

# *Diakrinō* and Jew-Gentile distinction in Acts 11:12

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## Abstract

A textual analysis of the word *diakrinō* in Acts 11:12 was undertaken to establish whether the verse contradicts the theory that Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus remain distinct in a theologically significant manner, as some English translations imply. The study finds no clear evidence in the text to sustain the translation that there is ‘no distinction’ between the two. *Diakrinō* in Acts 11:12 is very unlikely to denote distinction in the sense of differentiation, and even less likely to indicate wavering or doubting on account of the distinction which observant Jews like Peter made between fellow Jews and Gentiles. Instead, *diakrinō* in this text is most likely intended to denote contestation or dispute: Peter was told to obey *without dispute*, not *without making distinction* between Gentiles and Jews.

## 1. Introduction

In the book of Acts, Luke made use of the word *diakrinō* in the negative to express that there is ‘no distinction’ between Jewish and Gentile believers. This denial of distinction occurs in Acts 15:9 and, depending on the English Bible used, sometimes also in 11:12. It is not surprising,

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<sup>1</sup> The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

therefore, that these texts have been used to support the teaching that the former distinction between Jews and Gentiles, found throughout the Old Testament, is erased among those who believe in Christ. That is, there is no essential difference between a Jewish believer and a Gentile believer; their ethnicity and prior faith traditions are inconsequential. (The same conclusion may be reached by one or a combination of other New Testament texts which appear to refute intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction: Ephesians 2:15; Romans 3:22; 10:12; Galatians 3:28 and Colossians 3:11, each in its context.) Cultural differences may persist, but these are not of any theological importance. Given the background of biblical evidence that Israel is to retain a particular role in God's purposes (e.g. Jer 31:35–37; 33:25–26; Rom 11), and the evangelical<sup>2</sup> assumption that the canon is consistent (see the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, 1978), one is faced with a dilemma: how can we reconcile these apparently contradictory claims? If the Bible is wholly true,<sup>3</sup> the texts supporting one or other side of the argument must have been misinterpreted. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether the phrase 'no distinction' in Acts 11:12 has been accurately understood by Christian faith tradition, or if it may be reasonably interpreted in a manner that allows for intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. The case of 15:9 will be considered separately elsewhere.

Acts 11:5–18 tells of Peter's defence against certain circumcised believers in Jerusalem who criticised (*diakrinō*) him for visiting, and eating with, uncircumcised men (11:1–3). In his response, in 11:12, Peter recounted the words of the Holy Spirit to him, which Luke had already recorded in Acts 10:20. Peter said that 'the Spirit told me to

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<sup>2</sup> I use 'evangelical' in the sense indicated under the headings 'purpose' and 'doctrinal basis' of the Editorial Policy of *Conspectus* which affirms the inspiration and authority of the Bible.

<sup>3</sup> This is another evangelical axiom expressed, for example, in the Lausanne Covenant (1974), the Chicago Statement (1978) and the Cape Town Commitment (2011).

accompany them, not hesitating *at all*' (11:12).<sup>4</sup> However, some English translations including the RSV (1971), NRSV (1989) and ESV (2001) state that the Spirit instructed Peter to accompany the men from Cornelius 'making no distinction', meaning that Peter should not be prejudiced against them on account of their uncircumcision. The broad semantic range of *diakrinō*, as well as the plausibility of various meanings it may denote in this context, account for the differing English translations. However, questions may be raised about why *diakrinō* (albeit in a different inflection) is translated one way in Acts 10:20 and another way in 11:12 when both texts speak of the same event. The translation of *diakrinō* in 11:12 and its use in 10:20 are the topics explored below to see whether 11:12 does indeed refute the theory of distinction.

## 2. No distinction in Acts 11:12

In traditional Christian interpretation, the vision of 10:9–16 served both to declare to Peter that he should not regard Gentiles as unclean, and that all foods have been cleansed (see also Mark 7:19). In a previous paper (Woods 2012),<sup>5</sup> I presented textual, contextual, and historical evidence to demonstrate that the interpretation of Peter's vision ought to be restricted to the former only (the cleansing of the Gentiles), and that it had no bearing on Jewish food laws nor applicability of Jewish Law in general. (See also Miller [2002] on Peter's vision, and Rudolph

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise specified, scriptural quotes are taken from the LEB in which the convention of italicising words supplied by the translators is used.

