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# Does Circumcision Save?

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## Acts 15:1–5

Acts 15:1 **Some men** came down from Judea and taught the **brothers**, “Unless you are circumcised after the custom of Moses, you can’t be saved.”

**Some men** Jewish Christians, believers in Christ.

**brothers** Brothers in Christ, in this case, the converted Gentiles.

This sets the subject of almost the entire chapter 15 (up to verse 33). The complete and entire issue was whether or not circumcision was required in order to be saved. The question was not whether it was required for other purposes, but only whether or not it was required for salvation. The Jews (Christians) from Judea said that it was, and Paul, God’s chosen apostle to the Gentiles, said it was not. Paul made his decision according to the Holy Spirit and according to Torah. It must be clearly appreciated that Paul’s ruling did not contradict Torah in any way.

Since Torah specifies that all male children of the Chosen People must be circumcised on the eighth day, how then is it that Paul’s ruling did not violate the Torah? It is because there is a clear precedent in Scripture showing an exception to this commandment. During their wanderings in the wilderness, the Israelites failed to circumcise their children (Joshua 5:5). The parents were punished for their disobedience, but the children were uncircumcised through no fault of their own. This is the kind of circumstance in which the converted Gentiles now found themselves.

When the uncircumcised Israelites drew near to the promised land, God was with them, and they conquered all the lands of the Transjordan. When, however, it came time to cross the Jordan and take possession of the Promised Land, then God instructed Joshua to circumcise the people. God would not violate His Covenant regarding circumcision and the inheritance of the land.

### Genesis 17:8-10

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.“

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

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

In like manner, it will only be necessary for the Gentiles to be circumcised in order to enter fully into the Covenant made with Abraham, to enter the Promised Land. This is a physical promise, with a physical condition. The Promised Land is not a spiritual location (as some modern Christians appear to believe), but a real, physical location.

It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit knew that Israel was about to be sent into another period of exile, and that it will only be after this period, when the Temple is rebuilt, that the

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Gentiles and Jews alike will be able to return to the Promised Land, their inheritance from God, given to Abraham and his seed. Anyone who is in Christ is the seed of Abraham, and heir according to the promise.

Acts 15:2 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.

It can be seen that this was not an easy matter to decide. Paul, however, knew the correct answer because he was guided by the Holy Spirit on this, while the others were not (the Holy Spirit does not argue against himself). Those arguing against Paul knew that the Torah required circumcision.

Acts 15:3 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.

The whole subject and focus is on the conversion of the Gentiles.

Acts 15:4 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.

Paul reported the great success he was having in saving the Gentiles.

Acts 15:5 But some of the sect of the **Pharisees who believed** rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, **besides** to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

**Pharisees** I.e., Jews.

**who believed** Who were Christians.

**besides** ‘Besides’ is the correct word here for Greek ‘τε’, not ‘and’, as it is most frequently translated.

Those Christian Pharisees rose up to say that besides commanding the Gentiles to keep the Torah (which was a given), they must also be commanded to be circumcised in order to be saved (see verse 1). Here, it is not repeated, “in order to be saved.”

Note that there is a subtle mistranslation of verse 5 in most Bible versions: they have the word “and” instead of the correct word, “besides”. An example of the translation of ‘τε’ as ‘besides’ is given in the Concordant Greek Text, which appears in the accompanying illustration.

The Greek word “te” may be translated “and” or “besides” or “both”, depending on circumstance, but this is a fact known by very few people. The wrong choice is made by many translators because they have misconstrued and misunderstood the whole issue that was being debated, wrongly assuming that the debate was concerning whether or not the Gentiles were to keep Torah. In fact, it was just a given that the Gentiles would need to keep God’s Law, not one letter nor one serif of which will be altered until all is completed, as Yeshua clearly explained in [Matthew 5:17–20](#).

5 ΜΕΤ ΔΥΤΩΝ ἘΞΑΝΕΣΤΗΣΑΝ ΔΕ ΤΙΝΕΣ ΤΩΝ ΑΠΟ ΤΗΣ ΑΙΡΕΣΕΩΣ ΤΩΝ  
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 them TO-BE-chargeING BESIDES TO-BE-KEEPING THE LAW of-MOSES of-Moses

<sup>5</sup> Yet <sup>any</sup>some <sup>from</sup> the sect of the Pharisees who have believed rise up, saying that they must be circumcised, besides charging them to keep the law of Moses.

Figure 1: Acts 15:5, Concordant Greek Text, showing 'τε' = 'besides'