

## The Book of Acts – Verse-by-Verse

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### Acts 10:24-29

As we rejoin our study, we find that Peter is about to take a large leap forward in his apostolic ministry. In my mind, it's crucial that it is Peter who has been chosen by God for this assignment – since he seems to have really taken charge of the Church at Jerusalem.

He's just seen a very unusual vision of "clean" and "unclean" animals which, of course, were symbols of the Jews and Gentiles. The question is, "Did Peter grasp the meaning of the vision?" We'll find that out in short order.

Luke moves forward in his narrative by noting, "24 The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends."

If we outline the Spirit's schedule, one Day 1 Cornelius saw the angel and sent his messengers to Joppa. They made the 32-mile trip from Caesarea Maritima to Joppa somewhere around 24 hours.

According to some research I did, the average human can walk between 3-4 miles in an hour - depending on age, physical fitness, and the terrain.

Since the distance between Caesarea and Joppa was about 32 miles, three men could make that trip in about 8 hours without stopping. That's probably not realistic. Factoring in breaks and rest stops along the way, the trip

could be accomplished on foot within a 24-hour timeframe.

On Day 2, Peter's group arrived in Joppa, at just about midday. This coincided with the conclusion of Peter's vision of the "clean" and "unclean" animals.

After spending the night at Simon's home, on Day 3 the three men were joined by Peter and a delegation as they headed back to Caesarea Maritima. They no doubt spent the night between the two cities and arrived in Caesarea Maritima on Day 4.

Peter did not go with the three messengers by himself. In Acts 11:12 we learn that some brothers in Christ joined Peter and the messengers. Peter tells the Jerusalem Council, "The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house." – Acts 11:12

This was, no doubt, wisdom on the part of Peter. Not knowing how things would turn out, it was in his best interest to have other Messianic Jews with him when he went to Cornelius' home. Knowing the Jewish mandate of 3 witnesses, this makes sense.

Altogether, the group included ten people: the three messengers, Peter, and six Messianic Jews.

Repeating verse 24, we find, "The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends."

Peter must have been surprised when he discovered that he wasn't just meeting with Cornelius. When he arrived, he realized that Cornelius had gathered a large group in his home, including his personal household, his

extended relatives, and his close friends. In short, Peter was meeting a room packed with Gentiles – not just one Gentile seeking salvation!

We should note Cornelius' actions here. The angel evidently told him that when Peter arrived, he would explain what he needed to do. Cornelius wasted no time in sending out the messengers, but he also invited his extended relatives and close friends to come to hear what Peter had to say.

I like this. The man hasn't even been saved yet – and he's already doing evangelism! He's not playing it safe. He's not keeping this to himself. Up to this point, he's done just about everything that a "God-Fearer" can do within the limits of Judaism. Now he is certain that Peter will tell him what the next steps are – and he doesn't want his family and friends to miss out on it.

Let's look at verses 25-26:

"As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

As Peter was preparing to enter Cornelius' home, the Centurion met him and fell at his feet in reverence. In Western culture, this is practically unheard of, but in Eastern culture it was quite common.

The Old King James Version uses the word "worship" when it describes Cornelius prostrating himself before Peter. Modern translation use the word "reverence" because Westerners tend to associate worship with divine worship.

In the ancient East, there were two kinds of worship – “religious worship” and “civil worship”. In Oriental or Eastern cultures, it was common for persons to prostrate themselves on the ground before those of rank and honor as a sign of deep respect.

When Sarah, Abraham’s wife died, Abraham needed a place for her tomb. Look at the conversation between Abraham and the Hittites in Genesis 23:

“The Hittites replied to Abraham, “Listen to us, sir. You are God’s chosen one among us. Bury your dead in the finest of our tombs. None of us will withhold his tomb for burying your dead.”

Now, notice what verse 7 says: “Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites.”

You’ll find a similar display of humility on the part of Jacob when he meets Esau after fleeing from Laban, his father-in-law. Genesis 33 records:

“But Jacob himself went on ahead and bowed to the ground seven times as he approached his brother .... the maidservants and their children approached and bowed down. Leah and her children also approached and bowed down, and then Joseph and Rachel approached and bowed down.”

Now that we have seen these examples, let me make an additional observation about Cornelius’ homage to Peter. Let’s remember that Cornelius is a Centurion. He is a military man who has risen through the ranks of Roman Army. One hundred soldiers are under his authority – and

yet, when he sees Peter, he pays him the ultimate respect.

In Peter's case, although he is very aware of the Eastern tradition of "civil worship", there is still something that he finds disconcerting about Cornelius' obeisance. There is a hint of Peter's concern that the man is showing more than simple humility because Peter tells Cornelius, "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself."

This reminds us of another scene in Revelation 22 where John is overcome with emotion when an angel shows him a portion of the future. John records, "And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me." – Revelation 22:8

The angel immediately responded, "No, don't worship me. I am a servant of God, just like you and your brothers the prophets, as well as all who obey what is written in this book. Worship only God!"

Considering what happened to Lucifer so many centuries before, the angel wanted no part of being worshipped! I think Peter is reflecting the same kind of concern about Cornelius. Only God is deserving of true worship!

