

Paul's Letter to the Galatians
"For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed,
I prove myself to be a transgressor.
For through the Law I died to the law
that I might live to God."
(Galatians 2:18-19)

by Avi ben Mordechai

Paul was perhaps one of the most brilliant religious thinkers of his day. As it is with many who are brilliant in their thinking and reasoning skills, there is always the possibility that people of this caliber can also be seriously misunderstood by those who do not have the same level of reasoning and brainpower. Certainly, Paul, with his intense intellect (Acts 26:24), was a man born for a unique purpose to help all of us with our learning of the Torah of Life. Consider Acts 21, when Paul stood before James and the elders in Jerusalem, giving testimony about the vast numbers of gentiles who were coming into the faith in Yeshua. Concerning this, the Nazarean elders in Acts 21:21-24 said to Paul:

...You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed, and they are all zealous for the Law; and they have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs. What, then, is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Therefore do this that we tell you. We have four men who are under a vow; take them and purify yourself along with them, and pay their expenses in order that they may shave their heads; and all will know that there is nothing to the things which they have been told about you, but that you yourself also walk orderly, keeping the Law.

Was Paul actually teaching all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses and to not circumcise their children nor walk according to the customs of the Jews? No, he was teaching no such thing; it may only appear that this is the case because of the specific language that is being used to express the allegation. Because of hours of study, I have a working knowledge of the expressions and what they meant to the people of the day; I understand the terminology of the accusations; it is clear to me what the rumor against Paul is really all about. In this short article I hope to help you to also see the issues clearly.

If I were to say to you, "please go fetch me a *Dendrobium chrysanthum* in a nearby flower bed," but you had no idea what a *Dendrobium chrysanthum* was, perhaps only knowing that it is of the orchid family, then you would simply not be able to fulfill my request; you would not know exactly what I was looking for. Quite similarly, there are many terms and concepts in the biblical record, but few people are biblically trained through hours of study to know exactly what the terms and concepts mean, not even knowing what they meant to Paul and to his readers. With so many people reading Paul but not knowing what he was really talking about, it exacerbates an already difficult problem of nearly 2,000 years of cultural misunderstandings. Naturally, if we do not correctly learn to assess what Paul was facing in his day, then it can only lead to more misunderstandings of Paul, leading to further mistakes in our interpretations of his words. Let us take a look at four seriously misinterpreted sections of Paul's words to the Galatians.

Galatians 2:18-19—Misinterpretation #1

In his letter to the Galatians at 2:18-19, Paul wrote the following:

For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law that I might live to God

For most who might read this, the interpretation may be that Paul used to keep the Law of the Old Testament before coming to “Christ,” but because the Law points to “Christ,” it therefore means that Paul should never attempt to rebuild a path back to the Old Testament, lest he deny Christ and as a result, fall from grace and become a transgressor of the freedom from the Law of Moses that God gives through Christ. Because Paul realized that with the Law of the Old Testament now fulfilled in Christ, it had to mean that he was able to go on to really live for God and not become bogged down in a Law that was already fulfilled. But is this really what Paul was getting at? I’ll answer this shortly.

Galatians 3:10—Misinterpretation #2

Here’s another example, this time from Galatians 3:10—

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.”

A simple reading of this verse out of its context and first-century understanding, which is what most people do without realizing what they are doing, is this: if you perform the commanded laws of the Old Testament then you will put yourself under a curse. The reason for the curse is because none of us can possibly keep all the law as God demands and thus, because none of us can actually keep all the law that God demands, we automatically are declared cursed for trying to obey it. What naturally follows in the minds of most is this resultant reasoning from Galatians 3:13—

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” —

In other words, believe in “Christ” (Messiah) and the curse of the law goes away because all the law is fulfilled for you in Christ, because you could not do it anyway; only Christ could fulfill the law perfectly and the Almighty knew that, right? So, when “Christ” came, he simply released you from the Law of Moses, which most people call “bondage,” which is an interpretive derivation from lots of New Testament passages including Galatians 5:1. In the minds of many people, this freedom from the Mosaic “Old Covenant” Law now means that you don’t have to do that “stuff” any more; just have faith—intellectual faith in Yeshua or Jesus, or at least belief in a list of doctrines about him. But again, is all of this what Paul was really getting at or is this all a heap of huge misunderstandings of his words? Shortly, I will answer this. For the sake of clarity, allow me to present two more examples.

