

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Journal of Biblical Literature* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_jbl-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_jbl-01.php)

## Acts xv. 21.

JAMES HARDY ROPES.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.

Μωσῆς γὰρ ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων κατὰ πόλιν τοῖς κηρύσσοντας αὐτὸν ἔχει ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς κατὰ πᾶν σάββατον ἀναγινωσκόμενος.

IN this verse the second half (ἐν ταῖς . . . ἀναγινωσκόμενος) evidently explains the positive statement of the first half, telling in what the proclaiming of Moses consists, viz. in the weekly reading of the Bible in the synagogues. It is further made clear by ἐκ γενεῶν that the synagogues meant are Jewish and not (as Grotius, followed by Hammond, thought) distinctively Christian meetings. Again, the proclaiming of Moses is most naturally explained as a proclaiming to those who were not already familiar with him. This is the sense of κηρύσσειν suggested by its use in the Old Testament to denote the announcement of a fast, an appointment to office, etc., which led (cf. Jonah i. 2, iii. 4) to the New Testament use with reference especially to the message of John, or of Jesus and the Christians. The word κηρύσσειν could, perhaps, be used of the inculcation of Moses' teaching on more or less unwilling Jews (cf. Rom. ii. 21; Gal. v. 11), but to assume this makes the explained word κηρύσσοντας describe the fact intended quite as directly as the explanatory word ἀναγινωσκόμενος, and deprives the sentence of all its force. Both words are indeed used in the Old Testament to translate אָרָב, but the translators have thereby meant to discriminate between two shades of meaning. The sentence is thus best interpreted as meaning that through the reading of the Law in the Jewish synagogues every Sabbath, the Gentiles all over the Greek world have for ages past had Moses preached to them.<sup>1</sup> The emphasis in the sentence clearly belongs to the assertion of antiquity and world-wide extension made in the words ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων κατὰ πόλιν. It is impossible to emphasize Μωσῆς and neglect the following words, as some interpreters have tried to do.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Brenske, *Exegetische Bemerkung zu Apostelgeschichte 15*, 19-21, in *Theologische Studien und Kritiken*, 1859, p. 711-716.

The difficulty with the verse is to determine its bearing on the argument of James's speech. That Moses has long had preachers everywhere is given as a reason for the proposal not to burden Gentile converts but to write to them to abstain from idolatrous abominations, from licentiousness, from strangled flesh, and from blood, but wherein the cogency of the reasoning consists has puzzled interpreters. The verse is important because it is so intimately associated with the most disputed point in the central chapter of Acts; it has often been held to furnish the key by which to understand the attitude of the author of Acts toward the provisions of the so-called Apostolic Decree.

The interpretations group themselves naturally into: (1) those which treat the sentence with γάρ as giving a reason for the several positive injunctions of vs. 20; (2) those which treat it as giving a defence of the liberality of the proposed policy, *i.e.* a reason for vs. 19; and (3) those which make it refer in a more general way to the whole proposal of vs. 19 and 20.

(1) In the first of these groups the views of F. Vatablus (in *Critici Sacri*), of Calovius (followed by Wieseler and, if I do not misunderstand him, by Nösgen), and of Brenske, need not be discussed. The interpretation of Calvin and that of Overbeck are more important.

(a) Calvin's view has become almost the received interpretation; it is represented for substance by such names as Morus, Rosenmüller, Kuinoel, De Wette, Hackett, Lekebusch, Bloomfield, Ritschl, Meyer, Alford, Gloag, Jacobson, Holtzmann, Weiss, Felten (Roman Catholic), Page. The four points of vs. 20, it is said, were matters that caused special annoyance to those Jews who might think of turning to Christ, and to Jewish Christians who still frequented the Synagogue, and they were kept fresh in the minds of such people by the reading of the Law every Sabbath. Hence in order to avoid friction, "*ne illi offendantur*," the Gentiles must consent, says James, to conform to Jewish prejudice. These interpreters sometimes go so far as to represent the four points as in James's view and in fact matters of indifference over which, seeing that the Jews took them so much to heart, it was not worth while to make a contest. As Calvin says, the old ceremonies had to be given a decent burial.

The *first* difficulty with this plausible view is that it does not do justice at all to the form of the sentence, in which the antiquity of the Synagogue worship in the Diaspora is emphasized. Under this interpretation the three words διὰ τοὺς Ἰουδαίους (cf. xvi. 3) would have expressed the idea as completely and far more clearly and forcibly. *Secondly*, the word κηρύσσειν, as we have seen above, is not

naturally taken as referring to the repetition of familiar precepts before hearers who are zealous to observe them. *Thirdly*, it is far from clear that any Jews who were disposed to insist on the Law which the Synagogue kept fresh in their mind would have been in any sense satisfied with these four points. One who could be satisfied with these alone out of all that Moses had urgently enjoined must have already in principle admitted the freedom of the Gentiles from the whole Law, in spite of his own weekly hearing of it in the Synagogue. This must have been even more obvious to the author of the speech than to us. *Fourthly*, the injunction to abstain from licentiousness (which is probably to be taken in the proper sense of the word) was not based on the Jewish Law in any greater degree than was any other point of Christian morals. The interpretation simply does not apply to this point and would be impossible if this point stood alone without the first three.

