

## Purity

Islamic purity practices are described in some detail in Tabataba'i pages 228ff. Ali (1988: 109a, 110a) defines the matter in precisely the same way. The ablutions of Islam are of three basic types: dry ablutions under special circumstances, ablution of head, hands and feet, and finally washing of the entire body.

States of purity and impurity are defined in terms of contact with defiling substances, such as urine, faeces, unclean animals, menstrual blood, semen, and dead bodies. Ablutions after defilement are required before engaging in acts of worship.

The only remnant of purity regulations to be found in established Christianity is baptism and in a very limited degree the washing of feet. The distinction between pure and impure has disappeared. The acts requiring a state of purity in Islam, such as prayer in prostration and reading the sacred text as an act of worship, are also more or less non-existent in Christianity.

The concept of purity in Islam is attached to three more features besides ablutions. These are circumcision, avoidance of unclean meat in the diet, and the giving of alms in charity, which is known as zakat or purification.

The question now facing us is whether or not the Bible reflects the distinction between pure and impure as found in Islam and in Judaism as well for that matter. Furthermore, does the Bible recognize ablutions in principle before certain acts of worship? Finally, if so, are those acts of worship and methods of ablution similar to those in Islam?

It follows also to note whether or not the practice of circumcision is justifiable on the basis of the Bible, and whether avoidance of certain meats is maintained, and if so, whether they are the same ones forbidden in Islam. The giving of alms in charity might be mentioned also, but it is a feature of Islamic purity which is found in some form in both Judaism and Christianity as well. Since it is less distinctive, it will not interest us greatly here, except to note that the Bible certainly does enjoin charity.

There is a little note in John 2:6 which sheds light on purity. `And there were set there six waterpots of

stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins apiece.' Now Jesus quarreled with the people of his time about ablutions. He strictly avoided ablution before eating and did not permit his disciples to engage in it.

The quarrel is described in Mark 7:2–3. `And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread with defiled, that is to say, with unwashed, hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, except they wash their hands oft, eat not, holding the tradition of the elders.' (See also Matthew 15:2 and Luke 11:38).

Having divine authority, Jesus did not follow the tradition of the elders. He had authority to render a verdict on the law himself. It is a mere fact that the washing of hands with the invocations involved does not appear in the law.

The quarrel was apparently so involved that some of the disciples of Jesus in fact did not understand the principles of his interpretation. Even at the end of his ministry the issue was unclear. Peter demands an ablution before the meal in John 13:9. `Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head.'

It is as though Peter had got the impression that the practice of Jesus was stricter than that of the Pharisees, and in addition to hands, the feet and head should also be purified before eating. The fact was that Jesus opposed ablution of any kind before eating, because it was not justifiable by the Torah.

The washing of feet was an exemplary act in hospitality (cf. Genesis 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; 1 Samuel 25:41 and 1 Timothy 5:10), not an act of ablution. Peter did not apparently realize this. His outburst, however, gives us the one clear reference in the New Testament to ablution of head, hands and feet.

Jesus did not oppose ablution that was justifiable on the basis of the Torah. Specifically the entire body ablution, called baptism in the New Testament, is often mentioned. Other forms of ablution are ignored since there was no argument about them. The text deals only with forms of ablution that went beyond the injunctions of the law. Ablution before the performing of acts of worship remains valid in the practice of Jesus.

Since the practice of ablution is not described in the New Testament, even in the case of full-body ablution or baptism, we are constrained to rely on the text of the so called Old Testament for details of its execution. Even there, the details are scarce. The description of ritual acts is notoriously deficient in religious texts, in the Qur'an even more than in the Bible, since they are practices that are transmitted more by the example of the prophets than verbal precept.

Nevertheless a number of descriptions exist. The Torah describes ablutions for the priests and for others on certain occasions of ritual defilement, such as contact with the dead and sexual activity.

