

CIRCUMCISION AS METAPHOR IN PAULINE PERSPECTIVE

CIRCUMCISION AS METAPHOR IN PAULINE PERSPECTIVE

By

JOEL R. PAULS WOHLGEMUT, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Joel R. Pauls Wohlgemut, B.A. (University of Waterloo)

SUPERVISOR: Professor Stephen R. Westerholm

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the metaphorical appropriation of the symbol of circumcision in the Pauline corpus. It begins by surveying the references to circumcision (both literal and metaphorical) in the Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, and by summarising Paul's treatment of the subject of physical circumcision. A detailed examination of the circumcision metaphors in three specific texts (Rom 2:25-29, Phil 3:3, and Col 2:11-12) follows. One theme which unites all three passages is the recognition of circumcision's ongoing significance *in some form*. Nevertheless, the three texts employ the image of circumcision in different ways. Rom 2:25-29 draws on material from the LXX to redraw the covenantal boundaries which define the people of God. Phil 3:3 appears to brandish the symbol polemically, countering those who would insist on the necessity of physical circumcision, but likely operates within the same Pauline framework found in Romans. Col 2:11-12 parallels Philo by showing very little interest in the connection between circumcision and covenant, and exploiting the more manifest implications of the circumcision ritual; this suggests that Colossians manifests either a different aspect of Paul's thought or the perspective of another writer.

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Finally, I wish to dedicate this thesis to my wife, Wendy, whose love and support have made it possible for me to pursue my dreams.

ὁ γὰρ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἕτερον νόμον πεπλήρωκεν

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------|---|
| ADB | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> |
| Ant. | Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i> |
| BAGD | Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i> |
| BCE | Before the Common Era (BC) |
| BDF | Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament</i> |
| BZAW | Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft |
| CBQ | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> |
| CE | Common Era (AD) |
| CGTC | Cambridge Greek Testament Commentaries |
| DSS | Dead Sea Scrolls |
| EKKNT | Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament |
| ExpTim | <i>Expository Times</i> |
| HB | Hebrew Bible |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| JSJ | <i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period</i> |
| JSNT | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i> |
| JSNTSup | <i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament--Supplement Series</i> |
| JSP | <i>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha</i> |
| JTS | <i>Journal of Theological Studies</i> |
| J.W. | Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i> |
| LSJ | Liddell, Scott, and Jones, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> |
| Migr. | Philo, <i>De migratione Abrahami</i> |
| NCB | New Century Bible |
| NEB | New English Bible |
| NovT | <i>Novum Testamentum</i> |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| NTS | <i>New Testament Studies</i> |
| Post. | Philo, <i>De posteritate Caini</i> |
| QE | Philo, <i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Exodum</i> |
| QG | Philo, <i>Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesim</i> |
| SBLDS | SBL Dissertation Series |
| SJT | <i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i> |
| Spec. | Philo, <i>De specialibus legibus</i> |
| TDNT | <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> |
| TynBul | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> |
| USQR | <i>Union Seminary Quarterly Review</i> |
| VTSup | Vetus Testamentum, Supplements |
| WBC | Word Biblical Commentary |
| WTJ | <i>Westminster Theological Journal</i> |
| WUNT | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament |

INTRODUCTION

In a recent article, Paula Fredriksen comments that "Circumcision is...singled out in Hellenistic Jewish, pagan, and Christian literature as the premier mark of the Jew."¹ The importance of circumcision in defining and representing Jewish identity at the turn of the era meant that any variation on that tradition would have to come to terms with this central symbol. Discussions of circumcision in the Pauline corpus tend to focus on Paul's strident rejection of the ritual as a requirement for being "in Christ." Typical is the opinion that Paul sees circumcision as "irrelevant,"² or as "merely incidental," and thus a non-issue as far as Gentiles are concerned. This view is generally based on the argument in Galatians, where Paul warns his audience that to allow themselves to be circumcised would be to obligate themselves to the entire Jewish law (5:3) and cut themselves off from Christ (5:4). Here, Paul takes a hard-line position: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything..." (5:6). Paul's letter to the Galatians clearly indicates that a rejection of physical circumcision for Gentiles was part of at least one strand of early Christian self-definition. Yet in light of this observation, why is it that *metaphorical* references to circumcision appear in a number of Pauline texts?

¹ Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," *JTS* ns 42 (1991), 536.

² Robert G. Hall, "Circumcision," in *ABD*, ed. D.N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1030.

This thesis considers the meaning and significance of circumcision metaphors in two sections of Paul's undisputed letters (Rom 2:25-29; Phil 3:3), and one text whose authorship is disputedly Pauline (Col 2:11-12). Focussed treatments of this side of the matter are rare, and there is need for a careful assessment of this evidence. These textual studies are facilitated by an initial investigation of the place of circumcision (both physical and metaphorical) in the Second Temple Jewish literature, and by a subsequent survey of Paul's position on the literal rite. Finally, I will attempt to pull all of this evidence together, and to make some suggestions about the significance of metaphorical circumcision in Paul's writings, commenting on the similarities and differences observed in the three texts.

With respect to the focus of the thesis, one set of questions dominates my agenda: if the requirement of physical circumcision for Gentiles is such a problem for Paul, why is circumcision maintained as part of his set of images? Is spiritualised circumcision merely used polemically to counter calls for physical circumcision, does it represent a positive link to Israel's past, or is it endowed with substantively new content? To my mind, it makes a great difference whether a significant Jewish covenant marker (circumcision) is being transformed rather than abolished. In the following pages, I hope to offer some insight on these queries.

