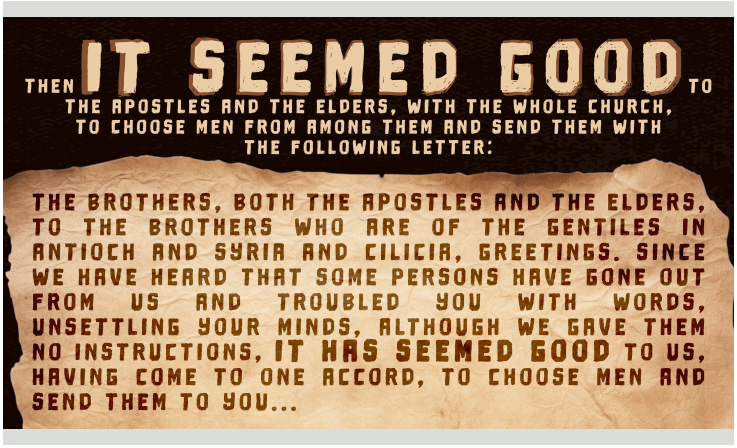
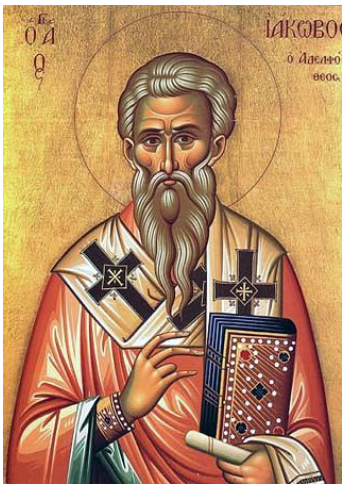
Digging Deeper

November 15, 2026



Peter Addresses the Council



Barbara Sande

One of the most interesting things about the Jerusalem meeting is that it is James who appears as a key leader and is described as rendering a decision on the matter of Gentiles and the Law (Acts 15:13-21). The structure of the Jerusalem community seems to center around elders, and James appears to be the leader of this group of elders. To take up a thread from earlier in the book, the Jerusalem community is living like a new Israel. In the early history of Israel, Moses led as a prophet, but through a council of 70 elders.

Within this community there are some who are "more conservative" with respect to the Law, primarily Pharisees (v.5). These Pharisees accept Jesus as the Messiah, but consider the Gentiles who are coming to Christ as a result of Paul's mission as "joining Israel." If the community thought of itself as new Israel, then Gentiles in Paul's churches were like Gentiles who joined Israel in the Hebrew Bible. They ought to "convert" and accept Jewish Law and practice.

Luke intends his description of the meeting in Acts 15 to show to Theophilus that the church is an orderly independent entity that functions in a way that is similar to the Greco-Roman world. A question that effects the whole is presented to an assembly, which debates that issue and makes a decision that the whole accepts (Witherington, Acts, 451). Luke describes a report from Peter and Barnabas, explaining that the Holy Spirit has come upon Gentiles as it is the Jews at Pentecost, and that miracles are being done by the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles.

James states that it is not right to "trouble" the Gentiles with the Law. The verb παρενοχλέω is rare in the New Testament, only used in this passage. It does appears in 2 Macc 11:31 in a text describing the Jews being permitted to "enjoy their own food and laws" without being troubled by the Greek authorities. In that case, the Jews were not to be "troubled" over their keeping of boundary markers like circumcision or food laws, here in Acts the Gentiles are not to have the Law imposed upon them.

Perhaps James is the best to make the statement since he stands between the two parties, the Gentile Party represented by Paul, and the Circumcision party represented by the Pharisees. It is hard to know just how much "power" James has at this point, but the resolution seems to keep both sides happy.

I wonder if this solution really satisfied everyone, since Paul never (specifically) mentions it in his letters and he continues to have trouble with Judaizers.