

Circumcision: A token of obedience just for Israel or for Gentile God-fearers as well?

In my early days and years since finding the Almighty and His Messiah, I had thought the issue of male physical circumcision a simple one based on the writings of the Apostle Paul.

In recent years though, as I have come to learn that a significant amount of mis-translation and deliberate distortion exists in Paul's epistles, I have come to recognize that circumcision is far from a simple issue.

The challenge is partly in dissecting the epistles of Paul to try and identify what is clearly consistent with the Tanakh; removing what is clearly in contradiction to the Tanakh; and then also trying to fully appreciate what is now revealed more fully through the life, death and resurrection of Yeshua.

As a result in a recent article I had said:

"Thus, it would seem that physical circumcision is not a barrier to entry into the community of faith; the Commonwealth of Israel, but that, for men, it is

either

a necessary act of obedience at some later stage in their walk,

or

*the physical act is replaced by the 'spiritual', that is,
that the sign is seen through the reality it points to namely,
the circumcision of the heart.*

It is argued by some that physical circumcision may still be desirable to show a unity of spirit, that is, that those of the 'graft' demonstrate their unity and humility in being grafted into the cultivated Olive Tree through this action. Personally, though I see this as unlikely for the practical reason, that few would ever know if a gentile male has been circumcised as an adult to show his loyalty and support to the Commonwealth of Israel.

Thus, at this stage of my study, I believe the evidence points most strongly to the fact that the circumcision of the heart is a valid way in which the covenant can be fulfilled and a means by which Gentiles, both male and female, can in fact enter into the Abrahamic covenant. Therefore, I also believe that the Apostle Paul has not demonstrated apostasy through his position on this issue, but that his 'midrashic' comments have shown the true intention of circumcision as Moses and Jeremiah had before him." – see <http://luke443.blogspot.com/2011/04/apostle-paul-part-2.html>

I had written these comments and tried to leave the question open. After being seriously challenged by some excellent arguments from some Facebook friends especially David Thaxton, I have spent some more time on this issue and feel a little more at ease with my understanding now.

So below I have tried to summarise my understanding.

Abraham was righteous before he was circumcised, but HaShem asked that he and his family be circumcised as a mark or token of their new relationship with the Almighty. This token was to remain to mark their descendants. But this token was to be an outward sign of an inner state.

Gen 17:

1 Then Abram was ninety-nine years old, Yahweh appeared to Abram, and said to him, "I am God Almighty. Walk before me, and be blameless.

2 I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

3 Abram fell on his face. God talked with him, saying,

4 "As for me, behold, my covenant is with you. You will be the father of a multitude of nations.

5 Neither will your name any more be called Abram, but your name will be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you. Kings will come out of you.

7 I will establish my covenant between me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you.

8 I will give to you, and to your seed after you, the land where you are traveling, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. I will be their God."

9 God said to Abraham, "As for you, you will keep my covenant, you and your seed after you throughout their generations.

10 This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your seed after you. Every male among you shall

be circumcised.

11 You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. **It will be a token of the covenant between me and you.**

12 He who is eight days old will be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations, he who is born in the house, or bought with money from any foreigner who is not of your seed.

13 He who is born in your house, and he who is bought with your money, must be circumcised. My covenant will be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.

14 The uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that soul shall be cut off from his people. He has broken my covenant."

Note that this token, this sign that is physical circumcision is for the nation of Israel. All males born into the family and all bought into the family are to be circumcised.

Moses was given the 10 Words, and when explaining what he was to do with the second set of tablets, HaShem speaks to all Israel when he says *"Therefore, circumcise the foreskin of your heart; and don't be stiff necked any longer!"* (Deut 10:16)

What is meant here by a circumcised heart? I like Moshe Avraham Kempinski's answer:

"Why does G-d use the term a 'circumcised heart'? It is because circumcision involves removing a covering. We believe that every human being was born with the heart of G-d. When G-d breathed His breath into Adam, every single human being had the heart of G-d placed within him.

But what have we done? Since our youth we have covered this heart with our own ego, our won needs, and our selfish desires. We have covered or hearts and separated ourselves from true equilibrium. This is why G-d asks us to uncover our heart - to uncover the heart of G-d that is already beating inside. In this way we re-ignite what is most natural to us.

... having a relationship with G-d is essentially returning to what is most natural. The Hebrew word for repentance, 'teshuvah' means 'to return'. This is a return to the original state of affairs, being in harmony with what was always meant to be. It is not something new to be attained, nor is it some higher state of consciousness. It is returning to what is already ingrained within every single soul and in every single heart. It is about re-establishing the divine connection set in place at creation." --- Moshe Avraham Kempinski - from "The Teacher and The Preacher- a dialogue" p37

How does God establish 'circumcised hearts', as he states in Deut 30 that *"Adonai your God will circumcise your heart, .."*

Read the whole of the famous 'blessings and curses' chapter and it should be evident that it is through the Almighty's loving discipline that His people Israel, are taught the lessons of life needed to develop 'circumcised hearts'.

Deut 30:

1. It shall happen, when all these things have come on you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, **and you shall call them to mind** among all the nations, where Yahweh your God has driven you,

2 **and shall return to Yahweh your God, and shall obey his voice according to all that I command you this day, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul;**

3 that then Yahweh your God will turn your captivity, and have compassion on you, and will return and gather you from all the peoples, where Yahweh your God has scattered you.

4 If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of the heavens, from there will Yahweh your God gather you, and from there he will bring you back:

5 and Yahweh your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and he will do you good, and multiply you above your fathers.

6 Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed, to love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, that you may live.

7 Yahweh your God will put all these curses on your enemies, and on those who hate you, who persecuted you.

8 You shall return and obey the voice of Yahweh, and do all his commandments which I command you this day.

So, at this time, physical circumcision was a marker of Jewishness, it was a requirement for the children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, if they wished to inherit and possess the Land that the Almighty was giving them (see Joshua 5 as well).

It was also a requirement of any who wished to find redemption and salvation. Gentiles could become proselytized Jews and for men this would involve getting circumcised and obeying the 613 mitzvot (commandments).

It may appear that Gentiles could be accepted by HaShem without becoming Jews as we read in Isaiah 56:6-7, *“Also **the foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh, to minister to him, and to love the name of Yahweh, to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath from profaning it, and holds fast my covenant; even them will I bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer: their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.**”*

The ‘New International Bible Commentary’ (General Editor F.F Bruce), argues though, that the to ‘join or bind to God’ in verse 6 implies circumcision. If so, then the foreigners here, these Gentiles have become proselytized Jews, as they have not just been obedient to the Sabbath and the 10 Words, but to all the 613 commandments of the covenant.

