

Eitan ben Levi

August 5, 2025

Circumcision in the Apostolic Scriptures, Part 1: What Is Paul Talking About Here?

Among Reformed Christians it is a common position that the Biblical ritual of circumcision described in Genesis 17:10-14 does not apply to Christians today. This belief is found in the views of several of the Reformers, and is a key argument used by Presbyterians and other denominations to defend the practice of infant baptism as a replacement for circumcision.¹ This view of circumcision as an outmoded Biblical ritual appears to be bolstered by passages from Scripture where Paul apparently disparages the practice of circumcision, saying such things as “Circumcision is nothing...” (1 Corinthians 7:19, New American Standard Bible 1995) and “...if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.” (Galatians 5:2)

However, the traditional interpretation of these passages rests on the assumption that the circumcision spoken of by Paul is synonymous to the ritual from the Torah (Pentateuch.) In the interest of being as objective as possible when reading the Bible, it is good to test this assumption by exploring the Scriptures to see whether these references by Paul refer to the act of circumcision laid out in the Torah, to a different practice, or to a different status. We will see that in two passages from the Pauline epistles there is unambiguous attestation to alternate uses for the Greek words commonly translated *circumcised*, *to circumcise*, and *uncircumcised*, and this fact offers a path to an interpretation of four other passages on circumcision that is stronger than the tradi-

¹ Peter Goeman, “Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? A Comparative Analysis” *DBSJ* 29, no. 1 (2024): 79.

tional Christian interpretation of these passages in light of the broader teaching of the entire Bible concerning Genesis 17 circumcision.

Alternate Meanings of “Circumcision”

The vocabulary used by Paul to refer to circumcision is the same term that is used in the Septuagint’s translation of Genesis 17, using the Greek verb περιτέμνω (*pe-ri-tem-no*). Paul also uses the noun περιτομή (*pe-ri-ta-may*), derived from περιτέμνω (*peritemno*), on a regular basis along with its antonym (word with an opposite meaning) ἀκροβυστία (*ah-kro-boo-stee-ah*). This might lead to a hasty conclusion that since the same key vocabulary is used, the meaning must be the same. However, to do so would be to ignore the fact that the meaning of words is controlled by context.² The best way to resolve Paul’s intended meaning for the terms he uses in relation to circumcision is to examine the word in its grammatical and historical context, comparing the meanings attested in the *contemporary semantic range*³ of each word to see which meaning makes the most sense in context.

The first passage that is worthy of note on the matter of Paul’s view of circumcision is Ephesians 2:11-12, which reads:

“Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,”... performed in the flesh by human hands - *remember* that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the

² D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 64.

³ In other words, we must consider the possible meanings of a word that are demonstrably in use at the time the document with the word in question was written. We must likewise exclude meanings that fell into obsolescence before the document in question was authored, and meanings that did not develop until later. Finally, we must content ourselves with choosing only *one* meaning from the semantic range, at most *two* if there is good reason to believe the double-meaning wordplay (which is very rare) is in use. Likewise, where the same word is used multiple times in close proximity within a document, it should be assumed the same one meaning is in mind unless there is very good reason to believe the author consciously switches meanings.

commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”

This verse singularly proves that Paul’s use of the term here translated “Circumcision” (περιτομῆς, *peritomes*, a form of *peritome*) and the opposing “Uncircumcision” can refer to more than just the ritual in Genesis 17, for here Paul openly states an abstract way the terms were used in his day, to speak of Jews (classified as περιτομή, *peritome*) and Gentiles (classified as ἀκροβυστία, *akrobustia*.)

A second alternate use of περιτέμνω (*peritemno*) and περιτομή (*peritome*) is found in Colossians 2:11, where it says, “In Him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ...” (Colossians 2:11, English Standard Version). As noted by Murray Harris in his commentary on Colossians, these uses of περιτέμνω (*peritemno*) and περιτομή (*peritome*) describe the Sanctification a believer receives through Christ, the process by which a sinner is made right with God.⁴ Specifically, the emphasis of this vocabulary choice in Colossians likely depends on the connotation that circumcision has in Hebrew culture, which is initiation into covenant membership.⁵ Because circumcision is the sign of membership in the Abrahamic covenant, its enactment was regarded as the initiation of membership in that covenant. This meaning behind the act of circumcision paved the way to abstractly use the term περιτομή (*peritome*) to specifically describe a member in good standing of God’s covenant.