CHAPTER ONE

DEFINING THE TRUE COMMUNITY: PHYSICAL AND METAPHORICAL CIRCUMCISION IN EARLY JEWISH TEXTS

When approaching the topic of circumcision in Early Jewish sources, we are inevitably drawn back to the scriptural account of the inauguration of the rite, in which God tells Abraham, “This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gen 17:10-11). There is also significant evidence of metaphorical appropriation of the circumcision ritual in the HB. Those who stand in rebellion against God are described as being “uncircumcised in heart” (see Lev 26:40; Jer 9:26; Ezek 44:7,9; cf. Deut 30:6), and thus the cry to “circumcise your hearts” occasionally comes to disobedient Israel/Judah (Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4). Nevertheless, in order to discuss the significance of circumcision as part of the historical context of Paul's letters, we need to assess how texts such as Genesis 17 were being interpreted and used near the beginning of the Common Era. Consequently, this chapter surveys a wide variety of Jewish literary sources dated roughly from the second century BCE to the first century CE, analysing the perspectives on circumcision--both literal and metaphorical--which they offer.

Jubilees

The book of *Jubilees*, likely written between 170 and 140 BCE,¹ testifies both to the use of figurative circumcision language and to the emphasis on bodily circumcision in the Maccabean period. The reference to “circumcision of the heart” takes place in the LORD’s opening speech to Moses, in which he foresees an eventual confession of Israel’s sin:

And after this they will turn to Me in all uprightness and with all (their) heart and with all (their) soul, and I will circumcise the foreskin of their heart and the foreskin of the heart of their seed, and I will create in them a holy spirit, and I will cleanse them so that they shall not turn away from Me from that day unto eternity. (*Jub.* 1:23)²

The links between this passage and Deuteronomy 30 are fairly clear: the latter text describes a return to the LORD God and a gathering out of exile, declaring that “the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants” (Deut 30:6). Both texts focus on the commandments and the necessity of their being fulfilled (*Jub.* 1:24; Deut 30:8). Interestingly, in both cases the LORD’s circumcising activity seems not to *change* behaviour as much as *confirm* and *maintain* an orientation to obedience. For example, in *Jubilees* the people themselves turn to God “in all uprightness,” and the divine circumcision of the heart effectively serves to secure their fidelity “from that day unto eternity” (*Jub.* 1:23). Still, it must also be said that God’s cleansing and the gift of a holy spirit afford the people protection against the spirit of Beliar (see 1:20) and thus allow them to fulfill the commandments. Therefore, God’s circumcision of the heart both endorses an existing moral stance

¹ James C. VanderKam, “Jubilees, Book of,” in *ABD*, III:1030.

² Quotations of *Jubilees* are from R.H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913).

and enables people to obey God and his commandments.

While *Jubilees* adopts circumcision metaphors from the Hebrew Scriptures, when discussing physical circumcision it contains strong language in favour of maintaining the rite. In reference to Abraham's circumcision of Isaac, we hear that "he was the first that was circumcised according to the covenant which is ordained for ever" (*Jub.* 16:14). Just prior to this, in a discussion of Abraham's initial circumcision of his household, the eternity and finality of this covenant is emphasised:

This law is for all the generations for ever, and there is no circumcision [here, "cutting short"] of the days, and no omission of one day out of the eight days; for it is an eternal ordinance, ordained and written on the heavenly tablets. And every one that is born, the flesh of whose foreskin is not circumcised on the eighth day, belongs not to the children of the covenant which the Lord made with Abraham, but to the children of destruction... (*Jub.* 15:25-26)

In fact, not only is this ordinance "written on the heavenly tablets," but even "all the angels of the presence and all the angels of sanctification have been so created from the day of their creation" (*Jub.* 15:27)--that is, the proximity of the angels to God necessitated their being created already circumcised. The strength of this polemic is undoubtedly part of the reason why it is dated to the Maccabean period, in which circumcision was hailed as a prime indicator of covenant loyalty. From the perspective of *Jubilees*, the covenant marker of physical circumcision is necessary if Israel wishes to remain in the land (15:28).

Maccabees

In the course of its partisan reflection on the religious and political turmoil of the second century BCE, the Maccabean literature describes the role which circumcision played on both sides. On the one hand, the prohibition of infant circumcision by Antiochus IV (1 Macc 1:48) is in keeping with his resolute defiance of Jewish institutions. To be sure, 1 Maccabees indicates that the Seleucids were not the only ones antagonistic toward the covenant marker of circumcision: independently, some Jews had their circumcision reversed, and sought to participate in all that Hellenistic culture had to offer (e.g. the gymnasium; 1 Macc 1:14). Still, the decree of Antiochus and its subsequent enforcement (see accounts of execution in 1 Macc 1:60-61; 2 Macc 6:10), as well as the responses evoked from Jewish nationalists, give an idea of the intensity surrounding the issue.

Although the stated existence of some Jews who demonstrated little regard for circumcision as a covenant marker and commandment (see above) leads us to suspect that circumcision was not a sticking-point for all, it was clearly defended by the Maccabees as an integral part of faithfulness to “the Law.” Indeed, not only did people endure punishment in stoic fashion, but Mattathias, along with his recently-formed rebel force, “forcibly circumcised all the uncircumcised boys that they found within the borders of Israel” (1 Macc 2:46). This sweeping claim testifies to the status of physical circumcision as a litmus test and absolute requirement of covenant faithfulness from the Maccabean point of view.