Thus, it appears that physical circumcision is indeed a marker or token of being Jewish and a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We may well ask though that, if Gentiles who become believers, as they are grafted into this family, must they also be circumcised?

The answer before the arrival of Yeshua was surely yes. So another very relevant question is, what has changed with the crucifixion and resurrection of Yeshua?

Before addressing this though, let us consider a little how HaShem expects obedience to his mitzvot, his commandments (and also perhaps by inference to circumcision) to play out in real life.

Consider the case of so called ‘animal sacrifices’ and ‘blood atonement’.

See for example Leviticus 17:

*1 ADONAI said to Moshe, 2 "Speak to Aharon and his sons and to all the people of Isra'el. Tell them that this is what ADONAI has ordered: 3 'When someone from the community of Isra'el slaughters an ox, lamb or goat inside or outside the camp 4 without bringing it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to present it as an offering to ADONAI before the tabernacle of ADONAI, he is to be charged with blood - he has shed blood, and that person is to be cut off from his people. 5 The reason for this is so that the people of Isra'el will bring their sacrifices that they sacrifice out in the field -so that they will bring them to ADONAI, to the entrance of the tent of meeting, to the cohen, and sacrifice them as peace offerings to ADONAI. 6 The cohen will splash the blood against the altar of ADONAI at the entrance to the tent of meeting and make the fat go up in smoke as a pleasing aroma for ADONAI. 7 No longer will they offer sacrifices to the goat-demons, before whom they prostitute themselves! This is a permanent regulation for them through all their generations.' 8 "Also tell them, 'When someone from the community of Isra'el or one of the foreigners living with you offers a burnt offering or sacrifice 9 without bringing it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to sacrifice it to ADONAI, that person is to be cut off from his people. 10 When someone from the community of Isra'el or one of the foreigners living with you eats any kind of blood, I will set myself against that person who eats blood and cut him off from his people. **11 For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for yourselves; for it is the blood that makes atonement because of the life.'***

We see here the very clear and emphatic prohibition against eating the blood of an animal, because the life (the ‘breath’ of God) is in the blood and this ‘life’ must be given back to God.

God informs Israel that when animals are sacrificed, they are to be sacrificed on the altar, not out in the field where they may be sacrificed to idols but before the Almighty, in recognition that their meat is an offering from God, but that the blood of the animal remains His.

Note also that in verse 11, that the sacrifice required both the altar and the shedding of blood. The offering being made here is a ‘sin offering’, that is, an offering for unintentional sin (see Lev 16 preceding).

Most Christians, on reading the Tanakh (OT) and from the preaching they receive in their churches believe that bringing a blood sacrifice to God is crucial and indispensable for the cleansing of sin. This very belief is foundational to the argument that Yeshua’s death could be a full ‘atonement’ for the sins of the world.

However, it appears that at no time was this the commonly accepted belief of the Jewish people! That is, the custodians of the Tanakh have never believed that the shedding of blood is the only and necessary ingredient for repentance and forgiveness of sin!

Rather the Tanakh declares that there are three ways to find atonement with the Almighty.

They are the 'sin sacrifice', repentance, and righteousness or charity¹ (from the Hebrew word 'Tzedakah' – giving to the poor is seen as an act of righteousness or justice and is seen as a duty).

In fact the sin sacrifice is only for unintentional sin (see Numbers 15:27-31). There are a great many scriptures that demonstrate as well that sin sacrifice is not really the best option at all. At the core of any act of atonement, is the call from HaShem for man to repent and act with a circumcised heart.

For example, King David stated in Ps 40:7 *"Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; but my ears You have opened; burnt offering and sin offering You have not required."* Also in Ps 50:16-17 King David states: *For you don't delight in sacrifice, or else I would give it. You have no pleasure in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*

Also when we look closer at the 'blood sacrifice' we see from Lev 5:11 that a poor person could bring grain if they could not afford an animal.

Lev 5:11 *'But if he can't afford two doves, or two young pigeons, then he shall bring his offering for that in which he has sinned, the tenth part of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it, neither shall he put any frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering.'*

Thus, it should be seen here that all these commandments are ultimately acts which are to serve as tokens, and as 'heart prompts'. That is, though such actions and steps of obedience, man was to come to a position where he would turn his heart over to HaShem.

The principle that I would suggest is evident here is that it is the state of the heart that is vital, not necessarily the outward sign or token or even mitzvot.

Using this principle, as seen through the replacement of animal blood with grain, we may also surmise that, as physical circumcision is also the outward sign, there may be an approach where the physical act of circumcision is not vital, at least in circumstances where a 'circumcised heart' is evident.

And so this leads us quite naturally, I think, to the case of Titus.

Titus was a Gentile (Greek) and one of the Apostle Paul's most trusted assistants. He went with Paul on a number of his journeys and was also went with him when Paul went to Jerusalem for the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

While the Apostle Paul saw that it was important to circumcise Timothy (I have discussed this in a number of my articles including 'Living The Way' and 'Siblings of the King'²), he very emphatically resisted any calls to circumcise Titus.

Gal 2:3: *"But not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised."*

Or as David Stern translates it:

Gal 2:3-5 *"But they didn't force my Gentile companion Titus to undergo b'rit-milah. 4 Indeed, the question came up only because some men who pretended to be brothers had been sneaked in - they came in surreptitiously to spy out the freedom we have in the Messiah Yeshua, so that they might enslave us. 5 Not even for a minute did we give in to them, so that the truth of the Good News might be preserved for you."* – Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)

What is especially significant here is that, as far as we can ascertain from the limited accounts we have in the New Testament, Titus was never asked to be circumcised even though he was considered, not only a follower of Yeshua, but also a very influential elder and church leader in the first century.

Also, Titus was present at the Jerusalem Council when the very significant issue of just what 'Jewish markers' and what portion of the 613 mitzvot (commandments) should be expected to be complied with by Gentile followers of The Way.

1 See for example Leviticus 4:1-35, Deuteronomy 4:26-31; I Kings 8:46-50; Isaiah 55:6-9; Jeremiah 7:3-23; Ezekiel 18:1-23; Hosea 6:6; 14:2-3; Micah 6:6; Psalm 40:7-9; 51:16-19; Proverbs 10:2; 11:4; 16:6; II Chronicles 6:36-39

2 Timothy's mother was Jewish and so Timothy was considered Jewish by the Jewish religious authorities of his day. He father though was Greek and he had not been circumcised 8 days after birth. To be an effective witness to his Jewish brethren, the Apostle Paul saw the need for Timothy's Jewishness to be unequivocal.