Exodus 29:4. `And Aaron and his sons thou shalt bring unto the door of the tabernacle of the

congregation, and shalt wash them with water.' See also Exodus 40:12, Leviticus 8:6.

Exodus 30:18–21. 'Thou shalt also make a laver of brass, and his foot also of brass, to wash withal: and thou shalt put it between the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar, and thou shalt put water therein. For Aaron and his sons shall wash their hands and their feet thereat: When they go into the tabernacle of the congregation, they shall wash with water, that they die not; or when they come near to the altar to minister, to burn offering made by fire unto the Lord: So they shall wash their hands and their feet, that they die not: and it shall be a statute for ever to them, even to him and to his seed throughout their generations.' See also Exodus 30:30–32.

Leviticus 14:9. 'But it shall be on the seventh day, that he shall shave all his hair off his head and his beard and his eyebrows, even all his hair he shall shave off. and he shall wash his clothes, also he shall wash his flesh in water, and he shall be clean.' See also Leviticus 15:5–11,13,16,17,21, 22,27.

Numbers 19:7–8. 'Then the priest shall wash his clothes, and he shall bathe his flesh in water, and afterward he shall come into the camp, and the priest shall be unclean until the even. And he that burneth her shall wash his clothes in water, and bathe his flesh in water, and shall be unclean until the even.' See also verses 18–19.

Deuteronomy 23:11. 'But it shall be, when evening cometh on, he shall wash himself with water; and when the sun is down, he shall come into the camp again.'

The prophets note some instances of ablution, in some cases showing slight differences in the details from those depicted in the Torah.

2 Kings 5:10,14. 'And Elisha sent a messenger unto him, saying, Go and wash in Jordan seven times, and thy flesh shall come again to thee, and thou shalt be clean... Then he went down, and dipped himself seven times in Jordan, according to the saying of the man of God: and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child, and he was clean.'

2 Chronicles 4:6. 'He made also ten lavers, and put five on the right hand, and five on the left, to wash in them: such things as they offered for the burnt offering they washed in them; but the sea was for the priests to wash in.'

The Psalms make some references to the ablutions that have preceded the prayer occasion. These give innocence as the spiritual counterpart of ablution.

Psalms 18:20,24,26. 'The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands hath he recompensed me... according to the cleanness of my hands in his eyesight... With the pure thou wilt show thyself pure.'

Psalms 24:3–4. 'Who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart.'

Psalm 26:6. 'I will wash my hands in innocence: so will I compass thine altar, O Lord.'

Psalm 73:13. 'Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence.'

Isaiah and Jeremiah concentrate on the problem of hypocrisy, or the attitude that as long as the formal aspect of ablution is maintained, moral behavior can be discounted. These prophets show clearly that formal ablution is of no value if it is not followed by the behavior it implies.

Isaiah 1:16. 'Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil.'

Jeremiah 2:22. 'For though thou wash thee with nitre, and take thee much soap, yet thine iniquity is marked before me, said the Lord God.'

The New Testament texts show that the practice of ablution was continued by the followers of Jesus Christ.

Acts 9:37. 'And it came to pass in those days, that she was sick, and died: whom when they had washed, they laid her in an upper chamber.'

Hebrews 10:22. 'Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.' The author is not referring here to hygienic practices, necessary though they may be. He is talking about ritual purity through ablutions and its spiritual, moral and ethical counterpart.

It can be concluded that the concept of ritually pure and impure is found throughout the Bible. Although there may be some minor variation in its details, ablution is maintained throughout in the form of total immersion or washing on one hand, and the washing of the extremities on the other. Ablution is a formal sign of the inward decision to put away evil actions.

The concept of purity and impurity in the Bible is not limited to ablution alone. When there was a disagreement among the followers of Jesus about the practice of the law, it was specifically the matter of purity that was maintained and agreed upon for all people. Acts 15:20. 'But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood.'