Qumran

When proposing to articulate a “Qumranic” perspective on circumcision and associated imagery, it is important to remember that the so-called “sectarian” literature of the Dead Sea was not the only material available to the community. For example, the recovery of fragments of fifteen or sixteen copies of Jubilees speaks to the influence and esteem of that work,³ and thus some of the points raised earlier may apply here.⁴ Still, the literature peculiar to Qumran does provide the possibility of perspectives on circumcision which are unique to this Jewish group.

Nevertheless, having raised the possibility of distinctiveness, let me begin by saying that a survey of the references to circumcision in the Dead Sea Scrolls indicates a marked indebtedness to the Hebrew Scriptures. An examination, however, is still useful as a way of confirming the currency of particular images within one strand of Second Temple Judaism. We begin with the only reference to physical circumcision in the non-biblical Dead Sea texts: an allusion to the Abrahamic narrative in the *Damascus Document* (CD 16.4-6).⁵ The context makes repeated mention of a covenant by which one returns to the law of Moses. The text then goes on to say that “on the day that a man swears to return to the Law of Moses, the Angel of Persecution shall

³ James C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 40.

⁴ See R. Le Déaut, “Le thème de la circoncision du cœur (Dt. XXX 6; Jér. IV 4) dans les versions anciennes (LXX et targum) et à Qumran,” in *Congress Volume*, VTSup 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 190 n47, on this connection.

⁵ Otto Betz, “Beschneidung II: Altes Testament, Frühjudentum und Neues Testament,” in *Theologisch Realenzyklopädie*, eds. G. Krause and G. Müller (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980), V:718, fails to mention this text, and thus his conclusion that circumcision is mentioned in the Qumran writings “nur in bildlichem Sinne” is not quite correct.

cease to follow him provided that he fulfils his word: for this reason Abraham circumcised himself on the day that he knew" (CD 16.4-6).⁶ Here, Abraham seems to be lifted up as an example of prompt obedience to the command of God. The fact that circumcision is placed in parallelism with the "law of Moses" to which people are called supports the notion that references to physical circumcision in the DSS are lacking because it is simply presupposed.⁷ On the other hand, there are several instances in which circumcision appears in a metaphorical manner.

In the *Hodayot* (1QH) circumcision imagery appears to carry on traditions of the Hebrew Bible. At one point, the psalmist, apparently called to bring a message of hope in the face of calamity, praises God: "Upon my uncir[cumcised] lips Thou hast laid a reply. Thou hast upheld my soul, strengthening my loins and restoring my power" (1QH 2.7-8).⁸ The language is strongly reminiscent of Moses' protestations at his own call, in which he tells the Lord that he is "uncircumcised of lips" (Ex 6:12,30). Here "uncircumcised" appears to have the sense of "unprepared," "not fitted for the task." The same sense appears to be operative in another passage: "My heart is astounded, for to the uncircumcised ear a word has been disclosed" (1QH 18.20). Again the emphasis is on "unworthiness," particularly in the light of the phrase

⁶ All quotations from the DSS are from Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, 3d ed. (London: Penguin, 1987) unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ So Betz, "Beschneidung," 718: "als etwas Selbstverständliches vorausgesetzt."

⁸ Vermes actually reads "[uncircumcised] lips", as if the word were entirely restored. Florentino García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated* (Leiden: Brill, 1994) gives no indication that the text is defective. Hartmut Stegemann's reconstruction reads שפתי [ול] לער, with the restoration apparently based on שפה בערול in line 18--hence my "uncir[cumcised] lips." Note also that García Martínez renumbers col. 2 as col. 10, following Emile Puech.

“ear of dust” used subsequently (1QH 18.27)

Yet the religious and ethnic overtones of this vocabulary emerge more strongly elsewhere. In 1QH 2.18-19, having described the man confirmed by God who possesses teaching, understanding, and knowledge, the psalmist laments that “they have exchanged them for lips of uncircumcision, and for the foreign tongue of a people without understanding, that they might come to ruin in their straying.” The parallelism of “lips of uncircumcision” and “foreign tongue” makes the point: the things which such people say (in this immediate context, slanderous accusations against the psalmist) are incompatible with membership in the people of God. Thus, the designation “uncircumcision of the lips,” like uncircumcision of the penis, is a way of recognising boundaries, but this time on the basis of what is said.

Finally, there are two interesting references to the “circumcision of the heart” in the Qumran materials. In an interpretation of Hab 2:16, the *Habbakuk Pesher* declares that “this concerns the Priest whose ignominy was greater than his glory. For he did not circumcise the foreskin of his heart, and he walked in the ways of drunkenness that he might quench his thirst” (1QpHab 11.12-14). The “Priest” mentioned here appears to be the so-called “Wicked Priest” who is vilified throughout the work (e.g. 11.4; 12.2). As to the meaning of the circumcision imagery, although the immediate context lacks specificity, examples abound elsewhere: he forsook God (8.10), he took the people's wealth (8.12), he pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to confuse/consume⁹ him on the Day of Atonement (11.4-7). Thus, refusal

⁹ Heb. לבלעם: Vermes = “confuse”; García Martínez = “consume”.

to “circumcise the foreskin of his heart” results, in the writer’s eyes, in a predisposition to all kinds of evil. But what is interesting about this passage is the fact that the reference to symbolic uncircumcision is not evoked by anything in the scriptural text. This reinforces the idea that allusions to Deut 10:16 were recognised and well-understood as shorthand for adherence to behavioural norms.