In fact, the Jerusalem Council began with the very question of circumcision:

Acts 15:1-5

1 Some men came down from Judea and taught the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you can't be saved."

2 Therefore when Paul and Barnabas had no small discord and discussion with them, they appointed Paul and Barnabas, and some others of them, to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders about this question.

3 They, being sent on their way by the assembly, passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, declaring the conversion of the Gentiles. They caused great joy to all the brothers.

4 When they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the assembly and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all things that God had done with them.

5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses."

Note that the issue of circumcision is mentioned both in verses 1 and 5, and yet, after the discussion, and with the very presence of the uncircumcised Titus, circumcision is not included in the edict of the Council of Elders.

While I have presented elsewhere that the Noahide Laws presented by the Jerusalem Council were clearly to be in addition to adherence to the 10 Words (which clearly includes the Sabbath), physical circumcision was not part of this core upon which the prohibitions against the worship of idols, against sexual immorality, against eating blood and strangled animals, were added.

Thus, in circumcising Timothy (also discussed in earlier articles) and in not circumcising Titus, the Apostle Paul, along with the Jerusalem Council³, determined that Gentiles did not need to become Jews to be grafted into the cultivated Olive Tree of Israel⁴.

While through the Messiah, Jew and Gentile had become one spiritually, just as male and female had become one, they were still distinctly different. For a great many good and practical reasons, Jewish believers were not to abandon their heritage and their obligations under Torah to, as much as possible, observe all 613 mitzvot⁵; Gentile believers, on the other hand were not called to become proselytized Jews; that is, they do not need to take on the whole yoke of the 613 plus the Oral Law.

I see 1 Corinthians 7:18-19 as very indicative of this understanding: *"Was someone already circumcised when he was called? Then he should not try to remove the marks of his circumcision. Was someone uncircumcised when he was called? He shouldn't undergo b'rit-milah (circumcision). 19 Being circumcised means nothing, and being uncircumcised means nothing; what does mean something is keeping God's commandments"* – CJB

I believe that the Apostle Paul is here stating first that Jews remain Jewish and Gentiles remain Gentiles, but that what is more important than the token of circumcision⁶ and the identity that it implies, is that all are to be obedient to Torah, to the commandments of God. Note also, that, if these verses are a reliable translation of the Apostles words and understanding, then if we accept his legitimacy, Paul is clearly stating the circumcision is NOT a commandment of God (at least, not for Gentiles).

Gentiles were still called to be obedient to Torah but to appreciate that just as man and women have different obligations and roles before the Almighty, Gentiles also have different obligations and roles. One of their roles being to make Jewish

³ The Apostles Peter, James and John, etc., clearly agreed with Paul and Barnabas regarding Titus, as Titus was in their midst when they met and discussed these issues, which included circumcision. – see Acts 15:5 & Gal 2:1

⁴ Some have argued that the 3-4 Noahide Laws given here were only a starting point for acceptance of Gentiles into the Commonwealth of Israel, and that therefore at some time later in their journey, Gentiles would be expected to be circumcised and adopt all 613 mitzvot. While this is possible, it seems highly unlikely for a number of reasons. Firstly, if circumcision were to be required at some later date or stage in the spiritual journey of Gentiles, given its primacy in this discussion, we could expect this delay to be explicitly stated. In fact, this is true for all the other Jewish commandments. There is plenty of evidence in the words of both Yeshua and the Apostle Paul that obedience to the 10 Words is a requirement for entry in the Kingdom of God. There is not the same weight of evidence for circumcision or the complete 613 mitzvot. In fact, the evidence for participation in the Feasts for example, is that it is recommended but not obligatory (eg. Col 2:16).

⁵ Since the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE and, if living outside of Israel, all 613 mitzvot can not be observed. *"The 19th/20th century scholar Rabbi Israel Meir Kagan, identified 77 positive mitzvot and 194 negative mitzvot which can be observed outside of Israel today."* - <http://www.jewfaq.org/halakhah.htm>

⁶ When the Apostle Paul states that 'circumcision means nothing ...' he should not be taken literally here. He is using a Hebraism (a form of hyperbole), in that he accentuates the differences to make his point. As an observant Jew, his circumcision was still an important part of his identity.

people jealous of their devotion to HaShem, and in doing so, to help some of the natural seed of Abraham repent and return to HaShem.

While the non-circumcision of Titus is perhaps the most telling testimony in this very challenging case, the Apostle Paul also offers an insight into this new understanding that had been brought about by the life, death and resurrection of Yeshua.

When HaShem poured out the blood of His Son on His Holy Hill⁷, the Almighty effectively opened the door to the Kingdom to Gentiles. This was evidenced by the pouring out of the Spirit on the household of Cornelius, and spoken of by the Apostle Paul in a number of places, but significantly in Ephesians 2 and Colossians 2.

In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul announces that the 'middle wall of partition' had been removed. He also speaks of this in Colossians 2:11-15 where he describes how Gentiles are able to move from a place of no hope and without God, to a place in the Kingdom through being 'circumcised' in the circumcision of Messiah.

Col 2:11 -12

"Also it was in union with him that you were circumcised with a circumcision not done by human hands, but accomplished by stripping away the old nature's control over the body. In this circumcision done by the Messiah, you were buried along with him by being immersed; and in union with him, you were also raised up along with him by God's faithfulness that worked when he raised Yeshua from the dead." - CJB

Did Yeshua bring a change in Torah?

What, if anything, changed with the arrival of Yeshua? There is no suggestion that he annulled the Torah. He certainly explained it and completed it, but there is evidence that he did more. Among the more is that he became the new High Priest⁸; he became the Mediator between man and God and he is, and will be the judge of all men (under the direction of the Almighty).

Further though, did his life, his death, resurrection and ascension change in any way the manner and conditions through which man could have relationship with the Almighty?

I would argue the answer is a qualified yes.

HaShem had declared to Moses that he would raise up a prophet who would speak exactly what the Almighty told him. Yeshua did this.

There is no question that Yeshua spoke as HaShem directed him, and lived as led by God. He was Torah observant; and informed his brethren that to inherit eternal life, they too must be Torah observant. However, there is very good evidence I think that Yeshua in 'completing' Torah, introduced something of a new path to the Father.

