

What does the Bible have to say about circumcision – is it applicable for those who believe in the God of Israel, or has it somehow “been done away with”? The people who believe in the God of Israel are basically split into two distinct groups – those who believe that the New Testament is the inspired word of God and is therefore true, and those who don’t. For the most part, those who don’t believe claim to be “Jewish” and those who do claim to be “Christian”. In regards to the Jews, most believe that physical circumcision is still in effect while on the other hand, most Christians believe that it’s not. Thus, it seems that the circumcision question is centered on understanding the New Testament..

When asked why they believe physical circumcision is no longer in effect, most Christians quote Paul, and specifically his letter to the Galatians. It’s clear that Paul referenced circumcision a number of times in Galatians, but was Paul actually teaching that circumcision was no longer of any value to the followers of Yeshua, and if it’s not, why was it so important before Yeshua was crucified?

The circumcision question carries with it a number of ramifications, but probably the most important is this – if the law concerning circumcision changed, then God’s law changed, and if God’s law changed, then God changed, and if God changed, He’s not really God. Since I’m not willing to accept that conclusion, nor do I believe you are either, it’s important that we answer this question.

In this study, I want to show that physical circumcision is still a very important part of God’s law, and by simply defining the terms as they were in the first century, we can see that Paul never taught against God’s law, and specifically not against circumcision. We’ll see why it’s important to accept the whole Torah as a unit, look at the purpose of circumcision, discover the meaning of some 1st century Greek words, search a few passages of Paul, then see if church historians substantiate what we’ve learned.

Why is This Important?

In their attempt to make sense of some of Paul’s writings – letters which even Peter said were hard to understand - many theologians claim that the Torah was either divided into parts (moral, civil, and ceremonial) or that parts of it were only temporary. But do we have to divide God’s law into parts to understand Paul? No . . . according to Peter, all we have to do is become educated and stable. Remember what he said –

^{NKJ} **2 Peter 3:15-16** . . . consider *that* the longsuffering of our Lord *is* salvation -- as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, ¹⁶ as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures.

If we want to understand Paul, we must become educated and stable, educated in the Torah of God, and stable in our belief in God and His Son, Messiah Yeshua. Let’s enhance our understanding and our belief in God by seeing what He says about His law and Himself.

God describes himself as a covenant keeping God. When He enters into a covenant, it’s binding . . . not only for the other party, but for God himself¹. While rehearsing the events of the previous 40 years, Moses told the generation that would soon cross the Jordan River that God -

¹ The Genesis 9 covenant as well as the Genesis 15 covenant are one-sided covenant which require God to perform what he’s promised, but require nothing of the other party.

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 4:31** “. . . will not forsake you nor destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them.”

God also described Himself as a God that does not change –

^{NKJ} **Malachi 3:6** "For I *am* the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

It's reassuring and comforting to know that we have a God who is as stable as a rock – one who has not and will not change. As believers in Yeshua, we can rest assured that He is unchanging as well. The book of Hebrews states that we can avoid being deceived by strange doctrines by realizing that -

^{NKJ} **Hebrews 13:8** Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Knowing how steadfast and stable they are, we can also know that God and His Son are dedicated to the entire Torah. On behalf of YHVH, Moses told Israel –

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 4:2** "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

He later said –

^{NKJ} **Deuteronomy 12:32** "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.

Knowing that man would attempt to change His law, and use the New Testament as an excuse, God ends the “Christian” version of the Old Testament² by again saying –

^{NKJ} **Malachi 4:4** "Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, *With the* statutes and judgments.

We see that YHVH is clearly opposed to taking away from, nullifying, or doing away with any of His law, but what about Yeshua? Did he nullify part of Gods law? Clearly not -

^{KJV} **Matthew 5:17-18** " Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. ¹⁸ "For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

So we see that it's not YHVH, nor is it Yeshua who are breaking God's own law by adding or taking away from it. Instead, they are firm in their support of the Torah . . . the entire Torah. Never-the-less, they knew that Christian theologians would attempt to divide the law into parts and summarily dissolve some of those parts.