The final, and in many ways most striking, citation is from the *Rule of the Community*:

No man shall walk in the stubbornness of his heart so that he strays after his heart and eyes and evil inclination, but he shall circumcise in the Community the foreskin of evil inclination and of stiffness of neck that they may lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the Community of the everlasting Covenant. (1QS 5.4-6)

This section is addressed to those who “separate from the congregation of the men of falsehood” (5.1-2), steadfastly keep God’s commands (5.1), and persevere in the covenant (5.3). The Deuteronomic tone is pervasive, with its emphasis on commandments and covenant, and the repudiation of evil and stubbornness. Circumcision of the “heart” is not mentioned specifically, but heart/eyes/evil inclination are made parallel (5.4-5), and previous references to “the spirits of truth and falsehood” struggling in the “hearts of men” (4.23) lead us in the direction of this image. Once again, circumcision is used as a general metaphor for turning from evil and toward the good, though the *Rule of the Community* goes on to spell out the requirements in substantial detail. In effect, this ethical aspect is integrally linked to the boundary function of circumcision: the “Community of the everlasting Covenant” (5.5-6) is comprised only of those who separate themselves (5.1-2) and act accordingly.

In conclusion, several things can be said about circumcision in the DSS. We have every reason to believe that bodily circumcision was simply assumed for the people at Qumran. Since this practice linked them with the general Jewish populace, differentiation could only be accomplished via metaphor.¹⁰ The circumcision metaphors found in the Qumran writings take two complementary, yet distinct, approaches. On the one hand, they represent a basic shift of orientation from evil to good, or from unpreparedness to sanctification. At the same time, circumcision is linked to covenant (as with Abraham), and thus this “shift” defines the boundaries of the present community of God.¹¹

Philo

The distinguishing feature of Philo’s treatment of circumcision is the way in which the literal and symbolic aspects are tenaciously held together and defended. On the one hand, at the beginning of his exposition in *De specialibus legibus* I, Philo acknowledges that physical circumcision is ridiculed (γελάται δὲ ἡ τῶν γεννητικῶν περιτομή; *Spec.* 1.2), but goes on to offer a four-part defence of the practice. According to Philo, circumcision 1) guards against infection and disease; 2) promotes cleanliness or purity (καθαριότης) like that expected in the sacred sphere; 3) likens the genitals to the heart, both being generative organs (of thought and living creatures respectively); and 4) enhances fertility (*Spec.* 1.4-7). These explanations recur in substantially the same form (but a

¹⁰ So Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1028: “Because those at Qumran viewed the rest of Israel as apostate, they used circumcision metaphorically rather than literally to define the sphere where God works.”

¹¹ Le Déaut, “Circoncision du cœur,” 193, ties these two themes together: “A Qumrân, le thème de la circoncision du cœur est donc employé pour illustrer les conditions *morales* d’une vie de perfection dans l’alliance nouvelle.”

different order) in an exposition of God's command to Abraham that every male child be circumcised (*QG* 3.48, on Gen 17:12). Apparently, Philo regards these justifications as traditional, describing them as “ancient sayings of divinely gifted men” (ἀρχαιολογούμενα παρὰ θεσπεσίοις ἀνδράσιν; *Spec.* 1.8).

To this defence of the physical, however, Philo wants to add his own symbolic understanding of circumcision (see the emphatic ἐγώ in *Spec.* 1.8). This elaboration has two components. First, circumcision represents the “excision of pleasures” (ἡδονῶν ἐκτομή; *Spec.* 1.9), taking its appropriateness from the fact that intercourse stands as the chief of such pleasures. Such pleasure is more sharply defined as that which is “excessive” (περιττή) and “superfluous” (πλεονάζουση). Second, circumcision portrays the banishment of conceit (οἴησις) from the soul (*Spec.* 1.10). Philo is careful in specifying the nature of this conceit: it stems from pride in the purported ability to create human life without appeal to the “Cause” of all. Thus, it is again fitting that the symbol consists of an action performed on the reproductive organ. As well, this notion of “banishing conceit” is likely more than purely symbolic: by acknowledging that a man's pride may “be checked by the sign of circumcision” (*QG* 3.47), Philo appears to allude to the widespread repugnance toward the act.

This two-part symbolic understanding of circumcision re-appears at other junctures in the Philonic corpus. In a discussion of Gen 17:10, Philo talks about the circumcision of the mind so that only necessary and useful (i.e. not superfluous) things remain, and the cutting off of those things which cause an increase of pride (*QG* 3.47). Likewise, in his

allegory on the Abrahamic narrative:

It is true that receiving circumcision does indeed portray the excision of pleasure and all passions [ἡδονῆς καὶ παθῶν πάντων ἐκτομήν], and the putting away of the impious conceit, under which the mind supposed that it was capable of begetting by its own power... (*Migr.* 92)

Still, it is precisely in this passage that we find Philo's strongest plea that the symbolic sense of circumcision not replace the literal: circumcision may indeed portray these things, "but let us not on this account repeal the law laid down for circumcising" (*Migr.* 92). Here, Philo is in the midst of criticising those who emphasise the noetic/intellectual aspect of matters at the expense of the literal (see *Migr.* 89-90). Philo's assessment of the situation is clear: "they ought to have given careful attention to both aims, to a more full and exact investigation of what is not seen, and in what is seen to be stewards without reproach" (*Migr.* 89).

