

## Is Circumcision for Everyone?

When today's Christians think about the physical circumcision of males, they often do not know what to do. While on the one hand, it is properly acknowledged that Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) was circumcised, as were His Jewish Disciples, on the other hand it is frequently thought that physical circumcision—perhaps in *any* capacity—is not really that important any more. For myself, I remember the first day of the first course I took at Asbury Theological Seminary in 2005, Kingdom, Church, & World, and how the instructor showed the class a slide image of Michaelangelo's statue of King David. He asked everyone what was wrong with this picture. Most people answered something along the lines of: "*The statue is naked!*" While a valid answer, it was not the one he wanted. He then told the class: "*David was a Jew. This statue of David is uncircumcised.*"

Today's Messianic movement generally has a more favorable view of circumcision than its contemporary Christian counterparts. It is firmly acknowledged and defended that male Jewish Believers should not only be circumcised, but that as a part of their ethnic heritage and traditions, that they should hold the appropriate circumcision rites and customs for their male infants, and actively continue the practice for posterity. Concurrent with this, presumed medical benefits of circumcision are often encouraged for all males, as circumcision is a practice witnessed and rooted in the Scriptures. There is controversy in some quarters, though, as it concerns circumcision in relation to Messianic Passover *seders*, and circumcision for converts to Judaism. Some believe that the relationship of God's people to circumcision has not changed at all with the arrival of the Messiah, and others think that circumcision, while being important, is not as important for the post-resurrection era as it once was.

What is an appropriate, Messianic perspective on the issue of circumcision? How do we give a proper hearing to how the subject matter is approached in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Apostolic Writings? Should circumcision be encouraged for all the males in our ranks? How do we avoid the scores of abuses that have been manifested in Biblical and religious history surrounding circumcision?

### What is Circumcision?

Some of you, while having read Scripture, may be unfamiliar with what “circumcision” actually is. As *EDB* adequately describes it: “The removal of the foreskin of the penis. While practiced by some ancient Near Eastern peoples for various reasons and in specific ways, circumcision had a unique place in the worship and practice of the people of Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

The following is the medical definition of circumcision as supplied by the 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* (מֹהֵל). A *mohel* today uses a very sharp metal knife to slice the foreskin off of an eight-day old male 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 male child’s circumcision he is given his name.<sup>3</sup> The Gospel of Luke reflects this tradition, recording how John the Immerser/Baptist was given his name at his circumcision:

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<sup>1</sup> Allan R. Bevere, “Circumcision,” in *EDB*, 256.

<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/>>.

<sup>3</sup> For a further summary of the significance of circumcision in Jewish tradition, consult Eisenberg, pp 7-14; a summary of Orthodox Jewish rulings and traditions is accessible in Paysach J. Krohn, *Bris Milah: Circumcision – The Covenant of Abraham* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1985).

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“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” today, the historical truth is that many other ancient societies circumcised their males:

“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” (*ISBE*).<sup>4</sup>

This entry attests to the fact that circumcision was observed 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 their 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 a male 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 useful to be aware of, if one is to examine the subject matter throughout a range of Scriptural passages.

The primary Hebrew word used in the Tanach (Old Testament) for circumcision is *mul* (מול), a verb meaning “to **circumcise**” or “to **circumcise**

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<sup>4</sup> T. Lewis and C.E. Armerding, “Circumcision,” in *ISBE*, 1:700.

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oneself, be circumcised" (HALOT).<sup>5</sup> A closely related term to this is *orlah* (עֲרֵלָה), "foreskin of a man's penis" (HALOT).<sup>6</sup> *Arel* (אַרֵּל) describes the state of being "provided with a foreskin, **uncircumcised**" (HALOT).<sup>7</sup> In the Hebrew 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>8</sup> specifically, "to cut off the foreskin of the male genital organ, **circumcise**" (BDAG).<sup>9</sup> In the Greek Septuagint, *peritemnō* is often used to translate the Hebrew *mul. Akrobusitia* (ἀκροβυστία) in most Bibles is rendered as "uncircumcision," but it is "lit. **prepuce, foreskin**" (BDAG).<sup>10</sup> Thayer says that *akrobusitia* "in the Sept. [is] the equiv. of עֲרֵלָה the prepuce, the skin covering the glans penis."<sup>11</sup> Much of the time in the Greek Scriptures, "the uncircumcised" is more specifically the more anatomical "foreskinned." The last term used is *aperitmētos* (ἀπεριτμητός), only used once in Acts 7:51. BDAG indicates that it is "lit. **uncircumcised**,"<sup>12</sup> and it corresponds via the Septuagint to *arel*.

In examining the Scriptures, especially the Messianic Writings, it can be important to know what term regarding circumcision is being used. Also note that a frequent reference to "the circumcision" in the New Testament is a reference to the Jewish people, as being physically circumcised was readily identifiable with a man being Jewish, composing those who were born into Judaism and circumcised as infants. To this it needs to be recognized how after the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E., "circumcision" took on an inflated national importance for much of the Jewish community. It is also likely, especially in targeted places within Paul's letters to the Galatians and to the Romans, that when "circumcision" is referred to, ritual proselyte conversion in order for a non-Jew to convert to Judaism is what is being considered.<sup>13</sup> In various parts of the Apostolic Scriptures, "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 should be considered for the appropriate context.

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<sup>5</sup> HALOT, 1:555-556.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 1:886.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 506.

<sup>9</sup> BDAG, 806.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>11</sup> Thayer, 24.

<sup>12</sup> BDAG, 102.

<sup>13</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.

## Abraham and Circumcision

In the Tanach, we see how circumcision was originally established as the sign of the covenant made between the Lord and Abraham:

“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 Hebrew word for “sign” here is *ot* (אוֹת), which is defined by *BDB* as “sign, pledge, token,” “signs, omens,” “sign, symbol,” “signs, miracles,” and “signs, memorials.”<sup>14</sup> Circumcision was given to Abraham as a *b’rit olam* (בְּרִית עוֹלָם) or “everlasting covenant,” perhaps to be viewed even as an “eternal covenant” (Keter Crown Bible). At the very least, this signifies that circumcision should bear some level of significance for all of those who claim a connection to Abraham.

Physical circumcision was given by God to Abraham as a sign of the covenant that He gave to him. What was that covenant (cf. Genesis ch. 15)? A major part of it was a promise that Abraham’s descendants (Heb. sing. *zera*, זֶרַע; lit. “seed”) would be multiplied exponentially (Genesis 15:5), as well as the promise of the Land of Canaan for him and his progeny (Genesis 15:7).

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 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. Jewish people *and* Christians alike, obviously choose to believe in the Bible.

What is important to recognize about the sign of circumcision, other than the fact that it was intended to be a God-given, physical manifestation of His promises to Abraham—is that this sign was notably given *after* God made His promises 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

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<sup>14</sup> *BDB*, 16.

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numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you” (Genesis 13:14-17).

Some Bible readers 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 more fully understood what the Lord had set for him, he was then circumcised. *Circumcision came at the right time for Abraham*, noted by Paul to be a seal of the quality of faith he possessed (Romans 4:9-11). Male infants who were the descendants of Abraham, recipients of God’s promise, were then required to be circumcised on the eighth day. Circumcision was to serve as the sign that God was fulfilling His promises.

