

# *MORE SEED & BREAD, ISSUE NO. 276*

## **The Meaning of Uncircumcision (Akrobustia) in Ephesians 2:11**

By M.B. Hammond

Of all the peoples of the world, the Israelites were the only people with the God-given rite of male *circumcision*. They practiced two types of *circumcision*: the eighth-day circumcision given to Abraham by God as a covenant (Gen. 17:10-14) and the eighth-day circumcision of the Mosaic Law done by a priest in the temple (Lev. 12:3). However, after many years, the Israelites disobeyed God, resulting in their captivity to other lands. The Jews did not have a “portable religion.” As a consequence, many Jews living outside of Judea, without access to Jerusalem, no longer practiced the rite of *circumcision* and were considered *akrobustia*.

The English word *uncircumcision* as translated from the Greek word *akrobustia*, used in Ephesians 3:11, actually means *foreskin*. Most Bible students assume it refers only to “people of Gentile extraction” or “those of the nations.” Similarly, in the Ephesians’ letter, addressed by the Apostle Paul to “the saints, the ones being in and believing in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1; O.Q. Sellers’ resultant version from **Seed & Bread** No. 58) does not refer exclusively to “circumcised ones.” In the Acts Period, Paul presented his message to the Jews in the synagogues first. And when they heard and distanced themselves from the message, he then went to the Greeks (Gk.- *Hellen[ists]*; Rom. 1:16). But this inclusion of some Greeks/Gentiles made many of the Jews jealous (Rom 11:11; Acts 13:44-52). “The Judaizers” (see **More Seed & Bread** No. 254) that dogged his steps attempted to proselytize all the Christians (Jews and those of the nations) by making them accept *circumcision* and the Law, which Paul taught was of no value (Acts 15:24). Most Jews throughout the *dispersion* could not follow the Law of God, as given to the Israelites, and were given the epithet *akrobustia* by their brothers in Palestine. However, salvation was/is by faith in Jesus Christ alone, who placed no difference between Jews and those of the nations (Rom. 15:8-9).

The unique use of words by Paul in Ephesians needs to be understood in terms of God’s purposes for Israel. Paul says: **Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles (Gk.-*ethnos*) in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision (Gk.-*akrobustia*) by that which is called the Circumcision (Gk.-*peritoma*) in the flesh made by hand; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope (expectation), and without God in the world: but now in Christ Jesus, ye who sometimes were afar off, are made nigh (near) by the**

**blood of Christ. For He is our peace, Who hath made both one, and hath broken down** (razed) **the middle wall of partition between us** (Eph. 2:11-14; see also O.Q. Sellers' resultant version in **Seed & Bread** No. 59). As explained earlier, the word *Gentiles* used in verse 11 means "those of the nations" (Gk.-*ethnos*). Specifically, it was the covenants of God that were the "middle wall of partition" separating the Jews/Israelites from those of the nations (Eph. 2:14). We note that Paul was writing to "Gentiles in the flesh," called "the uncircumcision" (Gk.-*akrobustia*) and to the Jews in Palestine, called "the circumcision" (Gk.-*peritoma*). Paul knew that *circumcision* was of the heart (Rom. 3:29-30). We need to look more closely at the wording here.

The people Paul was addressing were Jews in their behavior, not necessarily by birth. He does not directly call them "the seed of Jacob," but, if these Jews of the *circumcision* were designating these "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise" by the repugnant term *akrobustia*, then they were not disdainful of those of the nations, but rather their Jewish brothers who were not repatriated to Palestine. We shall next examine what is actually inferred by Paul's explanation.

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem considered themselves *righteous* because they supposedly followed the Mosaic Law to the letter, though often inserting their own definition. They called all the poor people and outcasts *sinners*. When they heard Paul's glowing account of the groups of out-called ones/believers that he had established during his first missionary journey, Scripture says: **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. And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter** (Acts 15:5-6). When the deliberation was complete, James gave Paul a letter saying, **For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay no greater burden than these necessary things: That ye abstain from meats (food) offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well. Fare ye well** (Acts 15:28-29). As explained earlier, these self-righteous Jews were labeled "the Judaizers" who interfered with Paul's message to sinners throughout his second and third missionary journeys. These were the people he criticizes in Galatians 2:4 with the scathing words, **And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily (privately) to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage.** These Judaizers had done everything possible to make the Jewish and Gentile believers throughout the *dispersion* into Jewish proselytes rather than believers in Jesus Christ.