In the above passage the word translated “destroy” comes from the Greek word “kataluo” (Strong's 2647) which has as its primary meaning “to dissolve, disunite (what has been joined together)”. This is precisely what Christianity has done. It has taken God's law, divided it into parts, and then declared some parts void . . . and they claim that Paul was the one who gave them authority to do so. But if God is true to His word, and Yeshua is true to His, from where would Paul get his authority to nullify a very pivotal part of Gods law. What's more, even if Paul had the authority, why would he want to do so . . . especially in regards to circumcision?

The Role of Circumcision -

In the Biblical sense, circumcision was introduced with Abraham, but there's evidence that the practice may have existed even earlier. In an Egyptian tomb dating back to approximately 2300 B.C. there's a drawing showing men of one race being circumcised by men of another, possibly showing that the ones

² Jewish Bibles contain the same text, but are arranged differently, ending at after 2 Chronicles.

being circumcised had become slaves.³ This interpretation of the drawing may be correct since the Hebrew word for “circumcise” (*malal* – מָלַל – Strongs 5243) is the same word that is translated “wither” or “cut down”⁴. It’s also the root of the word “nemalah” which is “ant”.

^{NKJ} **Proverbs 30:25** The ants *are* a people not strong, Yet they prepare their food in the summer;

Abraham was 99 years old when he was circumcised. It had been nearly 25 years since he had left Haran and entered Canaan. During that time he had been tested a number of times, and in some cases failed, but because he believed in the promises YHVH had made, he was declared righteous and soon thereafter had a son – though not the son of promise. Thirteen years later, Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. Paul refers to that circumcision as a “seal of righteousness”.

^{NKJ} **Romans 4:11** And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal⁵ of the righteousness of the faith which *he had while still* uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe . .

So Abraham was declared righteous by God, and the writer of Hebrews said that a sign of that declaration was his circumcision. What else can we learn about circumcision and its purpose? Why did God require it? God’s instructions to Abraham make it quite clear -

^{NKJ} **Genesis 17:10-14** "This *is* My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised (*muwl*); ¹¹ "and you shall be circumcised (Heb.- *malal*) in the flesh of your foreskins (Heb.- *orlah*), and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. ¹² "He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. ¹³ "He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ "And the uncircumcised (Heb.- *arel*) male child, who is not circumcised (*muwl*) in the flesh of his foreskin (Heb.- *orlah*), that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

What we see is that (for a male), God intended circumcision to be the sign of his covenant relationship with YHVH. For the Hebrew male child, circumcision was something that was done to him. At 8-days old the father would circumcise his son as a sign that the son had become a part of the covenant people. As a sign, circumcision is similar to the sign of the Sabbath⁶ in that they are both a sign of God’s people. Whereas circumcision (when done as God intended) shows that you were born into a covenant family⁷, the Sabbath is what you do to show that you are a part of the covenant people.

Circumcision is also a visible reminder that you belong to Go, and in fact, after his circumcision Abraham began to refer to himself before YHVH as “your servant” and YHVH called Abraham “my servant”.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 18:3** . . . "My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant.

³ <http://jamestabor.com/2012/10/15/egyptian-circumcision-before-the-time-of-abraham/>

⁴ See Job 24:24; Psalm 37:2

⁵ semeion (Strong’s 4592) - a sign, mark, token

⁶ Exodus 31:13

⁷ Circumcision later in life indicates your desire to be a part of the covenant people – Gen. 34:15, Ex. 12:48

Understanding the Terms -

Before going further, let's examine some of the Hebrew words pertaining to circumcision, all of which are used in the above account. They are:

- *malal* – מָלַל – Strongs 5243 – (verb) circumcise, wither, cut down
- *muwl* – מוּל – Strongs 4135 – (verb) to circumcise, cut,
- *orlah* – עֲרֵלָה – Strong's 6190 – (noun) foreskin , uncircumcised
- *arel* - עֲרֵל – Strong's 6189 – (adjective) having foreskin, uncircumcised

“Malal” and “muwl” are both verbs that are used when referring to actual act of circumcision. “Orlah” is a noun that refers to the part of the male organ that is removed and discarded, and “arel” is an adjective describing the physical state of the male organ. Both “orlah” and “arel” are rooted in the word “arel” (עֲרֵל – 6188) which means “to count as foreskinned” or “to remain unharvested”. This root word is used in the verse pertaining to the fruit of newly planted trees –

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 19:23-24** ²³ ' When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised to you. *It shall not be eaten.* ²⁴ 'But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to the LORD.