Let's look at verses 27-29:

"Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. 28 He said to them: 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. 29 So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?'"

After helping Cornelius to his feet, Peter accompanied him into the house. When he got inside, he realized the house was filled with Gentiles. I wonder if, at that moment, Peter's vision came back to him. The sheet he saw was filled with all kinds of animals, birds, and insects.

Here was a crowd in Cornelius' home, all as eager as their host to hear what Peter had to say. Three days ago, Peter could not have believed he would be standing under a Centurion's roof – addressing a crowd of the Goyim! In the Church's three years of spreading the Gospel, not a single apostle had dared to do something so clearly contrary to Jewish Law and custom.

The first thing Peter does is to reference that very prohibition. He tells the crowd, 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him.'

There is an interesting discussion about the word that Peter uses when he says "it is against our law" for Jews to associate with Gentiles. The technical Greek word for law is "nomos". In our text, word is "athemitos". It is a composite of the word, "tithemi" – which means to "set forth" and the article, "a", which creates a negative tone.

In essence, the Greek word "athemitos" doesn't refer to a "hard and fast" law (nomos), but a socially unacceptable action. The "athemitos" is not a written prohibition, but a cultural taboo.

This word only appears twice in the New Testament – in Acts 10:28 as well as I Peter 4:3.

So, here's the real question: "Does the Old Testament Law actually say that a Jew could never visit or associate with anyone from another nation?"

The simple answer is, "No". Why then, were the Jews so adamant about avoiding Gentiles? I think the real answer is found, not in the Torah, but in Jewish history.

The rabbinic literature that survived the destruction of the 2nd Temple stressed the unique identity of the Jews as God's Chosen People. As such, the Jews practiced a form of xenophobia – the fear of other cultures.

Jewish exclusivism maintained a tight hold on the Jewish culture. As one scholar puts it, "Because of this social view, many religious Jews sought to keep a measured distance away from most Gentiles, believing the average Gentile to be intrinsically "unclean," capable of transmitting ritual impurity to Jews, and or leading Jews away into idolatry." - Ariel HaNavy

Peter's statement to the crowd at Cornelius' home reflects the common view among 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jews that consorting with Gentiles was taboo. But there is something else. When Peter says, 'You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him", he is stating that the Gentiles themselves know that this is the unwritten rule.

This social prohibition, then, was understood by both the Jews and the Gentiles. Was it based on the Torah? No, but that didn't keep it from being understood by both Jewish and Gentile people groups.

So, for the Jews, what was the real problem? As others have noted, the Gentiles' lack of scruples in food

matters and other rules that applied to Jewish life made the Gentiles a source of ritual contamination.

For a pious Jew to meet Gentiles socially was not categorically forbidden, but it did expose them to religious liabilities. As such, it was just safer to avoid entering Gentile buildings, or handling articles belonging to Gentiles, or eating with them. With the latter, a Jew could never be certain that the food offered to them by a Gentile host were not ritually forbidden.

That very issue arose among the Messianic Jews and Gentiles when they began to formulate house churches. Look at what Paul says in Romans 14:1-3:

"Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them." – Romans 14:1-3

Considering these ritualistic pitfalls, 1<sup>st</sup>-century Jews did their best to avoid all forms of personal social interaction with Gentiles. This is what Peter is saying when he references the fact that it was against Jewish customs for him or any other Jew to "associate with a Gentile or visit him".

But now something has happened to change Peter's mind about the Jewish exclusivism of his day. He tells Cornelius, "But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean."

When we read Peter's words here, we must ask, "When did God show him that?" We might say, "Well, that happened when Peter saw the vision", but Luke tells us Peter was still wondering what the vision meant when the three men stood in the courtyard and asked for him.

So, yes, the vision contributed to Peter's changed opinion, but that wasn't everything. Second, there was the Holy Spirit's instructions for Peter to go with the men, "not doubting anything". That added to Peter's spiritual calculations as well.

But there was something else. Peter invited the three men into Simon's home and entertained them that afternoon. Then, getting up early in the morning, the 10 men set out for Joppa. They spent the day walking and talking as they travelled. They stayed overnight somewhere between Caesarea Maritima and Joppa. We can picture them eating together and talking about numerous things.

By the time Peter and company arrived at Cornelius' home, Peter had become convinced that these Gentiles were the very subject of the vision he had beheld on the rooftop of Simon's home.

I am certain that those two days involved the most time Peter had ever spent with Gentiles! He is walking with them, conversing with them, eating with them, and learning a great deal about the Gentiles from them.

Somewhere between Caesarea Maritima and Joppa, the fuller message finally got through to Peter. God showed him that he should not call anyone impure or unclean. Now I'm not saying it was a done deal for Peter. Even after the Cornelius incident, Peter would

have some relapses – but the foundation had been laid and it was up to the Holy Spirit to build on it.

Professor Ellicott put it this way:

The Apostle had, we find, at last learnt the lesson which the vision had taught him, in all the fulness of its meaning. Humanity as such had been redeemed by the Incarnation and Ascension, and was no longer common or unclean, even in the most outcast heathen. God was willing to receive all men.” – Ellicott

Next time: The Gentile “Pentecost”