Galatians 4:21-26—Misinterpretation #3

In Galatians 4:21-26, Paul said this:

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.

Here, the “obvious” understanding, according to some, is that if we slip into keeping the “Old Covenant” Law from Mount Sinai then we will be guilty of walking in the flesh and not walking in the Spirit. The result is that we will become slaves like Hagar was a slave to Sarah. So, by extension, “freedom in Christ” means to NOT obey Old Testament Law but to only obey the Law of Christ. Doing anything else puts us in the theological camp of the Jerusalem of Paul’s day, which was in slavery with her children, performing the customs of the Law of Moses!

Galatians 5:2-4—Misinterpretation #4

Finally, in our brief examination of four seriously misinterpreted sections of Paul’s teachings to the Galatians, let us take a look at Galatians 5:2-4

Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

Once again, the general premise that most people arrive at is this: if you have never received a physical circumcision but you nonetheless believe in “Christ,” then by the Law of Christ, you should not let anyone try to convince you that you should receive a physical circumcision. Seeking out a physical circumcision would mean that you are placing yourself under the law that you have been delivered from and thus, you will by default, sever yourself from Christ, because in truth, you are justified and saved only by grace and not by law. So, do not let anyone tell you that you have to keep the laws of the Old Testament and that you should get circumcised. Is this really the “truth” of what Paul was driving home to the hearts of his readers? I will answer this shortly.

Unlearning Traditional Doctrines

It is my sincere assertion that most of today’s Christians continue to misunderstand Paul’s teachings because they are unfortunately still under the spell of the doctrines of third to fourth-century church dogma. In order to escape its influence, the only way out is to unlearn traditional church doctrine, which for some, is a formidable task! Quite similarly for many Messianic believers in Yeshua, meaning those who feel drawn to practice Rabbinic Judaism like the Orthodox Jews, there is another problem; that of asking for a spiritual curse. Why? Because the teachers of Rabbinic Judaism—the Rabbis—know nothing about the real Yeshua and the real Paul. All that they know can be summed up by what they know of Yeshua and Paul from Christianity, which is an outgrowth of third to fourth century church dogma. Therefore, Messianics who have embraced rabbinic Judaism have to unlearn traditional Judaism in order to come into the fullness of what Paul and Yeshua really taught.

Now, if we want answers to our questions and we want to stop misunderstanding Paul’s words from the above four common misinterpretations that I showed you, then we must study to show ourselves approved (2 Timothy 2:15). This is done by studying the teachings of the written Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings and to do so within the whole context of rabbinic Jewish *halacha*, which is a technical religious term for how Jews interpret and apply their rabbinic Torah learning. This is an important principle to remember because Paul was once taught at the feet of the rabbinic “giant” Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). However, on the road to Damascus something dramatic happened to Paul (Acts 9:3-9). He did not become a Christian. Rather, Paul turned from all of his traditional learning as a Pharisee and became a Mosaic Law Scripturalist, realizing all that he had learned as a Pharisee studying the oral law of the rabbinites (Pharisees) with men like Gamaliel was nothing more than rubbish (Philippians 3:8-9). Paul’s teaching prior to his experience on the road to Damascus was to obey the laws and the authority of the Pharisaic Sanhedrin who had religious control over the Temple high priests, implied from passages like Acts 9:1-2 and 4:5-23, which was a religious authority derived from a Pharisaic twisted interpretation of Deuteronomy 17:9-12.

Paul's teaching after his experience on the road to Damascus was this: only obey YHWH's righteous high priest the Mashiach not based on the Aaronic order, but based on the higher order of Melchi-Tzedeq (Psalm 110). Paul had come to learn what Yeshua's disciples had already learned years before based on Matthew 15:13-14 and 16:11-12. For Paul, it was indeed a "conversion" but not to Christianity. Rather, his conversion was to leave the doctrines of the scribes, Pharisees and elders like Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and to remove himself from their binding traditions ("*takanot*", Matt. 15:3) and legal interpretations (Matt. 23:4) concerning the biblical, scriptural Law of Moses. For Paul, as it was for those who believed in the teachings of Yeshua, the issue was about whether all followers of Yeshua's message should also obey rabbinic authority and the oral law along with Moses' sacred written Law (Matt 21:23; Mark 1:27; Acts 26:10). Consequently, when you read through Paul's letters, particularly Galatians and some of the narratives about Paul in the book of Acts, you will notice plenty of rabbinic oral law terminology that the chronicler Luke placed in juxtaposition with Mosaic written Law terminology. However, for most people unfamiliar with this kind of technical writing, of which Paul penned much, misunderstandings can be expected.