This is an interesting verse that we'll talk about later in this study.

Going back to Genesis 17:14 you'll notice that the word translated “uncircumcised” (*arel*) actually means “having foreskin”, thus the “uncircumcised” male is the “fore-skinned” male, and it's the foreskinned male that will be cut off from the people because he has violated the covenant.

Since the foreskin has no value once it's cut off, it's simply discarded⁸, though in many Jewish circumcisions, it' buried. The only scriptural example of what happens to the foreskin is that of Moses' son whose foreskin was “cast at his feet”⁹. Because the foreskins are cast off it can be understood that an Israelite male who is “foreskinned” is metaphorically wearing (according to Genesis 17:14) the sign of those who are or will be cast off.

Just prior to the first Passover we see that YHVH had remembered his covenant and had thus set out to gather His people out of Egypt, and like before – if a person wanted to be a part of that covenant people, he must have been circumcised.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 12:48** "And when a stranger dwells with you *and wants* to keep the Passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised (*muwl* – מוּל), and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land. For no uncircumcised (*arel* - עֲרֵל) person shall eat it.

There again, the foreskinned man is not allowed to eat the Passover lamb, the lamb that symbolized the redemption of God's people.

But the term “foreskinned” (Heb. - arel) did not always mean that a person had not been circumcised, it was also used as an adjective or a label that was placed on a person or a people. Moses claimed that because he was of “uncircumcised” lips, he would be unable to convince Pharaoh of anything – especially since he was unable to make an impact on his own Israelite brothers.

⁸ Unless used to buy the hand of the king's daughter (2 Sam. 3:14)

⁹ Exodus 4:25 KJV

^{NKJ} **Exodus 6:12** And Moses spoke before the LORD, saying, "The children of Israel have not heeded me. How then shall Pharaoh heed me, for I am of uncircumcised (arel - עֵרֶל) lips?"

This exchange between YHVH and Moses took place some time after the Burning Bush. By now, Moses had already spoken to Pharaoh and had been rejected. What's more, the elders of Israel had confronted Moses blaming their dire situation on him – thus rejecting him as well. Now YHVH is telling Moses to go back again, but Moses responded saying that he had “foreskinned” lips. We know that literally, that was not the case . . . what then was Moses saying?

It's been suggested that Moses may have had a speech impediment such as stuttering; though it's more likely he was simply slow with his words and could not “think on his feet”. That is hinted at earlier when Moses talked with God at the Burning Bush, but God had already remedied that problem by telling him the YHVH himself would put the words in his mouth.

^{NKJ} **Exodus 4:10-12** Then Moses said to the LORD, "O my Lord, I *am* not eloquent, neither before nor since You have spoken to Your servant; but I *am* slow of speech and slow of tongue."
¹¹ So the LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the mute, the deaf, the seeing, or the blind? *Have* not I, the LORD? ¹² "Now therefore, go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall say."

What then does it mean “uncircumcised” lips. First let's notice that Moses never said that he had uncircumcised lips, he just said that he was of uncircumcised lips. He had been separated from his Hebrew brothers for 40 years and had forsaken the Hebrew culture at least to the point that he had not circumcised his children¹⁰. Though it's likely he had maintained the Hebrew language during that time, never-the-less, to Pharaoh and the elders of Israel, Moses was not a Hebrew. Moses realized that he could not just march back in to Egypt and expect his brothers to accept him as their “Hebrew” messiah. To the circumcised Hebrews, Moses was just an “arel”, a “foreskin” – a Hebrew who was no longer a “Hebrew”. In the case of Moses, “uncircumcised lips” meant that he felt unqualified to speak on behalf of the Hebrews. When he recorded these events for us, he inserted his own genealogy between two accounts of his “uncircumcised lips” statement seemingly to show that he was indeed a “Hebrew”.