*What does this mean for us today?* How many of us consider ourselves to be recipients of the promise given to Abraham, of his seed 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 physical descendants of Abraham or not in order to be reckoned as his “seed” or “progeny” (cf. Galatians 3:29). But what does matter is that we all recognize ourselves as recipients of the promises that God made to him. Are we to take physical circumcision of the male member at all seriously, not overlooking or ignoring it as just some practice for Ancient Israel or cultural practice for Jews? Does it bear any significance—of any kind—for modern-day Messiah followers?

### Circumcision in Ancient Israel

The Torah specifically instructed that males, who were born into the community of Ancient 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” (Leviticus 12:2-3).

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 Ancient Israelites would circumcise their males, there was intended to be a distinction between them and their surrounding neighbors. While circumcision was practiced by other societies in the Ancient Near East, it was not practiced to the same extent as that of the Israelites. As *EJ* poignantly states, “The importance of circumcision is...evident from the repeated contemptuous references to the Philistines as uncircumcised.”<sup>15</sup> Being called “uncircumcised” was by no means considered to be complimentary.

As the Ancient Israelites were in the process of leaving Egypt, instruction regarding the inclusion of the *ger* (גֵּר), an outside sojourner who entered into Israel, is witnessed. A *ger* was required to be circumcised if he were to keep the Passover.

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<sup>15</sup> Leonard V. Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*.

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If he were circumcised, then not only could he eat the Passover, but he 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. The same law shall apply to the native as to the stranger who sojourns among you” (Exodus 12:48-49).

This verse, and related passages,<sup>16</sup> has a wide degree of significance for many in today’s Messianic movement. The summarizing statement about *torah achat* (אֶחָדָה תּוֹרָה) or “one law” directly concerns how there are not two separate standards by which people were reckoned as Israelites here; physical circumcision reckons one as a “native of the land,” ready to fully participate in Passover. In order for the native-born male to be a real “Israelite” ready to eat the Passover, he had to be circumcised; and in order for the *ger* to be considered a real “Israelite” and keep the Passover, he had to be circumcised. It was not as though the *ger* had to be circumcised, and *also* sacrifice ten bulls and twenty sheep, or be circumcised and pay two talents of silver pieces. The same standard applies.

Anyone not native born of Israel, but who would be sojourning in the Promised Land, would be in a rather odd predicament when it came time in the course of the year for the people to observe the Passover. Native male Israelites who were circumcised from the time of birth would be able to eat the Passover lamb without any problems. A family of sojourners, who had fully recognized and confessed faith in the God of Israel and recognized His goodness, and were by no means idolaters, would stand out—if the males had not undergone circumcision—in not being able to fully participate in eating of the Passover.

While it is tempting to think that Exodus 12:48-49 presents circumcision as the entryway for the *ger*/sojourner into Ancient Israel—Israel is not a people who was to be defined by “circumcision.” It is actually the commemoration of the Passover and remembrance of the Exodus which defines Israel and God’s salvation activity on Israel’s behalf. Full participation in the Passover requires circumcision, and then results in “native of the land” status being granted to the sojourner. *Passover is actually to be the central focus of membership in Israel, of which being circumcised has a part.*

Why were the males in Ancient Israel to make sure they were circumcised before eating of the Passover? Leaving Egypt we see, “at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:41), an affirmation that Abraham’s descendants would only be in Egypt for a limited time (Genesis 15:13). God was faithful to make sure that Israel’s bondage to Egypt eventually ended, and so being circumcised to keep the

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<sup>16</sup> Leviticus 7:7; 24:22; Numbers 9:14; 15:15-16, 29-30.

Consult the author’s article, “Approaching One Law Controversies: Sorting Through the Legalism,” appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*.

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Passover, commemorating their freedom from oppression, would allow them to remember how He has kept His word to Abraham (cf. Genesis 17:10).<sup>17</sup>

### Circumcision Taken Seriously

In Orthodox Judaism today, circumcision is considered so important that it is said, “An adult who intentionally remains uncircumcised suffers *כְּרַת* [*karat*], *spiritual excision*, meaning that the soul loses its share in the World to Come, and the violator may die childless and prematurely” (*ArtScroll Tanach*).<sup>18</sup> Most Jewish people, however, simply consider circumcision to be an important part of the life cycle of being Jewish, and that something major is lost when a Jewish boy is left uncircumcised. Within Judaism, circumcision is often referred to as *b'rit milah* (בְּרִית מִלָּה) or *bris milah* (Ashkenazic), which literally means “covenant of circumcision.” Circumcision still remains largely practiced, even among liberal Jews, as persecution of the Jewish people in past history, from the Maccabean crisis to the expulsion of Jews from Spain during the Inquisition to Hitler’s Holocaust, has often involved Jews being prohibited from circumcising their males or having to hide it. Jews who are often not religious circumcise their male infants as a definite sign of resilience against past oppression.

Queen Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of the Northern Kingdom, prohibited circumcision as a part of forsaking God’s covenant (1 Kings 19:14). As *EJ* summarizes,

“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. 44:7, 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>19</sup>

As referenced, being “uncircumcised” is an adjective that is used within the Tanach to describe faithlessness and rebellion against God:

“To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are closed and they cannot listen. Behold, the word of the LORD has become a reproach to them; they have no delight in it” (Jeremiah 6:10).

“‘Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised’” (Jeremiah 9:25).

“[W]hen 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

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<sup>17</sup> For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “The Message of Exodus” (appearing in the *Messianic Spring Holiday Helper*).

<sup>18</sup> Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *ArtScroll Tanach* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1996), 34.

<sup>19</sup> Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*.

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food, the fat and the blood; for they made My covenant void—*this* in addition to all your abominations...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 44:7, 9).

During the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E., the tiny Jewish nation faced down the military, religious, and social assaults from the Seleucid-Greek leader Antiochus Epiphanes. Among the many atrocities they committed, the Seleucid-Greeks prohibited the Jews from circumcising their infant males: "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). We witness that mothers who saw that their sons were circumcised, actually 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" (2 Maccabees 6:10).

The zeal of the Jewish priest Mattathias for the ways of God's Torah, as he started a guerilla war against the Seleucids, was significant. We see how "Mattathias and his friends went about and tore down the altars; they forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel" (2 Maccabees 2:45-46). Yet while young Jewish boys were being circumcised, we also are told that many "removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil" (1 Maccabees 1:15). *EJ* 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>20</sup>

This same process 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 the Jews in his Corinthian audience not to be "uncircumcised," better meaning "drawn over," a more accurate rendering of the Greek verb *epispāō* (ἐπισπάω), "**to pull the foreskin over the end of the penis, pull over the foreskin**" (*BDAG*).<sup>21</sup> Epispasm was an ancient procedure that many male Jews wanting to conform to Greek standards went through, to restore and regrow their foreskin.

The mistake that was made by both those during the time of Jezebel, and later during the time of the Maccabees, is that they forsook the practice of circumcision to conform and assimilate to the ways of the nations. The Jewish people, though, have largely learned from these mistakes regarding circumcision, and have recognized circumcision to be a valued component of their Biblical heritage.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *BDAG*, 380; "remove" (REB).