On this basis, let us return to our posted examples and point out Paul's real teaching and criticism against the Pharisaic/Rabbinic oral law of his day.

Rumor that Paul was not Keeping the Torah

Here, in Acts 21:21, are the words that were reported to Paul by Yeshua's Jerusalem elders:

...they (the 10,000's x 10,000's that were zealous for the Law of Moses) have been told about you, that you are teaching all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.

In this situation (Acts 21:21), there was a rumor spread by those who seriously disliked Paul's anti-rabbinic stand. Remember, Paul was hated by the scribes and Pharisees that perhaps at one time may have loved him (Gal. 1:14). They had turned against him because he was following Yeshua's teachings concerning their authority and binding traditions (referred to in Hebrew as the *takanot*, *ma'asim*, and *minhagim*). You can see their hatred of Paul in two passages: Acts 23:12-14 and 2 Corinthians 11:24. (Notice here in 2 Cor. 11:24 that Paul was beaten "forty less one" which is an exact rabbinic "formula" based on the oral law, meaning he was beaten five times with 39 lashes each. Therefore, this tells us that the mob beating him in each case was an "oral law" mob—Pharisees, not a group representing scriptural, biblical Law Deuteronomy 25:3.)

In Acts 21:21, the rumor was spread by a group of pro-rabbinic oral law proponents who believed in the "Law" but to them, "Law" meant ORAL, which automatically superseded the WRITTEN. You see, even today within the ranks of Judaism, there is no distinction made between the two bodies of teachings. Ask any orthodox Jew today about obeying the Law of Moses and he will always speak of it within the context of what is oral as passed down through the sages AND what is written as passed down from Moses. The two always go together in the minds of orthodox Jews; these two bodies of laws are never considered as separate entities. For the "orthodox Jews" in Paul's day (scribes and Pharisees), when they were spreading the rumor about Paul that he was not keeping the Law of Moses, they knew precisely what they were saying; that because Paul was against the rabbinic oral law THEN it did not matter one whit to the scribes and Pharisees if he was keeping Mosaic WRITTEN LAW or not. As far as they were concerned, Paul was NOT keeping any Jewish religious Law, period! However, as for all those 10,000's x 10,000's who were zealous for the Written Law of Moses, when they heard the rumor that Paul was supposedly not keeping the Law, they had assumed that he had stopped obeying the Written Commandments of Moses. I see no evidence that they had it in their minds that Paul was acting against the Pharisaic oral law. Rather, to these 10,000's that were zealous for the Law, if indeed the rumor was true that Paul was walking contrary to the Law, then for them, the concern was that Paul had entirely forsaken Moses, which of course, would have been a huge problem for them, considering that all these were quite "*zealous for the Law.*" So, Ya'acov (James) and the

elders told Paul to purify himself and to pay the expenses of four men who were under a Nazarite vow according to Numbers 6:9-21. They instructed him to follow through with the rituals of purification according to the Written Law of Moses. When the 10,000's x 10,000's of those zealous for the Law saw Paul in the Temple going through the rituals of purification and paying the expenses of the four men under the Nazarite vow, then clearly, the people saw that there was nothing to the rumors that they had heard, that Paul had abandoned Moses and the customs! They saw him performing regulations written in the Law of Moses; he just was not doing things according to the oral law of the scribes and Pharisees. However, keep this one fact in mind: regardless of Paul's actions, the Pharisees still would have maintained that Paul was not following the Law of Moses, even if he was doing things exactly as Moses specified in his divinely Written instructions. The same would be true today. If a Jew, such as me, scrupulously keeps the Written Law of Moses in an orthodox Jewish community, it is meaningless in the eyes of the rabbis; it is as though I'm not keeping the Law so long as I reject the oral traditions, period. In essence, I will receive no credit for any performance of the *Mitzvot* of the Written Word if I do not obey the established oral traditions. If you do not believe me, try it sometime in the face of an Orthodox Jewish community and see what they say about you.