As time went on, the Hebrews began to use the term “arel” (foreskinned) as an uncomplimentary epithet. Take the case of David and Goliath. David didn't simply refer to Goliath as the “Philistine”, but instead called him the “foreskinned Philistine”.

^{NKJ} **1 Samuel 17:26** Then David spoke to the men who stood by him, saying, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who *is* this uncircumcised (arel - foreskinned) Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?"

It's likely that just like the other Philistines, Goliath had not been circumcised¹¹, therefore there was no reason for David to include the adjective “foreskinned”, never-the-less, David did so, and it appears he did so with contempt.

Still later, the prophets used the term “arel” (foreskinned) allegorically to refer to Israel's rebellious heart.

^{NKJ} **Jeremiah 9:26** "Egypt, Judah, Edom, the people of Ammon, Moab, and all *who are* in the farthest corners, who dwell in the wilderness. For all *these* nations *are* uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel *are* uncircumcised (arel - foreskinned) in the heart."

Notice that the prophet refers to the nations as being foreskinned because physically they were, but he also referred to Israel – a nation of circumcised men – to be foreskinned in the heart. Ezekiel does the same in referring to those who may not visit the end-time Temple.

¹⁰ Exodus 4:25-27

¹¹ 1 Samuel 18:25

^{NKJ} **Ezekiel 44:9** 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "No foreigner, uncircumcised (foreskinned) in heart or uncircumcised (*arel* - foreskinned) in flesh, shall enter My sanctuary, including any foreigner who is among the children of Israel.

We see that the term “arel” (foreskinned) does not necessarily refer to a person who is not physically circumcised, but can also refer to a person who has been circumcised, but whose heart toward God is not correct. Recalling again what happens to the foreskin once a male has been circumcised, we see that a person “foreskinned in the heart” is one who is in danger of being cast away.

If a person had no knowledge of the New Testament, but had only read the Tnakh¹², he would more than likely have positive views of circumcision and its purpose; but when we get into the New Testament, things change - but only because of preconceived ideas and the lack of knowledge in regards to the Greek words that are used. Therefore, before we get into Paul’s writings, we need to define some of Paul’s misunderstood words and trace them back to their Hebrew counterpart in the Tnakh.

There are two primary words used in the New Testament that refer to circumcision. They are “peritemno” and “akrobusia”.

Peritemno (Strong’s 4059) comes from a combination of root words that mean “to cut around” and is most often translated “circumcise”. Its Hebrew counterpart is “muwl” (מול) – Strong’s 4135). The noun form of “peritemno” is “peritome” (Strong’s 4061) and is usually translated “circumcision”. Though the NT writers used “peritome” in reference to the actual act of circumcision, it’s quite often used (13 out of 36 times) as a label that refers to the Jewish people who were in fact “physically circumcised”¹³. One clear example is that found near the beginning of the book of Galatians -

^{KJV} **Galatians 2:7** But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as *the gospel* of the circumcision was unto Peter;

Note that in this passage, the second use of “the gospel” is added by the translators¹⁴, never-the-less, they maintained the correct use of “peritome” as a noun whereas other translations use it incorrectly as an adjective. Take for instance, the English Standard Version -

^{ESV} **Galatians 2:7** On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised

This is an unfortunate translation because it attempts to separate the peoples based on a physical characteristic rather than simply labeling the two groups of people – the “circumcision” (the Jews) and the “Uncircumcision” (the non-Jews). In the Galatians passage it’s clear that Paul was referring to the Jewish people as “the circumcision” and another group as “the uncircumcision”, not necessarily the “uncircumcised”.