Of course, given the Platonic *schema* which underlies so much of Philo's thought, we should guard against quickly presuming that literal and symbolic approaches stand in a balanced relationship. That such is not the case is indicated by Philo's equation in which outward observance is to inner meaning as body is to soul (*Migr.* 93). As he goes on to observe, the body is heeded because it is the abode of the soul, which has primary importance. Analogously, the "letter of the laws" is to be observed, since the entities which stand behind the symbols are thus made more apparent. Philo adduces other reasons for literal observation of the laws (principally in order to avoid conflict within the human community, *Migr.* 90,93), but the importance of the symbolic side is clearly elevated in the hierarchy.

There is one text in which this connection of inner and outer elements appears to break down. Commenting on Ex 22:21, Philo claims that “the proselyte is not the one who has circumcised his uncircumcision, but the one [who has circumcised] the pleasures and desires and the other passions of the soul” (based on Gk. frag., ὅτι προσήλυτός ἐστιν, οὐχ ὁ περιτμηθεὶς τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν ἀλλ’ ὁ τὰς ἡδονὰς καὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας καὶ τὰ ἄλλα πάθη τῆς ψυχῆς, *QE* 2.2). Puzzled by Philo’s apparent lack of concern for physical circumcision, H.A. Wolfson argues that the reference here must be to a special kind of “spiritual proselyte,” a category distinct from the full proselyte.¹² Peder Borgen is certainly right to question Wolfson’s explanation, based on the use of προσήλυτος to mean “full proselyte” elsewhere.¹³ Still, what are we to make of Philo’s statement?

Neil McEleney adopts one approach, maintaining simply that “Philo seems not to require circumcision” if proselytes otherwise keep the law.¹⁴ Still, this is merely put as an observation, and McEleney fails to deal with the difficult question *why* circumcision could be treated as “less than law.” In the second part of his explication of Ex 22:21, Philo claims that proselytes (lit. “those who by themselves have run to the truth”) are “newcomers...to laws and customs” (ἐπήλυδες...νομίμων καὶ

¹² H.A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), II:369.

¹³ Peder Borgen, “Observations on the Theme ‘Paul and Philo’: Paul’s preaching of circumcision in Galatia (Gal. 5:11) and debates on circumcision in Philo,” in *Die Paulinische Literatur und Theologie*, ed. S. Pederson (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980), 87.

¹⁴ Neil J. McEleney, “Conversion, Circumcision and the Law,” *NTS* 20 (1974), 329; Erwin R. Goodenough, *An Introduction to Philo Judaeus*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 157, takes a similar view.

ἑθῶν; *QE* 2.2).¹⁵ In this section Philo's attention is no longer focused on circumcision, and so there is no good reason to think that Philo is intentionally exempting circumcision from the category of "laws and customs." Finally, McEleney's reading is difficult to reconcile with Philo's argument in *Migr.* 92, in which the "law" (νόμος) of circumcising is defended.¹⁶ Consequently, we must look elsewhere for an interpretive resolution.

Borgen takes *QE* 2.2 to mean that, in Philo's mind, "bodily circumcision was not the requirement for entering the Jewish community, but was one of the commandments which they had to obey upon receiving status as a Jew."¹⁷ This refusal to dismiss physical circumcision altogether is an improvement, but two objections can be raised to framing the issue in this way. First, we must be clear about what questions are being addressed in the text. Borgen identifies what he believes to be the central query: "When does a person receive status as a proselyte in the Jewish community and cease to be a heathen?"¹⁸ Yet Philo explicitly opens the section with the question under consideration, wondering why the *Israelites* are described as "proselytes" in Egypt and *how* this rubric fits (see opening of *QE* 2.2). As John Nolland points out, Philo is principally interested in exploring the deeper significance of the term "proselyte," not in making legal

¹⁵ John Nolland, "Uncircumcised Proselytes?" *JSJ* 12 (1981), 179, also makes this point.

¹⁶ Goodenough, *Introduction*, 157 n49, explains the discrepancy by arguing that "Philo...wanted circumcision kept for the Jews," but this studiously evades the issue of the status of the proselyte.

¹⁷ Borgen, "Observations," 88.

¹⁸ Ibid; similarly John J. Collins, "A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century" in *"To See Ourselves as Others See Us": Christians, Jews, "Others" in Late Antiquity*, eds. J. Neusner and E.S. Frerichs (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 174.

determinations.¹⁹

The second point, then, grows out of the first: the preference which Philo demonstrates relates to *significance*, not *ritual chronology* (i.e. symbolic *then* literal). The dichotomy presented by Philo is stark: *either* desire is circumcised or the body is. Obviously, when presented with these alternatives, Philo will stress the former. In Ex 22:21 he clearly sees support for his continual emphasis on the “spiritual” realities behind symbols: the members of the Hebrew nation were “proselytes” not because they were circumcised (which they were not) but because they demonstrated self-restraint (*QE* 2.2).²⁰ This is primarily a theoretical consideration, not immediately a ritualistic one. Granted, Borgen claims that such a stance avoids the hard question: how can Philo define “proselyte” as “one who has received ethical circumcision, and [expressly] not physical circumcision”?²¹ In response, I can only reiterate the first point: Philo is attempting to explain a given scriptural text. The fact that the Israelites in Egypt were uncircumcised allows him to emphasise an historical antecedent for symbolic circumcision of “proselytes.” Yet if asked whether a person who claimed that his desires had been excised, but who as yet was uncircumcised could be considered a “proselyte,” it is difficult, on the basis of *Migr.* 89-93, to suppose that Philo would answer affirmatively. Thus, it is more accurate to say that the symbolic and literal aspects of circumcision are mutually reinforcing, but that the

¹⁹ Nolland, “Uncircumcised,” 177.

