

# Is Circumcision for Everyone?

by J.K. McKee posted 01 May, 2004 www.tnnonline.net

A commonly quoted Scripture in the Messianic movement, in relation to Torah observance, has become Exodus 12:49: "The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you." This Scripture is touted as meaning that all, both Jew and non-Jew, who follow the God of Israel, are applicable to *torah echat* (תּוֹרַה אַחַת) or "one law." This is used as a support to mean that all who follow the Holy One of Israel, are to follow the Torah or the Law of Moses. I most certainly agree with this conclusion and strongly believe that all Believers are to follow the "The same teaching" (CJB). However, if we place Exodus 12:49 in context, we will see that this specific instruction relates to Passover, and more specifically to the rite of circumcision:

"But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it" (Exodus 12:48).

The issue of circumcision is one of the most hotly debated and discussed in the Messianic community today, with extremes on both the Left and the Right. On the Left, you have Messianic liberals who believe that physical circumcision is unimportant by any means, and then on the Right there are some Messianic extremists who believe that physical circumcision is required for salvation. There has to be a fair-minded perspective of this issue that seeks to be Biblical, not looking for loopholes in regard to Torah observance, but at the same time recognizes that circumcision of the flesh is *not a salvation issue*.

If we consider ourselves to be Torah obedient, and indeed properly apply Exodus 12:49 to our faith practice, we have to deal with the issue of circumcision. There is no avoiding this. The challenge for us as conservative Messianics is to see that this subject is properly addressed, as we seek conformity with the life of Messiah Yeshua and want everything be in its proper order.

## What is Circumcision?

Some of you, while having read Scripture, may be unfamiliar with what "circumcision" actually is. The *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* describes it as "The practice of cutting off the foreskin of the male sexual organ. Originally, the practice was instituted by God (toward Abraham), and it became the external act signifying entrance in the OT community of faith."<sup>1</sup>

The following is the medical definition of circumcision as supplied by United States National Institutes of Health:

"Circumcision is the surgical removal of the foreskin of the penis. It is often performed in healthy boys for cultural or religious reasons. In the U.S., circumcision of a newborn boy is usually done before he leaves the hospital. Among the Jewish population, circumcision is done on the eighth day.

"The merits of circumcision are currently under debate. There is NOT a compelling medical rationale for the procedure in healthy boys. However, some boys have medical conditions where circumcision may be needed.

"Many physicians, rather than routinely recommending circumcision for healthy boys, allow the parents to make the decision after presenting them with the 'pros' and 'cons.'"<sup>2</sup>

Circumcision, while a medical procedure involving the removal of the foreskin from the male's penis, has become often associated as a religious practice. Most Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day as prescribed in Leviticus 12:2-3:

"Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: 'When a woman gives birth and bears a male *child*, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'"

In Judaism, the rite of circumcision is extremely important. It is performed by a specially trained Rabbi known as a *mohel*. A *mohel* today uses a very sharp metal knife to slice the foreskin

<sup>1</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 26.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Greene (2003). *Circumcision*, 19 February, 2003. *Medline Plus Medical Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 11 April, 2004, from <<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/>>.

off the eight-day old infant. No kind of anesthesia is necessary for this kind of circumcision, as the knife is intended to be sharp enough to cut while severing the nerves. A Jewish circumcision done properly is swift and painless. A Jewish circumcision ceremony today is a major event in the life of a boy, as he is given his name at his circumcision. Circumcisions may be performed in a synagogue, the infant boy's home, or at a hospital. It is customary that at a child's circumcision he is given his name. The Gospel of Luke reflects this tradition, telling us that John the Baptist was given his name at his circumcision:

“And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. But his mother answered and said, ‘No indeed; but he shall be called John’” (Luke 1:59-60).

While circumcision is most often associated as being a “Jewish practice,” the historical truth is that many other ancient societies circumcised their males. *ISBE* has the following description of circumcision:

“Circumcision is practiced by many peoples in different parts of the world. In biblical times it was a custom among the West Semites (Hebrews, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites) but was unknown among the Eastern Semitic peoples of Mesopotamia. In Egypt, as indeed generally in the ancient world, circumcision was a rite performed either at puberty or in preparation for marriage... Among the people of Canaan the Philistines were exceptional in their nonadherence to the practice, and of them alone is the term ‘uncircumcised’ customarily used. An additional example of uncircumcised Canaanites is given in Gen. 34:13-17, but there is the possibility that the Shechemites also were of non-Canaanite or non-Semitic descent.”<sup>3</sup>

This entry attests to the fact that the practice of circumcision was followed by other cultures outside that of Ancient Israel. Notably, other than Jewish males being circumcised for religious reasons, Muslims, believing themselves connected to Abraham's son Ishmael, also circumcise their males as part of religious practice. However, Muslims typically circumcise their males around the ages of 7-12, as Ishmael was not originally circumcised as an infant.

In the mid-Nineteenth Century, infant circumcision became quite commonplace in Britain and the United States in hospitals. The reasons for circumcision as a medical practice varied. The most common medical reason given for infant circumcision was that it was for the best health of the child. Periphery reasons given in the mid-1800s were often superstitious, including that it would stop males from bed-wetting or masturbation. The medical community today is not universally agreed on the practice of circumcision. Some say that it is beneficial, while others say that routine washing and proper maintenance of the foreskin will suffice for male health. It is unlikely that there will ever be a medical consensus regarding circumcision, as doctors in the U.S. ultimately leave the decision to the infant's parents. However, it is notable that today circumcision of male infants in the United States as a medical practice is more routine than it is in other countries. Most infants in Europe, Africa, Asia, and South America, unless being Jewish or Muslim, are not circumcised.

## Terms Used for “Circumcision”

There are some important terms used in the Bible regarding circumcision that are critical to know if we are to have a proper Scriptural understanding regarding what it is.

The primary Hebrew word used in the Tanach (Old Testament) for circumcision is *mul* (מול), a verb meaning “to circumcise” or “to circumcise oneself, be circumcised” (*HALOT*).<sup>4</sup> A closely related term to this is *orlah* (עֲרֵלָה), “foreskin of a man's penis” (*HALOT*).<sup>5</sup> *Arel* (עָרֵל) describes the state of being “provided with a foreskin, uncircumcised” (*HALOT*).<sup>6</sup> In the Hebrew

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<sup>3</sup> T. Lewis and C.E. Armerding, “Circumcision,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. et. al., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:700.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:555-556.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:886.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

Bible, being called “uncircumcised” is by no means complimentary. David said of the giant Goliath, “For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God?” (1 Samuel 1:26). The Prophet Jeremiah proclaims, regarding the judgment of the Lord, that “all the nations are uncircumcised” (Jeremiah 9:26).

