

Shayla: Why did Paul circumcise Timothy but not Titus?

Meforshim:

- [Galatians 2:3-5 HCSB](#) But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. (4) *This issue arose* because of false brothers smuggled in, who came in secretly to spy on our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, in order to enslave us. (5) But we did not yield in submission to these people for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel would remain for you.
- [Acts 16:1-3 HCSB](#) Then he went on to Derbe and Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy, the son of a believing Jewish woman, but his father was a Greek. (2) The brothers at Lystra and Iconium spoke highly of him. (3) Paul wanted Timothy to go with him, so he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, since they all knew that his father was a Greek.

To understand these two very different situations, the first thing we need to do is try to understand some of the social habits that were driving motivators.

The Jewish people, like many other semitic tribes, determined nationality by male descent. Hashem knew this practice and used it for His own good purposes. He chose a man named Abraham and made a covenant that included the wonderful promise that Hashem would make a great nation through Abraham.¹ This promise was fulfilled through Abraham's son Isaac,² and then continued on through one of Isaac's sons named Jacob.³ When Hashem changed Jacob's name to Israel,⁴ all of that patriarch's descendents became known by that name, i.e. b'nei Yisrael, or sons of Israel.⁵

So, we see that the Jews were a patriarchal people. However, there was Halakha that indicated that someone could become adopted into the People if they chose to follow God and obey His mitzvot, regardless of their genetic ancestry.

- [Exodus 12:48-49 HCSB](#) If a foreigner resides with you and wants to celebrate the LORD's Passover, every male in his household must be circumcised, and then he may participate; he will become like a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person may eat it. (49) The same law will apply to both the native and the foreigner who resides among you."
- [Numbers 15:13-16 HCSB](#) "Every Israelite is to prepare these things in this way when he presents a fire offering as a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (14) When a foreigner resides with you or someone else is among you and wants to prepare a fire offering as a pleasing aroma to the LORD, he is to do exactly as you do throughout your generations. (15) The assembly is to have the same statute for both you and the foreign resident as a permanent statute throughout your generations. You and the foreigner will be alike before the LORD. (16) The same law and the same ordinance will apply to both you and the foreigner who resides with you."

Goyim who desired to serve the Lord and were willing to abide by Hashem's commandments were to receive the same consideration as a native-born Jew.

- [Leviticus 19:33-34 HCSB](#) (33) "When a foreigner lives with you in your land, you must not oppress him. (34) You must regard the foreigner who lives with you as the native-born among you. You are to love him as yourself, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.

¹ Genesis 12:1-2

² Genesis 26:2-5

³ Genesis 28:13-15

⁴ Genesis 32:28

⁵ Genesis 34:7; 42:5, 45:21, 46:5, Exodus 1:1, Deuteronomy 23:17, 1 Chronicles 2:1

So, if someone did not have a Jewish father but wanted to fully and legally join the Jewish people, they had to formally agree to follow all of Yahweh's mitzvot. For a male, that would include getting circumcised. The same condition would obviously not apply to a female, as we can see in the life of Ruth.

She was a Moabitess, a nation against which a curse had been laid! And yet when she vowed "your people will be my people, and your God will be my God"⁶ our merciful God did not merely allow her to live as a second-class citizen in the land, but actually included her in the Messianic line!⁷ Even Israelis who refuse to admit the Messianic status of Jesus of Nazareth have to admit that Ruth became part of the royal line because by marrying Boaz she became the great grandmother of King David.

However, over time, the Jews began to make a distinction between three ancestral conditions: (1) One whose father is Jewish (fully Jew); (2) one whose mother is Jewish but whose father is not (conditionally Jewish); and one whose parents are both Gentile (not Jewish).

We can see an example of the second condition in Timothy. Timothy's mother was Jewish and she had raised him in the Jewish practices from birth with the notable exception of circumcision. Perhaps her Greek husband (Greeks highly valued the natural human form) had balked at what he perceived to be a barbaric practice?

However, circumcision was a requirement of Hashem's Abrahamic covenant,⁸ a fact well-known by all Jews, and Timothy's uncircumcised condition would have posed a substantial barrier when he tried to witness to fellow Jews from a Jewish standpoint. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him so *he took him and circumcised him* because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. Had Timothy refused to do this it would have seemed to the Jews he would witness to that he refused to identify with them; that he valued Greek, polytheistic and often anti-Semitic world views.

In a similar case, Paul again chose to go along with following the Law in order to assure that He was not teaching rejection of Moses.

- **Acts 21:20-24 HCSB** When they heard it, they glorified God and said, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law. (21) But they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, by telling them not to circumcise their children or to walk in our customs. (22) So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you've come. (23) Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have obligated themselves with a vow. (24) Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay for them to get their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law.
- **Acts 21:26 HCSB** Then the next day, Paul took the men, having purified himself along with them, and entered the temple, announcing the completion of the purification days when the offering for each of them would be made.

On the other hand, Titus was a completely different issue and Paul flatly refused to have him circumcised, stating that the truth of the gospel was at stake; that circumcising Titus would be tantamount to abandoning the gospel of justification by faith apart from works of the law.

Why such strong language? Where Timothy was already partially Jewish, both of Titus' parents were Greek.⁹ Where Timothy had been taught the Old Covenant from birth,¹⁰ it's not

⁶ Ruth 1:16

⁷ Matthew 1:5

⁸ Genesis 17:12-14

⁹ Galatians 2:3

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 3:15

likely that Titus was. Timothy was already Jewish by race and upbringing. Circumcising Titus would be saying that to be saved he had to be Jewish; that salvation is part and parcel with political, social affiliation. Now that WOULD be tantamount to rejection of the Gospel!

Also, notice who the antagonists were in the two different situations. In Timothy's case, they were unsaved Jews.¹¹ In Titus', they were false brothers.¹² That is a very different matter as we see in:

- **1 Corinthians 5:11 HCSB** But now I am writing you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother who is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a reviler, a drunkard or a swindler. Do not even eat with such a person.

The pressure in Titus' case would have been false believers who were trying to ensnare people by saying that circumcision was required for salvation. On the other hand, Timothy, a "completed Jew" was "well spoken of by all the brothers"¹³ already. There was no pressure from the brothers for Timothy's circumcision for their sake, rather it was "because of the Jews that were in those places"¹⁴. Timothy's circumcision was not from external social pressure, but was part and parcel of an internal missionary strategy.

Further, Titus was something of a test,¹⁵ a one-time trial to determine the nature of the balance between the Sinaitic Law and the Gospel. In that case, on the issue of circumcision at least, the Law lost. Circumcision was deemed maleh. On the other hand, Timothy was to be a co-laborer, a fellow missionary and constant companion on Paul's voyages. So, where Titus' case was a one-time theological battle, what was at stake in Timothy's case was how best to be "all things to all men"

- **1 Corinthians 9:20 HCSB** To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law--though I myself am not under the law--to win those under the law.

The Law of Freedom¹⁶ dictated that Titus not be circumcised and that Timothy be circumcised, the first for theological reasons and the second for evangelistic reasons. Our freedom in Christ (always for the furtherance of the Gospel not our own pleasure) allowed Paul to refuse a painful procedure for Titus, but allowed the missionary team to remove a stumbling block to witnessing to Jews.

¹¹ Acts 16:3

¹² Galatians 2:3-5

¹³ Acts 16:2

¹⁴ Acts 16:3

¹⁵ Galatians 2:1

¹⁶ James 1:25; 2:12