To understand this 'new path', I see it as important to distinguish the 'instructions of God' (Torah) that involve how we are to act in reverence before Him and towards our neighbours, (relational commandments - essentially the 10 Words) from actions that mark our membership of some group or which help protect us from harm (ceremonial, normative and positive but not moral commandments).

A good question then is, did Yeshua expand on the relational commandments and in any way change them? I would say no – he perhaps intensified them, or at least better elucidated them. For example, when he stated in Matthew 5:20 *"For I tell you that unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, there is no way you will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven."*, I believe he was arguing for righteousness to be an attitude of the heart.

The heart defines the person. Consider a wrong heart attitude, for example someone who is a thief at heart. A thief is not just someone who has stolen something, but anyone who, if given the opportunity, may indeed steal something.

The heart needs to be open to God, to be circumcised, to be so in tune with the Spirit of God and the Messiah, that it naturally does what is right at all times. After all Yeshua prayed that we would be one in spirit with him as he is with the Father. This is a spirit of unity of purpose, of love and loving relationship.

⁷ See my article on Psalm 2:6 as well as Frank Selch's more exhaustive commentary at www.theolivetreeconnection.com

⁸ For more on this very significant issue see my article 'Yeshua the High Priest' @ www.circumcisedheart.info

So, I see no evidence that Yeshua brought any change in the 'relational' and moral commandments. Did he though open up some changes in ceremonial, normative and positive commandments?

Most definitely – consider the introduction of the new Priesthood for example. So, it seems to me, there is at least some possibility that a change in other normative and/or positive commandments such as circumcision may have occurred. Consider one of the times we have recorded where Yeshua spoke about the circumcision ritual.

John 7: 22-24

Moses has given you circumcision (not that it is of Moses, but of the fathers), and on the Sabbath you circumcise a boy. If a boy receives circumcision on the Sabbath, that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me, because I made a man completely healthy on the Sabbath? Don't judge according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment.

Yeshua here is both condoning a practice that had developed and expanding it in an intriguing way. The practice had been developed that if a boy's 8th day from birth was the Sabbath, the person performing the circumcision was allowed to break the Sabbath by carrying the tools required through the village and performing the ritual. It was considered that when this conflict between the requirements of observing the Sabbath and of circumcising a male child on the 8th day were in conflict the circumcision took precedence. If however the child was ill on his 8th day since birth (which say was the Wednesday) and he was not well until the Saturday, the Sabbath, the ruling was that now the Sabbath took precedence and so the circumcision would not be performed until a later day.

Yeshua by his comments appears to condone this approach to the potential conflict between mitzvot (commandments). However, what he then goes on to say is possibly even more remarkable. Firstly, he states, given this ruling, why should he be condemned for healing the whole man on the Sabbath. The clear understanding being that circumcision was a form of healing (not only a token or marker but a positive commandment), perhaps primarily because it was a mark of entry into the family/tribe of Israel.

If Yeshua though has just healed the whole man, why would this now 'complete' man need physical circumcision (a part healing only)? Of-course if the man was Jewish he was most likely already circumcised, but Yeshua did heal at least some Gentiles (the Centurion's servant was probably gentile). Was this healing just from sickness, or more complete healing?

Let us consider again though the Jerusalem Council.

If nothing had changed with Yeshua, then there was absolutely no need for the pronouncement of James (Yaa'cov), the brother of Yeshua, on behalf of the elders and community of believers. It was already well established as to how Gentiles could enter the Commonwealth of Israel.

The fact that the Jerusalem Council saw it necessary to have their conference and make their ruling shows that things had changed. The events at Cornelius's house were one of the 'new' events that indicated the change. The vision from God, that Peter had on the roof of Simon the Tanner's house (Acts 10) also indicates that the Almighty recognized the need to help Peter see that a new way was now here.

The fact, that the question of circumcision needed to be discussed was also evidence that the apostles saw that a new path was open.

Turning again to Paul's writings, I see in Ephesians an indication that Gentiles can now come into relationship with the Almighty through the work of Yeshua and that they no longer need to become proselytized Jews.

Eph 2:11-13 "Therefore remember that once you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "uncircumcision" by that which is called "circumcision," (in the flesh, made by hands); that you were at that time separate from Messiah, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of the promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Messiah Yeshua you who once were far off are made near in the blood of Messiah."

Note that Gentiles become 'near', that is fellow citizens with Moses and David, etc., NOT through becoming Jewish, but through the 'blood of Messiah'.

Col 3:10 "... hav(ing) put on the new man, who is being renewed in knowledge after the image of his Creator, where there can't be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, bondservant, freeman; but Messiah is all, and in all."

Again, I believe that we are being told here that Yeshua is the one through whom this union, this unity of spirit and purpose comes, not the act of physical circumcision. Perhaps then gentiles, through Yeshua becoming their High Priest, their mediator and advocate, it is his circumcision that becomes their circumcision.

Perhaps this is the meaning of Colossians 2:11-12 *"Also it was in union with him that you were circumcised with a circumcision not done by human hands, but accomplished by stripping away the old nature's control over the body. In this circumcision done by the Messiah, you were buried along with him by being immersed; and in union with him, you were also raised up along with him by God's faithfulness that worked when he raised Yeshua from the dead."* (CJB)

For a male gentile follower of Yeshua to undertake circumcision may in fact then, be a denial of the efficacy of the crucifixion of Yeshua himself. Clearly such an act would be an unintentional error as the motives are pure, but it could still bring some grief to our Lord and our God. So again, I see a need to precede here with great caution.

The Jerusalem Council – a starting point in obedience or an end point?

A number have argued that the Noahide Laws decreed by James (Yaa'cov), the brother of Yeshua after the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) were only a starting point for gentile believers to be accepted into fellowship with Jewish believers, and that after accepting these initial 'laws', the gentile believers would over time, as they attended the synagogue, hear the words of Moses and be led to complete obedience to Torah.

In relation to the issue of physical circumcision then, this is expressed below by David Thaxton: *"My understanding of the Jerusalem Council may be different than yours. I see James telling all believers that circumcision is not required for initial salvation, as Moses is taught in the Synagogue and new converts will understand and comply later.."*

I would recommend a re-reading of Acts 15 while keeping this question in mind to see if this seems most likely. I see a number of reasons to argue that it does not.

