

TORAH
—IN THE—
BALANCE

VOLUMES I & II

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Torah In the Balance, Volumes I&II

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Abbreviations and Special Terms

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as *TWOT* for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament
Ara: Aramaic
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)
CJB: Complete Jewish Bible (1998)
CJSB: Complete Jewish Study Bible (2016)
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*
ESV: English Standard Version (2001)
Ger: German
GNT: Greek New Testament
Grk: Greek
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)
HCSB: Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004)
Heb: Hebrew
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)
JBK: New Jerusalem Bible-Koren (2000)
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
KJV: King James Version
Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)
LXX: Septuagint
m. Mishnah
MT: Masoretic Text
NASB: New American Standard Bible (1977)
NASU: New American Standard Update (1995)
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*
NEB: New English Bible (1970)
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*
NETS: New English Translation of the Septuagint (2007)
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*
NIV: New International Version (1984)
NJB: New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic (1985)
NJPB: Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures (1999)
NKJV: New King James Version (1982)
NRSV: New Revised Standard Version (1989)
NLT: New Living Translation (1996)
NT: New Testament
OT: Old Testament
REB: Revised English Bible (1989)
RSV: Revised Standard Version (1952)
t. Tosefta
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*

TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*
TLV: Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life
Version (2014)
TNIV: Today's New International Version (2005)
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*
UBSHNT: United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew
New Testament revised edition

v(s). verse(s)
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old
and New Testament Words*
Vul: Latin Vulgate
YLT: Young's Literal Translation (1862/1898)
WMB: World Messianic Bible (2020)

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Is Circumcision for Everyone?

When today's Christians think about the physical circumcision of males, they often do not know what to do to.¹ 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 Spring 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 per the Biblical injunction (Leviticus 12:2-3), 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, various medical benefits of circumcision are often recognized as being useful for males, as the practice of circumcision is witnessed not only in the Scriptures, but was present in societies pre-dating Ancient Israel. There can be controversy in some quarters, though. Some believe that the relationship of God's people to circumcision has not changed at all with the

¹ This chapter was updated and fine-tuned in March 2023, with a number of clarifications needing to be made after some negative feedback.

Also recommended is reviewing the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, "Circumcision" (2022), and the thoughts offered in the March 2023 issue of Outreach Israel News, "A Spiritual and Theological Refitting."

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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 avoid the scores of abuses and misunderstandings which have been manifested in Biblical and religious history surrounding circumcision? Hopefully in our discussion, we can have a better handle as Messianic people with this controversial topic.

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."²

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.'"³

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 was originally prescribed of ethnic male Israelites 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'" (Leviticus 12:2-3, NASU).

In Judaism, the rite of circumcision is extremely important. It is performed by a specially trained Rabbi known as a *mohel*. A *mohel* today uses a very sharp metal knife to slice the foreskin from off of an eight-day old male infant. No kind of anesthesia is

² Allan R. Bevere, "Circumcision," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 256.

³ Alan Greene (2003). *Circumcision*, 19 February, 2003. *Medline Plus Medical Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 11 April, 2004, from <<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/>>.

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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 Jewish male child's circumcision he is given his name.⁴ The Gospel of Luke reflects this tradition, recording how John the Immerser/Baptist was given his name at his circumcision:

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

While circumcision is most often associated as being a Jewish practice today, 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).⁵

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 discourage 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

⁴ For a further summary of the significance of circumcision in Jewish tradition, consult Ronald L. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004), 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).

⁵ T. Lewis and C.E. Armerding, “Circumcision,” in Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 1:700.

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washing 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 which 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*, a verb meaning “to **circumcise**” or “to **circumcise oneself, be circumcised**” (*HALOT*).⁶ A closely related term to this is *orlah*, “**foreskin** of a man's penis” (*HALOT*).⁷ *Arel* describes the state of being “provided with a foreskin, **uncircumcised**” (*HALOT*).⁸ In the Hebrew Bible, being called “uncircumcised” was 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, NASU). The Prophet Jeremiah proclaimed, regarding the judgment of the Lord, that “all the nations are uncircumcised” (Jeremiah 9:26, NASU).

There are three words used in the Apostolic Scriptures to describe these concepts. *Peritemnō* means “to cut around” (*Thayer*),⁹ specifically, “to cut off the foreskin of the male genital organ, **circumcise**” (*BDAG*).¹⁰ In the Greek Septuagint, *peritemnō* is often used to translate the Hebrew *mul*. *Akrobustia* in most Bibles is rendered as “uncircumcision,” but it is “lit. **prepuce, foreskin**” (*BDAG*).¹¹ *Thayer* says that *akrobustia* “in the Sept. [is] the equiv. of [*orlah*] the *prepuce*, the skin covering the glans penis.”¹² Much of the time in the Greek Scriptures, “the uncircumcised” is more specifically, the more anatomical, “foreskinned.” The last term used is *aperitmētos*, only used once in Acts 7:51. *BDAG* indicates that it is “lit. **uncircumcised**,”¹³ 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

⁶ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds., *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 1:555-556.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:886.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 506.