<sup>5</sup> In this paper concerning the interpretation of Peter's vision in Acts 10, I overlooked acknowledging Daniel Juster as the source of the interpretation, being an oral presentation. The missing reference is: Juster, D 2009. *Interpreting the New Covenant from a Messianic Jewish Perspective*. 23–25 October 2009; Beit Ariel Messianic Jewish Congregation, Sea Point.

[2003], Furstenberg [2008] and Eby [2011] on Mark 7:19 and the Pharisee's errors concerning the purity laws.)

If this is the case—that Gentile believers have been cleansed yet the Law still stands—it begs the question of how Peter was to make ‘no distinction’ between Jews and Gentiles in Acts 11:12, since observance of the Law is what outwardly distinguishes Jews from Gentiles. However, it was not Torah that prohibited Jews from associating with Gentiles (as one might infer from Acts 10:28), but the *halakhah* of some Jewish sects including the Pharisees (Woods 2012:182; Tomson 1990:230–236).<sup>6</sup> In such a theological framework, the Law continues to be binding on Jewish life, but is not to be extended by *halakhah* in a manner that restricts fellowship with Gentiles who have forsaken idolatry in order to worship the God of Israel—most especially those baptised into Christ and in the Holy Spirit. However, the question remains concerning the Spirit's instruction to Peter (11:12) to make no distinction between his Jewish brethren and the Gentile household of Cornelius, since Torah consistently differentiates between Israel and the nations. How could God require Torah observance for all Jews (whether they believe in Jesus or not) whilst simultaneously instructing the Peter not to distinguish between Jews and Gentiles? The first step in answering this question is to examine the key word, *diakrinō*, and its use in Acts 11:12.

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<sup>6</sup> *Halakhah* is a code of conduct for daily life in the tradition of a particular sect; the observance of *halakhah* ought to keep members of the community from breaking the Law though in some cases it was so abused as to defeat this purpose (e.g. Matt 15:1–9). Often, the requirements of Pharisaic *halakhah* exceeded those of Torah by far, resulting in onerous legalism. For more on *halakhah* in Jewish and Christian contexts, see Kessler and Wenborn 2005:174–175 and Bockmuehl 2003.

## 2.1. Textual analysis: Word study on *diakrinō*

### 2.1.1. Semantic range

The word in question as it appears in Acts 11:12 is *diakrinanta*, though some variant readings say *diakrinomenon*.<sup>7</sup> These variants both come from the same root word, *diakrinō*, which means to ‘judge’, ‘dispute’, ‘contend’, ‘distinguish’, ‘evaluate’, or ‘discriminate’, or, when applied reflexively, to ‘doubt’, ‘waver’, or ‘hesitate’ (Mounce 2006; Logos 2011; Louw and Nida 1996; Swanson 1997; Strong 2009; Thomas 1998). *Diakrinō* was not an uncommon word in the period, appearing four times in Acts and another fifteen times in the rest of the New Testament. It also appears twenty-eight times in the LXX (including Apocrypha) where it most commonly means ‘to judge’ or ‘to distinguish’. Notably, de Graaf (2005:736–737) provides Ezekiel 20:35–36 in the LXX as an example where *diakrinō* in the passive means to distinguish between members of a faith community, and separating them based on that distinction. The supposed meaning ‘to doubt’, ‘waver’ or ‘hesitate’ is not recognised in any ancient literature prior to the New Testament.

### 2.1.2. Parsing

The parsing of the textual variants in Acts 11:12 is as follows, with differences underlined:

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<sup>7</sup> The Westcott and Hort, Tregelles, and NIV editions of the Greek New Testament have διακρίναντα, whereas the Robinson and Pierpont edition has διακρινόμενον (Holmes 2010).

- *diakrinanta*: verb, aorist, active, participle, singular, accusative, masculine.
- *diakrinomenon*: verb, present, middle/passive, participle, singular, accusative, masculine.

A third textual tradition omits the phrase ‘*mēden diakr-*’ (whether *diakrinanta* or *diakrinomenon*) altogether (Spitaler 2007:87). In that case there is nothing to discuss, as that reading cannot be construed as refuting the distinction theory. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the phrase (in either form) is original, since it was used to recount the same event in Acts 10:20. In 11:12, the word used is in reported (indirect) speech, while in Acts 10:20 (*diakrinomenos*) is included in a quotation (direct speech.) The parsing there is:

- *diakrinomenos*: verb, present, middle, participle, singular, nominative, masculine.