### 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. That Yeshua was circumcised as an eight-day old infant is a fact of Biblical history:

“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 2:21-22).

Luke, a First Century medical doctor (cf. Colossians 4:14), 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 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 prohibited for circumcision to be observed 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 even 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 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>22</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>23</sup>

But was Paul’s attitude of circumcision truly one of stark opposition, as many Bible readers, and indeed Christian theologians, conclude? 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 a person is a true emulator of the Messiah, then one will be obedient as He was. For males, does this include being circumcised?

Errors have often been made in failing to understand that the Apostle Paul often had to place circumcision in its correct context for new, non-Jewish Believers of the First Century, as many made circumcision and/or conversion to Judaism as a proselyte as an issue of salvation, as it was widely believed that only physical descendants of the Patriarchs would inherit the Kingdom to come (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1), and by extension proselytes to Judaism also. Paul definitely refuted the idea that one’s salvation, and membership among the redeemed, was contingent on physical descent and physical circumcision—as opposed to faith in the Messiah of Israel and what He has accomplished via His sacrifice for sinful humanity.

### Becoming a Jewish Proselyte

Before reviewing some of the Pauline passages where circumcision is discussed, it is important to be aware how some of Paul’s references to “circumcision” might be a shorthand for “the ritual of a Jewish proselyte.” In Galatians 5:3, for example, we see the Apostle write, “I testify again to every man who receives circumcision...,” but *panti anthrōpō* (παντὶ ἀνθρώπῳ) is what actually appears in the source text. While it might sound strange to us, this is better rendered as “every human being” or “every person” (Kingdom New Testament), which would include females. The emphasis is not so much on the medical procedure of circumcision, but instead people going through the ritual of becoming formal proselytes to the Jewish Synagogue.

There is no agreement among scholars as to when real “proselytes” started emerging on the scene within Second Temple Judaism. The range of opinions one may encounter express views that a procedure for becoming a proselyte goes back to not just figures like the Moabitess Ruth, but as indicated by the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, “Many of the sages...favored accepting converts into

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<sup>22</sup> Alfred J. Kolatch, *The Second Jewish Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, 1985), pp 80-81.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

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the community, describing Abraham as the first Jew to seek converts and teaching that all Jews should follow his lead by attempting to win over Gentiles to the worship of YHWH.”<sup>24</sup> Yet in this entry’s estimation, “The Bible [meaning, the Tanach] does not have a concept of conversion. The idea arose around the first century C.E.”<sup>25</sup> The references that Scot McKnight provides on favorable attitudes toward proselytes, in his entry for the *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, all come from the broad First Century B.C.E.-C.E. and the time immediately after.<sup>26</sup> He also indicates how “The evidence from antiquity reveals a rather diverse set of requirements that differ from time and place so that it is no longer accurate to speak of Judaism requiring circumcision, baptism [or, immersion] and a sacrifice in the temple.”<sup>27</sup> His thought is, “all Jews would have expected repentance, obedience and social integration into the Jewish community if one wanted to become a proselyte,”<sup>28</sup> but the degrees of how fast or slow this took place are varied.

The main summary of what was required for ancient proselytes to Judaism is actually seen in the Talmud:

“Just as your forefathers entered the covenant only with circumcision and immersion and sprinkling of blood through the sacrifices, so they will enter the covenant only through circumcision, immersion, and sprinkling of blood on the altar” (b.*Keritot* 9a).<sup>29</sup>

It is very true that each one of these elements is seen in the Torah, so it was not unreasonable for the ancient Sages to place them together as the main components of what would constitute proselytization. (Those in the Diaspora would presumably have made some kind of monetary offering in place of a sacrifice.) But again, when did these procedures really take on significance and force? *Not in the Exodus*. The discussions about proselytes to ancient Judaism largely occurred contemporary to the ministry of Yeshua.

Of all of the elements listed, circumcision of males would have been the most important, and history certainly bears out the close association between circumcision and Jewish proselytes (especially given the tenor of Paul’s letter to the Galatians). Most critically not to be overlooked would be how circumcision was made illegal on threat of death during the Maccabean crisis (1 Maccabees 1:60-61; 2 Maccabees 6:10). The Pentateuch itself specifically requires circumcision of the *ger* to eat the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:48-49), which in turn results in “native of the land” status being afforded. The Pentateuch defines a people whose God has delivered them via the Exodus and His judgments on Egypt. After the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E., though, something like circumcision took on a

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<sup>24</sup> “ger,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 249.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> S. McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers,” in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), pp 840-841.

Among his references include: Tobit 1:7-8; *Testament of Levi* 14:4; *Testament of Naphtali* 1:10; *Philo Special Laws* 1.51-53; *On Rewards and Punishments* 61; Josephus *Wars of the Jews* 7.45; b.*Shabbat* 31a.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 844.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 845.

<sup>29</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

significantly nationalistic interest for the Jewish people—and was a bit over-extended at that—something although entirely understandable as many had fought and died for it.<sup>30</sup>

While outsiders had always been allowed into the community of either Ancient Israel or Second Temple Judaism, the fallout of the Maccabean crisis really would have forced the issue of how it was to formally take place, especially as the Jewish people would have been most concerned with maintaining their ethnic cohesion and resisting much of the surrounding Hellenism and Romanism. Quickly, being “circumcised” was synonymous with “being Jewish.” Its significance became much inflated, beyond that of either being the memorial sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:10) or a useful procedure for good health. In McKnight’s estimation, “Circumcision as a conversion ritual becomes confused with how Jews perceived the nation: the act and national identity are not easy to separate.”<sup>31</sup> He makes a reference from Josephus to a Roman general named Metilius caught in battle, “for when he entreated for mercy, and promised that he would turn Jew, and be circumcised, they saved him alive” (*Wars of the Jews* 17.454).<sup>32</sup>

What were the social ramifications of becoming a Jewish proselyte in the Second Temple era? Some of them were quite good, because Yeshua’s word to Nicodemus “unless one is born again” (John 3:3) is appropriated directly from how a proselyte who had turned his back on paganism was thought to be like a newborn baby (b.*Yevamot* 48b)—now something true of the Messiah’s followers. At the same time, it was not always easy for those of the period who wanted to proselytize to do so.

Josephus records a scene of a King Izates, ruler of Adiabene, who was converted to Judaism via the teaching of the Jewish merchant Ananias. Izates had first seen how his mother eagerly embraced Judaism, and then he followed. He stopped short, though, of undergoing circumcision, as if his subjects heard of it, Izates’ life might be in danger. The record indicates that Ananias agreed on how undergoing circumcision would be life-threatening, and how God would forgive him for this oversight (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.38-42).

We should never think that all Jews of the First Century C.E. had a rigid view of circumcision, actually placing circumcision status ahead of belief in God. McKnight concurs, “there were dissenting voices at different times for special reasons.”<sup>33</sup> For a season between the Maccabean crisis and the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah, we should recognize that the making of many Greek and Roman proselytes was a good thing, especially given some of the criticism levied against them by their own people (i.e., Tacitus *The Histories* 5.5; Juvenal *Satires* 14.95-104). Yet at the same time, how much paranoia and xenophobia was present within the

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<sup>30</sup> Consult the author’s article “The Impact of the Maccabees on First Century Judaism,” appearing in the *Messianic Winter Holiday Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

<sup>31</sup> McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 845.