This text clearly enjoins the purity code in diet that is found in Leviticus eleven and Deuteronomy fourteen. This means that purity requires that slaughtering take place in such a way that the name of God alone and that of no idol is pronounced, that the blood is removed, and that only specific animals are appropriate to be eaten. All three of these factors are, according to Acts 15, essential.

In the clear light of this text it remains puzzling that Christianity ignores the most basic injunctions regarding purity. To take texts regarding the washing of hands (Matthew 15:10–20) or the association with Gentiles (Acts 10:9–28) and apply them to the matter of dietary purity is unjustifiable. To interpret

the Pauline statements (for example the discussion of vegetarianism in Romans 14:2–3) so as to grant permission to eat ritual impurities is only to construe Paul at variance with the rest of the Bible. The conclusion of such interpretation is the discrediting of Paul, not the permission to eat impurities.

The Jewish practice of kosher, on the basis of Exodus 23: 19, forbids the mixing of milk and meat, taking the precaution of keeping separate cooking and eating vessels. The Torah text forbids seething the meat of a kid in its mother's milk. The Jewish practice in fact comes, according to some scholars, from ancient Canaanite practice and not from the Torah at all.

In Genesis 18:8 Abraham mixes milk and meat products. Jews might say that the laws of purity were revealed only at the time of Moses, but that is belied by the fact that they were already known at the time of Noah (see Genesis 6–9). How could Noah take a different number of clean and unclean animals into the ark unless it was already clear to him which were clean and which unclean? The Bible thus describes a purity code which in some aspects is closer to that of Islam than it is to that of Judaism.

Ali does not give a specific and comprehensive list of forbidden meats. Tabataba'i does so on page 249. Slaughtering must be done facing towards Mecca, pronouncing the name of Allah, and letting out the blood.

A comparison with Acts 15:20, Deuteronomy fourteen and Leviticus eleven shows that the Bible and Islamic practice are almost identical. The slaughtering practice is described in the same terms. The list of forbidden species is the same with the exception of the camel and zebra, which are, according to Tabataba'i, permitted in Islam and forbidden in the Bible.

The camel, but not the zebra, is actually specified in the Qur'an as edible. There may be scholars who prohibit the zebra. A small difference is in the categorization. The forbidden species in the Torah are called *shekets*, abomination, which may correspond to the Islamic term *makruh*. Some of the forbidden meats in Islam are called by the stronger term, *haram*. The prohibition in Islam is thus couched in stronger terms than in the Bible.

Two other practices of purity are described in the Bible. The practice called 'circumcision' in English is called 'purification' in some other languages. According to the Bible, this practice was either instituted or reinstated at the time of Abraham (Genesis seventeen). It can hardly be overemphasized that the true faith of the Bible is specifically the faith of Abraham, since all of the Biblical prophets are purported to be either forefathers or descendants of Abraham. The practice of circumcision of male infants is not questioned at all in the Bible in any text.

There was a disagreement among Jews concerning the circumcision of adult converts to the faith, apparently between Hellenismg Jews mainly from Alexandria and others during the decades immediately preceding and following the time of Jesus Christ. Since circumcision, like ablution, was an outward sign of an inward preparation, it was thought that the inward preparation sufficed.

This argument carried over among the followers of Christ.

Paul took the position that adult converts to the faith need not be circumcised, in fact, should not be circumcised merely to satisfy the demands of the other party. The authoritative church in Jerusalem with James at its head agreed with him, while certain Pharisees did not (Acts 15:5,19–20). The discussion does not apply to the matter of circumcising infants. This was never questioned. It was only a matter of choosing to be or not to be circumcised oneself, at an age when that choice was possible. All of Paul's strong words against circumcision refer to this situation alone.

Interestingly enough, however, Paul's argument that circumcision is superfluous since Abraham was accepted before he was circumcised could be turned around to support the other argument. After all, he was circumcised even though he was accepted, and that even at the age of ninety. Despite Paul's forbidding circumcision to the adult converts in Galatia, he himself circumcised Timothy. Obviously Paul forbade the Galatians from circumcision because they construed it in such a way as to weaken their faith in Christ. There is not one word in the Bible to suggest that male children of believers should not be circumcised.