⁴ Murray J. Harris, *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Colossians* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 142.

⁵ Moises Silva, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, s.v. “περιτέμνω, περιτομή, ἀπεριτεμνός.”

In summary, Ephesians 2:11 is a sure example where περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobusitia*) describe the ethnic status of Church members as Jewish or Gentile. Likewise, Colossians 2:11 represents a sure and certain use in the Pauline Epistles of περιτομή (*peritome*) as a reference to covenant and non-covenant members, which opens the possibility that either or both uses for περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobusitia*) might be attested in other places in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament.) With this knowledge, let us assess the key verses mentioned previously that seem to disparage circumcision to see how the contexts of these verses compare to Genesis 17 and Ephesians 2.

Romans 2:17-3:4

The context in this passages contains several clues as to the intended uses of περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobusitia*). Verse 2:28 offers one clue where it says "...nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh" (NASB 1995). This appears consistent with the traditional scholarly conception that these verses refer to the state of being circumcised. However, there are also lines of evidence which suggest an alternate interpretation is possible. In this regard, a significant line of evidence is the general flow of Paul's argument.

In verses 2:17-23, he addresses Jews who consider themselves righteous on account of keeping the Torah, asking them if they live in a manner hypocritical to the Law they preach. Then in verse 24 Paul notes that such hypocrisy gives the nations cause to blaspheme the name of God. Immediately after this discussion, Paul makes his first mention of circumcision, "For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law..." (Romans 2:25). Grammatically, the conjunction γὰρ (*gar*, "for") is explanatory,

offering additional information regarding what is previously stated.⁶ With this in mind, Romans 2:25 represents a re-statement of Paul's argument from another perspective to provide further illumination on his message, and should be interpreted in that light. The thrust of the Apostle's message in the preceding verses is *if you consider yourself a Jew, a covenant member in good standing with the right to teach, you had better not be a hypocrite. Otherwise, you are only giving unbelievers a reason to blaspheme God.* If verse 25 is a re-phrasing of this argument as the grammar suggests, this requires that περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*) refer to one's status of covenant membership as part of Israel. In such a case, the message of verse 25 is that *having covenant member status is good if you keep the Torah, but if you do not keep the Torah you become like one who has no covenant membership.*

In following Paul's argument through the remainder of the passage, understanding περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*) as terms conveying presence or absence of Abrahamic covenant member status makes good sense of all the remaining uses. One matter which is important to address however is that in 2:27 the term translated "physically" by the NASB is φύσεως (*phuseos*, a form of *phusis*), which refers to the natural state of something, or what someone is by birth. This can be understood in combination with ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*) as "physically uncircumcised" as the NASB translates, but it is also possible for this to refer to someone who is "by birth outside the covenant" or "by birth a Gentile." In this respect, it appears that Paul in Romans 2:17-3:4 does not disparage circumcision, but rather is putting membership in the Abrahamic covenant in its proper soteriological perspective.

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1996), 673.

As for verses 2:28-29, note the parallel between Romans 2: 29 "...he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart..." and Colossians 2:11 discussed previously. Both passages speak of the same subject matter, that we are given covenant member status by the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In verse 29 it is clear that both Ἰουδαῖος (*You-dai-os*) "Jew" as well as περιτομή (*peritome*) refer to covenant member status as a believer. Although it is possible to understand verse 28 differently in isolation, in the context of verse 29 it is better to understand both verses as referring to covenant member status. Thus, the only reference which necessarily refers to the status of being physically circumcised is the implication in Romans 2:28, which constitutes Paul's denial that the "circumcision" of which he speaks is physical.

1 Corinthians 7:18-19

In the midst of a longer discussion about marriage, divorce, and celibacy, 1 Corinthians 7:18-19 are part of a brief side discussion by Paul, used to undergird his point that the Christian does not gain merit by deeds or by changing life status, and as such the Christian need only remain in the status they have had from their conversion. Specifically, Paul says in verses 18 and 19:

"Was any man called... circumcised? He is not to become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? He is not to be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but... the keeping of the commandments of God."