Firstly, note in v9-11, *"He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you tempt God, that you should put a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they are."*, that Peter states that his brethren have not been able to bear the yoke, NOT that they haven't been able to be it early in their walk but only over time as they learned and grew in their knowledge of Torah.

What about the reference to Moses in v19-21? *"Therefore my judgment is that we don't trouble those from among the Gentiles who turn to God, but that we write to them that they abstain from the pollution of idols, from sexual immorality, from what is strangled, and from blood. For Moses from generations of old has in every city those who preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath."* It would appear to me that the reference to Moses being preached in every city, is not stating that after being obedient to these Noahide Laws, they will then learn the rest of the words of Moses over time, as the evidence is clear that most Gentile 'God-fearers' were already attending the synagogues at this time.

In fact, in this context, it appears that James is arguing that these gentiles would be familiar with these Noahide Laws and nothing more. More revealing perhaps, is the content of the letter sent to the Gentile brothers in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. There is no mention here of Moses being preached and in fact of anything in terms of instructions and teaching beyond the four Noahide Laws mentioned.

As I have explained in other articles, I see good evidence that the four Noahide Laws were understood to be in addition to the Ten Commandments, which were extremely foundational to Israel's daily life and also very well articulated by both Yeshua and the Apostle Paul.

It is also illuminating to consider our great Jewish scholars who have spent some time studying the influence of Christianity on Judaism view the events of Acts 15. One good example is Yehezkel Kaufmann, an orthodox Jew who believes the resurrection of Yeshua was a myth, and who was a highly respected Professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. He writes:

"The origin of gentile Christianity was a religious and historic event, not a new religious concept. Religious Judaism longed for the return of the gentiles but, because of its historic experience and the continued dominance of idolatry among the gentiles, did not think that the gentiles would repent. Christianity, as a messianic movement, held at first to this historic messianic judgment of the nation Israel and refrained altogether from preaching the gospel to gentiles. But the gentiles

were, so to speak, "evangelized" of themselves. They were deeply moved by the Christian mystery and received the glad tidings which had not been announced for them. It was this messianic acceptance among the "gentiles," that is, the judaizing gentiles — those "God-fearers" who had not yet become fully Jews — which turned Christianity from its original course.

To the early Nazarenes, this Christian movement was a sign that God had not destined all the uncircumcised to perdition; thus their exclamation: "**Then God has given even the heathen repentance and the hope of life!**" (Acts 11:18). The idea that God desired the turn of the non-Jews to the faith of Israel had long been established in Israel But that God had addressed the gospel of the kingdom of heaven also to the gentiles, that he might baptize them with the "holy Spirit" and work "wonders" among them — these things were altogether new.

And in them, something else was implied: God has baptized these "God-fearers" who do not observe the commandments, **these uncircumcised gentiles**, with "the holy Spirit"; in this, he has given a sign that the "kingdom of heaven," which was vouchsafed only to the righteous few of this generation, is given also to those gentiles who believe in Jesus even though they do not observe the commandments. Therewith, Christianity began to function as the revelation of a new covenant, a new, divinely revealed distinct testament whereby, without dependence on the old, the proselytes could be received of the God of Israel. The triumphant future of Christianity is foreshadowed in the baptism of Cornelius and his company." p 158 'Christianity And Judaism: Two Covenants' By Yehezkel Kaufmann

Clearly Kaufmann saw the 'baptism of Cornelius' event as one example that something had changed and that the physically uncircumcised could become citizens of the Kingdom. Note his reference to Acts 11:18, which at least to Kaufmann seems to confirm this.

Another perspective:

Firstly, I don't believe the Pharisees that ask about circumcision for the Gentiles were outsiders at all. It appears from both the full context and the fact that so many Pharisees became follower of Yeshua, that those asking the questions here were not trying to make things difficult at all, but asking a bigger question than what is literally recorded.

I believe that the question was really just a metonym or short-hand for becoming Jewish.

To illustrate, in Australia (such metaphors are normally cultural), if my wife and I were going out to some big event and she were to ask me what I was going to wear and my answer was 'Black Tie', it would not mean that that was all I was planning on wearing. 'Black Tie' as part of a man's formal attire is a shorthand or metonym to describe that I would plan to wear a suit (tux) and probably even a bow tie, etc.

I believe that same metonymic approach is used in Acts 15. The Pharisees aren't just asking should the male gentiles be physically circumcised but really should they become fully Jewish (of which circumcision is a very significant part of course).

Now if we read Acts 15 and the Pharisees question as really in effect 'Should the Gentiles become proselytized Jews?', the complete response is to this very question. This is why circumcision is not directly mentioned in the reply – because the apostles understood the metonym, that is, what the real question was. Now, if you re-read the reply, the response fits the 'complete' question much better.

If this metonymic approach was being used then the conclusion is clearly that Acts 15 not some halfway point at all, but the complete answer.

The proof is in the pudding:

Let us consider though the impact over time of the Jerusalem Council's edict.

If it was indeed just a starting point for relationship and membership of the Commonwealth of Israel, we would expect to see historical evidence (if attainable), of the Gentile followers of Yeshua embracing circumcision and all 613 mitzvot.

Alternatively, if this edict was not just a starting point then there should be evidence that the Gentile followers did not overtime get circumcised, but essentially remained obedient to the 10 Words and the 4 Noahide Laws and other 'relational' Torah commands, including the Feast Days, but did not take up all the ceremonial and situational commandments.

The investigation of what transpired after the Jerusalem Council of 49 CE though, is made more difficult by two factors:

1. The real paucity of original documentation from 61 CE to around 100 CE, and
2. the significant shift in the Gentile Churches doctrinal position which began during this time as was well entrenched as early as 120-160 CE.

To support point one above, see the quote below by Adolf von Harnack:

"The greatest gap in our knowledge consists in the fact, that we know so little about the course of things from about the year 61 to the beginning of the reign of Trajan [98]. The consolidating and remodeling process must, for the most part, have taken place in this period. We possess probably not a few writings which belong to that period; but how are we to prove this? How are they to be arranged? Here lies the cause of most of the differences, combinations and uncertainties; many scholars, therefore, actually leave these 40 years out of account, and seek to place everything in the first three decennia of the second century." Adolf von Harnack, History Of Dogma, p.144

The change or doctrinal shift highlighted in point two is seen in this astounding quote from Clement, the Bishop of Rome (88-98 CE): *"If Christ the Lord who saved us, being first spirit, then became flesh, and so called us, in like manner also shall we in this flesh receive our reward."* (2nd Clement 9.5).