When Paul used the term that was translated “uncircumcised”, was he speaking of a person who had the opposite physical characteristic than that of one who is “circumcised”? Not necessarily. In Greek, as it is in English, you oftentimes indicate the opposite of a word thru the use of a negative particle. For instance, the opposite of “known” is “unknown”; the opposite of “kind” is “unkind”. In Greek, the most common negative particle is “a”. Thus the negative form of “peritome” (circumcision) would be “aperitome” (uncircumcision) and that’s what we find in the New Testament . . . but in only one verse – and it wasn’t written by Paul.

¹² An acronym for the Torah, prophets, and writings which Christian bibles refer to as the “Old Testament”

¹³ Acts 10:45, 11:2; Rom 3:30, 4:12, 15:8, Gal. 2:7, 2:8, 2:9, 2:12; Eph. 2:11, Phil. 3:3; Col. 4:11; Titus 1:10

¹⁴ In Gal. 1:6-8 Paul makes it clear that there is only one gospel

^{NKJ} **Acts 7:51** " You stiff-necked and uncircumcised (*aperitmetos* – Strong's 564) in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers *did*, so *do* you.

This, of course, is part of Stephen's defense before the Jewish leadership. This passage is the only time we see a Greek word that means the exact opposite of the word "peritome", and in this case, the "aperitome", the "uncircumcised" were actually circumcised Jews.

Though not "aperitmetos", another passage that shows the use of a negative form of the Greek word for "circumcision" is where Paul used the word "epispaomai" (Strong's 1986) to refer to a person who would attempt to "undo" his circumcision –

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 7:18** Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised (epispaomai). Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.

"Epispaomai" is a term that means "before drawing" as in "drawing a sword or knife". It's used in the book of Maccabees where it talks about the Jewish young men who would attempt to hide their Jewishness by attempting to restore the foreskin to the state it was "before the knife was drawn on it"¹⁵. We'll talk more about that later.

Since in only one place in the New Testament can we find the opposite of "peritome", where do we get all the other words that are translated "uncircumcision". We get them from the Greek word "akrobustia".

Akrobustia (Strong's 203) is a noun that means "foreskin". It comes from two Greek words that mean "the extreme end or tip of the male organ". As an adjective, it would mean "foreskinned". In the scriptures, "akrobustia" would be better translated "foreskin" or "foreskinned" because it only implies "uncircumcision" in that if the foreskin is not removed and cast off, a person is not circumcised. In other words "akrobustia" does not necessarily apply to the condition of the male organ any more than a "tire" applies to the overall mechanical condition of an automobile.

Akrobustia is equivalent to the Hebrew word "orlah" (עֲרֵלָה – Strong's 6190) or it's adjective form "arel" (עֵרֵל – Strong's 6189). As we learned earlier, the "orlah" is the foreskin that's removed and cast off. We also found that "arel" had become a derogatory term that at times was applied to both Israelites and non-Israelites. In first century Judea, the practice of using this epithet continued, especially when it came to the believers in Messiah Yeshua.

^{NKJ} **Ephesians 2:11** Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh -- who are called Uncircumcision (*akrobustia*) by what is called the Circumcision (*peritome*) made in the flesh by hands . . .

Here, Paul is telling the Ephesians that they are still referred to by the Jews as "the foreskins" – the ones who were cast off. Notice that Paul said they were called Uncircumcision. He didn't say that they were uncircumcised. Even the NKJ translators got it right . . . they capitalized "Uncircumcision" because they understood it to be a proper name. They did the same for the "Circumcision" knowing that it was a label used by the Jews for themselves. But even though the translators understood that when Paul used the word "akrobustia" he was using it as a name or label, they still did not use its proper meaning which is "foreskinned".

Using the correct understanding of "akrobustia" in the passage, it would read like this –

^{TLK version of Ephesians 2:11} Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh -- who are called the "cast off foreskins" by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands . . .

¹⁵ 1 Maccabees 1:15

Using the correct word meanings makes a difference as we'll see while we examine Paul's writings that include the translated words "Uncircumcision" or "uncircumcised".

Paul and Circumcision –

So was Paul against circumcision? Did he believe it had no value to the believers in Yeshua? Was he going against 1800 years of Hebrew history, against the Torah, against the prophets, and against YHVH and Yeshua as well? Let's examine a few passages, replacing the incorrect meaning of "akrobustia" with the correct meaning. We'll start with a couple of passages we've already mentioned.