²⁰ It is likely that the similarity of Deut 10:19 (“You shall also love the proselyte, for you were proselytes in the land of Egypt”) to Ex 22:21, and the proximity of the former verse to Deut 10:16 (“And circumcise your hard heart...” [LXX]) has influenced Philo’s exegesis here.

²¹ Peder Borgen, “The Early Church and the Hellenistic Synagogue,” *Studia Theologica* 37 (1983), 67, in criticism of Nolland.

symbolic aspect takes precedence in importance (not necessarily in temporal sequence).²²

In conclusion, then, although Philo is clearly inspired by the metaphorical aspect of circumcision suggested by Deut 10:16 (see citation in *Spec.* 1.305), physical circumcision is retained.

Consequently, in his commentary on Gen 17:10-11 ("There shall be circumcised every male of you, and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin"), Philo can say that he sees "two circumcisions, one of the male, and the other of the flesh; that of the flesh is by way of the genitals, while that of the male, it seems to me, is by way of the reason" (*QG* 3.46). While the fact that Philo explicitly targets groups who tend to neglect the physical implementation of laws (*Migr.* 89-90) indicates the existence of such impulses, Philo himself is not of such a mind.

Other Intertestamental Jewish Literature

Scattered references to circumcision appear in various literary works of Second Temple Judaism. In several cases, the issue of circumcision arises with respect to conversions to Judaism. Both Judith and the Greek version of Esther make passing reference to the rite as part of the incorporation of proselytes. Judith describes the situation of Achior the Ammonite, who believes in God, is circumcised, and joins the house of Israel (*Jdt* 14:10). The excerpt from Esther is much more general, indicating simply that many Gentiles were circumcised and became Jews (ἡλουδαίζω; Add *Esth* 8:17). The *Testament of Levi*, in commenting on the rape of Dinah and the subsequent slaughter of the

²² I also read Philo's claim that the penis is assimilated "to the heart" (πρὸς καρδίαν; i.e. and not the other way around; see *Spec.* 1.6) in this way.

Shechemites (Gen 34:1-31), appears to demonstrate a strong sense of the sanctity of circumcision. In the account recorded here, Levi specifically requests that the Shechemites *not* be circumcised, knowing that he desires revenge on them (*T.Levi* 6:3). As well, Jacob, rather than being angered at his sons because he now fears his neighbours (Gen 34:30), fumes because the Shechemites were circumcised before being killed (*T.Levi* 6:6). Although the passage does not explicitly articulate the status of the post-circumcision Shechemites, the concern attributed to Levi and Jacob plausibly stems from a recognition of circumcision as a marker of the proselyte. Thus, in a number of apocryphal and pseudepigraphal texts, circumcision is connected either directly (Judith, LXX Esther) or indirectly (*Testament of Levi*) with the induction of proselytes into Judaism.

Josephus

The writings of Josephus factor into a discussion of circumcision in Second Temple Judaism for several reasons. First, several brief references to physical circumcision attest to the ongoing significance of that marker from the second century BCE to the first century CE. Recounting Jewish history, Josephus notes two separate instances in which Jewish kings conquer new territory and promptly impose circumcision on the inhabitants: John Hyrcanus and the Idumaeans (*Ant.* 13 §§257-8) and Aristobulus and the Ituraeans (*Ant.* 13 §§318-9). Much later, in the context of the Jewish Revolt, Josephus tells the story of a Roman commander, Metilius, who agrees to be circumcised in order to spare his life (*J.W.* 2 §454). In each of these cases, physical

circumcision appears to be the means of identification (strongly coerced, to be sure) with the Jewish people. Still, it is Josephus' account of Izates which has provoked much discussion over this connection of circumcision and proselytism.

In Book XX of the *Jewish Antiquities*, Josephus recounts the story of Izates, king of Adiabene, whose wives were taught "to worship God after the manner of the Jewish tradition" (τὸν θεὸν σέβειν, ὡς ἰουδαίοις πατέριον ᾗν) by a Jewish merchant, Ananias (*Ant.* 20 §34). With their help, Ananias "similarly won over" (ὁμοίως συνανέπεισεν) Izates (§35). Still, this appears to have been only a preliminary step, for when Izates learns of his mother's approval of the Jewish religion, "he was zealous to convert to it himself" (ἔσπευσε καὶ αὐτὸς εἰς ἐκεῖνα μεταθέσθαι; §38). In his view, this move requires circumcision in order to be "genuinely a Jew" (βεβαίως ἰουδαῖος). His mother and Ananias, however, are horrified by such a suggestion. The point is raised that his subjects will not tolerate being ruled by a Jew (§39). Ananias fears that should the king be circumcised, he (Ananias) will be punished for his role as an instructor (§41). Consequently, Ananias assures Izates that he could "worship God [τὸν θεῖον σέβειν] even without being circumcised if indeed he had fully decided to be a devoted adherent of Judaism, for it was this that counted more than circumcision" (§41).