There are three words used in the Apostolic Scriptures to describe these concepts. *Peritemnō* (περιτέμνω) means “to cut around” (Thayer),<sup>7</sup> specifically, “to cut off the foreskin of the male genital organ, **circumcise**” (BDAG).<sup>8</sup> In the Greek Septuagint, *peritemnō* is used to translate the Hebrew *mul. Akrobustia* (ἀκροβυστία) in most Bibles is rendered as “uncircumcision,” but it is “lit. **prepuce, foreskin**” (BDAG).<sup>9</sup> Thayer says that *akrobustia* “in the Sept. the equiv. of עֲרֻלָּה *the prepuce*, the skin covering the glans penis.”<sup>10</sup> Most of the time in the New Testament “the uncircumcised” are more correctly understood as meaning “those with foreskin.” The last term used is *aperitmetos* (ἀπερίτμητος), only used once in Acts 7:51. BDAG indicates that it is “lit. **uncircumcised**,”<sup>11</sup> and it corresponds via the Septuagint to *arel*.

In examining the Scriptures, especially the Messianic Writings, it is important to know what term regarding circumcision is being used. Also note that a frequent reference to “the circumcision” in the New Testament is often a reference to the Jews. “The circumcision” is often a reference to the First Century Jewish community, as being physically circumcised was identifiable with one being Jewish, composing those who were born into Judaism and circumcised as infants. Yet, is also not impossible that when “circumcision” is sometimes referred to in the Apostolic Scriptures, ritual proselyte circumcision in order for a Gentile to convert to Judaism may be what is being considered.<sup>12</sup> In either case, “circumcision” takes on more social and communal dimensions than it concerns the actual medical procedure of removing a male’s foreskin, and the circumstances of each passage or letter must be considered for the appropriate context.

## Abraham and Circumcision

“This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a *servant* who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A *servant* who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant” (Genesis 17:10-14).

The sign of the covenant between the Lord and Abraham was physical circumcision and removal of the foreskin of the male. The Hebrew word for “sign” is *ot* (אוֹת). BDB defines *ot* as “*sign, pledge, token*,” “*signs, omens*,” “*sign, symbol*,” “*signs, miracles*,” and “*signs, memorials*.”<sup>13</sup> Circumcision was given to Abraham as a *b’rit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) or an “eternal covenant.” Circumcision, just like the Sabbath (Exodus 31:16-17), was to be something eternal and *never to be done away with*.

Physical circumcision was given by God to Abraham as a sign of the covenant that He gave to him. What was that covenant? The Lord promised Abraham that He would multiply his

<sup>7</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 506.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 806.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Thayer*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> *BDAG*, 102.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. T.R. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp 137-139.

<sup>13</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 16.

physical seed exponentially upon Planet Earth, more than the stars of the sky and the sand on the seashore:

“[I]ndeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice” (Genesis 22:17-18).

Most Jews, who consider themselves descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and most Muslims, who largely consider themselves descendants of Ishmael, practice circumcision because it is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. The difference between Jews and Muslims is that the Jews believe that the Abrahamic promise of multiplicity was passed on through Isaac and then Jacob, as the Bible says, and the Muslims believe the promise was passed on through Ishmael, as the Quran says. We obviously choose to believe in the Bible.

What is important to recognize about the sign of circumcision, other than the fact that it is a God-given, *physical* manifestation that one recognizes that the Lord promised Abraham that his descendants would exponentially multiply over the Earth, is that this sign was given *after* He made His promise to Abraham, *not* before. Abraham was called into covenant with God while he was in uncircumcision:

“The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, ‘Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you’” (Genesis 13:14-17).

Many people have the false impression that Abraham had to be circumcised, and then after being circumcised God made His promise to him. The simple truth of the matter is that Abram was called out of Ur while in uncircumcision. He sojourned in Canaan, what would later become the Land of Israel, while in uncircumcision. When Abraham knew what he was getting into and was fully committing himself to what the Lord had set for him, he was circumcised. Circumcision came at the right time for Abraham. Male infants who were born into the covenant of physical multiplication were then required to be circumcised on the eighth day. It was to be the sign that God was fulfilling His promise of multiplying the seed of Abraham.

What does this mean for us today? How many of us consider ourselves to be recipients of the promise given to Abraham of his descendants being as the stars in the sky and the sand of the seashore (Genesis 15:5; 22:17)? It does not matter if we are *actual descendants* of Abraham or not. But what matters is that we recognize ourselves as recipients of the promises that God made to him. Do we take circumcision at all seriously? Are we circumcising our males as Scripture requires?

## **Entering Into Israel**

As emphasized in Leviticus 12:2-3, males born into Israel were to be circumcised on the eighth day:

“Speak to the sons of Israel, saying: ‘When a woman gives birth and bears a male *child*, then she shall be unclean for seven days, as in the days of her menstruation she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.’”

This is the only place in the Torah where the command to circumcise a male on the eighth day is given, but it is one of considerable importance. As the Israelites would circumcise their males, there would be a distinction between them and their surrounding neighbors. While circumcision was practiced by other ancient cultures, it was not practiced to the extent that the Israelites practiced it. As *EJ* poignantly states, “The importance of circumcision is...evident from

the repeated contemptuous references to the Philistines as uncircumcised.”<sup>14</sup> Being called “uncircumcised” was by no means considered to be complimentary.

A *ger* (גֵּר), a sojourner who joins himself to Israel, was required to be circumcised if he were to keep the Passover. If he were circumcised, then not only could he eat the Passover, but upon declaring his faith in the God of Israel, would be considered as though he were a native:

“But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it” (Exodus 12:48).

On the basis of this verse, Judaism derived its formal practices for conversion as one converting to Judaism must be physically circumcised. In the First Centuries B.C.E and C.E., there were many Jewish synagogues in Greek and Roman lands, and Greeks and Romans converting to Judaism were required to be circumcised. A “God-fearer” was one who professed a belief in the God of Israel, but did not undergo full conversion, including circumcision. The Roman centurion Cornelius, mentioned in the Book of Acts, is an example of one who was a God-fearer. God-fearers were often not allowed in the Synagogue because of their uncircumcision, but allowed to look in from the outside.

### **Circumcision Taken Seriously**

In Orthodox Judaism today, circumcision is considered so important that the Rabbis say, “An adult who intentionally remains uncircumcised suffers *karet* [כָּרַת] [*karat*], *spiritual excision*, meaning that the soul loses its share in the World to Come, and the violator may die childless and prematurely.”<sup>15</sup> Within Judaism, circumcision is often referred to as *b’rit milah* (בְּרִית מִילָה) or *bris milah* (Ashkenazic), which literally means “covenant of circumcision.” Orthodox Jews today take circumcision very seriously as persecution of the Jewish people has often times focused around Jews being prohibited from circumcising their males.