There is not a lot of context to these two verses that can help distinguish between the possible senses of περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akroburstia*) as used here. Because of this, most scholars assume that this passage refers to circumcision

as commanded in Genesis 17.⁷ However, the structure of verse 19 carries a strong parallel to Galatians 5:6, which employs a similar (though not identical) phrase to presumably describe the same phenomenon. As such, it is reasonable to suggest that if Galatians 5:6 uses περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*) according to one of the alternate meanings attested in the Apostolic Writings, this use in 1 Corinthians likely has the same referent in mind. As will be shown in the following section, Galatians 5 and 6 display a use of περιτομή (*peritome*) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*) that best fits the use attested in Ephesians 2:11-12, using these terms to refer to Jewish and Gentile identity. Applying this meaning to 1 Corinthians 7:18-19 fits the flow of Paul's argument well, as Paul goes from discussing marriage and celibacy, to using the examples of Jew and Gentile (Circumcised and Uncircumcised) and slave and freeman to illustrate his point that the Christian should, generally speaking, retain the status of life with which he was saved, as changing one's life status from Gentile to Jew, slave to free, or vice versa in both cases does not curry favor in the eyes of God. As such, this passage does not mandate a Pauline abolition of Genesis 17.

Galatians 5:1-6 and 6:12-15

A major theme in the book of Galatians is Paul's condemnation of and rebuttal to a group that was teaching falsehoods to the Galatians. Because the group's precise identity is debated by scholars and not central to the argument here, I will simply call them the "Opposition."⁸ While Paul does not provide a full sketch of this group's beliefs, his portrayal of and attitude toward this group is consistent with another, likely re-

⁷ David E. Garland, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 384.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 39.

lated group that began spreading false doctrine in Antioch in Acts 15. The primary false doctrine that concerned the Apostles in Acts 15, and Paul in Galatians, was that it was necessary to receive a certain ritual in order to have salvation. Most commentators understand this rite in both Acts 15 and Galatians 5-6 to be the circumcision commandment from Genesis 17, and conclude that Paul regarded Biblical circumcision to be fundamentally optional.⁹ While Paul does state in Galatians 5:6 and 6:15 that “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything” (Galatians 5:6) in the context of Galatians 5 he seems to indicate that, far from being optional, circumcision denies true salvation (Galatians 5:2-4). If the circumcision to which Paul refers here is the Biblical ritual, then Paul is expressly calling it a sin to obey a Biblical commandment, not saying that obedience is optional.

In this case, it is valid to ask whether the meaning for the term *circumcision* attested in Ephesians 2:11-12 offers a meaning that is more consistent with the broader Scriptural witness when applied to Galatians 5-6, and in fact it does. Read with the meaning attested in Ephesians 2, περιτέμνω (*peritemno*) and περιτομή (*peritome*) both refer to Jewish identity obtained via proselyte ritual, a central part of which was physical circumcision.¹⁰ Correspondingly, ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*) refers to those who have not attained Jewish identity, the Gentile non-proselyte. Read in this way, it is clear that Paul is teaching the Galatians that they should not, under any circumstances, try to become proselytes for three reasons: First, because becoming a proselyte identifies salvation with works, not the grace of Christ (Galatians 5:2,4.) Second, one’s status of

⁹ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 57.

¹⁰ Rob Vanhoff, “Circumcision in the Second Temple Period: Part 3” (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource Institute, 2012), 3. Accessed August 13, 2025, <https://tr-pdf.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/articles/circumcision-in-the-second-temple-period.pdf>.

being Jew (physically or legally) or Gentile gives no advantage or disadvantage in the Kingdom of God (Galatians 5:6, 6:15.) Third, the Circumcision Party does not even have good motives to push for the proselytization of Gentiles (Galatians 6:12-13.)

What, then is to be made of Galatians 5:3, where Paul testifies that those who receive circumcision are under obligation to the entire Law? This is traditionally understood to imply that uncircumcised people do not have to keep the Torah, but circumcised people do.¹¹ However, this makes the critical assumption that the Greek word translated “Law,” νόμος (*nomos*), necessarily refers here to the commandments written in the Tanach (Old Testament,) or more specifically the Torah.