Temporarily, Ananias' advice carries the day. Nevertheless, Izates does not forget the idea completely, and when he encounters Eleazar, a Galilean Jew who adheres strictly to the ancestral laws, he obeys the summons to have the rite performed (§§43-6). Eleazar's rebuke is worth

citing: "For you ought not merely to read the laws²³ but also, and even more, to do what is commanded in them" (§44).

For some scholars, this story is evidence of an exceptional position: "Izates' understanding of himself and the teaching of Ananias should be regarded as examples of a belief among Jews in the first century which held that circumcision was not necessary for establishing Jewish identity."²⁴ McEleney agrees, claiming that "[o]bviously, Ananias thought the precept was dispensable in necessity."²⁵ Yet, there are a number of mitigating factors in this case. First of all, it is suspicious that Ananias is explicitly motivated by fear:²⁶ he initially predicts punishment for himself should Izates be circumcised (§41), and seriously worries about being blamed when the king does carry out his plan (§47). Still, this does not effectively counter the point at hand, for it may be that the possibility of danger simply characterises the situation as one in which abandoning circumcision is "necessary."

A more telling criticism is the fact that Izates is encouraged to refrain from circumcision *precisely in order that he might not be identified as a Jew*. As Paula Fredriksen explains,

Josephus does not depict Ananias 'allowing' Izates to be a convert without circumcision, while Eleazar insists on it; rather, Ananias welcomes Izates as a sympathizer precisely to preserve the king's status as a Gentile, and thus lessen the risk of provoking popular incident.²⁷

It is interesting to note that in Ananias' assurance to Izates that he can

²³ LCL reads "law," but the Greek is clearly plural, "laws."

²⁴ Gary Gilbert, "The Making of a Jew: "God-Fearer" or Convert in the Story of Izates," *USQR* 44 (1991), 301; see also Collins, "Symbol," 178-9.

²⁵ McEleney, "Conversion," 328.

²⁶ See Nolland, "Uncircumcised," 193.

²⁷ Fredriksen, "Judaism," 546-7 n42.

“worship God” without circumcision, virtually the same language is used as that which describes the initial teaching of Ananias to Izates and his wives (§34 τὸν θεὸν σέβειν; §41 τὸ θεῖον σέβειν). Since subsequent to the first encounter Izates wants to “convert” (μετατίθημι) to Judaism, a process which requires circumcision (§38), this suggests that he does *not* have status as a proselyte-Jew before this point. We may read Ananias as discouraging Izates from taking this step of Jewish identity in order to avoid conflict.²⁸ Consequently, this episode, rather than offering evidence for an uncircumcised proselyte, actually reinforces the notion that circumcision marks the convert to Judaism.²⁹

Conclusions

At this point, I want to step back from this survey of Second Temple Jewish literature and draw some conclusions. Admittedly, chronological and geographical diversity of the sources complicate this task, but there are a number of general statements which can be made.

First, the requirement of physical circumcision for all Jewish males had widespread support throughout this period. Undoubtedly, the Maccabean crisis at the beginning of the second century BCE acted as a catalyst in this respect, but the emphasis continued in successive centuries. The mark of circumcision stood as a sign of faithfulness to

²⁸ So Lawrence H. Schiffman, “At the Crossroads: Tannaitic Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Schism,” in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 2, eds. E.P. Sanders et al. (London: SCM, 1981), 127. Of course, if we see the pre-circumcision Izates as a “legitimate” Gentile God-fearer, then Eleazar’s criticism pertaining to Izates’ “offence” (§§44-5) becomes harder to explain. It is possible, however, that Eleazar’s “strictness” with respect to Jewish tradition precluded entirely this category of “God-fearer,” thus prompting him to demand circumcision of anyone who would take it upon himself to read Torah.

²⁹ See Fredriksen, “Judaism,” 536.

God's covenant with Abraham, without which one could not be counted as part of the people of God. Consequently, circumcision is repeatedly identified with the incorporation of male Gentile proselytes.

Second, as a complement to the first point, groups existed throughout this period which resisted the necessity of circumcision. These groups were of various kinds, from the Jews described in 1 Maccabees who submitted to *epispasm* (1 Macc 1:14-15), to Philo's hyper-allegorists (*Migr.* 89-90), to those, such as Ananias, who were "flexible" with respect to potential proselytes (*Ant.* 20 §§34-48). Certainly, the fact that the existence of a number of these factions must be read off the polemic of extant documents representing different perspectives gives reason to think that adherence to this point of view was limited. *How* limited such beliefs and practices were is unclear. While perhaps true in a strict sense, Gilbert's conclusion demands qualification: "Could Jewish identity exist in the first century without circumcision? While scholars might disagree over the number of Jews in antiquity who would respond in a certain way, the simple answer is yes."³⁰ The point is that two of the examples mentioned above--the renegade Jews in 1 Maccabees and Ananias--likely chose to dispense with circumcision *precisely to promote identification with Gentiles*. This is explicit in 1 Macc 1:14-15, and the above analysis of Josephus suggests this for the story of Izates as well. Thus, Philo's opponents appear to be the only ones interested in maintaining Jewish identity apart from circumcision.