The long history of the *dispersion* was brought to a focal point in Paul's discussion in Ephesians 2:11-14. The nation had been divided after Solomon died. The northern ten tribes were idolatrous from the start. Idolatry also alternately influenced the kings of Judah in the temple worship where God's law could only be practiced. As a result of disobeying God, He sent the northern ten tribes into captivity in Assyria in 720 BC, while the southern two tribes went into captivity in Babylon in 606-586 BC. It was after about 70 years, and the Persian

defeat of Babylon, that Cyrus allowed the Jews to reoccupy Jerusalem. The temple was rebuilt and dedicated in 516 BC. Of the more than 1.5 million Jews then in captivity, only about 50,000 returned to the land. About 450 BC, Ezra collected the books of the Law and castigated the priesthood for intermarriage with the surrounding countries. The book of Malachi, written about 400 BC, clarifies that the priesthood was lacking in its obedience to the Law of Moses. The Old Testament ends there with large numbers of Jews in the *dispersion*—many more in Palestine.

The 400 years between the Old and New Testaments saw the Greeks defeating the Persians and Israel alternately under the rule of the Egyptian rulers (Ptolmies) and the Syrian rulers (Seleucids). Around 200 B.C. the Syrian rulers became despotic (Antiochus IV Epiphanies, the worst one), and they attempted eradicating God's religion in Israel. The Maccabean rebellion followed, which is recorded in the *Apocrypha*. This collection of books is not included in the *Protestant Bible* and remain of secular interest only, even though for about 100 years they record Israel's self-rule (167-63 BC). In that time the Pharisees and Sadducees became wealthy leaders of the nation and even intruded into the teaching duties of the priesthood. About the time of the Greek Empire, the Grecian language had now become the secular language of the rulers. The *Septuagint* (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures containing the Old Testament) was produced in Alexandria about the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Most New Testament quotations follow this version. It is probable the epithet *akrobusia* originated somewhere in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, as the Pharisees attempted gaining power over the people. Their purpose was preserving national integrity and strict conformity to Mosaic Law. They developed into self-righteous and hypocritical formalists (see Matt. 12:1-45; 15:1-9; 16:1-12; 22:1-45).

In 63 BC, the Romans, under Pompey, conquered Palestine. Antipater, an Edomite, was appointed ruler over Judea. Upon his death, he was succeeded by his son, Herod the Great, who was king from 37 BC to 3 BC. This Herod rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem with great splendor, currying favor with the Jews. In the 400-year inter-testament period, the term *dispersion* applied to Jews living outside of their homeland of Palestine. Originally, many had chosen living in the lands of their captivity, but their numbers increased; many went to far-flung lands. There grew strong colonies in all the provinces of the ancient Greek Empire, followed by the Roman Empire. In John, these people were identified, just after Jesus spoke to them (John 7:33-34). These Jews were now jealous: **Then said the Jews among themselves, Whither will He go, that we shall not find Him? Will He go to the dispersed among the Gentiles, and teach the Gentiles (nations)?** (John 7:35). They knew that large Jewish numbers were scattered abroad, and as explained earlier, this jealousy led to the strong epithet *akrobusia* being applied to them. Paul addressed this group in Ephesians 2: 11 as "Gentiles in the flesh."

"The middle wall of partition" was simply a description of the spiritual separation of the Jews in the land who could still observe the requirements of Mosaic Law and those outside the

land who were bereft of these opportunities. Since their religion was not portable, those in the *dispersion* were truly aliens and strangers from the promises of God that depended on their obedience to the Law. But, Christ was their peace: **Having abolished in His flesh the enmity (between them), even the law of the commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you who were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father** (Eph. 2: 15-18). This *peace* had been established in the Acts Period with the inclusion of *uncircumcised* Jews and Gentiles in the missionary work of Paul and others. Paul continues: **Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit** (Eph. 2:19-22). Consequently, Paul understood that God in Christ, in the Dispensation of the Grace of God, had removed all barriers, including even those of the Mosaic Law, the basis of the Jewish religion.

The SEED & BREAD Bible-study leaflets are published as often as time and means permit and are sent free to all names on THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY mailing list. Send us your name. There will be no obligation, solicitation or visitation. Additional copies of any issue available on request.

MORE SEED & BREAD, ISSUE NO. 276, Published December 2005