Queen Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom, prohibited circumcision as part of forsaking God’s covenant (1 Kings 19:14). This forsaking of the covenant was later used to apply being “uncircumcised” to one’s not being faithful to God:

“There was a period...in the kingdom of Israel, under the influence of Queen Jezebel, when circumcision was abandoned (I Kings 19:14). Elijah’s zeal in persuading the Israelites to resume the forsaken covenant won him the name of ‘Herald of the Covenant’... In the time of the Prophets, the term ‘uncircumcised’ was applied allegorically to the rebellious heart or to the obdurate ear (Ezek. 44:1, 9; Jer. 6:10). Jeremiah declared that all the nations were uncircumcised in the flesh, but the whole house of Israel were of uncircumcised heart (Jer. 9:25)” (*EJ*).<sup>16</sup>

After the Southern Kingdom returned from the Babylonian exile, and faced the military assaults from the Seleucid leader Antiochus Epihanes, Antiochus and the Seleucids prohibited Jews living in the Land of Israel from circumcising themselves: “And the king sent letters by messengers to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah; he directed them to follow customs strange to the land... and to leave their sons uncircumcised. They were to make themselves abominable by everything unclean and profane” (1 Maccabees 1:44, 48). In fact, 2 Maccabees 6:10 tells us that mothers who saw that their sons were circumcised suffered martyrdom:

“For example, two women were brought in for having circumcised their children. These women they publicly paraded about the city, with their babies hung at their breasts, then hurled them down headlong from the wall.”

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<sup>14</sup> Leonard V. Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. MS Windows 9x. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 1996),

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<sup>16</sup> Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*.

*EJ* further attests, concerning the Seleucid influence on the Jews, that “Many Jews who wanted to participate nude in the Greek games in the gymnasia underwent painful operations to obliterate the signs of circumcision (epispasm).”<sup>17</sup>

This same practice is alluded to by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:18a: “Was any man called *when he was already* circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised.” He tells them not to be “uncircumcised,” literally meaning “drawn over,” the correct translation of the Greek verb *epispao* (ἐπισπάω). This verb means “to draw upon or over oneself, to draw the foreskin over again” (AMG).<sup>18</sup> This was the ancient procedure that many Jews wanting to conform to Greek standards underwent to restore their foreskin.

The mistake that was made by both those of during the time of Jezebel, and later during the time of the Maccabees, is that they forsook the practice of circumcision to become like those of the nations. Consequently, we do not often realize that this is the reason why circumcision is often frowned upon today in the Christian world. The Jewish people, however, have largely learned from these mistakes regarding circumcision, and have made it an integral part of their spiritual heritage. While circumcision has become a common medical procedure in many parts of the world, it is not a common procedure in many other parts of the world. And, circumcision is often not viewed as a valid practice regarding one’s obedience to God. If it has any importance, then it is believed to be for medical reasons exclusively.

## Yeshua and Circumcision

We should all agree that as Believers in the Messiah, our ultimate aim should be to emulate Him *in all respects of our lives*. Yeshua, being the Word of God made manifest in the flesh, and being perfect, obeyed the commandments as laid out in the Torah or Law of Moses, and as such was circumcised. This is plainly attested in Luke 2:21-22:

“And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was *then* called Yeshua, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord.”

Luke, a First Century medical doctor, plainly mentions that Yeshua the Messiah was circumcised on the eighth day, and that His Earthly parents, Joseph and Mary, offered the prescribed sacrifice for a first-born male as required in Exodus 13:2:

“Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me.”

Yeshua Himself does not say much about physical circumcision in the Gospels. While it is recorded for us that He was circumcised, the only instance where Yeshua talks about circumcision is in John 7:22-24, where He is accused of breaking the Sabbath by healing a person. Yeshua responds to this criticism by saying that it is not unlawful for a person to be circumcised on the Sabbath. Circumcision is an acceptable practice for *Shabbat*, just as is making a person well:

“For this reason Moses has given you circumcision (not because it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and on *the* Sabbath you circumcise a man. If a man receives circumcision on *the* Sabbath so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made an entire man well on *the* Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.”

Jewish commentators recognize the fact that Yeshua was circumcised on the eighth day as the Torah prescribes, and indeed the fact that Yeshua did not violate or “abolish” the Law. Alfred J. Kolatch states the following in *The Second Jewish Book of Why*:

“During his career as preacher to his fellow Jews in Palestine, Jesus was careful to point out that he had no intention of promoting the idea that observance of Jewish law should be

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 638.

abandoned. The Synoptic Books of the Bible (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) portray Jesus as a practicing Jew....Given Jesus' portrayal as an observant Jew in the Synoptic Gospels, the total abandonment of Jewish ritual by the Christian Church seems strange. It is explained as an attempt by Church Fathers to draw a sharp distinction between Jew and Christian and thereby strengthen the Church. The abandonment is also the result of the great resistance encountered by Paul (and others) in his missionary activity among the Gentile population outside of Palestine. Paul found himself unable to win converts to Christianity when he insisted on adherence to biblical laws such as those pertaining to the Sabbath, family, purity, and especially circumcision."<sup>19</sup>

To Kolatch and many other Jews, their problem is not with Yeshua. Rather, their problem is with Paul. Kolatch goes on and says "Paul condemned as his enemy those Christians who continued to follow the Old Jewish law of circumcision, because by their actions, he said, they were shaking the faith of ignorant Christians and were turning away Gentiles from the new message he brought them."<sup>20</sup>

But was Paul's attitude of circumcision truly one of opposition, as many Christian theologians believe? Consider that in 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul writes "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Messiah." We know that Yeshua the Messiah was Torah obedient, and that He was indeed circumcised. If one is a true emulator of the Messiah, then one will be Torah obedient as He was, *which includes being circumcised*. The error has been in failing to understand that the Apostle Paul places circumcision in its correct context for new Believers, as many made physical circumcision as an issue of salvation, rather than one's maturation and growth in the faith.

## The Judaizers and Circumcision

One group of people in the New Testament that Christian theologians often focus on, as proof that physical circumcision has no value for Believers today, is the Judaizers. Often, a person who enters into the Messianic community from an evangelical Christian background, and adopts a Torah obedient lifestyle, can be accused of being a "Judaizer." The common definition of Judaizers are often "Judaistic teachers [who] had come in to adulterate Paul's gospel with a mixture of human works and some form of legalism."<sup>21</sup> While partially correct, this is not an entirely accurate interpretation, because we have to understand that not everything of Judaism, be that the Judaism of today, or of the First Century, *is entirely Biblical*. What these people advocated often has to be considered on a case-by-case basis, and "to Judaize"<sup>22</sup> (Galatians 2:14, YLT) likely pertained to ritual conversion on the part of new, non-Jewish Believers—a critical part of which would have been circumcision.

From the Biblical text itself, we are told in Acts 15:1: "Some men came down from Judea and *began* teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'" This was the position of the Judaizers. They attested that the non-Jews coming to faith in Yeshua had to be circumcised and observe the Torah *first*, before they could be saved. Otherwise, their conversion experience was meaningless. The Apostle Peter plainly ruled that physical circumcision and Torah observance were *not* to be prerequisites for salvation: "God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us; and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:8-9). Peter did not say that those of the nations were saved through circumcision. Paul adds to this in Galatians 6:15, "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation."

Even though physical circumcision was made clear by the Apostles *not to be a salvation issue*, these Judaizers did errantly influence many. Much of Paul's letter to the Galatians is spent refuting the idea that physical circumcision and/or conversion to Judaism were required prerequisites for salvation and inclusion in God's community. Specifically, Paul warned the

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<sup>19</sup> Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1985), pp 80-81.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Handbook* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967), 659.