¹⁰ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 806.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² *Thayer*, 24.

¹³ *BDAG*, 102.

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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 witnessed, 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 mainly being considered.¹⁴ 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 some appropriate ancient context.

Abraham and Circumcision

In the Tanach, readers encounter how circumcision was originally established as the sign of the covenant made between God 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, NASU).

The Hebrew word for “sign” here is *ot*, which is defined by *BDB* as “*sign, pledge, token,*” “*signs, omens,*” “*sign, symbol,*” “*signs, miracles,*” and “*signs, memorials.*”¹⁵ Circumcision was given to Abraham as a *b’rit olam* or “everlasting covenant,” perhaps to be viewed even as an “eternal covenant” (Keter Crown Bible). At the very least, this signifies that circumcision should continue to bear some level of notice throughout the revealing of God’s plan in history.

Physical circumcision was given by God to Abraham as a sign of the covenant 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*; 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).

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 16.

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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, or their association with Abraham.

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 brought into covenant with God while he was in uncircumcision:

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

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 more fully understood and could comprehend the dimensions of 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 physical descendants of Abraham, direct recipients of God’s promise, were then required to be circumcised on the eighth day. Circumcision was to serve as the sign to them that God was fulfilling His promises.

Circumcision in Ancient Israel

The Torah specifically instructed how native born Israelite males were to be circumcised on the eighth day after birth:

“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, NASU).

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

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contemptuous references to the Philistines as uncircumcised.”¹⁶ 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*, an outside sojourner who entered into the community of Israel, was witnessed. A *ger* was required to be circumcised if he were to keep the Passover. If he were circumcised, then not only could he eat the Passover, but 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, NASU).

This verse, and related passages,¹⁷ has a wide degree of significance for many people you will encounter in today’s Messianic movement, but it is frequently taken out of context. The summarizing statement about *torah achat* or “one law,” directly concerns how there were not two separate standards by which people were reckoned as full members of the community of Ancient Israel; physical circumcision reckoned 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 applied.

Anyone not native born of Israel, but who would be sojourning in the Promised Land, would have been in a rather odd predicament when it came time in the course of the year for the population 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 One 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 was not a people who were to be defined by “circumcision,” though. It was actually the commemoration of the Passover and remembrance of the Exodus which were to define Israel and God’s salvation activity on Israel’s behalf. Full participation in the Passover required circumcision, and then resulted in “native of the land” status being granted to the

¹⁶ Leonard V. Snowman, “Circumcision,” in Cecil Roth and Geoffrey Wigoder, eds., *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972), 5:568.

¹⁷ 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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sojourner. *Passover was actually to be the central focus of membership in Israel*, of which being circumcised had a part.

Why were the males in Ancient Israel to make sure they were circumcised before eating of the Passover? Leaving Egypt it is stated, “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, NASU), an affirmation of how 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 Passover, commemorating their freedom from oppression, would allow them to remember how He had kept His word to Abraham (cf. Genesis 17:10).

Circumcision Taken Seriously

In Orthodox Judaism today, circumcision is considered so important that it witnessed, “An adult who intentionally remains uncircumcised suffers [*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*).¹⁸ 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* 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 them 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 (1 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*).¹⁹

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

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

¹⁹ Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*, 5:567.

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“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, NASU).

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

“[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 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, NASU).

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 Seleucids 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, RSV). It is witnessed 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, RSV).

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, RSV). 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, RSV). *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).”²⁰

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” (NASU). He specifically directed Jewish Believers not to be “uncircumcised,” perhaps meaning “drawn over,” a more accurate meaning of the Greek verb *epispaō*, “**to pull the**

²⁰ Ibid.

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foreskin over the end of the penis, *pull over the foreskin*" (BDAG).²¹ Epispasm was an ancient procedure many male Jews wanting to conform to Greek standards went through, to restore and regrow their foreskin. This would allow them to be socially mobile in the pagan world, and would doubtlessly result in apostasy from the One God of Israel.

The mistake which was made by both those during the time of Jezebel, and later during the time of the Maccabees, was 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 element of their Biblical heritage.

Yeshua and Circumcision

Yeshua of Nazareth, as the Messiah of Israel, was circumcised as an eight-day old infant. This 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, NASU).

Luke, a First Century medical doctor (cf. Colossians 4:14), plainly mentioned how 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" (Exodus 13:2, NASU).

Yeshua Himself did not say much about physical circumcision in the Gospels. While it is recorded that He was circumcised, the only instance where Yeshua talked about circumcision is seen in John 7:22-24, where He was accused of breaking the Sabbath by healing a person. Yeshua responded to this criticism by saying that it was not prohibited for circumcision to be observed on the Sabbath. Circumcision was an acceptable practice for *Shabbat*, just as was 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" (John 7:22-24, NASU).