It is true that this is a very common use of νόμος (*nomos*) in the Apostolic Writings, but there are at least three passages in the Gospels and Acts that unambiguously demonstrate uses of νόμος (*nomos*) that do *not* refer to Biblical Laws. In Matthew 12:5, the “Law” cited by Jesus that the priests in their service of the Temple are permitted to break Sabbath is not a law found in the Torah. Instead, this appears to be an early attestation to the existence of the *halachic* (traditional) ruling of the Pharisees that later developed into the teaching found in the Mishna in *b. Shabbat* 132b.¹² Likewise, John 7:51 quotes Nicodemus’ citation of a law which offers the accused the right to a defense, a matter not stated in Scripture, and in Acts 23:3 Paul is on trial for violating the “Law” that Gentiles may not enter the Temple (see Acts 21:28), another law without precedent in Scripture. Gentiles may not eat meat given to a priest (Leviticus 22:10,)

¹¹ Schreiner, *Galatians*, 313.

¹² Tim Hegg, “Can We Speak of ‘Law’ in the New Testament in Monolithic Terms?” Paper presented at the ETS NW Regional Meeting (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 1996), 9. Accessed August 12, 2025, <https://tr-pdf.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/articles/can-we-speak-of-the-law-in-the-new-testament-in-monolithic-terms.pdf>.

nor may they eat the Passover unless they undergo the circumcision of Genesis 17 (Exodus 12:48,) but nothing in Torah forbids a Gentile from entering the Temple courts to worship the LORD.

All three of these verses unambiguously attest that νόμος can refer in the Apostolic writings not only to the Scriptures, but also to the traditions and ordinances of Jewish authorities, the *halacha*. The remaining question, then, is whether there are exegetical grounds to understand the use of νόμος in Galatians 5:3 to mean halachic rulings. In fact, such an understanding does better fit the context of the epistle to the Galatians, for Paul is writing this letter as a response to the work of his Opposition in Galatia. If the περιτομή (*peritome*) in this passage is, as has been suggested, the result of becoming a proselyte to the Circumcision Party, then the νόμος to which those proselytes become liable is the *halacha* of the Opposition. In this context, Paul's statement from verse 5:2 makes perfect sense, as he is arguing that the one who becomes a proselyte to the Opposition is simultaneously denying the Lordship of Messiah (5:2) and affirming the lordship of the Opposition (5:3).

Conclusion

While the passages analyzed in this article are often cited as proof that Genesis 17 and the practice of circumcision mandated therein are no longer relevant for the Christian per Paul, a closer examination of the evidence reveals that there are ways of understanding these verses that harmonize much better with the overall message of the Bible. In each case, Paul uses the terms περιτομή (*peritome*, circumcised) and ἀκροβυστία (*akrobustia*, uncircumcised) in an abstract way, as metonyms to refer to Jewish identity or covenant member status. The alternative interpretations proposed

here take the first-century cultural context of the epistles into greater account than the traditional interpretations of these passages, and the alternative understandings are more logically compatible with the plain import of Genesis 17:11-14 that the covenant sign of circumcision is a permanent ordinance for God's people.

However, the six passages that are the focus of this article do not represent an exhaustive listing of the Apostolic teaching on circumcision. In my next article, "Circumcision in the Apostolic Scriptures, Part 2: Why Did They Do This?" I will offer a closer look at the historical information provided in the Apostolic Scriptures that discuss the matter of circumcision to see if the actions of Yeshua and the Apostles provide more evidence as to their view of Genesis 17 circumcision. If the actions of the Apostles are consistent with the interpretation of their teachings offered here, it will strengthen the case that circumcision as commanded in Genesis 17:10 and repeated in Leviticus 12:3 is a commandment that still applies to modern Christians.

Bibliography

- Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996.
- Garland, David E. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- Goeman, Peter. "Does Baptism Replace Circumcision? A Comparative Analysis." *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 29, no. 1 (2024): 79-97.
- Harris, Murray J. *Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament: Colossians*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010.
- Hegg, Tim. "Can We Speak of 'Law' in the New Testament in Monolithic Terms?". Paper presented at the ETS NW Regional Meeting, TorahResource, 1996. <https://tr-pdf.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/articles/can-we-speak-of-the-law-in-the-new-testament-in-monolithic-terms.pdf>. Accessed August 11, 2025.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Galatians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic.
- Silva, Moises. *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.
- Rob Vanhoff, "Circumcision in the Second Temple Period: Part 3" (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource Institute, 2012), 3. Accessed August 13, 2025, <https://tr-pdf.s3-us-west-2.amazonaws.com/articles/circumcision-in-the-second-temple-period.pdf>.
- Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1996.