The parsing and usage may provide some clues for interpreting *diakrinō* in 10:20 and in the variants of 11:12.

### 2.1.3. Interpretation

Most editions of the critical text of 11:12 opt for *diakrinanta*, so that the preceding word negating it, *mēden* (‘nothing’, ‘not at all’), becomes its direct object. As an active participle, the lexical connotation more likely has a sense of ‘judging,’ ‘distinguishing’ or ‘discriminating’ than the ‘doubting,’ ‘wavering’ or ‘hesitating’ sense. In 10:20, on the other hand, *diakrinomenos* is in the middle voice, suggesting the latter sense as a better option.<sup>8</sup> This creates some tension, since both texts report the same event. One might consider the possibility that Luke deliberately

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<sup>8</sup> I gratefully acknowledge Kevin Smith’s insights in establishing the nuances implicit in the different Greek forms discussed above (pers. comm. 10 February 2012).

used different voices in these two instances in order to create an ambiguity in which both senses apply. However, it is invalid to draw any theological inference—in this case one of ‘no distinction’ between Jews and Gentiles in Christ—on such conjecture. Moreover, such a proposal has been opposed in the literature—de Graaf (2005:739) states the opposite: ‘It is probably significant that the author of Acts does not appear to have thought that the difference in voice between the two occurrences signalled a significant difference in meaning.’ I prefer to make no conclusion about implications of the voice of *diakrinō* in the two verses, and turn our attention to the textual variant in Robinson and Pierpont’s (RP) Byzantine Textform (2005).

In the RP edition of the Greek NT, the verb in question in Acts 11:12 is in the same middle voice as that of *diakrinomenos* in 10:20; only the case differs. In this case, the ‘discriminating’ might seem the intended meaning, and it would be fully consistent with 10:20 and the historical context: Peter was to go with the Gentiles without discriminating against them (on account of their being non-Jews). David de Graaf (2005), however, argues that *diakrinō* in Acts 10:20, 11:12 and in seven other places in the New Testament should be ‘rendered with words that express *divided loyalty* or *disunity*’ (emphasis added) (p. 733). This interpretation creates rhetorical irony if *diakrinō* in 11:2 is also interpreted in the same way—the so-called circumcision party ‘kept their distance from’ Peter for associating with Gentiles (de Graaf 2005:740). In that case, the division indicated by *diakrinō* nevertheless relates to that between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus. In fact, even the less likely but more commonly used sense of ‘doubting’ also suggests making ethnic distinction for the purpose of preserving purity, which was indeed a concern for Peter (10:14, 28). For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to accept that the text in 11:12 may have indicated that Peter was not to discriminate against Gentiles—

regardless of the original form of *diakrinō* therein. Due to the uncertainty involved, the key question must change from asking whether the text refutes the theory of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction to whether it *could* do so. However, there is an additional interpretation that must first be considered.

In 2007, Peter Spitaler published his doubts about interpreting *diakrinō* to mean ‘doubt,’ ‘hesitate’ or ‘waver’ in Acts 10:20 (and elsewhere in the NT) owing to lack of evidence for this new semantic sense. He argued that ‘contextual, grammatical, linguistic and semantic markers’ necessary to identify a new ‘NT meaning’ not found in prior or contemporary literature are absent (p. 92). He noted the inconsistent use of the authors of Acts, James, and Jude if ‘doubting’ is indicated by *diakrinomai* in Acts 10:20; James 1:6 and Jude 22 whereas the older Hellenistic Greek meaning—to ‘contest’ or ‘dispute’—is used in Acts 11:2; James 2:4 and Jude 9. Further, Spitaler objects to the reliance of the ‘doubting’ interpretation on a conjectural ‘faith-doubt’ antithesis (p. 85). He posits that an older and established sense of the form, to *dispute* or *contest*, fits the context better, especially in the light of Peter’s triple objection or disobedience to the voice in the vision (10:9–16). This established semantic option links 10:20 with 11:2 (p. 90) (where ‘those of the circumcision’ *disputed*, *contested*, or *contended* [YLT and LITV] with Peter) in a similar irony as that noted by de Graaf (2005:740) who preferred the lexical sense of *separation*. De Graaf’s point is that in Acts 10:29, Peter said he went with Cornelius’ messengers ‘without raising any objection’ (*anantirrētōs*) surely strengthens Spitaler’s case that the Spirit’s instruction was to go without *contention* (against the Spirit), rather than to go without ‘doubting’ (within himself.) Spitaler’s interpretation may also be used comfortably in 11:12: Peter was not to contest with the Holy Spirit who commanded him to go with Cornelius’ men. If Spitaler is correct, the sense of *diakrinō* in 10:20 and 11:12 relates to uncontentious obedience, not to Jew-Gentile distinction. In

