

Paul's discussions of circumcision, mainly in Galatians, Philippians and Romans, have been interpreted as being condemnation against the Torah, because the Law calls for circumcision for newborns and those wanting to participate in key parts of worship of God.

However, it must be remembered that circumcision by the first century A.D. had become an "identity marker" separating Jews from non-Jews. Like observance of Shabbat, circumcision was listed among the "works of [the] law" in the Dead Sea Scrolls that defined those separate from the corrupt religious system around the time of the first century. The rite of circumcision could be behind the division between Jewish and "unconverted" non-Jews that Paul dressed down Peter and the Galatian congregations in chapters 2 and 3 of this letter.

### **Gal. 5:1–12 — Is Paul railing against circumcision proscribed in the Torah?**

- **Gal. 5:11–12** — Paul wanted the Influencers to emasculate themselves.
  - Comments from two Messianic scholars underscore the significance of Paul's instructions related to circumcision in this passage.
    - Tim Hegg of Torah Resource wrote that the teaching on the death of the Messiah and the inclusion of the nations by faith without ritual conversion sent a shock wave through leadership of Israel in the first century.  
"The teaching that the royal and triumphant Messiah would be crucified at the hands of mere mortals set the whole idea of rabbinic messianism on its head. But perhaps most egregious was the fact that through the death of the Messiah, the distinction between Jew and Gentile within the covenant people of God had been abolished, and this is at the very core of the Pharisaic teaching in regard to the covenant itself. Such taking down of the wall between Israel and the nations was viewed as a disintegration of the essential identity markets by which the 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaisms defined themselves."<sup>1</sup>
    - J.K. (John) McKee of TNN Online and Outreach Israel Ministries wrote that this was a wakeup call to God's original calling of their father Abraham.  
"For the Jews of the First Century, the cross of Yeshua had caused a proverbial 'scandal,' as ideas pertaining to Israel's identity and mission were truly shaken to get people to remember the call originally given Abraham to be a blessing (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8)."<sup>2</sup>
  - In Galatia there was a cult of Cybele, whose priests practiced castration.<sup>3</sup>
    - Paul could be drawing a parallel between those who were insistent that ritual circumcision was the key to being part of the justified people of God and the celibate priests of Cybele, who performed ritual self-castration as a sign of devotion to that pagan deity.
      - A shrine for Cybele was located near Pessinus on the central western edge of the province of Galatia. It's roughly 100 miles north of Pisidian Antioch, which Paul visited on his first journey.
      - Roman poet Catullus crafted a description of the initiation of priests into the cult into a 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. poetic play, now called Poem 63. In the Latin poem, Attis had to make himself like a woman to become a priest of Cybele.  
"The Great Mother Goddess Cybele whose ancient shrine was at Dindymus in Asia Minor, was served by priests who performed her ritual of self-castration and ritual domination before the mighty Mother Goddess. The text is from a long poem written by Roman poet Catullus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., which is unique in the history of Greek and Latin literature, both in the subject matter, and the strange verse in which the poem is presented. There are fragments of Greek texts which indicate that the cult of Cybele was well known in the ancient East and had been previously treated in poetry, but this text is the only coherent description of the frightening Ritual of the Great Goddess. ... The cult of Cybele originated in Phrygia at Mt. Ida (Asia Minor), it spread rapidly into Greece by the 6th c B.C., and in 204 B.C. was introduced to Rome with the importation of a sacred stone which formed the core of a developing cult. In Catullus' time there was a well established temple-cult at Rome, which is assumed to have given him some of the materials out of which to write this poem. The cult lasted well into Christian times and was one of the last pagan cults to disappear. In the later period it was assumed that the Magna Mater was a great earth figure, that Attis was symbolic of renewed life and vegetation, but this may have been an idea derived from the Isis/Osiris cult which was also popular under the Empire. ...  
"Over the high seas in a quick boat carried, Attis

1 Tim Hegg. *Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*. TorahResource: 2010. p. 230 (189).

2 J.K. McKee. *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*. TNN Press: 2007. p. 143.

3 McKee. p. 143.

When he had reached the Phrygian forest with mad desire  
 Touched with his foot the shore and came unto  
 The dark places of the goddess, hidden in deep forests,  
 Driven there by raging madness, his mind wandering away,  
 With a sharp piece of rock he tore off the weights of his groin.