<sup>22</sup> Grk. *Ioudaizō* (Ἰουδαῖζω); cf. Esther 8:17, LXX.

Galatians, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Galatians 1:8), as the Judaizers were distorting the gospel message, making it one of works and not one of faith in the Messiah. It is interesting to note the historical context of Galatians 1:8 and in Paul’s warning against the Judaizers. *IVPBBBC* states the following:

“Some Jewish mystics of the period claimed revelations from angels (especially in the apocalyptic literature)...Paul may allude here to the curses of the covenant leveled against those who failed to keep Moses’ law (Deut 27-28).”<sup>23</sup>

If the Judaizers were in fact those who practiced Jewish mysticism and occultic practices, which today have developed into what is known as Kabbalah, this would make sense in light of Paul’s words in Galatians 6:13, “For those who are circumcised do not even keep the Law themselves, but they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.” If the Judaizers, those who demanded circumcision and Torah observance for salvation, were in fact Jewish mystics, then it would make sense for Paul to write the Galatians and tell them that those who are forcing circumcision “do not themselves keep the law” (RSV), as the spiritism and divination they would be practicing is expressly prohibited in the Torah. They may have had some kind of “mystical” view of circumcision or the conversion process.

This perspective on the Judaizers can place circumcision in an entirely different light when we read the Apostolic Scriptures. When circumcision is being addressed, is it the practice of circumcision itself that is perhaps being “condemned,” or is it the motivation for being circumcised that is being condemned? Circumcision for the wrong reason can be a serious problem.

## Paul and Circumcision

In relationship to the debate over circumcision, most Christian theologians are eager to quote the writings of the Apostle Paul, which supposedly condemn circumcision. In fact, *EJ* notes that “With the rise of Christianity [circumcision] became the sign of difference between the adherents of the two religions. Paul declared that justification by faith was sufficient for converts to Christianity (Rom. 3:4).”<sup>24</sup> This same sentiment is even voiced by some “Hebraic Roots” teachers. One says, “Paul includes circumcision with commands that are no longer to be adhered to.”<sup>25</sup> The need to place Paul’s writings in their appropriate context is absolutely imperative if we are to have a proper view of physical circumcision.

We all must recognize that the Apostle Paul himself was circumcised. In Philippians 3:5 he attests to being “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee.” Paul knew what his lineage was as a Jewish person, coming from the tribe of Benjamin, and he was a Pharisee. We also must recognize that Paul had Timothy circumcised, as Timothy’s mother was a Jewess and the two of them were going to minister in areas with large Jewish populations. Acts 16:1-3 attests to this:

“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.”

Of course, our question should be that if Paul opposed circumcision, as many theologians believe he did, why did he have Timothy circumcised? Could it be that when Paul met Timothy, he was disappointed, because having been raised by a Jewish mother, Timothy should have been circumcised as an infant—and this had not been done properly? Could it have been that Timothy’s circumcision was overdue? This appears to be the case. But what about other instances

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<sup>23</sup> Craig S. Keener, *IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL: 1993), 520.

<sup>24</sup> Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*.

<sup>25</sup> William J. Morford, *The Power New Testament*, third edition (Lexington, SC: Shalom Ministries, 2003), 376.

where Paul appears to be speaking against circumcision? Is it possible that we need to look at these on a case-by-case basis and that we have taken what he has said out of historical context?

In Romans 3:30 Paul attests to the fact that “there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (NIV). Those who are circumcised and uncircumcised will be saved from their sins through the same God. This is a clear attestation that circumcision is not a salvation issue, otherwise the Lord would be powerless to save the uncircumcised. But let us examine Romans 3:29-31 which gives us a slightly larger picture of what Paul is saying to the Roman Believers:

“Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not *the God* of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.”

After telling the Roman Believers that the God of Israel is the same of both the Jews and non-Jews, and that He will save both the circumcised and uncircumcised, Paul goes on and tells them that faith does not negate the importance of Torah. Rather, “we uphold the law” (RSV). The verb *histēmi* (ἵστημι) means “to uphold or sustain the authority or force of any thing” (Thayer).<sup>26</sup> If Paul says that we are to uphold the authority of the Torah, then we have to realize that circumcision is one of the commandments of the Torah, and a foundational one if a man considers himself to be a part of Israel.

Earlier in his letter to the Romans, Paul writes “You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU,’ just as it is written. For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (Romans 2:23-25). Here, Paul says that if you follow the Torah, then circumcision has value, but when you violate or transgress the Torah, your circumcision becomes as though it were uncircumcision or foreskin. So, if a person is circumcised and then violates any principle of the Torah, circumcision is of no value because you are condemned by the Torah. This is why James says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10).

With this in mind, Paul admonishes the Jewish Believers in Rome not to become too enamored with their circumcision, because if circumcision becomes a sense of false pride for them, then by the non-Jews adhering to the basic righteous requirements of the Torah, it will be as though they are circumcised:

“So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter *of the Law* and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:26-29).

Paul emphasizes to these Jewish Believers that ultimately circumcision is of the heart, and a Jew’s praise does not come from men, but from God. This is because the Hebrew name *Yehudah* (יהודה) means “the LORD has praised.” These Jewish Believers are to look to the Lord, and not to other men to be praised. They are not to have a false sense of pride because they knew to be circumcised from the time they were infants. They are rather to be secure in their faith and look to God for answers. Here, Paul is placing circumcision in its proper perspective for Jewish Believers.

But what about circumcision in its proper perspective for non-Jewish Believers? Did Paul truly say that circumcision was not required and unimportant in all respects? Some say so based on 1 Corinthians 7:18-20:

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<sup>26</sup> Thayer, 308.

“Was any man called *when he was already* circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters* is the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.”

Paul is quoted as saying “Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. . . Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him” (NIV). Paul is supposedly telling us that if a man is called into the faith and is uncircumcised, then he is to remain uncircumcised. But this is not the Biblical pattern.

As already stated, the Patriarch Abraham, who was given the sign of the covenant, circumcision, *was uncircumcised* when he was called into the covenant by God (Genesis 13:14-17; cf. 17:10-14). This is recognized by Paul in Romans 4:9-12:

“Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, ‘FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.’ How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.”

When viewed properly, Abraham was called into the covenant that God was making with him when he was uncircumcised. But later, as the sign of that covenant, Abraham and all in his household were to be circumcised. By circumcising themselves, they were fully committing themselves to the Lord and were recognizing the covenant that He made with them. This physical act came at an appropriate point *after God called Abraham into the covenant*, but it was not *initially required* for entry into the covenant. Circumcision of the male penis, rather, was to be a physical identifier of the covenant of physical multiplicity that God made with Abraham. With this in mind, Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7:18-20 take on a whole different perspective:

“Was any man called *when he was already* circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters* is the keeping of the commandments of God. Each man must remain in that condition in which he was called.”