As for the rumor that Paul was telling the Jews to not circumcise their children, it is so very obvious what was happening here. The Pharisees were very angry that Paul was teaching the children of the Jews to NOT submit to circumcision ACCORDING TO PHARISAIC HALACHA, which is what the rest of the statement meant, that Paul was "*telling them not to circumcise their children nor to walk according to the customs.*" The "customs" are a reference here to Pharisaic oral tradition regarding circumcision, which is a technical term for not obeying the established rabbinic regulations.

Works of the LAW or Works of the law: what is the difference?

In my example of Galatians 3:10, again the Pharisaic oral tradition is the subject of the discussion:

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them."

The term "*works of the law*" in Hebrew is *Ma'asei HaTorah*" and in principle it refers to all of the binding rules, regulations, traditions, enactments and prohibitions that make up the teachings of the oral law of the Pharisees and scribes. Yeshua had already warned his disciples against these teachings years before, saying to them in Matthew 16:11-12:

How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning bread? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Then they understood that he did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

It is this very same teaching that was also echoed by Yeshua in Matthew 15:3 and 6:

And he (Yeshua) answered and said to them (Pharisees), "And why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (takanot)? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He, who speaks evil of father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever shall say to his father or mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by has been given to God,' he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And thus you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition (takanot).

The traditions spoken of here are not just any traditions, as though all traditions were in some way bad! Not so. The term here from Hebrew is *takanot*, which is a category of binding rabbinic oral law, something that Paul was quite familiar with. The *takanot* (from *Tav Kuf Nun*, which means repair or fix) are legal enactments added to the

Law of YHWH by the supposed authority of Moses. However, the *takanot* are not at all based on scriptural reasoning. These laws were (and still are today) forced upon the people as a means to firmly establish the structure of rabbinic authority. Today, in modern Judaism, the *takanot* are vast in number and if you were an Orthodox Jew but you were not doing the *takanot*, it would be seen as though you were rebellious against YHWH by not obeying the elders as per Deuteronomy 17:9-12, which is a reading twisted out of context to support two additional twisted rabbinic interpretations: Exodus 23:2 and Deuteronomy 30:12, with a later teaching on this in the Babylonian Talmud at Baba Metzia 59b and the story of Rabbi Eliezer. As for the *takanot*, the rabbis say that they received authority to enact rulings of this type because they are Israel's supposed judges, again based on Deuteronomy 17:9-12. Paul's premise in Galatians (as is mine) was this: if their authority were valid then they themselves would have to be subject to making their *halacha* according to Deuteronomy 4:2 and 13:1 (12:32 in English Bibles). Furthermore, in judging difficult cases, they would, by the teachings of the Torah itself, have to listen to Heaven and listen to prophecy, even as the elders in Moses' day were subject to the judges, who were subject to Moses, who was ultimately subject to a judgment from a high priest and/or heaven itself. Five cases of this exist in the Written Torah: 1) The daughters of Zelophehad and their inheritance in Numbers 27:6-7; 2) The members of the same tribe of the daughters of Zelophehad—Manasse—concerning their inheritance in Numbers 36:4-5; 3) The second Passover in Numbers 8:6-14 for those ritually unclean during the first month; 4) The man caught blaspheming the Name of YHWH in Leviticus 24:10-16; 5) The man gathering sticks on the Shabbat in 15:32-36. In each of these cases a ruling from Heaven's judge was in order. If there were truly a valid oral law delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai, as the rabbis say (B. Talmud Berakhot 5a), then why did Moses have to later go to YHWH and get a ruling on these five cases? I would think that they should have just consulted their oral law. In any case, the rabbinic law makes no provision for listening to heaven, even if a ruling from heaven were needed, based on a twisted, out-of-context reading of Deuteronomy 30:12, and once again, supported in the Babylonian Talmud at Baba Metzia 59b and the story of Rabbi Eliezer, which was further grounded in Moshe ben Maimon's (the Rambam's) *Introduction to the Mishnah*, where it is stated categorically:

If there are 1,000 prophets, all of them of the stature of Elijah and Elisha, giving a certain interpretation, and 1,001 Rabbis giving the opposite interpretation, you shall "incline after the majority" and the law is according to the 1,001 Rabbis, not according to the 1,000 venerable prophets. And thus our Sages said, "By God, if we heard the matter directly from the mouth of Joshua the son of Nun, we would not obey him nor would we listen to him!" The Sages said further, "If Elijah comes and tells us, 'The levirate obligation is canceled through a shoe' (see Deut. 25:9), we will listen to him [because this is what the Oral Law teaches], but if he says it is canceled through a sandal, we will not listen to him [because this is contrary to the Oral Law]" (pp. 16-17).¹ ...And so if a prophet testifies, that the Holy-One, Blessed be He, told him, that the law of a certain commandment is such and such, or that the reasoning of a certain sage is correct, that prophet must be executed... as it is written, 'it is not in heaven' (Deuteronomy 30:12). Thus God did not permit us to learn from the prophets, only from the Rabbis who are men of logic and reason (pp. 27-28).²

Yeshua confirms that the twisted rabbinic teaching of *Lo Bashamayim He* (It is not in heaven) was very much in vogue in his day, as per Matthew 5:10-12 and 23:23-27, which are both about who has the real authority on earth. In Galatians 3:10, Paul was saying that anyone who submits to the binding traditions of the Pharisees (today's rabbinites) and their *takanot*, *ma'asim*, *minhagim*, these constitute mutiny against Moses and YHWH in Heaven and therefore it puts you under a curse because the Written Torah demands that you abide by all things that are

¹*Moses Maimonides Introduction to the Mishnah, Jerusalem, 1992 (Hebrew) [excerpt translated by Nehemia Gordon and confirmed by Fred Rosner's English translation published by Jason Aaronson Publishers, New Jersey and Jerusalem. Translation also independently confirmed by Elezar Brandt and Dina ben Mordechai in Jerusalem].*

²*Ibid.*

Written in the book of the Law to do them. In other words, by doing Pharisaic “works of the law” (their binding traditions and customs) you will NOT be doing the Torah (as much as you would like to think that you are) and therefore, if you are NOT doing all that is written in the Torah (Deuteronomy 27:26) then a curse is upon your head as one who says that he follows Yeshua and keeps the Torah that he taught, but does not do it, in fact. Afterwards, Paul then went on to make a point that Messiah removed the curse from you, so therefore, do not go back under the binding Pharisaic traditions and give allegiance to their supposed religious authority (Matthew 23:7-10), or for that matter, do not even submit to the common religious laws of mankind as Israel in exile has been doing for a very long time (2 Kings 17:34; Colossians 2:8). The world is filled up to the brim with these kinds of traditions that commandeer the rightful place of the Mosaic Written Law in our lives. I will be the first to admit that we have a difficult job ahead of us simply because the rabbis and the nations have been making up new religious laws for millennia, and it’s always easier if one does not have to “reinvent the wheel” so to speak. But, their “wheel” is cracked, or as Jeremiah put it:

*For My people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water. (Jeremiah 2:13)*

So, what to do? We must unfortunately start over re-interpreting and re-applying Torah Law in the Spirit of the Mashiach. This means an intensive tearing down and rebuilding process based on the Written Instructions. But, as we saw in Galatians 2:18, we cannot rebuild a path back to what we have decided is corrupt; otherwise this would make us transgressors of the Torah and as transgressors we would place ourselves back under the very curse that Yeshua removed from us (Galatians 3:13).

Slavery at Mount Sinai

Concerning Galatians 4:21-26 and Paul’s analogy of Hagar, this is quite simple to interpret once you understand the context and a little bit of Pharisaic oral law:

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.

Paul starts off with a statement, *Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law?* If you know that the basic premise of Jewish jurisprudence derives from Deuteronomy 6:4—the *Shema*—then his statement makes perfect sense. In other words, those of you who want to obey *Ma’asei HaTorah* and put yourself under binding rabbinic oral tradition, which is to be “under the law,” do you not listen and obey the Torah as it records a blood oath contract between Israel and YHWH in Exodus 24:7, which is restated by Yeshua in Luke 8:19-21? So then, Paul appeals to the authority of Written scripture and relates an allegory about Hagar and Mount Sinai. This makes sense when you remember from Exodus 32, the incident of the “golden calf”, which happened at Mount Sinai, when the elders of Israel called the calf YHWH (Exodus 32:5-8). The issue here is about scoffing at YHWH and making His word of no affect, even as Hagar did in Genesis chapters 16 and 21. Later, this same mockery and scoffing of the Word of Elohim resurfaces with the coming of the Pharisaic oral law of which Yeshua himself in Matthew 15:3-9 likened to the rebellion of all Israel against YHWH in Isaiah 29:13. Paul, picking up on this, naturally calls the party of the Pharisees and their students, who are the forerunners of today’s rabbis and their Orthodox Jewish communities, slaves like Hagar and idolaters like their forefathers. He then goes on to explain that those who obey the Word of YHWH and keep the true Torah of Life, they are of Jerusalem above.