Since the subject of circumcision is becoming an increasingly polemic one, it appears necessary to examine the Biblical texts in more detail. The basic legal texts will be observed first and then the New Testament ones, especially as they relate to the Pauline situation, which is the basis for most Christian practice.

The institution of circumcision is found throughout the seventeenth chapter of Genesis. This happened when Abraham was ninety–nine years old (Genesis 17:1). Circumcision is dealt with in regard to the command to obey God perfectly and enter into covenant with Him (17:1–2). It is not set forth for the Jews alone, but for the many nations of which Abraham is to become father (Genesis 17:4–6). It is a part of the promise that Abraham's descendants will inherit the land of Palestine (17:7–8).

Circumcision is performed on males alone, not on females (17:10). Circumcision consists of cutting off the foreskin (17:11). It should normally take place on the eighth day after birth, that is, on the same day of the following week (17:12). It should be performed on every male one has access to (17:12–13). Failure to be circumcised constitutes a breaking of covenant with God (17:14). The rest of the chapter describes Abraham's performance of circumcision at the age of ninety–nine when his son Ishmael was thirteen.

Abraham circumcised Isaac as an infant in Genesis 21:4. 'And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him.'

Later legislation is limited to only a few Mosaic passages. Exodus 12:44,48. 'But every man's servant that is bought for money, when thou hast circumcised him, then shall he eat thereof... And when a stranger shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncir–

cumcised person shall eat thereof.' This text adds to the Abrahamic covenant only that circumcision is an absolute prerequisite for participation in the observance of Passover.

The general legislation is repeated in Leviticus 12:3. `And in the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'

Circumcision is used metaphorically to indicate willingness to obey God from the heart. Such symbolism begins already in the Mosaic text, Deuteronomy 10:16. `Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff necked.' Deuteronomy 30:6 expands on the metaphorical use. `And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.'

Genesis thirty-four reports the circumcision of the Shechemites by the sons of Jacob. This story is interesting, since it appears to make circumcision the only requirement of conversion. Exodus 4:26 mentions the circumcision of Moses' son. Joshua five reports the circumcision before entering the promised land.

The only other remarks of the prophets are those of Jeremiah. First is Jeremiah 4:4 in which he echoes the metaphorical usage in Deuteronomy. In Jeremiah 9:25 the valuelessness of circumcision without obedience is maintained. `Behold, the days come, said the Lord, that I will punish all them which are circumcised with the uncircumcised.'

This is the whole legal and early Imami basis on which the later discussion of circumcision rests.

Circumcision is also mentioned a few times in the gospels. Luke mentions the circumcision of both John and Jesus in Luke 1:59 and 2:21. The only report of Jesus speaking of circumcision is in John 7:22-23. `Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses, but of the fathers;) and ye on the Sabbath day circumcise a man. If a man on the Sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath day?'

This teaching does not directly relate to circumcision, but to the justification of Jesus' act of healing on the Sabbath in the eyes of the Pharisees. When Jesus was accused of breaking the Sabbath by healing, he gave this argument. The verdict of the Pharisees was that a Sabbath born child should be circumcised on the following Sabbath, and this did not constitute Sabbath-breaking, since it was commanded in the law. Jesus does not comment on the validity of the Pharisaical verdict.

Stephen, in his sermon in Acts 7:8, reports the covenant of circumcision with Abraham in a positive sense. `And he gave him the covenant of circumcision: and so Abraham begat Isaac, and circumcised him the eighth day; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat the twelve patriarchs.'

The problem with circumcision arises for the first time in Acts 10:44-47. `While Peter yet speak these

words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost. For they heard them speak with tongues, and magnify God. Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?'