Paul first talks about the status of one being called into faith in Messiah Yeshua. He admonishes those who are circumcised, not to become drawn over (*epispadō*), or painfully remove the sign of the covenant. Then, it appears as though he is saying that those who are uncircumcised are not to be circumcised. But after this he makes a very intriguing statement, “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts” (NIV). What is this supposed to mean? Is Paul contradicting himself, first saying that being circumcised or uncircumcised does not matter, but then that keeping God’s commandments of the Torah does matter? Not at all. Being circumcised or uncircumcised does not matter in regard to the status that a man finds himself when he is converted and comes to faith in Yeshua. Keeping the commandments, *including circumcision*, does matter. But it is not an instantaneous process.

The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, for example, recognized that Torah observance for the new, non-Jewish Believers was not an instantaneous process, and that is why it ruled that they did not have to be circumcised to be saved and welcomed into the *ekklēsia*. The council ruled, rather, for the non-Jews to abstain from idolatry, sexual immorality, blood, and unkosher meat. These rulings would allow the new, non-Jewish Believers to enter into the Synagogue and hear Moses taught. Over time as they grew and matured in their faith, the non-Jewish Believers would be incorporated into the Commonwealth of Israel and they would become more and more Torah observant.

This is the perspective of circumcision that the Apostle Paul is coming from. In 1 Corinthians 7:20 he says, “Let each one continue in the calling in which he was called” (my translation). The Greek verb *menō* (μένω) has a variety of meanings: “*remain, stay, abide; live,*

*dwell; last, endure, continue*” (CGEDNT).<sup>27</sup> Yeshua tells us in John 15:7, “If you abide [*menō*] in Me, and My words abide [*menō*] in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” The Apostle John admonishes Believers in 1 John 2:27-28, “As for you, the anointing which you received from Him abides [*menō*] in you, and you have no need for anyone to teach you; but as His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you abide [*menō*] in Him. Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.”

We are admonished in the Scriptures to abide—meaning *continue*—in our walk of faith. The critical part of continuing in our faith is that we are to grow and mature. We are always to be in a state of moving forward and in being conformed to the image of the Messiah. When Paul writes that he who is uncircumcised is to continue in his calling, is he saying that this person is to remain uncircumcised for the rest of his life? Remember that Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:19 that “*what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.*” I cannot conclude that he is saying that the Torah’s commandments matter, except circumcision. Rather, when we understand that Abraham did not have to be circumcised to enter into the covenant, but was circumcised at a later point, so too are uncircumcised new Believers not to be circumcised to receive salvation. **But, as new Believers continue in their Messianic walk of faith and mature, at some date in the future they are to undergo physical circumcision.**

But what about what Paul says in Galatians 5:2, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you,” or “Christ shall profit you nothing” (YLT)? Is this a blanket statement by Paul that if a Believer undergoes physical circumcision that he is no longer “saved”? Some would say so. However, Paul’s letter to the Galatians was written by him to specifically refute the idea that circumcision, i.e., conversion to Judaism, would bring proper salvation, and to speak against the false doctrines of the Judaizers. Paul was writing those who were being errantly taught that circumcision preceded faith in Yeshua; he was not speaking against circumcision as a practice, otherwise he would not have had Timothy circumcised. When we know that Paul was not coming against circumcision as a practice, but rather the improper usage of it, we can understand why he forbade the non-Jews of the Galatian assemblies from being circumcised—because it was being misused:

“Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Messiah, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:2-6).

In these words, Paul tells the Galatians that if they believe that ritual circumcision will save them, then “Christ will be of no value to you at all” (NIV). He writes that those who are trying to be justified by keeping the Torah, rather than being justified by Messiah Yeshua and allowing Torah obedience to be an outward manifestation of one’s faith in Him, have fallen. He writes of the responsibility that the circumcised person has to keep the Torah, but then emphasizes the key element of Torah obedience, which is love (Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 6:5).

In Galatians 6:13 we see that the Judaizers were forcing circumcision upon the Galatians, because “they desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.” It was for a self-serving reason, not one that was motivated by the Holy Spirit, where circumcision would be adopted as one would grow in his walk of faith. Paul forbade circumcision of the Galatians because it was abused, and because the Judaizers were using it as a means to promote their Torah-prohibited Jewish mysticism.

It was with this in mind that Paul writes in Galatians 4:9, “But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and

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<sup>27</sup> Barclay M. Newman, Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies/Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1971), 113.

worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?" These are not the Biblical appointments of Leviticus 23, as is commonly asserted, but rather mystical practices associated with astrology and the occult.<sup>28</sup>

However, as it relates to circumcision, we must take note of Galatians 5:3, "I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law." How does this apply to those of us who are non-Jewish Believers and were circumcised in a medical context as infants? It would seem to me that, at the very least, because we have been circumcised and are identifying with the Abrahamic Covenant, that we should take note of the commandments of the Torah. We are responsible for what the Law tells us. The Galatians to which Paul wrote may have not been ready for this, being so new in the faith.

In his epistles, Paul warns against those of the false circumcision. He said of the Judaizers, "I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves" (Galatians 5:12), meaning that he wishes that they would just go ahead and "emasculate themselves" (NIV), or cut off their sexual organs. Leviticus 21:17-21 says that a priest who has been castrated cannot function in the service of God, so if the Judaizers would just cut off their testicles then they would be physically unfit to be "ministers":

"Speak to Aaron, saying, 'No man of your offspring throughout their generations who has a defect shall approach to offer the food of his God. For no one who has a defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man, or he who has a disfigured *face*, or any deformed *limb*, or a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or a hunchback or a dwarf, or *one who has* a defect in his eye or eczema or scabs or **crushed testicles**. No man among the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a defect is to come near to offer the LORD's offerings by fire; *since* he has a defect, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.'

In Philippians 3:2-3, Paul warns against those of the "false circumcision" or the "those who mutilate the flesh" (RSV):

"Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Messiah Yeshua and put no confidence in the flesh."

In his admonition to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul warns against those whose confidence in God is in their physical circumcision and not in the Spirit. This might be an allusion to those who believed that true devotion to God was contingent on one removing his testicles. AMG defines *katatomē* (κατατομή) as "A cutting away, mangling...*peritomē*, ordained by the Law of Moses, has a spiritual significance distinguishing God's people (Israel in the OT) from the heathen. When this spiritual meaning is forgotten, then *peritomē*, circumcision, becomes *katatomē*, a mutilation, a butchering up, a mere cutting away flesh which in itself is of no value."<sup>29</sup> Paul's admonition here places circumcision in its proper place: **physical circumcision is meaningless without an appropriate heart attitude.**

The Apostle Paul attests in Galatians 2:7, "I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter *had been* to the circumcised." He had been given the special calling by God to go and preach the gospel to those of the nations, those who were not circumcised from the time of birth, unlike Peter who had been given the calling to go and minister to his fellow Jews. The Jerusalem Council made it clear that circumcision of the flesh was not necessary for salvation. This is why in Galatians 5:11 Paul says, "if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished." As a Pharisee, prior to his conversion of faith, Paul would have proclaimed that circumcision was necessary to be part of the righteous redeemed. Our problem with Paul, too often, has been that we have taken a statement here or a statement there from him, and formed entire theologies around it, rather than examining the whole of his words, and placing them in historical context and in their complete Biblical context.