Did You Say Circumcision OR Recircumcision?

Finally, let us take a look at Galatians 5:2-4

Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.

According to the Written Torah, we know that Abraham was commanded to perform the law of circumcision in his household, which includes all those bought with money and those born in the house, as it is written in Genesis 17:9-14

God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."

Considering that the sons of Jacob are the descendants of Abraham and that the gentiles of the nations also are encouraged to enter into the faith of Abraham the believer, you would think that this law of physical circumcision would apply to all males that enter into the household of Abraham by faith, all males from among the Hebrews and the goyim (gentiles). If so, why is it that the law of male circumcision is an obsolete teaching that appears to have no more place among the faithful in Yeshua? Are we to understand that Galatians 5:2-4 is to supersede Genesis 17:9-14? Has physical circumcision for male Jews and converts who believe in Yeshua been made into a spiritual circumcision only, based on a teaching of Paul in Romans 2:28-29? If so, then how are we to get around Deuteronomy 10:12-16, which speaks about outwardly obeying YHWH's commandments as a sign of an inward circumcision of the heart? Again, everything is easily understood when we study Paul in light of what was happening with the spread of rabbinic Judaism in his day. Without this crucial element of study, misunderstandings will continue to abound.

First of all, take a look at Acts 15:1 and 5:

...And some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."

...But certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed, stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."

An astute biblical student should immediately be able to see a problem here. You see, circumcision was never a custom of Moses. It was a law of YHWH given to Abraham. Now, when you take this piece of information and you look at Acts 15:5 where it tells you that certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed in Yeshua stood up and started arguing their case for the "law of Moses," you should immediately recognize that their argument was about circumcision according to the Pharisaic *halacha* or the oral law. Remember, oral law

observant Jews do not ever make a distinction between the Written Code and the supposed oral code of Sinai. For “Orthodox Jews,” Moses’ Written law is superseded by the supposed Oral. So, when they, the believing Pharisees say the “*law of Moses*” you have to use context to determine what is going on. In this case their context is over the oral law of Moses as it was used to interpret the Written Law. The Written Law about circumcision has a huge supplement in the oral law and you can read all about it in the Babylonian Talmud at Shabbat 133a, 135a and 137a plus in Yevamot 48a/b.

In brief, rabbinic oral tradition from the days of Shammai and Hillel, who predated Yeshua by about a generation, taught the circumcision principles called “*Hatafat Dam Brit*,” “*Peri’ah*,” and “*Metzitzah*.” *Hatafat Dam Brit* is a drawing out of a drop of blood from an already circumcised male organ. *Peri’ah* was a specialized way of doing a circumcision by pulling back the excess skin from the corona and cutting it off. *Metzitzah* was a sucking action applied to the male organ to facilitate the healing of the wound. Each of these three circumcision regulations became part of the process of the oral tradition and thus was legally binding. In Paul’s day, it was never good enough if a gentile had already gone through a biblical circumcision according to Abraham or any of the patriarchs according to the Written Law. Rather, the believing Pharisees were very strict about this matter and demanded that the goyim submit to the Pharisaic halacha on circumcision and thus submit to their authority for making supposed rulings according to Moses. Paul comes along and says to these men, based on his own previous commitment to Pharisaism that this was not a teaching of YHWH. An argument ensued and the matter was brought up to the Nazarean religious authorities in Jerusalem. What you see in Acts 15 is a debate over whether the gentiles or goyim are supposed to submit to a RE-circumcision according to the Pharisaic *halacha* or perhaps submit to a first-time circumcision according to the Written Law but supervised according to Pharisaic *halacha*. Interestingly, the Nazarean elders did not say “get circumcised,” or “recircumcised” or “don’t get circumcised at all.” Rather, they ruled on four things that are based on the Written Law, leaving circumcision out of it entirely. However, they did say in Acts 15:21 that Moses is read in the synagogues every Shabbat, implying that the goyim will know what to do IF they would simply listen to the words of Moses and not to the words of the Pharisees. That was good enough for them and I agree with this. For the believing elders of Jerusalem, those who had walked with Yeshua, the issue was not about re-circumcision or no circumcision at all; it was about keeping the commandments of YHWH and doing what YHWH commands us by the hand of Moses. Paul picked up on this and restated this principle in 1 Corinthians 7:19 and in Galatians 5:6. This is confirmed just a few verses later in Galatians 5:9, where Paul said in context, “*A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough*.” This was Paul’s teaching on Yeshua’s words in Matthew 16:11-12 on the concept of what is called in Hebrew *Se’or*, or leaven.