This text is full of special concepts and assumptions. The first is the use of the term 'the circumcision' for a certain group of people. The larger set is the whole of those under the law of Moses. The subset within the circumcision is those 'which believed' in Jesus Christ. Through the preaching of Peter and a divine act, we are brought face to face with a new group, those who believe in Jesus Christ, but are not 'of the circumcision'. This new group is characterized by belief in Christ, the gift of the Holy Ghost, and baptism by water. They are not circumcised, and it remains somewhat unclear what their relationship to the law of Moses is.

The question cannot be delayed beyond Acts 15: 1. 'And certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved.' Acts 15:5 'But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.'

The question is not resolved by appeal to rabbinical method, but by appeal to Imami authority in the figure of James, who is either the Imam in his own right succeeding Jesus, or his representative. Acts 15: 13. James begins his verdict by making prophetic reference to the Davidic authority passed on through Jesus. Acts 15: 16–17. At the same time he extends this authority to the Gentiles. In verse 19 he turns to the verdict at hand. 'Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God: But that we write unto them, that they abstain from pollutions of idols, and from fornication, and from things strangled, and from blood. For Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day.' Acts 15: 19–21.

Verse nineteen clearly implies that converts among the Gentiles should not be constrained to be circumcised. But verse twenty adds details which cloud a clear verdict. If the converts are not required to be circumcised, they are still required to adhere to certain forms. It is impossible that the practices mentioned are exhaustive, since fornication is mentioned but not adultery, eating meat offered to idols is forbidden, but not idol-worship itself.

Nor is it clear that James is referring to the covenant of Noah for the Gentile converts, rather than the covenant through Abraham or Moses. If James were implying the covenant of Noah to be valid, he should have mentioned the practices specific to that covenant. In fact he does refer to the specifics of that covenant in regard to diet, but he overlooks blood revenge, and adds to it fornication. He is not therefore referring to the covenant of Noah.

The problem is resolved when we remember the character of Imami verdicts. James has no incentive to

interpret the law in general. He is dealing with a specific case. He is acting as Imam at a particular time in regard to a particular problem. He therefore speaks to the practical issues present. He knows what issues are specifically at stake with the particular Gentile converts in question. They are liable to commit fornication, but not adultery. They are liable to eat meat offered to idols, but not worship idols. They are liable to eat things forbidden by the law, and must be reminded specifically of those. These people are liable to think that the Imami verdict allowing them as adult converts to remain uncircumcised permits their ignoring the law on other points, specifically in diet. James thus warns them of this danger. In so doing, he limits the verdict to the matter of the releasing of the Gentile converts in question from the obligation of circumcision.

Having established the Imami verdict and limited it to the matter of releasing from the obligation of circumcision in a particular case, James goes on to speak about the reading of the law in verse twenty-one. The clear implication is that James expects the uncircumcised Gentile converts to listen to the reading of the law in the synagogues every Sabbath. The Christian who appeals to the verdict of James for the neglect of circumcision in later times must also follow the verdict of James and attend the Sabbath reading of the law in the synagogue. One cannot take the one without the other.

There are two points in regard to this situation that must be made. The first is that the question of circumcising adult converts to the law of Moses was one widely debated, especially among Hellenistic Jews. The period was one of missionary endeavor, and there were many cases of conversion to Judaism. The problem was very real and practical.

The second point is that Paul was present at the giving of James's verdict and appears to support it, since he was part of the delegation which took the verdict to the Gentiles in question, the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:23). If we must add attending the Sabbath reading of the law in the synagogue to release from the obligation of circumcision in James's verdict, we must also add the avoidance of eating meat offered to idols. Paul does not appear to take this verdict of James as of universal significance. He admits its validity for the specific case at hand, but he does not admit its general validity.

Paul in principle allows eating meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8. His argument is of great interest. He bases it on the unity of God. Since God is one and there are no other gods besides Him, idols are empty, having power only in the mind of the ignorant. Therefore, it is not significant whether meat has been offered to idols or not.