<sup>32</sup> *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 626.

<sup>33</sup> McKnight, “Proselytism and Godfearers,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 845.

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Jewish world, at least in the Land of Israel, given the presence of: the Roman occupation, the Essenes secluded off to themselves readying for the final battle, various Zealot groups and uprisings, and the two major schools of Pharisees? Given how the Maccabean crisis had promoted Hellenistic integration and assimilation, to what degree would Greek and Roman proselytes to the Synagogue be truly welcomed into the Jewish community and not treated with some suspicion? Philo's observation was that it took three generations for proselytes to really become Jews (*On the Virtues* 108), and we are probably all familiar with the classic example of Shammai who refuses to teach a non-Jew the Torah on one foot, versus Hillel who taught him to do no harm to neighbor (b.*Shabbat* 31a).

While not all Jews of the broad First Century had an overly-rigid view of the practice of circumcision, many Jews not only really did have an overly-rigid view of circumcision, but they had a **grossly unbalanced perspective** on circumcision's theological and spiritual significance. Originally, as attested by the *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, circumcision was intended to be "a sign given to Abraham of [Israel's] covenant with God (Gen. 17:10-14)."<sup>34</sup> As Jewish history progressed, and people were undoubtedly influenced by negative external forces like the Maccabean crisis, we see views expressed in ancient Jewish materials that take circumcision *far beyond* the original importance it is given in the Hebrew Tanach. The *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* offers the further summary:

"...The circumcised Jew is...seen as imitating the holy angels, who were created circumcised (Jub. 15:27),<sup>35</sup> and Moses, who was born circumcised (LAB 9:13)....

"The rabbis explain circumcision's importance by describing the foreskin as a disgusting imperfection, the removal of which renders the body perfect (M. Nedarim 3:11)<sup>36</sup>...[C]ircumcision is described as the primary purpose for which God created the world in the first place, the embodiment of the covenant that made creation worthwhile.

"The rabbis attributed to circumcision protective powers...Circumcision saves Jews from the tortures of Gehenna, to which the uncircumcised are subject. Even Moses' considerable merit could not protect him from the dangers he faced prior to circumcision (M. Nedarim 3:11).<sup>37</sup> Failure to observe the covenant of

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<sup>34</sup> "circumcision," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 121.

<sup>35</sup> "Because the nature of all the angels of the presence and all the angels of sanctification was thus from the day of their creation. And in the presence of the angels of the presence and the angels of the sanctification he sanctified Israel so that they might be with him and with his holy angels" (*Jubilees* 15:27; O.S. Wintermute, trans. "Jubilees," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 [New York: Doubleday, 1985], 87).

<sup>36</sup> "Rabbi says, 'Great is circumcision, for, despite all the commandments which Abraham our father carried out, he was called complete and whole only when he had circumcised himself...' (m.*Nedarim* 3:11; Neusner, *Mishnah*, 412).

<sup>37</sup> "R. Joshua b. Qorha says, 'Great is circumcision, for it was not suspended even for a moment for the sake of Moses, the righteous'" (m.*Nedarim* 3:11; *Ibid.*).

circumcision was one of the reasons for the destruction of the Temple (B. Menahot 53b)<sup>38</sup>.<sup>39</sup>

These sorts of ancient views associated with circumcision—as though God somehow made the world for circumcision—are those which would have been understandably opposed by the Apostles. It should also not be surprising why Yeshua the Messiah Himself was not too positive with what the process of making proselytes to Judaism had widely become in the period of His ministry (Matthew 23:15). Circumcision as an overly-inflated national symbol of the First Century Jewish community, which for many was somehow more important than simple belief in the Creator God, is something that we see surely confronted in the Messianic Scriptures.

### The Apostle Paul and Circumcision

In relationship to the debate over circumcision, most Christian theologians are quite eager to quote the writings of the Apostle Paul, which apparently give a uniform, negative evaluation regarding the practice. In the estimation of the *EJ* entry, it cannot be overlooked how, “With the rise of Christianity [circumcision] became the sign of difference between the adherents of the two religions [when contrasted to Judaism]. Paul declared that justification by faith was sufficient for converts to Christianity (Rom. 3:4).”<sup>40</sup> This same sentiment is even voiced by some Hebraic Roots teachers, with one actually saying, “Paul includes circumcision with commands that are no longer to be adhered to.”<sup>41</sup> It is probably safe to say, given the permanent theological importance of circumcision for understanding the Biblical narrative, that some of Paul’s remarks made about circumcision need to be read a bit more carefully. Does the Apostle Paul really have a negative evaluation of circumcision, or are some of his remarks conditioned by complicated ancient circumstances?

All Bible readers have to 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 Paul and Timothy together 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

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<sup>38</sup> “He said to him, ‘You owed it to remember the covenant of circumcision!’” (b.*Menachot* 53b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

<sup>39</sup> “circumcision,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 121.

<sup>40</sup> Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*.

<sup>41</sup> William J. Morford, *The Power New Testament*, third edition (Lexington, SC: Shalom Ministries, 2003), 376.

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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.”

Timothy, being half-Jewish and half-Greek, was likely not circumcised as an infant because his Greek father had prevented it. By this point in time, Timothy’s father had probably died, and it would have been quite natural for Timothy to go through with a circumcision overseen by Paul. Being raised by a Jewish mother and grandmother in the Tanach Scriptures (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15), but being uncircumcised, would have simply raised too many unnecessary side issues when presenting Jewish people with the good news.

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 and reckoned as members of the faith community, 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 and count them among His own. But let us examine **Romans 3:29-31** which gives us a slightly larger picture of what Paul was 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 the nations at large, and that He will save both the circumcised and uncircumcised, Paul goes on and tells them that faith in God and His Messiah does not negate the importance of the Torah. “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31, RSV), the verb *histēmi* (ἵστημι) meaning “**to validate someth. that is in force or in practice, reinforce validity of, uphold, maintain, validate**” (BDAG).<sup>42</sup> If Paul says that Messiah followers are to uphold the authority of God’s Torah, then when one reads the Torah it should be rightly recognized that physical circumcision is included among its commandments. At the very least, this would require physical circumcision to still be a practice worthwhile of studying for key spiritual lessons, and not just to be brushed over as a part of past Biblical history.

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’ [Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:20], 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, obviously speaking to the Jewish Believers in Rome, Paul says that if they follow the Torah then circumcision has value, but if they were to

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<sup>42</sup> BDAG, 482.