²¹ BDAG, 380; "remove" (REB).

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Jewish commentators recognize the fact that Yeshua was circumcised on the eighth day as the Torah prescribed, and even that Yeshua did not violate or “abolish” the Law. Alfred J. Kolatch summarizes 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.”²²

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.”²³

But was Paul’s attitude of circumcision truly one of stark opposition, as many Bible readers, and indeed various Christian theologians, often conclude? 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. Much of Paul’s opposition to the circumcision of new Greek and Roman Believers was involved with how many Jewish Believers many made circumcision, more specifically formal proselyte conversion to Judaism, as being the only true means of inclusion among the company of redeemed (i.e., Acts 15:1, 5). 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 circumcision status. Instead, Paul stressed consistently throughout his letters that faith status, in the Messiah of Israel and what He had accomplished via His sacrifice for sinful humanity, was what reckoned a person among the company of redeemed.

Becoming a Jewish Proselyte

Before reviewing some of the Pauline passages where circumcision is discussed, it is important to be specifically aware how some of Paul’s references to “circumcision” are best thought of as a shorthand for, “the ritual of a Jewish proselyte.” In Galatians

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

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

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5:3, for example, the Apostle wrote, “I testify again to every man who receives circumcision...” (NASU), but *panti anthrōpō* 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.²⁴ The emphasis seen was not so much on the medical procedure of circumcision, but instead ancient Greek and Roman 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 of how 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 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.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶ The references which 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.²⁷ 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.”²⁸ His thought is, “all Jews would have expected repentance, obedience and social integration into the Jewish community if one wanted to become a proselyte,”²⁹ but the degrees of how fast or slow this took place were doubtlessly 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).³⁰

²⁴ “every circumcised human” (The Second Testament).

²⁵ “ger,” in Jacob Neusner and William Scott Green, eds., *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), 249.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ Ibid., 844.

²⁹ Ibid., 845.

³⁰ *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

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It is very true that each one of these elements is seen in the Torah, so it was not unreasonable for various 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 and the time afterward.

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 required circumcision of the *ger* to eat the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:48-49), which in turn resulted in "native of the land" status being afforded. The Pentateuch defined a people whose God had 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 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.³¹

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" became widely synonymous with "being Jewish." Its significance became much inflated, beyond that of being the memorial sign of the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 17:10). 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."³² 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).³³

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, NASU) 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.

³¹ Consult the author's article "The Impact of the Maccabees on First Century Judaism" (appearing in the *Messianic Winter Holiday Helper*).

³² McKnight, "Proselytism and Godfearers," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 845.

³³ Flavius Josephus: *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 626.

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Josephus recorded 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, for a moment, of undergoing circumcision, as if his subjects heard of it, Izates' life might have been 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).³⁴

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."³⁵ For a season between the Maccabean crisis and the arrival of Yeshua the Messiah, it should be recognized 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 were present within the 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 refused 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, various 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)."³⁶ As Jewish history progressed, and people were undoubtedly influenced by negative external forces like the Maccabean crisis, views were expressed in ancient Jewish materials which took circumcision *far beyond* the original importance it was 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),³⁷ and Moses, who was born circumcised (LAB 9:13)....

³⁴ It is seen in the further record of Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.43-48) that Izates went through with the rite.

³⁵ McKnight, "Proselytism and Godfearers," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, 845.

³⁶ "circumcision," in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 121.

³⁷ "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

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“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)³⁸...[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).³⁹ Failure to observe the covenant of circumcision was one of the reasons for the destruction of the Temple (B. Menahot 53b)⁴⁰.”⁴¹

These sorts of ancient views associated with circumcision—as though God somehow made the world for circumcision—were 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 for much of the First Century Jewish community, which for many was somehow more important than simple belief in the Creator God, is something which was surely confronted in the Messianic Scriptures.

The Apostle Paul and Circumcision

In relationship to the debate over circumcision, many of today’s Christian people are quite eager to quote the writings of the Apostle Paul, which apparently give a uniform, negative evaluation regarding the practice (for all time since). 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).”⁴² This same sentiment is even voiced by some Hebraic Roots teachers, with one actually saying, “Paul includes circumcision with

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).

³⁸ “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; Jacob Neusner, trans., *The Mishnah: A New Translation* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988], 412).

³⁹ “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.*).

⁴⁰ “He said to him, ‘You owed it to remember the covenant of circumcision!’” (b.*Menachot* 53b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

⁴¹ “circumcision,” in *Dictionary of Judaism in the Biblical Period*, 121.

⁴² Snowman, “Circumcision,” in *EJ*, 5:570.

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commands that are no longer to be adhered to.”⁴³ 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. Did the Apostle Paul really have a negative evaluation of circumcision, or were 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 attested 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” (NASU). 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 serve in areas with large Jewish populations. **Acts 16:1-3** attests to this:

“Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:1-3, NASU).