Sensitivity to meat offered to idols is the result of a weak conscience. One should therefore avoid eating meat offered to idols simply out of deference to those who have a weak conscience and might be emboldened to sin against themselves by our example. Paul thus rejects the universal value of James's verdict, accepting it only in the specific conflict among the Gentile converts in Syria, Antioch and Cilicia at that time. Once the Imami verdict releasing the obligation of any legal practice under specific circumstances is abandoned, the general recourse must be the written legislation. Paul therefore puts

himself face to face with the law.

Paul's discussion of circumcision is therefore outside the pale of James's release of the obligation on Gentile converts at the time. His discussion takes place strictly within the context of the law, and possibly within the context of Imami verdicts of which we have no record.

The first Pauline text is Romans 2:25–29. `For circumcision verily profiteth, if thou keep the law: but if thou be a breaker of the law, thy circumcision is made uncircumcision. Therefore if the uncircumcision keeps the righteousness of the law, shall not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision? And shall not uncircumcision which is by nature, if it fulfill the law, judge thee, who by the letter and circumcision dost transgress the law? For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.'

Here Paul notes three potential groups: those who are circumcised and keep the law, those who are circumcised and who do not keep the law otherwise, and those who are not circumcised and keep the law otherwise. He condemns the second group and condones the third. His argument is that circumcision is valid only when the law is otherwise observed, and that observing the law otherwise places the individual in the same situation as the circumcised law keeper.

This concept is a logical reversal of the text noted above in Jeremiah 9:25, where God's punishment falls equally on the circumcised and uncircumcised. Such a reversal, however, that God's reward falls equally on the circumcised and uncircumcised, conflicts with Genesis 17:14. Paul is led into the argument by the very real and practical situation of circumcision being a form imposed in infancy which does not necessarily conform to later individual choices.

Paul continues the discussion in Romans 3:1–2. `What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.' Paul recognizes the value of circumcision as a part of the configuration necessary for the guarding and transmitting of Scripture. He sees it to be a historically and socially important factor rather than a personal one. He thus interprets the legislation as referring to the creation of a people who would preserve revelation. He implies that to apply this to the individual faith experience is to skew the meaning and role of circumcision.

In Romans 4:9–12, Paul continues his thought. `Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness. How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.

And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of

the circumcision only, but who walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.'

Here Paul points out that circumcision is not the condition for receiving pardon for sin (cf. Romans 4:7–8). The condition for receiving pardon is faith in any case. Paul continues to maintain the non-salvific role of circumcision as seen in chapter three, but he does place an added burden on its meaning as a 'seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised'. By making circumcision a 'seal' of such righteousness, Paul apparently tries to use it psychologically to avert the hypocrisy which he condemned in chapter two. Although Paul thus rejects any salvific role of circumcision, he gives it more than a symbolic role. It is part of the process of preserving Scriptural revelation, and it is a physical badge which should stimulate the individual to exercise the kind of faith Paul does see as salvific.

In 1 Corinthians 7:18–19 Paul makes the same point more briefly. 'Is any man called being circumcised? let him not become uncircumcised. Is any called in uncircumcision? let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.'

Here Paul succinctly notes several things. He places the discussion clearly in the area of conversion of adult males to faith in Christ. He notes that such a situation should not have any effect on circumcision. He respects the same dichotomy that James had between circumcision and keeping the law in other matters. For the convert, circumcision is not obligatory, but keeping the commandments otherwise is.

Paul engages in a polemic discussion of circumcision without adding anything essential to his arguments in Galatians 2:3,7–9,12; 5:2–3,6,11; 6:12–13,15. Chapter two refers to the confrontations between Paul and others and does not directly deal with the practice of circumcision itself. Chapter five is even more polemic, using strong language against the circumcised. 'Behold, I Paul say unto you, that if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law... For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love.' The only thing Paul adds to his thought here is heat.

