

Does Acts 21:20-26 Justify the Incorporation of Jewish Laws Into Modern Worship?

“And when they heard it, they glorified the Lord, and said unto him, Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are all zealous of the law: And they are informed of thee, that thou teachest all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs. What is it therefore? The multitude must needs come together: for they will hear that thou art come. Do therefore this that we say to thee: we have four men which have a vow on them; take them, and purify thyself with them, and be at charges with them, that they may shave their heads: and all may know that those things whereof they were informed concerning thee, are nothing; but that thou thyself also walkest orderly, and keepest the law. As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication. Then Paul took the men, and the next day purifying himself with them entered into the temple, to signify the accomplishment of the days of purification, until that an offering should be offered for every one of them.” (Acts 21:20-26)

Christians in the 21st century are perplexed about this passage of scripture. After all, the old law was nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14-16; Eph. 2:14-16) and taken out of the way (Heb. 10:9). The apostle Paul wrote on a number of occasions that it was wrong for the Jewish-Christians to revert back to the law of Moses (Gal. 4:10-11; 5:1-4) and of course it had been made abundantly clear that they could not bind any part of the law of Moses on the Gentiles (Ac. 15). Yet in Acts 21, Paul actually participated in a Jewish observance. He purified himself and entered the temple. He participated in an observance that involved “an offering” (vv. 26). And all of this was done to prove that he “walkest orderly, and keepest the law.” The law of Moses? According to the context, the obvious answer is “yes.” So is there a contradiction between Acts 21 and the entire book of Galatians? Does Paul’s example here prove that we can incorporate certain aspects of the law of Moses into worship today in the 21st century?

While the passage as a whole is difficult, the answer to the above question is quite simple and can be found in verse 25. The Jerusalem elders told Paul in verse 25, “As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing, save only that they keep themselves from things offered to idols, and from blood, and from strangled, and from fornication.” There is, in this passage, a contrast between the “Jews...which believe” (vv. 20) and the “Gentiles which believe” (vv. 25). They were all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28), but in the first century when Judaism was still rampant, Jews who converted to Christianity held on to their heritage. It’s not as if their conversion to Christ meant the eradication of every Jewish element in their lives. Remember, Judaism was a religion, but there were also many secular and political aspects to it as well, such as Hanukkah (John 10:22) and Purim (Esther 9:26). Jewish customs and Jewish pride were engrained within these Jewish-Christians. The Gentiles, however, did not have the same heritage. In fact, there was much diversity among the Gentiles.

Acts 21:25 confirms to us that the Gentiles were commanded NOT to observe the Jewish customs. The Jews may have followed some of the Jewish customs, but the Gentiles were to “observe no such thing.” We today are Gentiles and therefore we fall under the scope of this command. Whatever Acts 21 means, it does NOT mean that Christians today are permitted to incorporate Jewish customs into their worship and service to God. We cannot conclude that because Paul participated in a Jewish observance in Acts 21 that we are permitted to do the same in the 21st century. That resolves the main part of the controversy.

Now why did Paul participate in this Jewish observance, and is it true that he kept the law of Moses while commanding other Jewish-Christians not to (as in the book of Galatians)? It is interesting to note that Paul was assisting four men who had taken a vow and vows must always be fulfilled (e.g. marriage). Paul was not actively setting out to observe the law of Moses because he felt obligated to do so *as a Christian*. He was simply helping four men fulfill a vow.

In doing so, Paul was killing two birds with one stone. Again, vows have to be fulfilled, and therefore these four Christian men were obligated to fulfill their vow (Num. 30:2). But Paul's efforts here also helped to calm some of the unrest among the Jewish-Christians who misunderstood the nature of Paul's teachings. They thought that Paul was teaching the Jews to forsake Moses (vv. 21), and while he was teaching that the law of Moses was no longer in effect, he was not teaching them to forsake Moses. In fact, Paul was teaching that the law of Moses was a tutor which led to Christ (Gal. 3:23-25). The Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem also thought that Paul was condemning the act of circumcision (Ac. 21:21). Paul was condemning the Judaizing teachers which *bound* circumcision among the Gentiles and/or observed circumcision in a religious way (Gal. 5:1-4), but he was not condemning circumcision itself. Just as it is not wrong today to circumcise your sons if you so choose, it was not inherently wrong then either. So there were some misunderstandings and misconceptions among the Christians in Jerusalem as to Paul's teachings, and so in helping these four Jewish men fulfill their vow, he was responding to that controversy.

There is nothing in the text of Acts 21 which says that what Paul did was worship unto God or that there was any religious connotation to it. We are only told that Paul purified himself and entered the temple for the sole purpose of assisting the four Jewish men. Many will point to the latter part of verse 24 where the elders say that Paul's assistance with the four Jewish men would prove that he walked orderly and kept the law. In Acts 16:3, we learn that earlier in his ministry, Paul had taken Timothy and circumcised him to satisfy the Jews in that area (so that their preaching efforts among the Jews would not be hindered). Perhaps that is what is happening in Acts 21. Perhaps Paul was walking orderly and keeping the law, not because he felt he was *required* to or because he *wanted* to, but because he wanted to maintain a positive influence among the Jewish-Christians. That is, if he didn't do it, just like with Timothy in Acts 16, he would have caused unnecessary division in the Jerusalem church. After all, there was nothing wrong with washing oneself with water nor was it wrong to enter the Temple. Vows were/are not sinful, and there is nothing wicked about shaving one's head if he so chooses.

Acts 21 cannot possibly be used to justify modern religious observance of the law of Moses as was pointed out earlier. But neither does this passage conclusively teach that Paul sanctioned the religious observance of the law of Moses in the early church. He sometimes went through the outward motions of certain parts of the old law so that he could positively influence those he was trying to teach, but he taught against the religious observance of the law (Gal. 4:10-11; 5:1-4) as well as the binding of the law upon others, especially the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-2).