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 attested 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 were either circumcised or uncircumcised, would be saved from their sins and reckoned as members of the community of redeemed, through the same God. This is a definite testimony of how 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 one 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” (Romans 3:29-31, NASU).

⁴³ William J. Morford, *The Power New Testament*, third edition (Lexington, SC: Shalom Ministries, 2003), 376.

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After telling the Roman Believers that the God of Israel was the same of both the Jewish people and the nations at large, and that He would save both the circumcised and uncircumcised, Paul continued and told them that faith in God and His Messiah did 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* meaning “**to validate someth. that is in force or in practice, reinforce validity of, uphold, maintain, validate**” (BDAG).⁴⁴ If Paul said that Messiah followers were to uphold the authority of God’s Torah, then when one reads the Torah it should be rightly recognized that circumcision is included among its commandments. This would require circumcision, at the very least, 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. It would also definitely mean that Jewish male infants, should indeed be circumcised on the eighth day (Leviticus 12:2-3).

Earlier in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote, “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**, NASU). Here, obviously focusing his words to the Jewish Believers in Rome, Paul said that if they followed the Torah then circumcision had value, but if they were to violate or transgress the Torah, then their circumcision became as though it were uncircumcision or foreskin. Hence, his point was that Jewish people were just as culpable to the powers and influence of sin as the rest of the apparent “uncircumcised” human race. With this in mind, Paul admonished the Jewish Believers in Rome not to become too enamored with their circumcision status, because if circumcision became a sense of false pride for them, then by presumably “pagan” Greeks and Romans adhering to the basic ethical or moral requirements of the Torah, it would be as though they were 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**, NASU).

Paul emphasized to these Jewish Believers in Rome that ultimately circumcision was of the heart, and a Jewish person’s praise did not come from mortals, but from the Creator God. This was because the Hebrew name *Yehudah* means “the LORD has praised.” These Jewish Believers were to look to the Lord, and not to others, to be praised. They were not to have a false sense of pride because they knew themselves to be circumcised from the time they were infants, with the pagan world outside them

⁴⁴ BDAG, 482.

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uncircumcised. They were, rather, to be secure in looking to God for all of their answers. Here, Paul placed circumcision in its proper perspective for Jewish Believers.

But what about circumcision in its proper perspective for non-Jewish Believers? Here, contextual readings of some Pauline passages need to be kept in mind. First to be recognized, is that the Greco-Roman world of the First Century Mediterranean knew of no medical circumcision, as has been practiced throughout much of the Nineteenth to early Twenty-First Century West. Secondly, when Paul is seen to condemn non-Jewish Believers from being influenced by “circumcision” in the First Century C.E., this was intended to strongly discourage them from going through the formal proselyte circumcision to Judaism, in order to somehow be truly reckoned among God’s people. Non-Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah were reckoned among the community of redeemed by the faith and trust they have placed in Him.

It is clear enough, based on Paul’s words appearing in **1 Corinthians 7:18-20**, that both circumcised and foreskinned were called to Messiah faith, in these two different dispositions:

“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” (1 Corinthians 7:18-20, NASU).

The instruction Paul gave in 1 Corinthians ch. 7 can be particularly difficult to understand, because it specifically pertained to “the things about which you wrote” (1 Corinthians 7:1a, NASU), meaning that the Corinthians had sent Paul a piece of correspondence, asking him various questions. These ancient issues, coupled with the various conditions at work—along with the regular presence of the Greek verb *menō*, meaning either “remain,” “abide,” or “continue”⁴⁵—can complicate one’s reading of the issues a great deal. The rendering of *menō* as “remain” can be a bit misleading, for the specific reason that a static-permanence in a certain 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 and alterations, both expected and necessary, in condition. Similarly for the Corinthian situation, abiding in the current sphere of one’s life—notably as someone unmarried or in a condition of slavery—should not have dismissed the possibility of future, God-directed changes.

Failing to approach **1 Corinthians ch. 7** for a Corinthian-specific or ancient situation *first*, in the scope of all of the other problems and issues present for this group of ancient people, can lead to errant conclusions like Paul not highly valuing the estate of

⁴⁵ Cf. F. Hauck, “*ménō*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 581.

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marriage, and that he thought that young men staying unmarried was always best (1 Corinthians 7:1b). Perhaps for someone such as the Apostle Paul, who had a significant ministry responsibility 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 also observed 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).

The 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, NASU). This is further detailed as, each “must remain in that condition in which he was called” (1 Corinthians 7:20, NASU), with *klēsis*, “condition” (NASU), more literally meaning “calling” (KJV/NKJV). One way to approach this, is that each person has been called to a particular vocation or life disposition, which they are to never leave. If held rigidly, then this means that no changes to such a vocation are to be allowed—no “growth” or even “continuance.” Another, and we should think more preferred way to view 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20, is that the *klēsis* or “calling” involves a person being called into salvation and sanctification by the Lord,⁴⁶ i.e., “Let each man abide in that calling wherein he was called” (1 Corinthians 7:17, American Standard Version; cf. Ephesians 4:1; 2 Timothy 1:9). If there are any changes to occur to one’s station in life, then those changes would become manifest as a person would abide in their calling to salvation and sanctification, growing in faith.