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<sup>28</sup> For a further analysis of Paul's letter to the Galatians, consult the editor's commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*. Also consult his article "Does the New Testament Annul the Biblical Appointments?"

<sup>29</sup> *Zodhiates*, pp 846-847.

Paul writes us that two things must occur before Yeshua the Messiah can return: the apostasy and the revealing of the man of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:3). Paul was accused by some of the Jewish Believers in Jerusalem of teaching apostasy from Moses: “[A]nd they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, **telling them not to circumcise their children** nor to walk according to the customs” (Acts 21:21). Part of the accusation regarding this apostasy was that he was teaching people not to circumcise their children. This accusation was false. Paul did not preach against circumcision in his writings. But what he did do was place it in its proper context. Circumcision was not required for new Believers coming to faith, but rather these Believers had to continue in their faith, just as Abraham did as he entered into the covenant, and be circumcised at a later point in time.

One such example of being circumcised at a point later in time may be Titus. We are told very little about Titus in the Apostolic Scriptures. Galatians 2:1-3 tells us that when Titus was brought to Jerusalem he was not compelled to be circumcised:

“Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. It was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but *I did so* in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus, who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised.”

Even though it is not required of Titus to be circumcised in these verses, note that we are not told anything concerning the state that Titus was in relating to his faith. We may safely assume, however, that Titus was a *young Believer* at the time. In his letter to Titus almost twenty years later, Paul tells him to “avoid...disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (Titus 3:9). The key to properly understanding this statement is to realize that you cannot have “quarrels over the law” (RSV) without *first* believing that the Torah is to be followed. Zenas, a lawyer or “the *Torah* expert” (CJB), and Apollos, who “was mighty in the Scriptures [Tanach/Old Testament]” (Acts 18:24), were part of Titus’ congregation in Crete (Titus 3:13). It is very possible that by this time Titus had become well versed in the Torah himself, and indeed *had undergone physical circumcision*.

I do not believe that the claims that Paul spoke against circumcision are at all accurate. Paul himself was circumcised, and he circumcised Timothy. What Paul does do in his epistles is that he clarifies the position of circumcision for new Believers. New Believers who are just coming to faith should not be circumcised. They should be given some time to grow in their faith, and then at a later point, *when they are ready*, undergo the process, just as Abraham did when he and his household were committing themselves fully to the covenant that God had set before them.

## **Circumcision of the Heart**

One of the important admonitions of the Scriptures is that we are to circumcise our hearts. Paul alludes to this in Romans 2:29, when he addresses Jewish Believers in Rome, “But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.” Another reference is Philippians 3:3, “for we are the *true* circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Messiah Yeshua and put no confidence in the flesh.” All too often, these Scriptures are quoted by Christians who then go on and say that physical circumcision is not important at all—all that matters is that one’s heart is circumcised. I agree that a circumcision of the heart, meaning a removal of the barriers that can spiritually block ourselves from the Lord, should be primary to physical circumcision—but circumcision of the heart was a Torah commandment:

“Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, *even* you above all peoples, as *it is* this day. So circumcise your heart, and stiffen your neck no longer” (Deuteronomy 10:15-16).

“Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Circumcision of the heart is by no means a “New Testament” concept, only, because it is commanded by God in the “Old Testament.” J.H. Hertz says that the Israelites “were not to allow, as it were, a hard covering to surround their heart, making it impervious to Divine influence.”<sup>30</sup> We are commanded to circumcise our hearts so that we might have proper communication and communion with God. Part of this obviously comes when we receive Messiah Yeshua into our lives and are born again. The Holy Spirit enables us to have the proper communication we need with the Father. But at the same time, in order to not to have any barriers between our Father and us, we need to be in obedience to Him. As Believers empowered by the Holy Spirit, He will convict us regarding what is right and what is wrong, and if we are truly growing in our faith we will be conformed to the likeness of Yeshua—and He was both Torah observant *and physically circumcised*.

Circumcision of the heart should and must be primary to circumcision of the flesh. But circumcision of the heart, meaning removal of the barrier between ourselves and God, does not negate the Biblical importance of circumcision. Again, it places physical circumcision in its proper perspective.

### **Circumcision and Messianic Passovers**

One issue that has arisen in the Messianic community in recent days has been what to do about the Passover. Exodus 12:48-49 tells us, “But if a stranger sojourns with you, and celebrates the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near to celebrate it; and he shall be like a native of the land. **But no uncircumcised person may eat of it.** The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you.” As it relates to circumcision and the Passover, we are plainly told that “There shall be one law for the citizen and for the stranger who dwells among you” (NJPS). Circumcision, no different than the seventh-day Sabbath/*Shabbat*, is an eternal ordinance.

The debate that has arisen in the Messianic movement is what to do about congregational Passover *sedars*. Most often, Messianic congregations will open up their Passover *sedars* to the public, and it is an excellent opportunity to expose Christians to their Hebraic Roots. However, a few Messianic congregations or groups make it absolutely necessary that if you are a male and attend their Passover *sedar*, that you must be physically circumcised. In response to this, other Messianic congregations and groups go overboard in saying that physical circumcision is unimportant and that circumcision of the heart is all that matters. What is a well-balanced Biblical position that we need to have on this?

First of all, unless those groups who demand that one must be physically circumcised to attend their Passover gathering *visually inspect every male’s penis* who comes to it, you have no way of knowing who is circumcised or uncircumcised. Someone can easily lie about their circumcision status. Secondly, we all have to realize that none of us are observing the Passover perfectly, and our Passover *sedars* are, at best, memorials of the Passover. Deuteronomy 16:5 says that “You are not allowed to sacrifice the Passover in any of your towns which the LORD your God is giving you.” The Passover lamb was only permitted to be sacrificed in Jerusalem at the Temple. This is why Ashkenazic Jews do not eat lamb at Passover. The reason we should not require physical circumcision of all males attending a Messianic Passover *sedar*, is the fact that we are in the Diaspora, and we are memorializing the Passover, rather than following it strictly as the Torah prescribes. But if we were in the Land of Israel, and indeed observing the Passover as the Scriptures prescribe, then physical circumcision would be required. However, it would be fair to say that at Messianic Passover *sedars* where uncircumcised people are in attendance, their participation in the *sedar* itself should be limited.

But to say that uncircumcised males can attend a Passover memorial negate the commandment of circumcision? Not at all. There is to be one Torah for the native and the sojourner, and in correct context that instruction specifically pertains to the rite of circumcision.

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<sup>30</sup> J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino Press, 1960), 789.

For Messianic groups to uphold Exodus 12:49 and say that all are to follow the Torah or Law of Moses, but then say that circumcision is unimportant, is being inconsistent with how they apply Scripture.