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violate or transgress the Torah, then their circumcision becomes as though it were uncircumcision or foreskin. Hence, Jewish people are just as culpable to the powers and influence of sin as the rest of the “uncircumcised” human race. 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 presumably “pagan” Greeks and Romans adhering to the basic 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 in Rome that ultimately circumcision is of the heart, and a Jew’s praise does not come from mortals, but from the Creator 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 others, to be praised. They are not to have a false sense of pride because they knew themselves to be circumcised from the time they were infants. They are, rather, to be secure in looking to God for all of their answers. Here, Paul places 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 totally unimportant, in all respects, for those of the nations? Some say so, based on his words appearing in **1 Corinthians 7:18-20**:

“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 apparently says that if a non-Jewish man is called into the faith and is uncircumcised, then he is to remain uncircumcised, and no changes of any kind are to be anticipated. But this is not the Biblical pattern.

As already stated, the Patriarch Abraham, who was originally given the rite of circumcision, *was actually 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’ [Genesis 15:6]. How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? **Not while**

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**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 or seal<sup>43</sup> of the covenant, Abraham was circumcised. By being circumcised, Abraham confirmed the importance of the covenant that God had made with him. *Abraham was already considered “righteous,” though.* 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 or to be reckoned as one of the Creator’s own.

The instruction Paul gives in 1 Corinthians ch. 7 can be particularly difficult to understand, because it specifically pertains to “the things about which you wrote” (1 Corinthians 7:1a), *meaning* that the Corinthians had sent Paul a piece of correspondence, asking him various questions. These Corinth-specific issues, coupled with the various conditions at work—along with the regular presence of the Greek verb *menō* (μένω), meaning either “remain,” “abide,” or “continue”<sup>44</sup>—complicate one’s reading a great deal. The rendering of *menō* as “remain” can be a bit misleading, for the specific reason that a static-permanence in a particular condition is not intended for *any* Messiah follower. The verb *menō* appears in Yeshua’s word of John 15:7: “If you remain [*menō*] in me and my words remain [*menō*] in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you” (NIV). Nobody can honestly argue that by “abiding” (cf. NASU, RSV) in Yeshua people are not to grow in their relationship with and understanding of Him, and with such growth integrate various changes, both expected and necessary, in condition. Similarly for the Corinthian situation, abiding in the current sphere of one’s life should not dismiss the possibility of future God-directed changes.

Failing to approach **1 Corinthians ch. 7** for a Corinthian-specific situation *first*, in the scope of all of the other problems and issues present for this ancient group of people, can lead to errant conclusions like Paul not highly valuing the estate of marriage, and that he thinks that young men staying unmarried is always best (1 Corinthians 7:1b). Perhaps for someone such as the Apostle Paul, who had a significant ministry call to spread the good news among his fellow Jews and the nations in the Mediterranean, an unmarried condition was to be preferred, as he could dedicate his time exclusively to God (1 Corinthians 7:32-35). Yet, he must also observe that because of the presence of fornication in Corinth, men and women should not only marry—but they should be mutually submitted in body to each other (1 Corinthians 7:2-9).

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<sup>43</sup> Grk. *sphragis* (σφραγίς), “that which confirms or authenticates, attestation, confirmation, certification” (BDAG, 980).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. F. Hauck, “*ménō*,” in *TDNT*, 581.

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The Pauline axiom in play here is “as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And so I direct in all the [assemblies]” (1 Corinthians 7:17). This is further detailed as, each “must remain in that condition in which he was called” (1 Corinthians 7:20), with *klēsis* (κλήσις), “condition” (NASU), actually meaning “calling” (KJV/NKJV). One way to approach this is that each person has been called to a particular spiritual vocation, which they are to not leave. If held rigidly, then this means that no changes to such a vocation are to be allowed—no “growth” in other words (or even “continuance”). Another, and we should think more preferred way to view 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, is that the *klēsis* or “calling” pertains to a person being called into salvation by the Lord.<sup>45</sup> The individual Corinthians are not to allow themselves to be influenced by any outside or inside persons or factions to change the fact that they each had different personal conditions when they received salvation. Being within the sphere of the Messiah Yeshua, “remaining” or “continuing” in Him (*menō*), anything that might actually change is entirely incumbent upon their maturation in Him, as “continuance” in their calling to salvation moved forward.

The key example of this is circumcision status. Paul asks, “Was any man called when he was already circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised” (1 **Corinthians 7:18a**). This actually happened to many Jews during the Maccabean crisis via the process of epispasm, whereby steps were taken to regrow the skin that had been removed from the male sexual organ (1 Maccabees 1:15). It would be unthinkable for Paul for any male Jewish Believer to remove the mark of circumcision he had received from time of birth! Paul further says, “Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised” (1 **Corinthians 7:18b**). Circumcision or non-circumcision status is not to be a pre-condition of one’s calling into Messiah faith, and none of the non-Jewish Corinthians should be pressured to being physically circumcised and/or going through ritual proselyte conversion.

What is intriguing here is that Paul follows his statement with, “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but *what matters* is the keeping of the commandments of God” (1 Corinthians 7:19). Obviously as far as salvation is concerned, circumcision status does not matter. But when Paul says “obeying the commandments of God is everything” (NRSV), what does this mean? All of God’s commandments *except* those of circumcision? It all comes down to how 1 Corinthians 7:20 is viewed with “Everyone should continue [*menō*] in the state [of faith] in which he heard the call of God” (Phillips New Testament). Does abiding or continuing in God imply any kind of furtherance (cf. Ephesians 4:1)?

The First Century Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds did not know of the medical practice of circumcision as we know today,<sup>46</sup> as circumcision was widely

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<sup>45</sup> F.F. Bruce, *New Century Bible: 1 and 2 Corinthians* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 71 considers the “calling” or *klēsis* to be “the divine call from darkness to light,” and argues against *klēsis* relating to one’s “vocation”, with reference to one’s employment or way of life understood as the subject of divine ordination.”

<sup>46</sup> On 10 January, 2010, I heard a Jewish medical doctor, Isadore Rosenfeld on FoxNews Sunday, encourage couples expecting a male child to seriously consider medical circumcision, not worrying about

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regarded as an ethnic mark of the Jewish people. A man circumcised to Greeks and Romans was guilty of defacing the body, *and* for many Jews being circumcised was the quintessence of being elected of God. Given this reality, I think it quite unlikely that many non-Jewish male Believers were ever physically circumcised as a simple act of obedience to God, because they would have had to do it most discretely. Yet for today's Messianic community, non-Jewish male Believers who are uncircumcised can be physically circumcised as a simple matter of obedience and progression in holiness, because the social and religious pressures against it from the First Century are largely not there any more. (But, such circumcision does **not** at all merit a male eternal salvation!)

The fact that the condition in which one was found, when being called into Messiah faith, can change, is realized in how those who are slaves are to take the opportunity to be freed should it present itself (1 Corinthians 7:21-23). *Continuing* with God, means that *He directs* the changes to one's original status (1 Corinthians 7:24). He is the One who tells a physically uncircumcised man to go get physically circumcised as he progresses in holiness—because His commandments are important to be heeded and followed.<sup>47</sup>

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 male non-Jewish Believer underwent physical circumcision, that he is no longer “saved”? Some would say so. However, Paul's letter to the Galatians was written by him to largely refute the idea that circumcision, i.e., conversion to Judaism, would bring eternal salvation, and to speak against the false doctrines of the Judaizers/Influencers.