“And when he saw that his body was now without man,  
 Staining with fresh blood the soil of the earth,  
 Then with snow white hands she took the tambour up,  
 Your tambourine, O Cybele, O Mother your rites,  
 And shaking with slim fingers the hollow hide of the herd  
 Began to sing to her comrades in trembling tones this:

“Come, priestesses, together to the high forests of Cybele,  
 Come now, wandering herd of the lady of Dindymus,  
 Like exiles seeking a new home, seeking new places,  
 Following my lead, following me as leader. O my friends,  
 You have endured the raging water, the wildness of the sea,  
 And un-manned your bodies by great hate of Love. ...’ ...”<sup>4</sup>

- Perhaps, Paul wanted these influencers of the Galatian congregations to exclude themselves from leadership and houses of worship, per Torah instructions:
  - “ “For no one who has a defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man, or he who has a disfigured face, or any deformed limb, 19 or a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, 20 or a hunchback or a dwarf, or one who has a defect in his eye or eczema or scabs or crushed testicles. 21 No man among the descendants of Aaron the priest who has a defect is to come near to offer the LORD’s offerings by fire; since he has a defect, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. 22 ‘He may eat the food of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy, 23 only he shall not go in to the veil or come near the altar because he has a defect, so that he will not profane My sanctuaries. For I am the LORD who sanctifies them.’ ” (Lev. 21:18–23)
  - “ “Also anything with its testicles bruised or crushed or torn or cut, you shall not offer to the LORD, or sacrifice in your land, 25 nor shall you accept any such from the hand of a foreigner for offering as the food of your God; for their corruption is in them, they have a defect, they shall not be accepted for you.’ ” (Lev. 22:24–25)
  - “ ‘No one who is emasculated or has his male organ cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD. 2 No one of illegitimate birth shall enter the assembly of the LORD; none of his descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall enter the assembly of the LORD.’ ” (Deut. 23:1–2)
  - These are popular passages critics use to discredit the Bible as the words of God, asserting that no all-loving deity would exclude emasculated or illegitimate people from communal worship.
    - Considering that the offerings were a “shadow” of something to come, the Messiah, then the message of perfection and ultimate acceptability of the “shadow” had to be underscored.
      - Faith in God must overcome the “Why can’t I ...?” and “How dare God exclude me because I’m not ...!” emotional responses.  
 “And a Canaanite woman from that region [district of Tyre and Sidon] came out and began to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’ 23 But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’ 24 But He answered and said, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ 25 But she came and began to bow down before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ 26 And He answered and said, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ 27 But she said, ‘Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ 28 Then Yeshua said to her, ‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once.” (Matt. 15:22–28; cf. Mark 7:24–30)
    - The Messiah would provide an 8<sup>th</sup> day experience for all believers to enter directly into God’s presence, no matter their “pre-existing conditions.”
- As Paul described in detail from the life of Abraham in *Galatians* 3, reiterated later in his life in *Romans* 4, circumcision was a sign of something God already did — declared Abraham righteous because of his trust in God’s promise of descendants — and what God would do — give Abraham descendants who would bless the whole world.
  - According to the Torah, it was a sign of this promise parents would pass to their 8-day-old sons (Lev. 12:3; cf. of Yeshua, Luke 1:59; of Yitskhak (Isaac), Acts 7:8).
  - Circumcision was not a rite of conversion or entrance into God’s people, but something undertaken after joining the family of God.

4 William Harris. “Cybele: The Lady of Dindymus. A Dramatic Musical Dance Performance.” Middlebury College: undated. Accessed in November 2010. <[community.middlebury.edu/~harris/cybele.html](http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/cybele.html)>

- Immersion in “living water,” or moving water, expanded from cleansing of priests (Ex. 29:4) and those who were in contact with a bodily discharge or the red heifer (Num. 19:1–10) to cleansing of Israel from iniquity in the Messianic age.  
“It will come about that he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy — everyone who is recorded for life in Jerusalem. 4 When the Lord has washed away the filth of the daughters of Zion and purged the bloodshed of Jerusalem from her midst, by the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning, 5 then the LORD will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy.” (Isa. 4:3–5; drawing on imagery from the exodus from Mitsraim)

### **Gal. 5:13–26 — What is the ‘freedom’ we’re ‘called to’? Does God’s Spirit motivate us to do things contrary to God’s Law?**

