

THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM & THE LAW OF MOSES II: A HISTORICAL CONTROVERSY

This historical account of the council of Jerusalem, mentioned specifically in Acts 15, is a continuation of the second portion of the article regarding the Council of Jerusalem and the Law of God that deals with the Scriptural context. This historical account is the second witness. It is recommended to read the first part to have a clearer understanding of the subject being dealt with. You can find it [here](#).

History records many similar gatherings as the council of Acts 15 at Jerusalem where a single individual bishop oversaw the meetings as the brethren assembled in conference together. The bishop issued the sentence according to the judgment of the brethren when unity prevailed amongst them. The first recorded bishop overseeing affairs at Jerusalem was the apostle James, and the first recorded sentence was given by him regarding the controversy of the circumcision of Gentile converts. Until the siege of the Jews many years later, which took place under Emperor Hadrian, there were fifteen bishops in succession there, all of whom are said to have been of Hebrew descent, and to have received the knowledge of Christ in purity. And being from Hebrew descent, and having faithfully passed down the knowledge of Christ and the law, they were approved of to be bishops by those who were considered competent in judging of such matters. These continued from the days of the apostles until the siege which took place at that time; in which siege the Jews, having again rebelled against the Romans, were conquered after severe battles.

Critical events happened from that time to after the seige which add witness to the observance of the law of God by the

bishops in Jerusalem, far from abolishing the law by the sentences in their councils, they guided their judgments according to the law and not independant of it. The bishops overseeing Jerusalem are historically maintained, leading up to the controversy regarding the law of God under Hadrian's reign over Jerusalem. They are as follows: (1) The apostle James (2) Symeon (3) Justus (4) Zacchæus (5) Tobias (6) Benjamin (7) John (8) Matthias (9) Philip (10) Seneca (11) Justus (12) Levi (13) Ephres (14) Joseph (15) Judah

At the time of the fifteenth bishop, Judas, Jerusalem was beseiged and a change took place amongst the Christians after the Hebrews were driven from the land. At this time, a new bishop took the office of overseeing affairs in the Christian church at Jerusalem, who made great breaches within the Christian faith with the Roman Emperor.

“And thus, when the city had been emptied of the Jewish nation and had suffered the total destruction of its ancient inhabitants, it was colonized by a different race, and the Roman city which subsequently arose changed its name and was called *Ælia*, in honor of the emperor *Ælius Adrian*. And as the church there was now composed of Gentiles, the first one to assume the government of it after the bishops of the circumcision was Marcus.” (Eusebius. The History of the Church, Book IV, Chapter VI)

“The first fifteen bishops of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews; and the congregation over which they presided united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ. It was natural that the primitive tradition of a church which was founded only forty days after the death of Christ, and was governed almost as many years under the immediate inspection of his apostle, should be received as the standard of orthodoxy. The distant churches very frequently appealed to the authority of their venerable Parent, and relieved her distresses by a liberal contribution of alms...

The Nazarenes retired from the ruins of Jerusalem to the little town of Pella beyond the Jordan, where that ancient church languished above sixty years in solitude and obscurity...under the reign of Hadrian, the desperate fanaticism of the Jews filled up the measure of their calamities; and the Romans, exasperated by their repeated rebellions, exercised the rights of victory with unusual rigour. The emperor founded, under the name of Alia Capitolina, a new city on Mount Sion, to which he gave the privileges of a colony; and denouncing the severest penalties against any of the Jewish people who should dare to approach its precincts, he fixed a vigilant garrison of a Roman cohort to enforce the execution of his orders...

They elected Marcus for their bishop, a prelate of the race of the Gentiles, and most probably a native either of Italy or of some of the Latin provinces. At his persuasion the most considerable part of the congregation renounced the Mosaic law, in the practice of which they had persevered above a century. By this sacrifice of their habits and prejudices they purchased a free admission into the colony of Hadrian...

When the name and honours of the church of Jerusalem had been restored to Mount Sion, the crimes of heresy and schism were imputed to the obscure remnant of the Nazarenes which refused to accompany their Latin bishop [Marcus]...