These two factors then, make it difficult to establish with any great certainty the full facts on this challenging issue⁹. Despite this, I believe the evidence highlighted below is still reasonably strong.

It might also be helpful to understand what were the accepted conditions for Gentiles to become proselytized Jews in the middle of the first century of the Common Era?

"It would appear, according to the Talmud, that on the occasion of admitting proselytes strictly so called into the Jewish communion three things were necessary:

- (1) circumcision;*
- (2) baptism, i.e. a bath with a view to Levitical purification; and*
- (3) a sacrifice (literally, a gracious acceptance of blood).*

In the case of women only the last two were required. After the destruction of the temple, as a matter of course the sacrifice was discontinued also." - Emil Schurer "A History Of The Jewish People In The Time Of Jesus Christ"

It is interesting to note then that after 70 CE, Gentile women need only submit to baptism (mikvah) to be accepted into the Jewish commonwealth. Until around 45 CE with the move of the Spirit at Cornelius's house, almost all believers had been Jewish or Jewish proselytes (called 'Nazarenes'¹⁰ by Kaufmann above).

Now they faced the challenge of accepting Gentiles. This led to the Jerusalem Council of 49 CE. What follows is some of the relevant evidence from this time on.

The fourth book of the Sibylline oracles, composed around 80 CE, and considered by most to be of Jewish origin, and paraphrasing Schurer ("A History Of The Jewish People In The Time Of Jesus Christ") *"contains an address to the Gentiles, in which prominence is given only to the worship of the true God and the belief in a future judgment, and most significantly instead of requiring the converted Gentile to be circumcised, states that only a mikvah (bath of purification or baptism) is necessary."*

I personally find his assessment a little strained. You can read this 'book' here:

<http://www.elfinspell.com/SibyllineOraclesBk4.html>.

Emil Schurer also suggests that some minimal observance of the ceremonial laws was common among Gentile 'God-fearers': *"The result of this was that to almost every one of the Jewish communities of the dispersion there was attached a following of "God---fearing" Gentiles who adopted the Jewish (i.e..... the monotheistic and imageless) mode of worship, attended the Jewish synagogues, but who, in the observance of the ceremonial law, restricted themselves to certain leading points, and so were regarded as outside the fellowship of the Jewish communities. ... Now if we ask ourselves what those points of the ceremonial law were which these Gentiles observed, we will find them plainly enough indicated in the passages already quoted from Josephus, Juvenal, and Tertullian. All three agree in this, that it was the Jewish observance of the Sabbath and the prescriptions with regard to meats that were in most general favour within the circles in question."* P314 Schurer "The Jewish People in the Times of Jesus"

⁹ Alex Hall has written a fascinating short summary of von Harnack's 'History of Dogma'. It is well worth a read – see <http://www.christianmonotheism.com/media/text/Alex%20Hall%202007.pdf> for a pdf version.

¹⁰ Ray A Pritz in 'Nazerene Jewish Christianity' argues that the Nazerenes were the Christian sect that most faithfully maintained the doctrines of the first disciples and apostles.

What does this tell us? It tells us that Gentiles such as at Colosse were obeying the edicts of the Jerusalem Council and were also observing the Sabbath. That is, it does indeed appear that they were effectively obeying the 10 Words and the 4 Noahide Laws, at least as a minimum and yet were not obeying all ceremonial laws. Note also no mention of physical circumcision.

Thus, given the time since the Jerusalem Council to the writings of Josephus, Juvenal, and Tertullian (160-220 CE), it would appear that the Jerusalem Council edict had not been just a starting point towards total Torah and Jewish observance.

Kaufmann also saw Christianity as removing physical circumcision and yet retaining a 'baptism'¹¹ as a 'rite of conversion': *Christianity's innovation was baptism as the specific rite of conversion. The perplexity of the Nazarene community resembles in some respect that of the time of Ezra and Nehemiah and the succeeding generation, when the concept of religious conversion was in process of formulation. The Christian solution to the question of conversion derives from the change in Judaism. It was both formally and in substance the Jewish principle that without the faith of Israel there is no salvation. To this concept the Christian church now attached new rites centered in the life and person of Jesus.* – 'Christianity And Judaism: Two Covenants' Kaufman p150

It would appear that up until the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the followers of Yeshua had been considered just another sect of the 'proto-Judaism' of the time.

There is a significant amount of evidence that the followers of Yeshua were in many ways indistinguishable from other faithful Jews. In "Judaism A Very Short Introduction" (p 20) Norman Solomon states: "... up to 50-60 AD there was no dividing line between Judaism and Christianity, Jesus indeed never thought of himself as preaching a religion other than Judaism or Torah ... if you asked Jesus or his disciples what religion they were, they would have replied Jewish".

Even the Jewish historian Josephus, after travelling through Israel in 50-60 AD saw Israel as composed of 4 groups, namely the Pharisees, the Saducees, the Essenes and the Zealots. He did not mention the 'Christians' or 'Nazarenes' as a separate group.

Many scholars argue that it was the destruction of the Temple coupled with the flight of Christians to Pella, and the establishment of the new 'Sanhedrin' council¹² at Yavneh that led to the split of the Church from its Jewish roots.

Pritz argues that these Christians who fled the impending destruction of Jerusalem prior to its fall in 70 CE were Nazarenes: *"One event which would seem to provide the first link between that Jerusalem congregation and the Jewish Christianity of patristic writings is the reported flight to Pella of the Decapolis.3 This move to Pella was undertaken, according to Epiphanius, by the sect known as the Nazoraioi (Nazarenes). Or, as Epiphanius would rather express it, the Nazarenes were the descendants of those Jerusalem believers who fled to Pella."* - 'Nazarene Jewish Christianity' by Ray A. Pritz

If Pritz and Kaufmann are correct and the Nazarenes were the most faithful sect of the growing Christian community then this may muddy the waters a little and bring contra evidence to my contention regarding circumcision as Pritz states: *"In addition to this second-hand information, that the Nazarenes still existed in his day, Augustine supplies us with the following information about the sect:*

- 1) they profess to be Christians and confess that Christ is the Son of God;
- 2) they practice baptism;
- 3) they keep the old law, specifically including
 - a. circumcision,
 - b. Sabbath observance, and
 - c. food restrictions such as abstinence from swine; and
- 4) they are few in number." P 78

Given that the followers of Yeshua had grown to at least 10's of thousands in the early years, the information that they were few in number seems questionable. Also, as Pritz goes on to state, Augustine's 'facts' also seem questionable:

¹¹ It is important to recognize that mikvahs (purification baths or 'baptisms') were a very important aspect of religious life, of 'halacha' in Israel.