- Gal. 5:13 — Is the “opportunity for the flesh” obeying the Torah?
  - McKee notes a common interpretation of this passage:  
“It is claimed that the Judaizers/Influencers in Galatia advocate that God’s standard of morality is found in the Torah, versus Paul who advocates a life for Believers entirely guided by His Spirit.”<sup>5</sup>
    - For example, commentator the *Word Biblical Commentary on Galatians* observed:  
“For the Judaizers, Christian obligation is to be understood in terms of subjection to the Mosaic law as the expressed will of God, with the prescriptions of Torah giving guidance for ethical living. For Paul, the obligation of the Christian is love that expresses itself in service to others, with that obligation being grounded in and guided by the Christian’s new existence ‘in the Spirit.’”<sup>6</sup>
  - Paul’s comments earlier in *Galatians* and later in life in *Romans* clarify whether the Torah is at enmity with the Spirit.
    - Yeshua redeemed us from God’s wrath against those who “walk” contrary to His instructions. Believers in the Messiah are freed from the curse.  
“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” (Gal. 4:4–5)
    - Paul described the prior situation of the unredeemed person in *Romans* 7, noting that someone “of flesh” can’t do what the “spiritual” Law tells him God wants him to do.  
“For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. ... 21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Yeshua Messiah our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.” (Rom. 7:14–16, 21–25)
    - This should be a warning to all of us who intellectually know the way God wants us to go — spoken via the Spirit through the Torah, prophets and apostles and via the Messiah — but don’t want to give up the fleeting, or “of flesh,” pleasure afforded by disobedience.
      - Power: Violence, gossip, slander.
      - Excitement: Lust, audacious lawbreaking, wanton danger.
      - Humor: Putdowns, revelry in lawless behavior.
    - In *Romans* 8, Paul continued the thought that those without God’s Spirit can’t follow God’s Law from the realm of the Spirit.  
“Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Yeshua. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Messiah Yeshua has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3 For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5 For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. 6 For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, 7 because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Messiah, he does not belong to Him. 10 If Messiah is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. 11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Yeshua from the dead dwells in you, He who raised

<sup>5</sup> McKee. p. 145.

<sup>6</sup> Richard L. Longenecker. *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*. Vol. 41. Nelson Reference & Electronic: 1990. p. 241. Quoted by McKee, pp. 144–145.

Messiah Yeshua from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.” (Rom. 8:1–11)

- Yeshua’s death “in the likeness of sinful flesh” freed us from “the requirement of the Law” for a lasting sin offering for our lapses in following God’s Law (vv. 3–4).
  - In other words, we’re no longer “under [the] law.” We’re “walking” in God’s loving-kindness, or His mercy.
- Pleasing God is related to “the mind set on the Spirit” (v. 6).
- “The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God” because it doesn’t and can’t “subject itself to the law of God” (vv. 6–7).
- Paul in Gal. 5:14 answers this question of whether he meant “freedom” from the Torah by quoting one of the two “greatest commandments” from the Torah: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18).
  - Torah obedience begins with love for those around us as people made in the image of God.
  - Rabbi Hillel, grandfather to Paul’s teacher, the great sage Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), is recorded in the *Talmud* as offering this advice to a convert:  
“He came before Hillel: ‘Convert me.’ [Hillel] said to him, ‘What is hateful to you, to your fellow don’t do. That’s the entirety of the Torah; everything else is elaboration. So go, study.’”
    - McKee noted, “The answer why commentators must downplay the role of Hillel’s sentiments is because Hillel’s style of Torah adoption by non-Jewish people was far more moderate and gradual than the competing School of Shammai.”
- **Gal. 5:16** — “Walk by the Spirit” means conducting your life by the leading of the Spirit of God.
  - In companion “new covenant” prophesies to Jer. 31:31–34, Ezekiel foretold of “end time” people of God “walking” in His commandments and statutes.
    - “‘Therefore say, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, ‘I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries among which you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel. 18 When they come there, they will remove all its detestable things and all its abominations from it. 19 And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, 20 that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God. 21 But as for those whose hearts go after their detestable things and abominations, I will bring their conduct down on their heads,’ declares the Lord GOD.’” (Ezek. 11:17–21)
    - “‘For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. 25 Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.’” (Ezek. 36:24–27)
- **Gal. 5:19–21** — “Deeds of the flesh” disqualify one from being called an heir and being redeemed from being “under [the] law.”
  - The Spirit guides us away from the “deeds of the flesh,” toward the holiness described in the spiritual Law.
- **Gal. 5:22–26** — The Law is not against the “fruit of the Spirit.”
  - So, the Spirit compels one to live life according to the Law.
  - *Karpōs* for “fruit” is singular, suggesting that all these attributes are to be part of the believer’s life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. Hendrickson: 2005. Quoted by McKee, p. 146.

<sup>8</sup> McKee, p. 153.