Thus from nearly every point of view this favorite interpretation is unhappy. It is, moreover, exposed to the same general difficulty as the interpretation of Overbeck, which is free from many of the special difficulties just noted.

(*b*) Overbeck, agreeing in the main with the view adopted by Baur in the second edition of his *Paulus* (p. 137), and followed substantially by Weizsäcker, thinks the sentence means that these points must be insisted on, because by the presence from ancient times of Synagogues in all the Gentile cities the Law has acquired a certain claim on the Gentiles which can be satisfied only by conformity to it in the matters named. As Weizsäcker says, the whole world has thereby become a Holy Land, and the Jews must enforce the regulations laid down for the conduct of resident aliens (cf. Schürer, *Geschichte des jüdischen Volkes*<sup>2</sup>, ii. p. 568 f.).

This view has in it, as we shall see, a large element of truth, but it is exposed to two fatal objections. *First*, the synagogues of the Diaspora can indeed be deemed to establish a claim for the religion of Jehovah over the whole world, but that the new People of God (which James has just declared the Gentile Christians to be, vs. 14) should continue to be aliens in this larger Land of Jehovah, and should as such continue to owe only the obedience theoretically required of a heathen trader, is a contradiction *in adjecto*. James may conceivably have thought of the Gentile Christians as a separate people of Jehovah, as it were on a parallel line to the Jews, subject to laws of God made specially for them, or he may have thought of them as owing a complete obedience to the Law; but to make him

say that persons whom he recognized as adherents of the Messiah, accredited by God himself, and thus made ensured heirs of the promises, stood in the category of complete outsiders would be out of the question. The case is wholly different from that of semi-attached "devout" persons, of whom only a part of the Law was required. A Jewish preacher might urge a part of the Jewish Law on them with the fond hope that they might gain by incomplete acceptance some of the blessings of salvation; but James has in mind a class of persons to whom, if the speech put into his mouth is meant to be at all sincere, he was conceding the same hope of salvation which he himself cherished. If the verse is taken as referring to a claim over the whole world made by the non-Christian religion of Jehovah, the argument becomes an impossible one. *Christians* of any description could satisfy such a claim only by complete conformity to the Law.

*Secondly*, this view is exposed to the same fundamental objection as are all the interpretations which connect vs. 21 exclusively with vs. 20, namely that it is opposed to the whole spirit of the speech and the chapter. The whole purpose of the speeches is to make the liberal decision approve itself to the in part reluctant body of Christians at Jerusalem. To apologize for any limitation of the freedom would be wholly out of character. The emphasis in the speech lies on vs. 19; in vs. 20 the word 'only' is in thought to be supplied; vs. 21 gives the reason for the freedom allowed, not for the imposition of restrictions. The audience is not conceived as needing any indication of a reason for legalistic requirements. And on the other hand, the tone of the whole chapter makes it plain that the author of Acts does not regard these four points as in fact legalistic reservations for the retention of which by the revered James he must apologize. The author is throughout this chapter wholly on the side of the Gentiles. The Jewish objectors are clearly deemed by him reprehensible persons who disturb the peace and who were properly rebuked in the final Letter (vs. 24). Peter, one of our author's heroes, and the great James take up the cause of freedom; their decision is hailed with joy by the Church at Antioch (vs. 30 f.) and is promulgated with heartiness by Paul (xvi. 4). The four points are, indeed, prominent in the writer's mind when he thinks of the decision (cf. xvi. 4), but he betrays no consciousness that they detract in the least from the victory over the Pharisees who demanded (xv. 5) that the Gentiles should keep the Law of Moses. The idea of a defence of the four points, such as this interpretation assumes,

is thus in accord neither with the situation presupposed for James's speech nor with the author's conception of the significance of the injunctions.

(2) Of the interpretations which, taking these last considerations into view, treat vs. 21 as giving the reason why the Gentiles need *not* be burdened (vs. 19), the view of Grotius (followed by Hammond) and that of Gieseler (accepted by Baur in the first edition of his *Paulus*) commend themselves so little that they need not be discussed. The view of Erasmus, however, has been and is still held for substance by many, as, for instance, Cornelius a Lapide, Weststein, Neander, Thiersch, Baumgarten, Zeller, Hilgenfeld, Ewald, Karl Schmidt (Art. "*Apostelkonvent*" in Herzog, *R.E.*<sup>2</sup>), Lumby, Blass.<sup>2</sup> According to this interpretation, James says in effect: This freedom may be safely accorded to the Gentiles; it will not lead to neglect of the Law on the part of the Jews, for they are constantly reminded of it in the Synagogue. This would mean that the writer of Acts ascribes directly to James the idea that the Gentile and Jewish divisions of the Church have different standards of conduct, so that Gentile freedom does not imply Jewish emancipation. Such was doubtless, as we infer from Galatians, in fact the precise attitude of the primitive Apostles, and it corresponds to the representations in the later chapters of Acts, where the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem are said to be zealous for the Law (xxi. 20), and Paul, as a Jewish Christian, appears as a good Jew who differs from his countrymen only in taking their hope seriously (xxiii. 1, 6, xxiv. 14 ff., etc.). Especially Acts xxi. 24 f. would seem, on this view, to be a parallel to our passage, presenting the converse. James there invites Paul to undertake a Jewish vow, but remarks that in the case of the Gentiles the four restrictions of xv. 20 were made, that is to say, as is clearly implied, *only* those four.