¹² Many biblical scholars believe that the "Birkat ha-Minim" benediction introduced by the Yavneh council, was aimed at removing Christian participation in the synagogues, and this coupled with the increasing Hellenistic influence within the church, led to the church separating from its roots and losing its Way.

"However: The statement that they are few in number, coming as it does after Augustine's uncertainty as to whether they still exist, gives the impression that it is not so much a statement of known fact as it is a reasonable assumption based on their obscurity. He himself has not encountered them and knows very few who have, therefore they cannot be (or ever have been) a very populous group. Likewise the assertion that they abstain from eating swine's flesh could well be a conclusion Augustine has drawn on his own. He knows that they keep the Law and are "Jews and nothing else," as Epiphanius says. He may logically infer that these Jewish Christians will not eat swine. It should be remembered that neither Epiphanius nor Jerome nor indeed any other writer brings this charge against the sect.

We can also see here that if they were only Jewish believers then of course we would expect them to still practice circumcision. So essentially, we gain little from this information and there appears little else in Pritz's book that further elucidates the gentile circumcision question.

Ignatius of Antioch, was apparently a student of John the Apostle third Bishop of Antioch. Writing to the Philadelphians sometime between 98 and 117 CE he states:

*"His disciples said to him, "is circumcision useful or not?" He said to them, "If it were useful, their father would produce children already circumcised from their mother. **Rather, the true circumcision in spirit has become profitable in every respect.**"* - Chapter 6, 'Ignatius to the Philadelphians'

Whether his statement here was factual or not and whether it was in full agreement with the apostles is rather difficult to ascertain. Ignatius for example was apparently one of the first to push for a change of the Sabbath to the first day of the week.

More conclusive information appears to be presented by Origen (around 203-216 CE) and Eusebius (around 300 CE) and Emperor Julian (around 350+ CE). Below are some revealing quotes from 'Jews, Pagans And Christians In Conflict' By David Rokeah:

"... Origen exhibited great restraint and curtailed his exchange of words with the Jew by saying: "It is not now on the agenda to explain the rationale of circumcision, which was begun by Abraham and forbidden by Jesus, who did not wish that his disciples should practice the same...."

Reading the Historia Ecclesiastica (by Eusebius) reveals that the central conflict and polemic between Jews and Christians were those of the period that preceded the revolt of 66-70 C.E. Afterwards, the Historia Ecclesiastica included almost no comments on the Jews, whereas citations from the addresses of Christian apologists to the Roman emperors and also quotations taken from the Acts of the martyrs abounded....

From the Jews' point of view, the limits of a debate were not exceeded, and the Jews therefore saw no need to compile polemical treatises against the Christians."

Circumcision, and unleavened bread during Passover:

*On these matters, Julian notes: Now I must consider this other question and ask them, for what reason do you not circumcise yourselves? **They reply that Paul declared that circumcision of the heart but not of the flesh was bestowed upon Abraham because he believed. He said nothing more about the circumcision of the flesh, and we should accept the not impious words proclaimed by him and Peter.***

Julian also disputed the right of the Christians to abolish circumcision on the basis of an allegorical interpretation and showed that, according to the Torah, the foreskin of the flesh must be circumcised (Contra Galilaeos, 351 A-B)."

While all Origen, Eusebius and Julian were all Hellenists, this information does still appear reasonable, and thus these men do give some support for the argument that physical circumcision had not been a rite of conversion for Gentiles coming into the church.

Certainly physical circumcision no longer part of 'Christianity' by 130 CE. The evidence is fairly strong that followers of Yeshua did not take part in the Bar Kochba revolt of 132 CE. A significant part of the rationale behind this revolt was the Roman order to ban circumcision. Also by reason of the Messianic character of the movement it was quite impossible for Christians to take part in it.

They could not deny their own Messiah by recognising the leader of the political revolution as also a Messiah.

It was only under Emperor Antoninus Pius (Roman Emperor from 138 – 161 CE) that the Jews were again allowed to circumcise their children. Jewish writings which refer to the circumcision prohibition, affirm also that even the observance

of the Sabbath and the study of Torah had been forbidden.

Interestingly when Emperor Antoninus Pius removed the circumcision prohibition, he only removed it for native Jews. It still remained in place for Gentiles.

It would therefore appear reasonable that if male Gentile converts to Christianity had been getting circumcised as a matter of faith and obedience, then this prohibition would have caused significant problems as it did for the Jewish population and would have been recorded. No such recordings of Christian revolts or protests are currently known.

Tertullian (160 -220 CE) noted that the Christians do not abstain from forbidden foods, celebrate the Jewish festivals, or practice circumcision.

Tertullian's comments appear to be in some conflict with the earlier quote made by Emil Schurer in "The Jewish People in the Times of Jesus", where Schurer indicates that the Gentile believers outside of Israel were in fact partaking in the Jewish Feast Days and restricting themselves regarding meats (as per the Jerusalem Council). Of course, Schurer is referring to the few decades after the crucifixion and Tertullian is making his comments on the situation some 100 years later when we know that the Hellenistic influence had become very strong and pervasive.

To summarise then, the evidence presented here is limited and requires some conjecture, and therefore it is not conclusive. Overall though, it would appear to support the contention that male Gentile converts were not expected to get physically circumcised.

The brilliant Prof. David Flusser is worth quoting once more:

Two quotes from Flusser are also worth reading:

"The liberal school of Hillel was not distressed to see Gentiles becoming Jews. By contrast, the school of Shammai made conversion as difficult as possible. The following sayings show that Jesus shared the strict standpoint of Shammai. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves" (Matt. 23:15).

A non-Jew who lives according to certain fundamental moral laws, without following the whole Mosaic law, is blessed. The proselyte, the Gentile who has converted to Judaism, however, is bound by the whole law.^{4 5} If a proselyte fails to fulfill the whole law, which formerly did not obligate him, his conversion to Judaism is itself the cause of his becoming a child of hell.

Quite needlessly he has thrown away his blessedness. As far as the sources allow us to judge, Jesus had a poor opinion of the non-Jews, the Gentiles." - Jesus by Flusser p 75,76

"The first adherents to the new faith among the Gentiles were recruited from among non-Jews who were already close to Judaism. These were the "Godfearers", 16 who accepted certain basic Jewish obligations, at least the so-called Noachide precepts; I hope to show elsewhere that the western text of Acts 15:29, giving the decree of the Apostles, is the original one.