The individual Corinthians were 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, “continuing” or “abiding” in Him (*menō*), anything which might actually change was entirely incumbent upon one’s maturation in Him, as “continuance” in a calling to salvation and sanctification moved forward.

Opening the complicated vignette of 1 Corinthians 7:17-24, Paul asked, “Was any man called *when he was already* circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised” (1 **Corinthians 7:18a**, NASU). This actually happened to many Jewish men during the Maccabean crisis via the process of epispasm, whereby steps were taken to regrow the skin which 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, resulting in apostasy from the One God of Israel! Throughout his letters, Paul upheld the value of circumcision for Jewish Believers. Paul would further say, the far more important, “Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised” (1 **Corinthians 7:18b**, NASU). Circumcision or non-circumcision status was not to be a pre-condition of one’s calling into Messiah faith, and none of the non-Jewish Corinthians should have been pressured

⁴⁶ 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.”

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to being circumcised, going through ritual proselyte conversion to Judaism, in order to consider themselves as “true Believers.”

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, NASU). Obviously as far as salvation is concerned, circumcision status does not matter. But when Paul said, “obeying the commandments of God is everything” (NRSV), what did this mean? Previously in Galatians 6:15, Paul had said, “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation” (NASU). It is fair to recognize that the stress he made on the commandments of God here, were those deep, internal heart matters, directly affected by being called into Messiah faith and the enactment of the New Covenant—the sorts of principles elucidated by the Lord in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chs. 5-7).

The First Century Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds did not know of the medical practice of circumcision as the Western world often knows today, as circumcision was widely 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, it was most improbable that many non-Jewish male Believers could ever be physically circumcised, even if they wanted to be. Yet, the fact that the condition in which one is found, when being called into Messiah faith, can change, is realized in how those who were First Century slaves, were indeed to take the opportunity to be freed should it present itself (1 Corinthians 7:21-23). *Abiding* with God, means that *He clearly and supernaturally directs* any changes to one’s original status (1 Corinthians 7:24).

For a number of the non-Jewish men in today’s Twenty-First Century Messianic community, who may be physically uncircumcised, the social and religious pressures against circumcision which were present in the First Century, are largely not there any more. Non-Jewish men do not have the responsibility to be circumcised on the eighth day as *b’rit milah* as ethnic male Jews (Leviticus 12:3). However, it is entirely possible, that an uncircumcised, non-Jewish male in today’s Messianic movement, may be personally convicted as he progresses in holiness, to honor the spirit of the Torah commandment—even though it has not been specifically enjoined upon him in the Torah. Practically speaking, this would involve going through a medical circumcision—with the full knowledge that it has absolutely nothing to do with salvation status, and that it will not reckon him as an ethnic Jew. (This might also be done in association with the advice of his doctor, for various health matters.)⁴⁷

But what about what Paul said in **Galatians 5:2**, “Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you” (NASU), or “Christ shall profit you nothing” (YLT)? Was this a blanket statement by Paul that if a male non-Jewish Believer ever underwent physical circumcision at any time, that he would no longer be longer “saved”? Some would say so. However, Paul’s letter to the Galatians

⁴⁷ For a more detailed review of this difficult passage, consult the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “1 Corinthians 7:17-24.”

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was widely written by him to largely refute the idea that circumcision, i.e., conversion to Judaism, would bring eternal salvation and true inclusion among God's own, 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, as that could even be turned against Jewish males being circumcised. The Judaizers/Influencers had less than honorable motives, as Paul attested, "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, NASU). Paul's teaching in Galatians made 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" (NASU). 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, 10)⁴⁸—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.⁴⁹

The Apostle Paul actually said of the Judaizers/Influencers, "I wish that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves" (Galatians 5:12, NASU), 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 said that a priest who has been castrated could function in the service of God, so if the Judaizers would have just cut off their testicles, then they would seemingly have been found physically unfit to be presumable "ministers."

The **Epistle to the Galatians** can definitely be read as a letter opposing ritual proselyte circumcision of non-Jewish Believers (Galatians 5:2, 4),⁵⁰ desiring to become "righteous," and everything else which such a process might encompass. The Epistle to the Galatians cannot be read as a letter opposing the routine medical circumcision frequently practiced in the West today, often with no religious overtones.

In **Philippians 3:2-3**, Paul warned 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" (Philippians 3:2-3, NASU).

⁴⁸ Consult the author's article "What Are 'Works of the Law'?" (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

⁴⁹ Consult the author's article "The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah" (appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*).

⁵⁰ Consult the exegetical analysis available in the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, "Galatians 5:2-3."