that case, Acts 11:12 *does not* indicate that ‘no distinction’ is to be made between Jews and Gentiles. The sound rationale of Spitaler’s opposition to an assumed new meaning of *diakrinō* in the New Testament undermines the inference that Acts 11:12 provides concrete evidence against the theory that Jews and Gentiles remain distinct in the New Covenant era.

Adding weight to Spitaler’s proposal is the fact that Luke (and Peter and the Holy Spirit) had viable alternatives for expressing another concept rather than employing a new meaning of *diakrinō*. *Diastolē* would have been ideal for the sense of ‘making a distinction’, just as it was used in Exodus 8:23 (LXX), when God said, ‘I will put a distinction between my people and your [Pharaoh’s] people.’<sup>9</sup> *Diastolē* is also used to denote distinction in the Psalms of Solomon 4:4 (LXX Apocrypha), Romans 3:22; 10:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:7. Similarly, *diapherō* might have been used to denote ‘differentiating’ (see its use in 1 Cor 15:41; Gal 4:1; 2:6; and Diognetus 3:5). If ‘doubting’ was the concern, *apisteō* was an option. If ‘wavering,’ then *adiakritos* (‘impartial’ or ‘unwavering’) or perhaps *aklinēs*, (‘without wavering’) might have been used in place of ‘*mēden diakr-*’ (‘*mēden diakrinanta*’ or ‘*mēden diakrinomenon*,’ Swanson 1997). In fact, *adiakritos* may have been ideal because it can carry both senses (that is, both ‘impartial’ and ‘unwavering’). Surely these alternatives would have provided Luke a better option than to use a new and inconsistent semantic shift of *diakrinō*?

A brief note is warranted regarding the ‘hesitating’ interpretation: if Peter was instructed in Acts 10:20 to go ‘not hesitating at all,’ then he was disobedient. Instead, he invited Cornelius’ messengers for a meal

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<sup>9</sup> The corresponding Hebrew text, Exodus 8:19, uses the word *p<sup>e</sup>dūt* which denotes redemption.

and accommodated them overnight (10:23) before setting out. (Contrast Claudius Lysias' response to the news of the planned ambush on Paul, 23:12–31.) The temporal sense of hesitating (i.e. delaying) is clearly not intended in 10:20.

Finally, the interpretation 'making no distinction' does not specify what Peter was speaking about; it assumes the reader will mentally insert the phrase 'between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles]'. By contrast, Peter explicitly inserted that phrase in Acts 15:9: '*metaxy hēmōn te kai autōn*'. In fact, at the time the Spirit spoke to Peter (10:19–20), Peter did not know that the men of whom the Spirit spoke were Gentile. Spitaler's option, 'without dispute', works better on both counts: there is no need to identify who is to obey without contention, since it is Peter to whom the Spirit spoke; and there is no assumption that Peter already knew the ethnicity of the men seeking him.

In summary, there are at least two possibilities in which the distinction issue may be invalidated in Acts 11:12. One is the variant reading which omits the phrase '*mēden diakr-*' altogether. The other is Spitaler's strong argument that the issue at hand is obedience without dispute or contest. Moreover, Luke could have chosen another word, like *diastolē*, to convey the message that Peter was instructed to 'make no distinction' among the two groups concerned. However, to provide more comprehensive coverage of the options, a response to the traditional interpretations of *diakrinō*, that state or imply that Peter was not to make any distinction between his Jewish kin and the Gentiles, is necessary.

## 2.2. Could Acts 11:12 possibly refute distinction theory?

If *diakrinō* is interpreted in some way as differentiating between Jews and Gentiles in Acts 11:12, whether it is taken as making distinction, doubting or hesitating (for ethnic reasons), or having a sense of disunity

(as per de Graaf 2005), does this undermine any basis for distinction between Jews and Gentiles in the church? Certainly not on its own. Consider the ESV translation: ‘And the Spirit told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man’s house.’ It is hardly reasonable for Luke, with a passing phrase, to expect his readers to eradicate the key doctrine of Israel’s election established in Torah and maintained in the Prophets, the Writings and even his own gospel. The gist of Peter’s vision (10:9–16) was that the Gentiles had been cleansed (Woods 2012) and his defence (11:4–17) hinged on this; he did not argue that Jew-Gentile distinction among Jesus-believers had been eliminated altogether, but rather that believing Gentiles were demonstrably acceptable to God (11:15. Also see 15:8–9).