### **The Anti-Circumcision Movement and the Man of Lawlessness**

Some are unaware of this, but the opposition to circumcision goes beyond some of the theological arguments as presented by many Christians. There is a concentrated, non-religious anti-circumcision movement in the United States and other countries where circumcision is a major medical procedure. Circumcision used to be a standard medical practice and was performed with or without parental consent. Circumcision is now performed only with parental consent, because of the anti-circumcision movement, although the anti-circumcision movement would like to make infant circumcision a criminal offense. Members of these groups vary from mothers who feel as though their male children will be or perhaps have been “mutilated,” to those men who believe that they should have been given a “choice” and wish that they had not been circumcised.

One anti-circumcision organization says, “There is a movement among men who feel that they have been wrongfully circumcised and are fighting to stop the routine circumcisions of infant boys in America and Australia. We feel violated and raped, and do not wish for another generation of males to feel as we do. Not only are we doing something about it through the many different organizations that have sprung up around this cause, but we are taking measures to restore the foreskins we have through non surgical methods of foreskin restoration.”<sup>31</sup> Foreskin restoration has become a medical practice in our day, whereby skin can be stretched over the head of the penis and “regrown,” just as being “drawn over” was in the First Century (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:18).

But the anti-circumcision movement has gone beyond just being a group of those who oppose infant circumcision and male adults who feel as though they should not have been circumcised. Advocates have become a political lobby.

One anti-circumcision group is the Students for Genital Integrity, founded by Greg Dervin, a college student in San Francisco. Dervin states, “We’re not just anti-circumcision... We’re against any forced cutting of a child’s genitalia.” The article, “A different kind of penis envy: Students fight to save foreskins,” appearing in the 09 March, 2003 edition of the San Francisco Chronicle, indicates that “Dervin took an interest in male circumcision two years ago after coming across information about the procedure on the Internet... Dervin is Jewish, and his foreskin was removed as part of his bris, a religious ceremony, on the eighth day of his life... Dervin and other members of his group are campaigning to educate parents, doctors and lawmakers about what they perceive as obsolete beliefs and cultural practices...” In describing circumcision, Dervin says that “It’s a human rights violation” and “I’m pissed. I was denied a whole sexual experience. I was robbed. The experience should be my birthright.”<sup>32</sup>

Dervin’s sentiments are the feelings of many liberals in society who believe that circumcision is an outdated, unnecessary, and archaic religious practice, which people should be opposed to. Dervin, as a Jew, believes that having his foreskin and “whole sexual experience” is his birthright, as opposed to recognizing himself as part of the Abrahamic Covenant and being one of the myriads of physical descendants of the Patriarchs. Dervin overstates his case in describing removal of the foreskin as “mutilation,” as a Jewish *mohel* performing a proper circumcision has to make his cut so quickly that the infant does not feel a thing and there is little or no blood. And, most circumcisions today occur in hospital settings, so to say that it is a “painful” procedure is grossly overstated.

There are some people who have taken the issue of circumcision to the criminal courts. The 23 January, 2003 edition of the New York Times reported a story of Josiah Flatt, who was circumcised as an infant in 1997. “Two years later, his parents sued the doctor and the

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<sup>31</sup> The Australian Foreskin Restoration and Anti-Circumcision Site (2004). [Main Page]. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://www.foreskin.net/>>.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Heredia (2003). *A different kind of penis envy: Students fight to save foreskins*, 09 March, 2003. *San Francisco Chronicle*. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://80-web.lexis-nexis.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/universe/>>.

hospital....They did not contend that the circumcision was botched or deny that Josiah's mother, Anita Flatt, had consented to the procedure in writing. They said, instead, that the doctor had failed to tell them enough about the pain, complications and consequences of circumcision, removing the foreskin of the penis." The article goes on and says, "This lawsuit is an attempt to abolish circumcision in North Dakota of newborn males with healthy foreskin...Plaintiffs want to change public policy so that only a competent male once he reaches adulthood, and not his parent, should be able to consent to circumcision."<sup>33</sup>

These beliefs, voiced by one "concerned mother," could go unchallenged by many because on the surface the argument is that one should decide whether or not to be circumcised should rest to the individual himself when he has become an adult. In fact, many Christians would agree with this remark, perhaps using as a point of comparison the issue of abortion and how those aborted are not given a choice. But the issue of circumcision can ultimately be a religious one. Bible Believers oppose abortion because murder of an innocent life is expressly prohibited in Scripture. However, infant circumcision is also a Biblical practice, and freedom to practice one's religion is currently protected in the United States and the West. Parents, under our system of governance, should have the right to raise their children in their religion, and if their religion requires that males be circumcised, which if done properly is not a painful procedure, then they should be allowed to do so. This is especially true of Messianics as it is of anyone else.

Current evidence suggests that one day infant circumcision, at least in certain countries, may be a criminally prosecutable offense. Norm-UK, a British-based anti-circumcision organization, states that it "has received hundreds of calls from men who feel ashamed or mutilated by the procedure. For young boys, the potential embarrassment of having a penis that looks different from those of their friends is obvious." This is often the common social argument against circumcision, but it really holds no weight because anyone can feel embarrassed for any reason, not necessarily a circumcised or uncircumcised penis. Yet the issue is ultimately religious. "[I]n a largely Jewish or Islamic community, this argument works as much in favour of circumcision as against it. Dr Lotte Newman, a former president of the Royal College of General Practitioners who chairs the circumcision working party of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, is troubled by **developments in Sweden which may lead to a ban on child circumcision there.** 'This trend against circumcision affects those religions which practise it traditionally,' she says."<sup>34</sup>

Ultimately, the debate against circumcision will have to become a religious one, and issues related to anti-Semitism will arise (although the arguments against circumcision are directed at the Islamic community as well). History has shown that many Jews have been persecuted because of being circumcised. One practice that some Jews had to adopt was that of semi-circumcision. "In Europe before the war, Jews concerned with recognition often underwent this half-circumcision. In this procedure, only half of the foreskin is removed. The procedure is enough to satisfy the religion, but equally important, the skin can be pulled over the gland without risk of an infection underneath. This enabled many Jews to escape detection at a time when their religion brought them much persecution."<sup>35</sup>

The anti-circumcision movement has made some political headway, even though infant circumcision has not become a criminal offense. "Florida has taken sides in the long-running debate over the medical necessity of circumcision. It has joined the opposition....the procedure is no longer covered by Medicaid in Florida except in limited cases."<sup>36</sup> While the State of Florida

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<sup>33</sup> Adam Liptak (2003). *Opponents of Circumcision Use the Legal System and Legislatures to Combat It*, 23 January, 2003. *The New York Times*. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://80-web.lexis-nexis.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/universe/>>.

<sup>34</sup> Simon Crompton (2003). *The unkindest of cuts*, 13 January, 2003. *The Times (London)*. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://80-web.lexis-nexis.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/universe/>>.

<sup>35</sup> Niels Lauersen and Steven Whitney, *It's Your Body: A Woman's Guide to Gynecology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1977), pp 383-384.