^{KJV} **Galatians 2:7** But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the Uncircumcision (*akrobustia*) was committed unto me, as *the gospel* of the circumcision was unto Peter . . .

As mentioned before, this appears to show that Paul was sent to the uncircumcised peoples and Peter to the circumcised. But is that the case? Not necessarily. Let's apply the correct meaning to the word "akrobustia" –

^{KJV} **Galatians 2:7** But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the "for-skinned" was committed unto me, as *the gospel* of the circumcision was unto Peter;

If Paul had wanted to indicate that he was sent to those who had not been circumcised, he could have – like Steven - used the more correct term "aperitmetos". But instead, he used the derogatory term that the Jews had been using to refer the non-Jews – "for-skinned". Paul was sent to the "non-Jews", not necessarily the "not circumcised".

Let's look at another passage, this time in 1st Corinthians –

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 7:18-19** ¹⁸ Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*.

For the anti-circumcision believer who gains his understanding through proof-texting, this passage is a real gold mine. But we must remember that the first three rules for Biblical understanding are 1) context, 2) context, and 3) context! Without taking into account the context of Paul's letter, this passage is impossible to understand. One must read the entire chapter then realize that Paul is answering questions that had been previously asked by the Corinthians . . . questions that were quite unusual.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 7:1** Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman."

We know, as they surely knew back then, that sexual relations within the confines of marriage were commanded by God ("be fruitful and multiply"). So why were they asking? They were asking because of the "present distress" (vs. 26). We don't know the nature of that distress, but Paul went on to say that "the time is short" (vs. 29) and because of that he made a number of recommendations and judgments that were meant to help them endure that distress. For instance, he recommended that the unmarried and widows stay unmarried, something that is never even hinted at throughout the entire Tanakh, in the words of Yeshua, or by any of the other apostles. He summarized these recommendations by saying –

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 7:24** ²⁴ Brethren, let each one remain with God in that *state* in which he was called.

There's another dynamic going on as well, and that's the coercion of the non-Jewish believers in Yeshua (the akrobustia) to convert to Judaism for the purpose of being a part of the people of God. This

conversion process required physical circumcision or “re-circumcision”¹⁶ as the case may be. Paul was opposed to the conversion of non-Jews to Judaism since he believed they were already God’s people through faith in Messiah Yeshua. James confirmed Paul’s view at the Acts 15 conference where he made the judgment that converting to Judaism was not a requirement, though Torah observance would be expected as they learned more about the Torah through their Sabbath attendance at the synagogue.

With that said, let’s add the correct words to this passage.

^{NKJ} **1 Corinthians 7:18-19** ¹⁸ Was anyone called while circumcised (peritemno)? Let him not become uncircumcised (epispaomai). Was anyone called while uncircumcised (akrobustia) ? Let him not be circumcised (peritemno). ¹⁹ Circumcision (peritome) is nothing and uncircumcision (akrobustia) is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God *is what matters*.

Like was said earlier, the word “epispaomai” means “before drawing (the knife)” which is understood to mean that you attempt to reinstate the foreskin. In response to the first question, Paul answered saying that a person should not attempt to reverse his circumcision. Apparently, because of the “present distress” it was not advantageous to be Jewish, and thus like what had happened during the time of the Maccabees, some of the Jews were thinking they should attempt to reverse their circumcision. For the same reason, Paul indicated that those who were called while a part of the “foreskins” (the non-Jews) should not rush into being circumcised since that would make them appear to be Jewish as well. Keep in mind that Abraham had been called for at least 25 years before he was circumcised, so rushing into it was not necessary - especially if it would endanger yourself or your family. He then added that in regards to their relationship with God, being Jewish or non-Jewish (the foreskins) didn’t matter, but what mattered was that they keep the commandments – the Torah. Of course, one of the Torah commandments is that you remove the foreskin, so therefore you would be expected to take care of it at a more appropriate time – especially before eating the next Passover.

Here’s another difficult passage from the book of Romans –

^{NKJ} **Romans 2:25** For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision (akrobustia).