Paul's heated conclusion in Galatians 6:12–13 is clearly in keeping with his rational arguments in Romans. 'For neither they themselves who are circumcised keep the law; but desire to have you circumcised, that they may glory in your flesh.'

The words are used in Ephesians 2:11 and Philippians 3:3–5. It appears that in the latter Paul more clearly takes a Deuteronomic position on heart circumcision. 'For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.' It has become increasingly clear that the circumcision of adult converts is associated with a rabbinical concept of legal interpretation as a way of personal salvation. Paul is the champion of the Imami alternative, that faith in Jesus Christ as the divinely appointed leader is essential to personal salvation. Paul shows an awareness from the beginning that the purpose of circumcision as originally legislated is not a way of

personal salvation, and to use it as such is to skew its meaning.

These concepts of heart circumcision by faith in Christ come out strongly in Colossians 2:11. 'In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.' Paul sees the Imami loyalty to Christ as the means whereby God performs the Deuteronomic circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 30:6). Unity of all in Christ is brought out without regard to circumcision in Colossians 3:11. In Colossians 4:11 and Titus 1:10 the word circumcision refers to the Jewish believers without adding to the discussion.

In sum, it appears that circumcision was taken out of its context to be a necessary act of adult converts in order to attain personal salvation. As such, it was strenuously attacked by Paul, who saw it in its role as a part of the process of preserving Scriptural revelation through a particular people partly identified by circumcision. He did grant it more than symbolic meaning in the personal experience, however, as long as it did not threaten the Imami status of Jesus as opposed to rabbinical method. For him, circumcision of adult converts began to take on symbolic meaning as reliance on rabbinical interpretation in the place of Christ's authority. In that context, he became bitterly opposed to circumcision of adult converts.

Paul's discussion of circumcision strenuously affirms obedience to the commandments among those who have accepted Christ as the divinely appointed representative of God. He does not even mention the practice of circumcising infants. He only touches the problem of requiring adult converts to be circumcised. His affirmation of obedience to the law implies the continued practice of circumcising infants in conformity to the example of Jesus.

The Christian aversion to keeping the law is largely a result of misunderstanding Paul's concept of Christ. The Christian idea of distinguishing between faith and acts of obedience to the law is a result of Greek and Gnostic distinction between spirit and matter. Paul's distinction is between keeping the law according to rabbinical authority and interpretation, and between recognizing the claims of Christ and obeying the law through love and loyalty to him. The conflict is between loyalty to Jesus and loyalty to rabbinicism in the first century AD.

It is conceivable that submission to rabbinical authority and submission to the lordship of Christ could theoretically result in precisely the same actions. The difference is not in conformity or nonconformity to the law of Moses, but in the motivation. Paul does not have authority to do away with the law of Moses. He can only point out who has God-given authority to interpret and implement it.

Finally, the legislation of circumcision, as Jesus according to John points out, is not based on Mosaic legislation but on the Abrahamic covenant, a covenant made in view of all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:1-3).

In sum, the four purity practices of Islam, circumcision, a ritually pure diet, alms in charity, and ablution of the whole body or the extremities, are all described in the Bible in ways almost identical to Islamic expression and practice. The details of ablution show some diversity even within the Biblical text itself,

but do not conflict in any way with Islamic practice. Despite the established Christian interpretation of the Pauline texts to be against purity codes, it is still possible to make a strong, Biblically comprehensive, and consistent case in favor of the purity codes of circumcision, diet, and ablution. It will be a matter of opinion whether the case against purity is strong and consistent. It is certainly not Biblically comprehensive, since it depends almost entirely on Paul alone, a man who according to the Christian Scriptures, never even met Jesus in person. On the other hand, as we have shown, Paul can be understood consistently to favor purity as well.

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.al-islam.org/islam-bible-thomas-mcelwain/purity#comment-0>