<sup>36</sup> Alisa Ulferts (2003). *Florida limits coverage for circumcisions*, 01 July, 2003. *St. Petersburg Times*. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://80-web.lexis-nexis.com.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/universe/>>.

justifies this Medicaid modification under the guise of cutting unnecessary costs from the state budget, ultimately this change is motivated by the anti-circumcision movement.

These are just a few examples of the influence that the anti-circumcision movement is having. This is a growing movement, and there is very little Christian opposition to it. The only major opposition to it comes from the Jewish and Islamic communities. And surprisingly, this is one of the few issues that Jews and Muslims can actually agree upon. What is the Messianic position going to be on this issue? Are we just going to stand by idly because circumcision is not a “salvation issue”? Or, are we going to circumcise our infants as the Scriptures prescribe and stand up to this discrimination?

One of the things that many Believers do not consciously realize about the antimessiah/antichrist, is that he is called the “man of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:3) or “the man who separates himself from *Torah*” (CJB). We have to realize that the antimessiah is going to oppose the practices of the Torah, and these practices do not just include keeping the Sabbath or appointed times, they also include circumcision. Daniel 7:25 tells us “He will speak out against the Most High and wear down the saints of the Highest One, and he will intend to make alterations in times and in law; and they will be given into his hand for a time, times, and half a time.” The word “law” used in the text here is not *torah*, but is *dat* (דַּת). *Dat* is an Aramaic word used in Scripture to not necessarily refer to the Torah, but rather the civil laws of society. AMG comments that “In Daniel 7:25, a ruler was prophesied to speak against the Most High God and to set up laws in opposition to Him, but the ruler could only do so for a period of time set by God.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, the Scriptures tell us that the antimessiah is going to set up his own set of civil laws that oppose the ordinances of the Most High. We already see things in motion whereby infant circumcision can be made illegal. We have seen this in history as the Syrian-Greek ruler Antiochus Ephiphanes forbade the Jews to circumcise their males during the time of the Maccabees, and later as Jews in Europe had to adopt partial circumcision.

But let’s take this a step further. Revelation 13:14-15 speaks of an image of the antimessiah that will be set up at the Abomination of Desolation and given life to speak by the false prophet:

“And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who had the wound of the sword and has come to life. And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed.”

We are not told that much about the image of the beast itself, although we know that it looks as though it were human, and that those who refuse to worship it are executed. We also know that the setting up of images for worship violates the Second Commandment. But have we considered what this image, presumably a statue of the man himself, will look like? Could it be that this statue will be a Classical Greco-Roman representation of the antimessiah? *Nude and uncircumcised?*

When we consider the fact that the antimessiah will oppose the saints of God, who in the Book of Revelation keep the commandments of the Torah and know Yeshua as their Lord and Savior, then it would make sense to believe that the antimessiah will likely be one who is uncircumcised. We do not want to be like the man of lawlessness.

## **Circumcision and the Kingdom to Come**

As Believers in Yeshua the Messiah, we know that physical circumcision is not a salvation issue. **One does not need to be physically circumcised to be saved.** The Apostolic Scriptures attest to the fact that there were those in the First Century who taught that physical circumcision was a salvation issue, and they misused circumcision to promote their own self-serving agendas. However, as Believers in the Messiah, to whom the Lord is restoring a Torah foundation, we must

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<sup>37</sup> Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 251.

recognize the fact that physical circumcision is a key part of Torah observance, and it is indeed an eternal ordinance. We cannot ignore it.

In this hour, our Heavenly Father has begun the process of restoring the whole House of Israel by reuniting Judah, scattered Israel/Ephraim, and those of the nations who enjoin themselves to the Commonwealth of Israel. The House of Israel/Ephraim was scattered into the nations and was exponentially multiplied as part of God's promise to Abraham that his descendants would number as the stars of the sky and sand by the seashore. Physical circumcision identifies oneself as part of the Abrahamic Covenant. What do we do with those in the Two-House Messianic community who want to be considered part of God's covenant with Abraham, but decide to be uncircumcised? The Rabbinic commentary I quoted earlier of being cut off by one's people is well taken. These people may experience some loss of something when Yeshua returns and rewards are dispensed regarding one's obedience or disobedience to the Torah (cf. Matthew 5:19). But those of us who examine the Scriptures conservatively should realize that circumcision is every bit as eternal as *Shabbat* or the Biblical holidays.

We must also keep in mind the fact that when Yeshua returns and the Temple is reestablished in Jerusalem, that only the circumcised in both heart *and* flesh will be permitted to enter into it. Physical circumcision will be enforced as an ordinance during the Millennium:

"You shall say to the rebellious ones, to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, 'Enough of all your abominations, O house of Israel, when you brought in foreigners, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary to profane it, *even* My house, when you offered My food, the fat and the blood; for they made My covenant void—*this* in addition to all your abominations. And you have not kept charge of My holy things yourselves, but you have set *foreigners* to keep charge of My sanctuary.' Thus says the Lord GOD, 'No foreigner uncircumcised in heart **and uncircumcised in flesh**, of all the foreigners who are among the sons of Israel, shall enter My sanctuary'" (Ezekiel 44:6-9).

What does this mean for us today? Many of us were circumcised as male infants because circumcision has become a standard medical practice in many parts of the world. God, in His omniscience, had us circumcised without us realizing the Biblical importance of it. Many of us have identified with the Abrahamic Covenant without even realizing it.

The big question is what to do with the uncircumcised in our midst. Physical circumcision is not something that has been abolished in the New Testament. While it is not required for salvation, Paul did admonish us in 1 Corinthians 7:20 that we are to "continue" (Grk. *menō*) in our faith. Part of continuing *or abiding* in our faith is growing and maturing. We are to be abiding in Messiah and to be conformed to His likeness and how He lived. Yeshua the Messiah was circumcised. It is inconsistent for us as Messianics to say that we should honor the Sabbath, keep the Biblical festivals, and eat kosher, because Yeshua did these things, but then say that physical circumcision is unimportant—because Yeshua was circumcised! Rather, what we must do is set physical circumcision in its proper place.

Abraham was called into covenant with God while he was uncircumcised. Many are called into faith in Messiah while they are physically uncircumcised. At a later point, Abraham and his entire household were circumcised. At a later point when the uncircumcised in our midst have been given time to grow in their faith, **they too should be circumcised**. While it should be made abundantly clear that physical circumcision *does not bring salvation*, if such Messianic Believers recognize that they are a part of Israel, and truly wish to identify with the Abrahamic Covenant, **then they should be circumcised as the Scriptures prescribe**. Otherwise, the admonition that one Torah or only one set of Instruction applies to all is null-and-void. Of course, we would avoid this problem if we simply circumcised our infant males as the Lord tells us.

Is circumcision for everyone? Circumcision is for those who are ready for it, and have reached the point in their faith where they are mature enough to understand what it is. Circumcision is not for those who believe that while going through with it that it will secure their salvation. Knowing when a person is ready to undergo proper circumcision should be a personal choice based on a man's spiritual maturity and convictions from Scripture.

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