Moreover, while the discrimination *against* Gentiles by Jesus-believing Jews was done away with (see 10:34–36), the discrimination *between* (i.e. differentiation of) Jews and Gentiles was never eradicated, not even in the early church. Both ancient literature and archaeological evidence indicate that the distinction between the two groups remained firmly established even within the church for several hundred years (Kinzer 2005:197–209; Rudolph 2013:24–25).<sup>10</sup> The mosaic at the Church of Saint Sabina in Rome, dating to the fifth century, demonstrates this most effectively with two figures that it explicitly names. One figure, representing the church of the circumcision, stands on one side while on the other side stands another figure representing the church of the Gentiles (Skarsaune and Hvalvik 2007:216). Hence, even if the technical objections regarding the meaning of the keyword, *diakrinō*, were resolved such that it may mean ‘distinction,’ both its

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<sup>10</sup> Skarsaune (2002:436–442), among others, even discerns that ‘philo-Semitism’ among Christians at grassroots level was the background to Chrysostom’s anti-Semitic sermons.

context and subsequent church history would nevertheless weigh substantially against this interpretation.

### 3. Conclusion

This paper examined the word *diakrinō* in Acts 11:12, which some English Bible translations interpret as ‘distinction’. Others imply an element of distinction by opting for a sense of doubting, hesitating or wavering to interpret *diakrinō*. Some commentators, such as the contributors to the ESV Study Bible, have taken the verse to mean that Peter was to make ‘no distinction’ between Jews and Gentiles. This reading supports the prevailing Christian view that there is no essential difference between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus; some cultural differences may remain, but the particularity of Israel is a purely historic phenomenon—its role in the redemption of humanity has been completed—and thus Israel has no on-going theological significance in the Christian era or within the church. However, some key biblical texts appear to contradict the notion that Jews and Gentiles, or Israel and the nations, are ultimately to become members of an ethnically undifferentiated mix in the messianic kingdom—a homogenisation of the two groups. Thus, the question arises as to whether Acts 11:12 and other ‘no distinction’ texts identified in the NT have been interpreted correctly. That is, how robust are interpretations of *diakrinō* which implicitly contradict the theory of distinction? Can Jew-Gentile distinction safely be discarded as a vestige of things past among members of the Body of Christ?

The use of Acts 11:12 to support the case against intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction is compromised by a number of concerns: (i) primarily the controversy surrounding the interpretation of *diakrinō*, (ii) its apparently inconsistent use in three instances in close proximity (10:20; 11:2; 11:12), including a recounting of the same event (10:20

and 11:12), and (iii) the contention that it suddenly has a new meaning for the first time in all of previous Greek literature, when other suitable words were available to denote ‘distinction’. Furthermore, it is questionable that a major biblical premise, the election of Israel, would be undone in a brief episode without warning or further clarification.

The lexical study discovered that ‘without dispute’ is a better translation of ‘*mēden diakrinanta*’ than ‘no distinction’; Peter was to obey the command of the Holy Spirit without dispute. Combining this insight with the concerns listed above, it is evident that Acts 11:12 cannot be taken as a renunciation of intra-ecclesial Jew-Gentile distinction. The text does not support, let alone prove, the case against distinction (in the sense of differentiation) of Jews and Gentiles within the church. What remains for further research is whether other key texts in the NT (particularly Acts 15:9; Rom 3:22; 10:12; Gal 3:28 and Col 3:11) are sufficient to uphold traditional Christian stance that the ancient categories of Jew and Gentile—Israel and the nations—are inconsequential in the present and future ages. This has particular relevance within the church in the present time, as Messianic Jews seek to maintain traditional Jewish practice (invariably including some degree of Torah observance) within their communities whilst promoting equality and close fellowship with Gentile Christians.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The following books demonstrate progression of Messianic Jewish theology in which Jew-Gentile distinction among Jesus-believers is pivotal: Kinzer (2005); Stern (2007); Harvey (2009); and Rudolph and Willitts (2013).

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