In his **Epistle to the Galatians**, Paul was writing those who were being errantly told that circumcision preceded faith in Yeshua; he was not speaking in blanket terms against circumcision as a practice for all time. The Judaizers/Influencers had less than honorable motives, as Paul attests, “Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised, simply so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Messiah” (Galatians 6:12). Paul's teaching in Galatians makes it abundantly clear that justification for all people occurs on the basis of trust in what the Messiah has accomplished (Galatians 2:16; 3:8-9, 11, 22-24, 26). The word of **Galatians 5:6** is, “For in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love.” The Judaizers/Influencers in Galatia had quantitatively put the cart before the horse in requiring the new, non-Jewish Believers to be circumcised as proselytes to Judaism. They errantly placed their various “works of law,” man-made sectarian rules and requirements (4QMMT; Galatians 2:16; 3:2, 5,

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the religious implications. The relevant video clip, “New Reasons to Circumcise Your Child” can be downloaded at <<http://video.foxnews.com>>.

<sup>47</sup> This section includes embedded quotations from the author's article “The Message of 1 Corinthians” (appearing in *1 Corinthians for the Practical Messianic*).

For a more detailed review, consult the FAQ, “1 Corinthians 7:17-24.”

## Is Circumcision for Everyone?

10)<sup>48</sup>—which involved ritual proselyte circumcision—to be the basis of inclusion into God’s people, and not what Yeshua had accomplished via His sacrifice for sinful humanity.<sup>49</sup>

The Apostle Paul actually said of the Judaizers/Influencers, “I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves” (Galatians 5:12), meaning that he wished that they would just go ahead and “emasculate themselves” (NIV), or cut off their sexual organs. Leviticus 21:17-21 notably 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 presumable “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.”

The **Epistle to the Galatians** can definitely be read as a letter opposing ritual proselyte circumcision of non-Jewish Believers (Galatians 5:2, 4),<sup>50</sup> desiring to become “righteous,” and everything else that such a process might encompass. The Epistle to the Galatians cannot be read as a letter opposing physical circumcision as a simple matter of obedience to God—*used not as a means for justification*—and especially as a valid medical procedure.<sup>51</sup>

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 this admonition to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul warns against those whose confidence in God is in their physical circumcision, and not in the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This might be an allusion to those who believed that true devotion to God was contingent on a man removing his foreskin. AMG notably defines *katatomē* (κατατομή) as “A cutting away, mangling...*peritomē* [περιτομή], 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

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<sup>48</sup> Consult the author’s article “What Are ‘Works of the Law’?”, appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

<sup>49</sup> Consult the author’s article “The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah,” appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*.

<sup>50</sup> Consult the exegetical analysis available in the FAQ, “Galatians 5:2-3.”

<sup>51</sup> For a further evaluation, consult the author’s commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

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value.”<sup>52</sup> Paul’s admonition here places circumcision in its proper place: physical circumcision is meaningless without an appropriate heart attitude, which is oriented toward the will of God, His Instruction, and the promises associated with circumcision.

The Apostle Paul attests in **Galatians 2:7**, per his relief mission in Acts 11:27-30, “I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter *had been* to the circumcised.” Paul had been given the special ministry calling by God to go and declare the good news of Yeshua the nations, those who were not circumcised from the time of birth, unlike Peter who had been given the ministry calling to go and minister to his fellow Jews. Is this an indication that the message that Paul declared to the nations was different than what Peter declared to Jews? While some think so, it is far better for us to recognize that Paul, having been born in Tarsus, trained by Gamaliel, and possessing Roman citizenship—had far more qualifications and special abilities to declare the good news to the nations than Peter did. Paul was specialized to go to the nations, and Peter was specialized to go to his fellow Jews, even though both of them declared the good news to all people. The testimony of the Book of Acts and the Pauline letters certainly indicates that Paul did not hesitate to declare the good news to his fellow Jews, and the recipients of the Epistle of 1 Peter also indicates that Peter had conducted ministry work among non-Jews (1 Peter 1:1, 14; 4:3).<sup>53</sup>

Circumcision of the flesh is not necessary for anyone to receive eternal salvation, and/or inclusion among God’s elect. This is why in **Galatians 5:11** Paul asks, “if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished.” In his experience as a Pharisee prior to coming to know Yeshua, Paul would have proclaimed that circumcision was necessary for non-Jewish people to be a part of the righteous redeemed. *This is precisely what he most often confronts and refutes in his letters.* Too often, however, readers have taken a statement here or a statement there from Paul’s letters, and concluded that he is totally against circumcision, when he really is not.

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 Jewish Believers not to circumcise their children. This accusation was false, and recognized as such by the Jerusalem assembly leaders. Paul did not preach against Jewish Believers circumcising their children in his writings.

As it concerned the early non-Jewish Believers of the First Century, there was really no medical option of them being circumcised like there is today in the Twenty-First Century. Circumcision for many in the Jewish community had taken

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<sup>52</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), pp 846-847.

<sup>53</sup> Consult the entry for the Epistle of 1 Peter in the author’s workbook *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*.

on an overly-inflated national significance that it Biblically does not have. Circumcision for the non-Jewish Believers would have been dependent on their continuing in the calling of faith (1 Corinthians 7:20, Grk.). It is unlikely that given the social circumstances of the First Century, that many male Greek and Roman Believers would have been able to choose for a discrete operation to remove their foreskin. Those early male Believers who served in positions in the Roman Empire, for example, might have been executed for treason for going through circumcision.

Later religious history does show that culturally speaking, particularly among those of the Eastern Christian Churches, that circumcision of males has been practiced without any stigma of non-Jews thinking that physical circumcision will merit eternal salvation. The same has been relatively true of many non-Jewish Christian men circumcised in the West over the past two centuries.

### Circumcision of the Heart

One of the important admonitions of the Holy Scriptures is that God's people are to circumcise their hearts. Paul alludes to this in Romans 2:29, when he addresses the 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, given to all Believers, 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." Colossians 2:11 further says, "in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah."

All too often, passages like these are quoted by modern 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. We should all fully 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**. Yet, circumcision of the heart was actually 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 exclusively, because it is actually 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>54</sup> God's people are commanded to circumcise their hearts so that they might have proper

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<sup>54</sup> Hertz, *Pentateuch & Haftorahs*, 789.

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communication and communion with Him. Part of this obviously comes when Believers receive Messiah Yeshua into their lives and are born again. The Holy Spirit enables each of us to have restored communion with the Father. But at the same time, in order to not have any barriers between God and us, we need to be in obedience to Him. As Believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit, the Lord will convict us regarding what is right and what is wrong. If we find ourselves truly growing in our faith, we will be conformed to the likeness of Yeshua—and we cannot deny that He was both Torah observant *and* physically circumcised.

**Circumcision of the heart should and must be absolutely 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 physical circumcision. Again, it places physical circumcision in its proper perspective. Heart circumcision takes precedence over physical circumcision of the male sexual organ. And to be reminded, God will justify both the circumcised *and* uncircumcised via faith (Romans 3:30). Faith in God is far more important than physical circumcision status.