The context of this passage is Paul telling the Jewish believers in Rome that their lack of dedication to the Torah is inexcusable (vs. 1), especially in light of the fact that they hold in contempt the non-Jewish believers who are just beginning to learn of God’s ways. The non-Jewish believers are referred to in this passage (vs. 26) by the label “the uncircumcision” as the KJV correctly shows. By now, we understand that the translators should have used the term “the foreskins” or as it would be in the eyes of the Jews “the cast off foreskins”.

What Paul is telling the Jews in Rome is that if they believe that being a Jew (circumcision) is your gateway to the Kingdom, then you had better keep the Torah perfectly because if you don’t you will be in the same boat as one of the cast off ones (the foreskins).

Paul continued saying –

^{KJV} **Romans 2:26-28** Therefore if the uncircumcision (akrobustia) keep the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision (akrobustia) be counted for circumcision (peritome)? ²⁷ And shall not uncircumcision (akrobustia) which is by nature, if it fulfil the law, judge thee, who by the

¹⁶ See my articles on Galatians beginning with the Acts 15 Conference - <http://www.amiyisrael.org/articles/Acts15Conference.htm>

letter and circumcision (peritome) dost transgress the law? ²⁸ For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither *is that* circumcision (peritome), which is outward in the flesh:

All Paul is saying is that if the “cast off ones” keep the Torah (along with their belief in Messiah Yeshau), then in the eyes of God they are no longer “cast off” but are as much a part of God’s people as the (righteous) Jew. He goes on to say that anyone who follows after Messiah (anyone with a foreskin - which is the way we naturally are at birth) and performs the Torah will judge those who claim righteousness by their attachment to Abraham, the covenant, and physical circumcision but yet transgress the Torah.

Paul finished his point by saying that a “true” Jew is not simply one that’s been circumcised, but one that has a circumcised heart as well.

Note that Paul never said the naturally foreskinned man could remain that way. By saying “if it fulfil the law” means that he strives to obey the Torah – all of it – including the commandment to circumcise.

I personally believe that in this passage, Paul is talking about three different groups of people – 1) the circumcised Jews, 2) the “cast off forskins” and 3) the true Gentiles. I’ll talk more about this later.

Here’s another passage in Romans that, without the proper meaning of the words, appears to indicate that God is OK with us doing away with part of His law.

^{NKJ} **Romans 3:29-30** ²⁹ Or *is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, ³⁰ since *there is* one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Is Paul saying that those who are not physically circumcised are justified and thus can remain uncircumcised? No – he’s simply saying that by faith both the circumcised (the Jews) and the “foreskins – cast off ones” can be justified. It has nothing to do with the state of their male organ, it’s simply a label.

Going back to Galatians -

^{NKJ} **Galatians 5:6** ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love.

Keeping in mind that the whole purpose for Paul’s letter to the Galatians was to show them that they did not have to convert to Judaism in order to have a part in the Kingdom of God, we see Paul continually referred to the Jews as “the circumcision” (peritome) and the non-Jews as the “foreskins” (akrobestia). He continued with these terms in this passage. Thus he’s not saying that physical circumcision is of no more value than remaining physically not circumcised, for to do so would violate the Torah. What he is saying is that being a Jew or a non-Jew is irrelevant in the eyes of God as long as you’re following the example of Messiah Yeshua.

There are many other passages that could be covered, but I believe this proves the point. Paul did not teach against circumcision. Instead, he’s used a term that was popular in the Jewish culture of his day that refers to a people for whom the Jews (both believing and non-believing) held in contempt.

Historical Evidence –

If indeed the first century believers, the Christians¹⁷ or Nazarenes¹⁸ as they were sometimes call, maintained the Torah commandment of circumcision, it would seem that there would be historical

¹⁷ Acts 11:26

evidence of such . . . and there is. A 4th century Catholic priests writes of them in letters where he attempts to stamp out any vestige of Judaism from “the church”.