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In this admonition to the Philippians, the Apostle Paul warned against those whose confidence in God was in their physical circumcision, and not in the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. This might have been an allusion to those who believed that true devotion to God was contingent on a man removing his foreskin. AMG notably defines *katatomē* as “A cutting away, mangling...*peritomē*, ordained by the Law of Moses, has a spiritual significance distinguishing God’s people (Israel in the OT) from the heathen. When this spiritual meaning is forgotten, then *peritomē*, circumcision, becomes *katatomē*, a mutilation, a butchering up, a mere cutting away flesh which in itself is of no value.”⁵¹ Paul’s admonition here once again placed circumcision in its proper place: a Jewish person’s circumcision was meaningless without an appropriate heart attitude, which was to be oriented toward the will of God, His Instruction, and the promises associated with circumcision. This was something Paul himself was able to properly balance, as a Jewish Believer in Israel’s Messiah.

The Apostle Paul attested 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” (NASU). Paul had been given the special ministry commission by God to go and declare the good news of Yeshua the nations, those who were not circumcised, unlike Peter who had been given the ministry commission to go and minister to his fellow Jews. Was this an indication that the message 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 at large 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).

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 asked, “if I still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? Then the stumbling block of the cross has been abolished” (NASU). 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 was precisely what he most often confronted and refuted in his letters.* Too often, however, various readers have taken a statement here or a statement there from Paul’s letters, and incorrectly concluded that he was totally against circumcision in all cases.

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

⁵¹ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), pp 846-847.

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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, NASU). Part of the accusation regarding this apostasy was that he was teaching Jewish Believers not to circumcise their infant sons. This accusation was false, and recognized as such by the Jerusalem assembly leaders. Paul did not preach against Jewish Believers circumcising their infant sons in his writings.

As it concerned the early Greek and Roman 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 on an overly-inflated national significance which it Biblically does not have. It is most improbable that given the social circumstances of the First Century, that, had they wanted to, 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, like the centurion Cornelius, for example (cf. Acts 10), might have been executed for treason for going through circumcision. This is why many Greeks and Romans, in acknowledging the One God of Israel, had likely stayed as God-fearers: they took on many outward aspects of Torah short of being circumcised.

Circumcision of the Heart

One of the important admonitions of the Holy Scriptures is that God's people are to circumcise their hearts. Paul alluded to this in Romans 2:29, when he addressed 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" (NASU). Another stress is seen in 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" (NASU). And in Colossians 2:11, it is further stated, "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" (NASU).

All too often, passages like these are quoted by modern Christians, who then go on and say that physical circumcision bears no significance of any kind for any of God's people; 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 which 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, NASU).

"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, NASU).

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Circumcision of the heart is by no means a “New Testament” concept exclusively, because it was 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.”⁵² God’s people are commanded to circumcise their hearts so that they might have proper 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 ourselves, we each 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 Bible readers cannot deny that He was both Torah observant and physically circumcised. At the very least, this means that all of us should have an appreciation of the Jewishness of our Messiah.

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, for Jewish Believers for certain, negate the Biblical importance of physical circumcision. Yet, an emphasis on circumcision of the heart, 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 some level of ongoing importance or relevance of circumcision for today’s Body of Messiah—for Jewish Believers (Leviticus 12:3) as *b’rit milah*, and possibly for non-Jewish Believers as a worthwhile medical practice—*does not* automatically mean 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 people (and those within the One Law/One Torah sub-movement).⁵³ 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 which **should be rightly opposed**.

While circumcision of males can often be approached from the perspective of it serving as the memorial sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-11), which is a positive factor for being circumcised—it cannot be overlooked that there are

⁵² J.H. Hertz, ed., *Pentateuch & Haftorahs* (London: Soncino, 1960), 789.

⁵³ Consult the article “The Significance of the Messiah Event” by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee (appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper*).

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a few negative dynamics of circumcision which 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 shame upon men. It is a mark of failure as much as a mark of status.”⁵⁴ 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/or 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 circumcision 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 expressed 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” (NASU). 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, it is witnessed,

“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, NASU).

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).⁵⁵ 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 details, “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

⁵⁴ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), pp 202, 203.

⁵⁵ 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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of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection” (NASU). 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 can still be regarded 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:

“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.”⁵⁶

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 which identifies one with the death, burial, and resurrection of the Messiah, is notably something which males *and* females can equally practice. While there is no indication in the Apostolic Scriptures that circumcision has been quantitatively nullified, circumcision should definitely serve as a sign for males that they *beware of how they use their sexual organ*. Circumcision of various (mainly Jewish) males, in a faith community where males and females are equals, can also definitely serve as a physical sign of some of a man’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, the lessons gained from circumcision should direct how all men should *actively control their sexual behavior and attitudes*.

The Anti-Circumcision Movement and the Man of Lawlessness

Some are unaware of this, but opposition to circumcision goes beyond various theological arguments which may be presented by certain Christians, who may think that the practice has been completely abrogated. 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

⁵⁶ 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.