It has been remarked with more ingenuity than truth that the virgin purity of the church was never violated by schism or heresy before the reign of Trajan or Hadrian, about one hundred years after the death of Christ (Gibbon E. Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Volume I, Chapter XV, Section I. ca. 1776-1788)

“According to rabbinic sources, he [Hadrian] prohibited public gatherings for instruction in Jewish law, forbade the proper observance of the Sabbath and holidays and outlawed many important rituals.” (Barron SW. Social and Religious History

of the Jews, Volume 2: Christian Era: the First Five Centuries. 1952, p. 107).

Feeling it was the first importance to their well-being, to procure for themselves the liberty of removing their effects into the city of Ælia, and to be admitted in the rights of citizenship there, a considerable number of the Christians came to the resolution of formally renouncing all obedience to the law of Moses. The immediate author of this measure was, in all likelihood, that very Marcus whom they appointed as their bishop: a man whose name evidently speaks him to have been a Roman, and who doubtless was not unknown in his nation that had been the chief command in Palestine and might possibly have been related to some officer of eminence there. Perceiving, therefore, one of their own nation placed at the head of Christendom, the Roman prefects dismissed at once all apprehension of their exciting disturbance in the newly-established colony, and from this time ceased to regard them as Jews.

In consequence in this favourable alteration of the sentiments of the Romans towards them...Marcus, at whose insistence, they were prevailed on to renounce the law of Moses... Nothing, in fact, can be better attested than that there existed in Palestine two Christian churches, by the one of which an observance of the Mosaic law was retained, and by the other disregarded. This division amongst the Christians of Jewish origins did not take place before the time of Hadrian, for it can be ascertained, that previously to his reign the Christians of Palestine were unanimous in an adherence to the ceremonial observances of their forefathers. There can be no doubt, therefore, that this separation originated in major part of them being prevailed upon by Marcus to renounce Mosaic ritual, by way of getting rid of the numerous inconveniences to which they were exposed, and procuring for themselves a reception, as citizens, in the newly formed colony of Ælia Capitolina(Mosheim JL. Commentaries on the affairs of the

Christians before the time of Constantine the Great: or, An enlarged view of the ecclesiastical history of the first three centuries, Volume 2, 1813, p. 196-197)

Hadrian's proclamations sought to root out the nationalistic features within Judea's Jewish communities,[5] which he saw as the cause of continuous rebellions. He prohibited the Torah law and the Hebrew calendar, and executed Judaic scholars. The sacred scroll was ceremonially burned on the Temple Mount. At the former Temple sanctuary, he installed two statues, one of Jupiter, another of himself. In an attempt to erase any memory of Judea or Ancient Israel, he wiped the name off the map and replaced it with Syria Palaestina.[16][17][18] By destroying the association of Jews to Judea and forbidding the practice of Jewish faith, Hadrian aimed to root out a nation that inflicted heavy casualties on the Roman Empire. Similarly, he re-established Jerusalem, but now as the Roman pagan polis of Aelia Capitolina, and Jews were forbidden from entering it, except on the day of Tisha B'Av.[56]

Originally written by an Arabic Muslim around the tenth century named Abd al-Jabbar and called Tathbit Dalal Nubuwwat Sayyidina Mahammad. One chapter of it is believed to be an Islamic interpretation of a lot of "Judeo-Christian" writings (some probably from true Nazarenes, others from Essenes, etc.). Shlomo Pines translated much of the one chapter of it into English, that discussed Arabic Judeo-Christians.

Here is the translation of one section of it that may have additional insight related to Marcus' supporters:

(71a) 'After him', his disciples (axhab) were with the Jews and the Children of Israel in the latter's synagogues and observed the prayers and the feasts of (the Jews) in the same place as the latter. (However) there was a disagreement between them and the Jews with regard to Christ.

The Romans (al-Rum) reigned over them. The Christians (used to) complain to the Romans about the Jews, showed them their own weakness and appealed to their pity. And the Romans did pity them. This (used) to happen frequently. And the Romans said to the Christians: "Between us and the Jews there is a pact which (obliges us) not to change their religious laws (adyan). But if you would abandon their laws and separate yourselves from them, praying as we do (while facing) the East, eating (the things) we eat, and regarding as permissible that which we consider as such, we should help you and make you powerful, and the Jews would find no way (to harm you). On the contrary, you would be more powerful than they."

The Christians answered: "We will do this."

(And the Romans) said: "Go, fetch your companions, and bring your Book (kitab)." (The Christians) went to their companions, informed them of (what had taken place) between them and the Romans and said to them: "Bring the Gospel (al-injil), and stand up so that we should go to them."