Epiphanius of Salamis was a Catholic bishop who served in Salamis, Cyprus He is considered a saint and a Church Father by both the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic Churches and gained a reputation as a strong defender of orthodoxy. Epiphanius wrote a number of treatises which were arguments against various religions and “heresies”. They were compiled into a collection called the “Panarion”. One of these treatises (# 29) was against the Nazarenes of the 1st century. In it he writes¹⁹ –

1:1 Next after these come the Nazoraeans. . . 1:2 . . . these people did not give themselves the name of Christ or Jesus' own name, but that of 'Nazoraeans.' 1:3 But at that time all Christians alike were called Nazoraeans. They also came to be called 'Jessaeans'¹³ for a short while, before the disciples began to be called Christians at Antioch. 5:4 . . . They were Jewish, were attached to the Law, and had circumcision. 7:4 They are perfectly versed in the Hebrew language, for the entire Law, the prophets, and the so-called Writings, I mean the poetic books, Kings, Chronicles, Esther, and all the rest - are read in Hebrew among them, as of course they are among the Jews. 7:5 They are different from Jews, and different from Christians, only in the following ways. They disagree with Jews because of their belief in Christ; but they are not in accord with Christians because they are still fettered by the Law—circumcision, the Sabbath, and the rest.

Paul was himself considered a Nazarene and thus would probably fit the description given by Epiphanius. Even though Epiphanius in some ways contradicts himself, his treatise supports the fact that Paul maintained the Torah application of circumcision.

The “Foreskinned”

We've seen that when Paul used the term “uncircumcision”, he was referring to a people who were described as being “cast away” or “cast out”. Who were those people, and who would fit that description. Could it have been the Gentiles – people who by definition were not the people of God, or were they people who had once been a part of Israel, but were later cast away? The Bible gives the answer –

^{NKJ} **Hosea 9:16-17** ¹⁶ Ephraim is stricken, their root is dried up; they shall bear no fruit. Yes, were they to bear children, I would kill the darlings of their womb." ¹⁷ My God will cast them away, because they did not obey Him; and they shall be wanderers among the nations.

Paul was speaking of the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel. The scriptures are filled with prophecies pertaining to the northern “Lost 10 Tribes” of Israel of whom God said He would cast away and spread throughout the nations, only to gather again at the end times. These descendents from the northern tribes – the Ephraimites – probably maintained the custom of circumcision, and thus when they were being called back to God's way could not be called “aperitome” the uncircumcised – because they were not uncircumcised, but they did fit the description of the “akrobustia” – the “cast off” ones. These are the ones Paul was referring to in the scriptures that incorrectly use the term “uncircumcised”.

So how does circumcision tie in to the commandment concerning fruit? Let's read the scripture again -

^{NKJ} **Leviticus 19:23-25** ²³ ' When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised (Heb. “*arel*” – *cast off foreskin*). Three years it shall be as uncircumcised (*arel*) to you. *It shall not be eaten.* ²⁴ 'But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to the LORD. ²⁵ 'And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that it may yield to you its increase: I *am* the LORD your God.

¹⁸ Acts 24:5

¹⁹ http://www.masseiana.org/panarion_bk1.htm#29.

The commandment states that the fruit of a tree is “cast off”, of no value for the first 3 years. During those years the fruit would simply fall to the ground and die. Not until the end of that 4th growing season, when the fruit become mature, is it considered holy and can be gathered, then in the beginning of the 5th year it can be consumed.

In the Hosea passage mentioned above, Ephraim bears no fruit, and if he did, it would be considered dead. But toward the end of the 4th year (the 4th millennia), Messiah Yeshua was born, and then near the beginning of the 5th millennia, He died and was resurrected. It was then that His real work began. It was then that Ephraim once again became a fruitful bow, ready to be gathered and used to feed the message of the Messiah throughout the world.

So did God lie to us in regards to circumcision? Did He and His Son “secretly” give Paul permission to change His law? Absolutely not! Paul did not teach against circumcision, instead he worked to bring the “cast off” ones back into the commonwealth of Israel, thus beginning the restoration of all things and the fulfillment of Bible prophecy.

Shalom Alecheim