According to this, idolatry, shedding of blood, and grave sexual sins were forbidden to Gentile believers. These were originally the Noachide precepts accepted also by the Synagogue on which the Gentiles were obliged.¹⁷ It is logical that the Apostolic Church of Jerusalem should accept the view of the Synagogue on the conditions which Gentiles needed to fulfill in order to be saved. It can easily be shown that, according to Jewish opinion, the fulfilment of other commandments of Judaism was not prohibited to Gentiles.

On the contrary, the Noachide precepts were only seen as the minimal condition for Gentiles to be recognized as God-fearers. They were so understood by the God-fearers themselves, who were attracted to the Jewish way of life and accepted many Jewish commandments without becoming full proselytes. This was also the attitude of Christian God-fearers, as may be seen from the Epistle to the Galatians;¹⁸ many of them wished to observe as many Jewish precepts as they could.

It is evident that, while the leadership of the Mother Church decided to lay no burden upon the Gentile believers beyond the Noachide precepts (Acts 10:28-29; see Gal. 2:6), it did not object to their voluntarily observing more. Among the figures of the primitive Church who instructed Gentile Christians to observe more precepts than these essential ones was

Peter, as we know from Paul's criticism of him for demanding that Gentiles live like Jews (Gal. 2:14).

Rather than interpreting the apostolic decree as a minimum, Paul evidently saw in the Noachide precepts the maximal obligations of Gentile Christians, even if he always strongly recommended a sympathetic understanding of individual Christians who observed personal restrictions. But at the same time, speaking about the incident with Peter at Antioch, he says (Gal. 2:15-21), among other things, that "no man is ever justified by doing what the law demands, but only through faith in Christ Jesus: so we too have put our faith in Jesus Christ, in order that we might be justified through this faith, and not through deeds dictated by law; for by such deeds, Scripture says, no mortal man shall be justified... If righteousness comes by law, than Christ died for nothing."

If this was what Paul thought about the Jewish way of life and of worship, we can easily understand why he did not accept the view that Gentile Christians should or could accept Jewish ritual obligations.

(Footnote:As far as I see, the possibility that the Apostolic decree was understood as a minimum has not been recognized by scholars.)" - JUDAISM AND THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY BY DAVID FLUSSER p 630.

What did Yeshua tell us on this issue:

I think it good though to leave the last word to Yeshua himself. I believe that he addressed the issue of Gentile entrance into the Kingdom and indicated that this was possible without full Jewish proselytisation.

Let us look at a couple of passages where Yeshua speaks on this topic.

Firstly consider in this context, Luke 16:21-25 and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

"Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. A certain beggar, named Lazarus, was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Yes, even the dogs came and licked his sores. It happened that the beggar died, and that he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried. In Hades, he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far off, and Lazarus at his bosom. He cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue! For I am in anguish in this flame.' 'But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that you, in your lifetime, received your good things, and Lazarus, in the same way, bad things. But now here he is comforted and you are in anguish.

It was generally accepted in Yeshua's day that the uncircumcised will go down to Gehenna and not be resurrected into the Kingdom. A number of scholars, such as the great Talmudic scholar, Saul Lieberman argue that this parable is a polemic against this common view of the Pharisees.

The rich man in purple and fine linen represents the Israelite. Note, that he is called a 'son' by Abraham. Note also in v29 that Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers have Moses and the Prophets (i.e. the Tanakh).

The poor man, Lazarus represents the uncircumcised Gentile who has not had the great blessings of being in the family of Israel. The reference to Lazarus desiring the 'crumbs' may also indicate his repentant heart and desire to know the Almighty.

If this is a valid interpretation of this parable of Yeshua, then he was indeed arguing that the uncircumcised could find salvation. It also indicates Yeshua's position that it was the attitude of the heart that mattered, which was evidenced in the righteous works of the believer, not the outward marks of membership.

Yeshua makes this clear in John 8:39: *'They answered him, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham.'*

Another quote from Yeshua, which is even clearer is Luke 4:24-29.

And he said, Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian. When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath.

It is well worth reading from the beginning of Luke 4 to set the context properly here and to appreciate that, only moments before, his fellow brethren and members of his home town had been impressed and amazed at him. Why were they now so full of wrath when he was only referring to events that were recorded in their Hebrew Bible?

Certainly they would probably have taken some offence at his comment that he (a prophet) was not accepted by them, but I believe the more significant issue was that the two examples he refers to are examples where Gentiles, namely the widow Zarephath and the Syrian commander and leper, Naaman, were 'saved' by God through his great prophets Elijah and Elisha.

Again, Yeshua here is indicating that the Almighty can choose to save even the 'uncircumcised', that is, those who are not members of the Commonwealth of Israel. Yeshua is again teaching that the outward markings or tokens are not the vital issue, but that what is required is repentance and a circumcised heart.

I suggest a careful reading of the story of Naaman in 2 Kings 5 to ascertain that this man was cleansed and saved through his faith in the God of Israel and His prophet and consequently worshiped only the Almighty. Again, he was at no time required to be physically circumcised.

In conclusion, I believe the evidence from the non-circumcision of Titus stands as something that it is most unlikely to be a deliberate falsification. I would argue it's significance is too subtle (though still very relevant), to be a deliberate distortion. Most of the deliberate or even sloppy errors in translation are quite obvious and blatant once seriously studied.

The case for Titus being present at the Jerusalem Council, while not conclusive is still reasonably sound. Similarly, if he was indeed circumcised and circumcision was indeed expected, then much of the debate in Paul's epistles is irrelevant and out of place., and this also should be quite obvious.

I don't believe this is the case though, so I continue to have greater confidence in the position I have tried to articulate here. I believe that physical circumcision of males is not a necessary act of obedience for Gentile believers. Ultimately, the Almighty and His Son, the High Priest and soon coming judge, will look at the heart to see if it is circumcised.

Is your heart uncovered before HaShem?

Have you returned to Him? Have you trusted in Messiah Yeshua and begun to walk with faith in the Almighty, that is with the 'faith of Yeshua'¹³? If you have been immersed in his death, then you too are raised in his life and your future, your true home is the coming Kingdom of God!

Paul Herring
July 2011

www.circumcisedheart.info

¹³ <http://www.charismacomputers.com.au/Christian%20site/The%20Faith%20of%20Jesus.pdf>