But these (companions) said to them: "You have done ill. We are not permitted (to let) the Romans pollute the Gospel. In giving a favourable answer to the Romans, you have accordingly departed from the religion. We are (therefore) no longer permitted to associate with you; on the contrary, we are obliged to declare that there is nothing in common between us and you;" and they prevented their (taking possession of) the Gospel or gaining access to it. In consequence a violent quarrel (broke out) between (the two groups). Those (mentioned in the first place) went back to the Romans and said to them: "Help us against these companions of ours before (helping us) against the Jews, and take away from them on our behalf our Book (kitab)." Thereupon (the companions of whom they had spoken) fled the country. And the Romans wrote concerning them to their governors in the districts of Mosul and in the Jazirat al-'Arab. Accordingly, a search was made for them; some (qawm) were caught and burned, others (qawm) were killed.

(As for) those who had given a favorable answer to the Romans they came together and took counsel as to how to replace the Gospel, seeing it was lost to them. (Thus) the opinion that a Gospel should be composed (yunshi`u) was established among them...a certain number of Gospels were written. (Pines S. The Jewish Christians of the Early Centuries of Christianity according to a New Source. Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Volume II, No.13; 1966. Jerusalem, pp. 14-15).

The 19th century scholar J.B. Lightfoot wrote:

The Church of Ælia Capitolina was very differently constituted from the Church of Pella and the Church of Jerusalem...not a few doubtless accepted the conqueror's terms, content to live henceforth as Gentiles...in the new city of Hadrian. But there were others who hung to the law of their forefathers...(Lightfoot, Joseph Barber. Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes and Dissertations. Published by Macmillan, 1881. p. 317, 331)

The consensus speaks of Marcus as one who cast off the law of God. It was not the apostle James, or any other succeeding bishop who had done this until that time from Jerusalem. However, because of this compromise, the succeeding bishops eventually came to be regarded as the orthodoxy among those ignorant of the historical events. This led to many other breaches in the observance of the law much further than in Jerusalem, affecting the observance of the law from those early professed followers of Christ, such as Justin Martyr, the first century Barnabas (not the companion of Paul), and the bishops of Rome. This led to the development of the Russian Orthodox church where the Jerusalem Patriarchates, claiming to be the successors of the apostle James, found their beginning. Yet these do not succeed James in their works, any more than the Popes have followed after the example of the apostle Peter. Rather, they cast aside the law of God, and observe, as the Papacy does, Sunday sacredness as the

legacy of Marcus, the bishop of Aelia Capitolina, while deeply disregarding much of the other principles of the laws contained in Moses.

WHAT OF THE LAW WAS NOT REGARDED ANY LONGER

So then, historically we see the consensus that the law of God was upheld until the time of Marcus, who made concessions with the Romans. By this means, Marcus had effectively severed Christian ties with their Jewish roots with no Scriptural basis for doing so, and in so doing, by disassociating themselves with the law of God, had severed themselves from the religion which Christ established. Then what was it about law of circumcision that made it so disagreeable to the early church? It was the outward nature of it's observance, which could not profit the man in his relationship with God, nor affect righteousness or salvation from sin; no practical holiness could result from fleshly circumcision, anymore than removing the leaven from the home at the time of the feast of Unleavened bread could purge out sin from the soul.

“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”

(Rom. 2:28-29)

All the law is to be upheld, yet the outward carnal elements were not what God regards as essential to salvation or of true religion which springs forth from a pure and undefiled heart. It was for this reason that the early church saw circumcision as unessential as it pertains to salvation.

If we go as far as to say that the apostles would have had the authority to do away with the law of God, they would be going against the very Scripture and instruction which was the test of the prophets and the Messiah: “To the law (Torah) and to

the testimony, if they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them." (Isaiah 8:20); if the Messiah came to do away with the law, there is no light in such a Messiah; thus it would have to make such a Christ a false Christ. If His apostles came and spoke of doing away with the law, the same is also true, being false apostles. God be thanked, Christ came to "magnify the law (Torah), and make it honourable" (Isaiah 42:21) and not to destroy it, and His true apostles are to teach whatsoever He commanded, thus they also speak according to the law, magnifying it, showing it as honourable in Christ. So do we do away with the law of God? "God forbid, we establish the law." (Romans 3:31)