But the correctness of the position ascribed to James and the parallel in xxi. 24 f. are not conclusive arguments against two positive difficulties. *First*, that for which vs. 21 is said to give the reason (viz. the idea that there need be no fear of a neglect of the Law) is an interpolation of the interpreter which is not expressed nor even hinted at in the passage; and, *secondly*, a still stronger objection is that in this as in some other interpretations *ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων* does not receive justice at all.

(3) A number of interpretations which make vs. 21 relate to the

<sup>2</sup> Blass seems to have confounded this view with that of Chrysostom mentioned below.

whole proposal of James in vs. 19 and 20, viz. of Bengel, of N. Zegerus (in *Critici Sacri*), of F. Zimmer (who in his *Galaterbrief und Apostelgeschichte*, 1882, has an ingenious interpretation resting on a highly improbable translation of τοὺς κηρύσσοντας αὐτόν as "those who confess him," i.e. proselytes), and of von Hofmann, need not be discussed here. As the only ancient interpretation, that of Chrysostom deserves mention, though it is obviously wrong. James, he says, wants to reply to the objection, Why not send these four injunctions to the Jews also? Because, says James, they can learn all this from the Law. A well-known scholion of Cod. 98 (given by Matthäi) and Whitby have accepted this view.

This confusion of unsatisfactory interpretations is discouraging, but an explanation of James's meaning has occurred to me which seems to avoid the difficulties of the current views. James is saying in his speech that the Lord has both signified of late that he means to take a nation from the Gentiles for his name, and has declared in times past through the prophets that all the nations should seek him upon whom his name has been called. He quotes a passage from Amos (ix. 11 f.) prophesying that the territory which, through the wide extension of the kingdom of David, once came to be Jehovah's possession ("the nations which are called by my name") shall be restored to the possession of Jehovah's representatives. But it is by no means clear at first sight that this covers the whole Greek world. Unless a claim on Jehovah's part can be shown to exist by which the Greek world is brought within the intended and normal extent of the future kingdom, the prophecy does not apply here and does not give any warrant for receiving the Gentiles to be λαὸς τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ. This claim, I would suggest, James finds in the fact that for generations everywhere Moses has had preachers; thereby the necessary preliminary has been fulfilled, the Gentiles have become Jehovah's property, not merely the old Empire of David but the whole civilized world has been brought within the prophecy.

This interpretation is supported by the method of the author of Acts, who is fond of explaining how his quotations apply. Familiar examples are ii. 29 ff., ii. 34 ff., and especially xiii. 36 f., where just as in our passage the explanation follows in a sentence introduced by γάρ.

On this view the γάρ of vs. 21 relates to the practical proposal of vs. 19. If, as seems to me clear, vs. 19 and not vs. 20 contains the gist of the speech, this causes no difficulty. A statement introduced by γάρ need not give the reason for its immediate predecessor, if that

does not contain the thought most prominent in the writer's mind. Cf. Matt. vi. 32 ; Rom. ii. 25, xvi. 18 f., which illustrate various cases of this principle. This seems a sufficient reply to the only positive objection that occurs to me to the view I have suggested. Zimmer, the only writer so far as I know who has hit on the interpretation, wrongly supposed that it made it necessary to connect vs. 21 directly with vs. 18, and rejected this summarily as "sprachlich . . . rein unmöglich."

Overbeck's idea that vs. 21 refers to a claim on the Gentiles seems to me correct, but he makes it a claim of the Law itself, not of Jehovah, who had only in the past been represented exclusively by the Law. My interpretation needs, of course, confirmation from some source for the idea that the preaching of the Law in the Synagogue could be thought of as satisfying the requirement that the name of God should have been named over the Gentiles and thus as constituting a claim. This I am not able to supply, but such a modern parallel as the feeling about China to which the thought of the Nestorian tablet set up by Christians in China in A.D. 781 gives rise, seems to show that the idea is a natural one.

It may be worth while also to refer to Acts xiii. 48 and xviii. 10, which are not wholly parallel, but both of which imply a claim of God over certain persons not yet converted.

Some of the considerations brought forward above are of importance also in considering the question of the credibility of this part of the narrative. I have tried, as in duty bound, to exclude everything but the question what the author of Acts meant by the verse.