Exactly what is Freedom in “Christ”?

“Freedom in Christ” or “Freedom in Messiah” means freedom to choose wisely to keep the Written Words of Moses which includes what was taught in the whole book of Deuteronomy redacted on the other side of the Jordan before all Israel entered into the Land of Promise. If we should return to the binding traditions of the scribes and Pharisees, which are today’s rabbis and their religious tribunals and *poskim* (decisors of Jewish law), then we are guilty of adding to or diminishing from the Torah in violation of Deuteronomy 4:2 and 13:1 (12:32 in English Bibles). In this case, YHWH will call us liars (Proverbs 30:6). To place ourselves under rabbinic authority and the observed binding traditions that run contrary to the Written Word of Moses is to place ourselves under the law according to Galatians 2:16-17 and 2:18-19:

...Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law (rabbinic oral tradition) but through faith in Messiah Yeshua, even we have believed in Messiah Yeshua, that we may be justified by faith in Messiah Yeshua, and not by the works of the law (rabbinic oral tradition); since by the works of the law (rabbinic oral tradition) shall no flesh be justified.

For if I rebuild what I have once destroyed (rabbinic oral tradition) I prove myself to be a transgressor (of the written Torah). For through the Law (Written Torah) I died to the law (rabbinic oral tradition), that I might live to Elohim (Deuteronomy 30:15). I have been crucified with Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Ben Elohim, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me. I do not nullify the grace (Written Torah) of Elohim; for if righteousness comes through the law (rabbinic oral tradition), then Messiah died needlessly.”

To observe the binding (legal) traditions of the Pharisees who were the forerunners of today’s rabbis, and yes, even observing the volumes of pagan customs of the nations, which includes practices such as Christmas, Easter, Sunday worship of “God,” eating forbidden foods like pork and shellfish and doing things contrary to what the Written commandments reveal to us, then we are guilty of condoning anti-Torah behavior and in many cases, “rebuilding” a path back to man’s rebellion against YHWH, which is what the Written commandments came to destroy. Thus, Paul admonishes us in Colossians 2:8 on the Written Torah authority of Leviticus 19:17-18 the following:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Messiah.

Food for Spiritual Thought

With all the issues that we have looked at together, let us consider these points to nourish our hungry minds:

- 1) The Law of the “Old Covenant” is called Truth in Psalm 119:142 and in Malachi 2:6 and John 17:17.
- 2) Since the job of the Spirit is to guide us into all truth (John 16:13) then it makes sense that Ezekiel 36:27 would be a valid prophecy because the job of the Spirit is to CAUSE US to walk in the Law of Moses.
- 3) Since the Law of the “Old Covenant” is seen as a movement of the Spirit then it makes sense that the prophecy of Malachi 4:4 would be used to remind us of our obligations.
- 4) We are then further reminded as a people connected to the family of Israel by faith that only obeying the Laws of the “Old Covenant” makes us members of the family of Yeshua, as he said in Luke 8:19-21.
- 5) Yeshua, in seeking to define who his “brothers” are, then goes on to teach Exodus 24:7, which is a contractual formula that all Israel entered into with the Almighty YHWH at Mount Sinai (Exodus 3:15).
- 6) In short, when we remain faithful to the contract in Exodus 24:7, we automatically become “brothers” and that means we become the people of YHWH or if you will, “His People”—Jeremiah 11:1-4.
- 7) The All Eternal One, in calling us His People, therefore gives us “LIFE” and that life is in keeping His commandments, as it is written in Deuteronomy 30:15-20.