### Circumcision in the Post-Resurrection Era

Arguing for the validity or relevance of circumcision as a legitimate practice to be considered and adhered to by today's male Believers, rooted in the Holy Scriptures, *does not* necessarily imply that circumcision has *the exact same* significance for God's people today, as it once did in previous generations. The degree by which Yeshua's offering up as our sacrifice for sins, has changed some of the orientation of physical circumcision of the male member—as He has inaugurated the era of New Covenant (Luke 22:20; cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—is likely to be a hotly debated issue among groups of today's Messianic Believers.<sup>55</sup> Given Yeshua's position on the Torah associated with the good works of His followers (Matthew 5:16-19), circumcision as a matter of obedience to God's Law should be encouraged. Circumcision as a matter of inclusion among God's people set in front and ahead of faith in Him, and as a salvation issue, is something that **should be rightly opposed.**

While circumcision of males is often approached from the perspective of it serving as the memorial sign of God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-11), which is certainly a good and positive reason for being circumcised—it cannot be overlooked that there are a few negative dynamics of circumcision that need to really be considered. While physical circumcision of the male member can be a sign to men that they are somehow connected to the Patriarch, John Goldingay is right to remind us in his *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel*, how circumcision “does draw attention to the need for their sexual activity to be disciplined and dedicated to God....Men [often] fail in this realm of their lives.” We may find, in various cases, that “The covenant sign becomes the covenant indictment and the covenant

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<sup>55</sup> Consult the article “The Significance of the Messiah Event” by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

shame upon men. It is a mark of failure as much as a mark of status.”<sup>56</sup> When a circumcised man looks at his penis, and that the foreskin has been removed—does he look at it as a connection to the Patriarch Abraham and how male sojourners in Ancient Israel were to join in keeping the Passover? Or, does he look at it as a physical reminder that a great deal of sinful activity has occurred in human history—including gross disrespect toward women—with the male sexual organ? It is surely up to the individual man to determine whether the *ot b'rit* (אוֹת בְּרִית), is a sign of honor or dishonor upon him.

Physical circumcision of males does not bear the same importance for the post-resurrection era, as it did for the pre-resurrection era. In Colossians 3:11, the Apostle Paul expresses the magnanimous power of the Messiah, in transforming lives, in the word, “there is no *distinction between* Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Messiah is all, and in all.” The ability for the Lord to change people is completely blind when it comes to whether a male is circumcised or uncircumcised. And, unlike a previous time, when one’s connection to the Abrahamic promise, was largely outwardly known by physical circumcision—it is unavoidable that the Abrahamic promise has come to its consummation via the atoning work of Yeshua (Galatians 3:14). Because of what Yeshua has accomplished via His sacrifice for all of sinful humanity, we see,

“For all of you who were baptized into Messiah have clothed yourselves with Messiah. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua” (Galatians 3:27-28).

The word of Galatians 3:28 directly subverted an ancient Jewish prayer, where Jewish males thanked God that they were not created a pagan, a slave, or a woman (t.*Berachot* 6:18).<sup>57</sup> Quite frequently among many Believers, Galatians 3:28 is appealed to for representing a new status for all human beings who recognize Yeshua (Jesus) as Savior. With this in mind, a major sign of identification as the Lord’s own is not so much physical circumcision, but is instead water immersion. As the steadfast word of Romans 6:5-6 tells us, “Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Messiah was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection.” The process of being immersed in water is intended to quantitatively identify a person with the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah—who has brought the original promise of Abraham (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8) to its climax.

Physical circumcision of males is definitely a secondary sign, when now compared to the water immersion of all people who acknowledge Yeshua as Lord. Richard B. Hays makes a few worthwhile observations on Galatians 3:27-28, which need to be considered:

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<sup>56</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel’s Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp 202, 203.

<sup>57</sup> This is more fully evaluated in the author’s exegetical paper on Galatians 3:28, “Biblical Equality and Today’s Messianic Movement,” appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*.

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“This does not mean that those who are in Christ cease to be men or women, any more than the male members of the community cease to be circumcised or uncircumcised. Rather it means that these distinctions are no longer the determinative identity markers, no longer a ground for status or exclusion. It should be noted that circumcision as an identity marker is applicable only to males; therefore, a community that singles out circumcision as its key sign of covenant membership will inevitably privilege male identity as normative. There is no evidence in Paul’s letters that he ever consciously considered this point, but the ritual of baptism, identity for both sexes, is distinctly appropriate as the sign of inclusion within a community in which the old distinction between ‘male and female’ has ceased to separate those who are in Christ.”<sup>58</sup>

It is fair to say that given the egalitarianism present in the era of the New Covenant, that circumcision of the male sexual organ is not as important as it once was. Water immersion, as a ritual that identifies one with the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah, is notably something that males *and* females can equally practice. While there is no indication in the Apostolic Scriptures that circumcision for males has been quantitatively nullified, circumcision should definitely serve as a sign for males that they *beware of how they use their sexual organ*. If males believe themselves to be connected to the Abrahamic promise of all to be blessed, how do they make sure that they are respecting the females who are also recipients of the promise?

It would also be fair to say that in the post-resurrection era, when water immersion or baptism has more importance for the people of God than circumcision, that circumcision is still a memorial sign of the Abrahamic covenant, and a most worthwhile medical procedure for hygiene. *Circumcision should be practiced by God’s people*. Circumcision, unlike the bulk of capital penalties of the Torah (cf. Colossians 2:14), has not been nullified by Yeshua’s sacrificial work. Yet circumcision of males, in a faith community where males and females are equals, can also definitively serve as a physical sign of some of the male’s limitations with how he approaches his sexuality, and how a great deal of devaluing females has occurred in human history. In the post-resurrection era, physical circumcision should serve as a sign of how all males should *actively control their sexual behavior and attitudes*.

**The issue of circumcision is especially touchy during the Passover season for Messianics**, as the Torah clearly specifies that “no uncircumcised person may eat of it” (Exodus 12:48). Within the Messianic community, there are some groups that do not let uncircumcised males attend their Passover *seders*. Is this right or is it wrong? We do need to keep in mind the fact that a Messianic Passover *seder* conducted today is often just a memorial of the Passover, and there are many elements that are not observed because there is no Temple to go to where the sacrificial lamb can be offered. Because today’s Messianics largely find themselves

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<sup>58</sup> Richard B. Hays, “The Letter to the Galatians,” in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 273.

in the Diaspora, there are things that the Torah originally specified that cannot be followed. And in our Passover memorials, we have to not only weigh in the difference of venue, but also the reality of the post-resurrection era in which we live.

We do not believe that it is necessary for males to be circumcised to attend a Messianic Passover memorial. However, it should be encouraged that participation of individuals within the order of service or events at a Messianic *seder* could be limited to only those males who are physically circumcised. (And, by extension, it would be appropriate to require any males within the leadership structure of a Messianic congregation to be physically circumcised.)

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

Some are unaware of this, but opposition to circumcision goes beyond various theological arguments that may be presented by many Christians. There is a concentrated, non-religious anti-circumcision movement in the United States and other countries where circumcision is a standard 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, partially 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>59</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 broad First Century for Jews wanting to be Hellenized (cf. 1 Maccabees 1:15; 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-

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<sup>59</sup> The Australian Foreskin Restoration and Anti-Circumcision Site (2004). [Main Page]. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://www.foreskin.net/>>.