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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 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.”⁵⁷ 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 male 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-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.”⁵⁸

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

⁵⁷ The Australian Foreskin Restoration and Anti-Circumcision Site (2004). [Main Page]. Retrieved 22 April, 2004, from <<http://www.foreskin.net/>>.

⁵⁸ 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/>>.

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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 conclude 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.”⁵⁹

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 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 little to 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

⁵⁹ 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/>>.

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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."⁶⁰

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 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*).⁶¹

The anti-circumcision movement has made some political headway, even though infant circumcision has not become a criminal offense. "Florida has taken sides in the long-running debate over the medical necessity of circumcision. It has joined the opposition....the procedure is no longer covered by Medicaid in Florida except in limited cases."⁶² While the State of Florida (2003) justified 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 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 many contemporary Believers do not consciously realize about the antimessiah/antichrist, is that he is called the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3, NASU) or "the man who separates himself from *Torah*" (CJSB). We have to realize that the antimessiah is going to actively oppose the practices of the Torah, and these practices do not just include keeping the Sabbath or appointed times or Biblical morality in general, 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" (NASU). The word "law" used in the text here is not *torah*, but is *dat*. *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

⁶⁰ 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/>>.

⁶¹ Niels Lauersen and Steven Whitney, *It's Your Body: A Woman's Guide to Gynecology* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1977), pp 383-384.

⁶² 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/>>.

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Him, but the ruler could only do so for a period of time set by God.”⁶³ The antimessiah, while surely opposed to God’s Torah, is also going to set up his own set of civil laws which oppose the keeping of His Instruction. We already see things in motion whereby infant circumcision could be made illegal. This has been seen 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 various 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 which 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” (Revelation 13:14-15, NASU).

Not much is said about the image of the beast itself, although it will look as though it were human, and that those who will refuse to worship it will be executed. The setting up of images for worship violates the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:4-6; Deuteronomy 5:8-10). But have we ever considered what this image, presumably a statue of the man himself, could 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 holy ones or saints of God, who in the Book of Revelation adhere to the commandments of the Torah and know Yeshua as their Lord and Savior (Revelation 12:17; 14:12), then it is possible for us to consider that the antimessiah could 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 God’s people. 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). None of us should ever look down with negativity at the practice of circumcision.

None of us should ever consider circumcision to be a salvation issue, as the power of the good news or gospel, is blind in saving males who are either circumcised or uncircumcised (Colossians 3:11). The reason circumcision was such a controversial

⁶³ Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, eds., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 2003), 251.

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issue in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament), is that “circumcision” for the First Century Jewish community had become an overly-inflated nationalistic symbol. For many First Century Jewish Believers, the Greek and Roman Believers needed to demonstrate their true loyalty to Israel’s God and Messiah by going through formal proselyte circumcision to Judaism. 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, NASU; cf. Acts 15:1). To these people, he said that if they thought circumcision would truly reckon them among God’s own, that they would be in severe danger.

Circumcision has become a common medical practice for non-Jewish males in North America and in other parts of the world since the late Nineteenth Century, and thankfully it is not often looked at as being that strange or taboo. Yet, in recent days in Western Europe, legislation has been proposed which would make infant circumcision illegal via the guise of it being “genital mutilation.” Sadly, many Christians would likely in support of making infant circumcision illegal.

There is no question in today’s Messianic community that the infant sons of Messianic Jewish couples and intermarried couples should be circumcised. It is also most fortunate that the controversy of much of the First Century *ekklēsia*—formal proselyte circumcision to be fully reckoned as a member of God’s people and/or granted salvation—is not present in the contemporary Messianic movement. *All agree that physical circumcision is not required for true inclusion as a member of God’s own and/or salvation.* Yet, male circumcision has been a widescale medical practice in much of the West, for well over a century, and a majority of non-Jewish people in various places have been medically circumcised as infants. Does this at all affect what non-Jewish couples, in Messianic congregations, should do with their infant sons?

In discussing the issue of circumcision in the contemporary Messianic community, the authors of the workbook *Messianic Judaism Class* (Teacher Book), provide the following answer. They assert, “For Gentiles, circumcision is not required or encouraged.” But then in asking the question, “Should non-Jewish baby boys be circumcised?”, they answer with, “It’s not required, not encouraged, but also not forbidden.”⁶⁴ Another perspective is offered by Barney Kasdan in *God’s Appointed Customs*:

“For Messianic Jews who represent the remnant of Israel, it is logical that they would desire to follow the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, as did the first-century Jewish believers in Yeshua. While non-Jews may also wish to have their sons circumcised, the eighth-day *b’rit milah* remains a distinctive sign between the Jewish people and the God of Israel.”⁶⁵

⁶⁴ James Appel, Jonathan Bernis, and David Levine, *Messianic Judaism Class*, Teacher Book (Copenhagen, NY: Olive Press, 2011), 59.