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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>60</sup>

Dervin's sentiments are the feelings of many liberals in society who believe that circumcision is an outdated, unnecessary, and archaic religious practice, to which people should be opposed. Dervin, as a Jew, believes that having his foreskin and "whole sexual experience" is his birthright, as opposed to recognizing himself as a definite descendant of Abraham who should be faithful to observe Biblical instructions. 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 that there is little or no blood. And, most non-religious circumcisions today occur in hospital settings, so to say that it is a "painful" procedure with no medical personnel on hand, is a bit overblown.

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 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>61</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, a wide number of today's Christians would probably agree with this

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<sup>60</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/>>.

<sup>61</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/>>.

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 is ultimately a religious one.* Bible Believers oppose abortion on demand 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, according to 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.

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. (Young boys who eat copious amounts of fast food or junk food, and are overly obese as a result, could just as much blame McDonald's hamburgers or Hershey's chocolate for their problem.) *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>62</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 [World War II], 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" (*It's Your Body: A Woman's Guide to Gynecology*).<sup>63</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

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<sup>62</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>63</sup> Niels Lauersen and Steven Whitney, *It's Your Body: A Woman's Guide to Gynecology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1977), pp 383-384.

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joined the opposition....the procedure is no longer covered by Medicaid in Florida except in limited cases.”<sup>64</sup> While the State of Florida (2003) justifies this Medicaid modification via the guise of cutting unnecessary costs from the state budget, ultimately this change could very well be motivated by the anti-circumcision movement.

These are just a few examples of the influence that the anti-circumcision movement has had. 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.

One of the things that many contemporary 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 asserts, “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 term 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>65</sup> The antimessiah, while surely opposed to God’s Torah, is also going to set up his own set of civil laws that oppose the keeping of His Instruction. 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 Epiphanes 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 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 be given animation by the false prophet that it may speak:

“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

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<sup>64</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/>>.

<sup>65</sup> Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 251.

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Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10). 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 (Revelation 12:17; 14:12), then it is quite possible that the antimessiah will likely be one who is uncircumcised.

### Is circumcision for everyone?

A great deal of Christianity has decided to largely ignore circumcision as an “Old Testament rite” entirely unimportant for Believers today. In terms of various parts of the Messianic world, circumcision is met with degrees of controversy, with many not quite knowing how to approach the issue.

Circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:11). The Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all circumcised. Yeshua the Messiah was circumcised (Luke 2:21). The Apostle Paul was circumcised (Philippians 3:5). If we intend to follow the example of these men, then none of us should ever look down with negativity at the practice of circumcision, and adult males who are uncircumcised can certainly be encouraged to be physically circumcised as a matter of simple obedience and good hygiene. Yet, being circumcised as a male adult must always be tempered with knowing that Abraham was considered righteous while uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-10; cf. Genesis 15:6), later being circumcised (at the age of ninety-nine) as he advanced in faith (Romans 4:11; cf. Genesis 17:1, 10-11).

**None of us should ever consider circumcision to be a salvation issue**, as the power of the gospel is blind in saving males who are either circumcised or uncircumcised (Colossians 3:11). We should encourage circumcision for the *appropriate* reasons (concurrent with the example of Abraham). The reason circumcision was such a controversial issue in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) is that the non-Jewish males coming to faith were not circumcised as infants as the Scriptures prescribe, and “circumcision” for the First Century Jewish community had become an overly-inflated nationalistic symbol. Had the non-Jewish males coming to faith been circumcised as infants, even as some kind of ancient medical procedure, then the controversy may not have really arisen. The foolish Galatians believed that circumcision of the flesh would assure them a place among the righteous, to which the Apostle Paul said, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, **Messiah will be of no benefit to you**” (Galatians 5:2; cf. Acts 15:1). To these people he said that if you think circumcision will save you, do not even bother receiving it.

Circumcision has become a common medical practice for non-Jews in North America and in other parts of the world since the late 1800s. We do not believe this is by coincidence. As the Father is in the process of restoring all of His people via the growth and expansion of the Messianic movement, it is probably not by happenstance that many non-Jewish males in the United States and elsewhere have

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been circumcised as a simple medical practice not looked at as strange or taboo. Yet, in recent days in Western Europe, legislation has been proposed that would make infant circumcision illegal via the guise of it being “genital mutilation.” Sadly, many Christians are in support of making infant circumcision illegal.

We believe that Messianic families—either Jewish or non-Jewish—should be encouraged to circumcise their infant males. Although the practice of circumcision is not a salvation issue, it does have medical and health benefits, and it can be employed as a simple memorial of the Abrahamic covenant. **Circumcision for all Believers—male and female—should be of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:6; 30:6; Romans 2:29) more than anything else**, but this in no way nullifies the benefits of a male being circumcised in the flesh. Being circumcised as an adult male should be an issue of maturity, as Believers are called to “continue” (Grk. *menō*, μένω) in the faith (1 Corinthians 7:20). It may not be necessary to be physically circumcised in order to be saved, but going through the procedure as a simple act of obedience (not as some kind of proselyte procedure) should not be discouraged. This kind of obedience would be no different than a urologist advising a man that circumcision would be useful for his penile health. My own great-grandfather, Bishop Marvin A. Franklin, and my two great-uncles Marvin and Robert, went through such a circumcision as grown adults in the early Twentieth Century.

When Yeshua returns and the Temple is reestablished in Jerusalem, we are notably told that only the circumcised in both heart *and* flesh will be permitted to enter into it. Physical circumcision will be enforced 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 non-Jewish Believers, including myself, were circumcised as male infants because circumcision has become a standard medical practice in many parts of the world. My parents were not born again Believers at the time, only attending church a few times a year, but they had me circumcised anyway. My late father, Kimball McKee, was circumcised, even though my grandfather G.K. McKee was not circumcised. God, in His omniscience, had many of us circumcised without us realizing any kind of Biblical importance to it. Even many Messianic Jews can testify to being circumcised as infants on the eighth day, even though they were raised in entirely secular homes which sporadically attended synagogue services.

Abraham was called into covenant with God while he was uncircumcised. Many are called into Messiah faith while they are physically uncircumcised. At a later point, Abraham was circumcised. With this in mind, at a later point when

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uncircumcised men in our midst have been given time to grow in their faith, **should they too be circumcised?** While it should be made abundantly clear that physical circumcision *does not bring salvation*, if such male Messianic Believers recognize that circumcision of their male sexual organ is a part of obedience to God, then such physical circumcision should not be opposed. And, it may be quite possible that when uncircumcised men in the Messianic movement are ready for the procedure, that they have been told they need it by their doctor for good penile health.

*Is circumcision for everyone?* Circumcision is for those men 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 going through with it will secure their salvation, nor is it intended for becoming a proselyte. Knowing when a man is ready to undergo proper circumcision, should be a personal choice based on his spiritual maturity and convictions from Scripture. A significant part of such spiritual maturity should not only be his steadfast reliance on the sacrifice of Yeshua for salvation—but also that he will remember to show great respect and honor to females, for whom great dishonor has often been shown with the male sexual organ in both Biblical and world history.