⁶⁵ Barney Kasdan, *God’s Appointed Customs: A Messianic Jewish Guide to the Biblical Lifecycle and Lifestyle* (Baltimore: Lederer, 1996), 23.

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Although the medical benefits of male circumcision have been debated in recent times, the authors of *Messianic Judaism Class* address the question, “Are there any physical benefits to circumcision?”, with, “There might be. They have discovered in Africa that the tribes that circumcise their males have a lower rate of HIV/AIDS infection.”⁶⁶ So what should non-Jewish couples, in today’s Messianic movement, do regarding the issue of circumcision and a male infant?

Non-Jewish Believers in today’s Messianic movement, who are not ethnic descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, do not have an expectation from the Torah to circumcise their infant males on the eighth day (Genesis 17:9-13; Leviticus 12:3) as *b’rit milah*. Yet, such non-Jewish Believers in today’s Messianic movement, particularly in a place such as North America, should hardly be discouraged to circumcise their infant males as a worthwhile medical practice with hygienic benefits. Such a hospital or clinical circumcision may, but frequently may not, be scheduled on the eighth day after birth. Non-Jewish couples who have a male infant child medically circumcised, may be seen to honor the spirit of the Torah commandment.

Various Messianic Jewish leaders today are seen to recognize that non-Jewish infant males undergoing circumcision as a medical practice, is hardly prohibited. In fact, a medical circumcision should likely be expected of non-Jewish couples in their congregations who have a male child. Yet, it is widely believed that the traditional Jewish ceremonies and blessings of the *b’rit milah*, involving the naming of a male child, should be reserved for infant males of Messianic Jewish and intermarried couples only—allowing there to be at least this distinction between Jewish and non-Jewish people in the assembly, when in various other areas it may not be so obvious. In the absence of a traditional Jewish *bris*, then another sort of ceremony or child dedication should be practiced to bless a non-Jewish infant male, who is born into the community of a Messianic congregation.

What about a non-Jewish adult male, who is physically uncircumcised? It is to be recognized 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). It is entirely possible that there are various, individual non-Jewish men, uncircumcised, in today’s Messianic movement, who might be personally convicted or moved, regarding the importance of circumcision in their reading of the Scriptures and growth in holiness. If they are mature enough to recognize circumcision status will not provide them with salvation, nor will it reckon them as ethnic Jews, then a medical circumcision to honor the spirit of the Torah commandment, could be an option. With growing opposition to circumcision in the West, non-Jewish males going through circumcision as a medical procedure, is definitely one way of standing in solidarity with the Jewish community.

When Yeshua returns and the Temple is reestablished in Jerusalem in the future Kingdom, it is prophesied how only the circumcised in both heart *and* flesh will be

⁶⁶ *Messianic Judaism Class*, Teacher Book, 58.

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permitted to enter into it. Physical circumcision will be apparently enforced during the Millennial Era:

“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, NASU).

What could this mean for us today? Is it at all possible that this future reality has broken into the present, in various cases? Many non-Jewish male Believers, including myself, were circumcised as infants because circumcision is a standard medical practice in many parts of the world. My parents were not Believers when I was born, only attending church a few times a year, but they had me circumcised anyway. My late father, Kimball McKee, was circumcised, even though my two grandfathers on both sides were not circumcised. God, in His sovereignty, has had many non-Jewish males circumcised, without them realizing any kind of Biblical importance associated with 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.

Is circumcision for everyone? **Circumcision is not for those who believe that going through with it will secure their salvation, or a “true place” among the company of God’s own.** Circumcision is dishonored by those who fail 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. There are likely many future discussions and conversations coming to the Messianic community, as we delve into the further details of circumcision, human sexuality, and the like. These will likely be enjoined to how our faith community should respond to growing opposition to circumcision, as a medical procedure, in the wider world.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ If necessary, some further discussion is offered in the Messianic Apologetics FAQ, “Circumcision” (2022).

SUGGESTED STUDY QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 10

1. What has been your general experience when encountering the topic of circumcision within the Messianic community? How does your local congregation or fellowship approach it?
2. What is circumcision from a medical standpoint? What are some of the Hebrew and Greek terms used for circumcision?
3. Summarize the role of circumcision for the Ancient Israelites.
4. How important has the rite of circumcision been within the scope of Jewish history? How did the Maccabean crisis of the Second Century B.C.E. change some approaches to circumcision?
5. What are some of the approaches witnessed in the Apostolic Scriptures regarding the rite of circumcision?
6. How frequently is circumcision associated with a non-Jew becoming a formal Jewish proselyte?
7. Do you think that today's Messianic people can ever overlook or forget about the Torah imperative for one's heart to be circumcised?
8. How do you think should circumcision be honored by Messiah followers in the post-resurrection era?
9. Have you ever heard of or encountered the anti-circumcision movement?
10. Do you think a widescale Messianic avoidance of addressing circumcision specifically, is a present cause for our faith community for failing to address human sexuality generally? What do you think?