Third, circumcision as a metaphorical image generally carries on

³⁰ Gilbert, "Making," 303.

the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, in which a “spiritualised circumcision” represents a turning from evil and a renewed commitment to God and the commandments. There is some nuancing of this theme in various sources: Philo explicitly declares that physical circumcision portrays the “excision of pleasures” and the banishing of pride (*Spec.* 1.9-10), while the *Rule of the Community* from Qumran describes that which is removed in such a “circumcision” as the “evil inclination” (𐤇𐤆”; 1QS 5.5).

Fourth, apart from one questionable reference in Philo (*QE* 2.2; see above) metaphorical circumcision assumes physical circumcision. Certainly, this only makes sense: if physical circumcision stands as a *sine qua non* of Jewish identity, then one natural way of criticising of this identification (e.g. on the grounds of inappropriate attitudes/behaviours) is an appeal to a “spiritualised” version of this symbol. Certainly, the allegorical tack which Philo adopts, focussing on the “removal” aspect of the rite and linking it to generic vices such as “love of pleasure,” tends toward the separation of physical and symbolic realities, a tendency apparently carried to completion by his opponents in Alexandria. Still, even though Philo plays down the covenantal implications of physical circumcision in his writings, at the very least it is an important reminder of the spiritual reality which it represents.

At this point, having surveyed references to physical and figurative circumcision in the Second Temple period, we begin to ask questions about the early Christian movement: how do we fit Paul into this matrix? How do we explain his repudiation of physical circumcision for Gentiles? Why do vestiges of the metaphors remain? It is to these questions that we now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

“NEITHER CIRCUMCISION NOR UNCIRCUMCISION”: PAUL AND PHYSICAL CIRCUMCISION

Clearly, any examination of metaphorical uses of circumcision in Paul's letters needs to take stock of the apostle's position on the physical rite before proceeding. Establishing his position on this issue fortunately requires very little “reading between the lines,” for it is this very topic of physical circumcision which dominates one of his early letters, written to the churches in Galatia. This chapter will investigate the place of physical circumcision in Paul's schema of the Christian life, drawing principally on relevant passages in Galatians and Romans.

Circumcision and Paul's Gospel

As a starting point for Paul's view of circumcision, we can begin by setting him into the context of the general Jewish affirmation (described in the previous chapter) of circumcision as a necessary sign of the covenant. In one of his brief moments of autobiography, Paul explicitly states what we might have otherwise assumed, that as a Jewish male he was “circumcised on the eighth day” (Phil 3:5). The designation “Pharisee” with which he describes his approach to the law later in that same verse, coupled with the boast that he “was far more zealous for the traditions of [his] ancestors” than other Jews (Gal 1:14), leads us to surmise that his stance on physical circumcision as a mark of Jewish

identity would have been firm. Jack T. Sanders even supposes that Paul's program of persecution targeted those Jews who dared to accept Gentile converts without requiring circumcision.¹ Yet, as Paul tells the story in Galatians, after he experienced the divine revelation of God's son, whom he was called to proclaim "among the Gentiles" (1:16), the irrelevance of circumcision becomes a hallmark of his gospel.

The "Jerusalem Council"²

In Galatians 2 Paul describes a visit to Jerusalem, during which he presented to the leaders there "the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain" (2:2). To be sure, we need not regard ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν as designating an *exclusively* Gentile gospel: the phrase may simply refer to "people living in Gentile lands," both Jews and Gentiles.³ Still, it is apparent that one of the critical elements of this gospel is the *absent requirement of physical circumcision*, a distinction which evidently is more significant for Gentile audiences. That this is indeed the issue is demonstrated by the example which follows immediately: Paul declares that subsequent to the presentation of his proclamation "even Titus...was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek"

¹ Jack T. Sanders, "Circumcision of Gentile Converts: The Root of Hostility," *Bible Review* 7 (Feb 1991), 24. Here he is following E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 191.

² It is impossible to discuss at length the similarities and differences between Paul's visit to Jerusalem described in Gal 2:1-10 and that recorded in Acts 15:1-29. On this, see Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Waco, TX: Word, 1990), lxxiii-lxxxiii. In agreement with a number of other scholars (Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979], 84-5; Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990], 188), I regard the two passages as referring to the same event (*contra* Longenecker, *Galatians*, lxxviii-lxxx).

³ So Longenecker, *Galatians*, 48.

(2:3). Thus, Paul identifies this tolerance of the Jerusalem leaders as legitimization for his circumcision-free message.

An explicit statement of endorsement, however, eludes us in the narrative which follows. Paul repeatedly makes reference to the fact that he and Peter are sent as apostles to the Gentiles and Jews respectively (2:7,8,9), but it is not specifically declared that Paul can admit Gentiles to the Christian community without circumcision.⁴ This observation leads some scholars to conclude that Paul cannot be describing the “Jerusalem Council” of Acts 15:1-29, since there an official edict is issued which intentionally omits the requirement of circumcision for Gentiles, an authority which would have bolstered Paul’s argument in Galatians 2.⁵ Nevertheless, it seems clear from Paul’s interpretation of the events that this recognition of his mission *to* the Gentiles carries with it a recognition of the gospel which forms the basis of such ventures: Gentiles are saved by faith and physical circumcision is not required. It is this conviction which undergirds Paul’s response to the situation in Galatia.

Physical Circumcision in Galatia and Paul’s Response

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul employs sharp rhetoric in order to neutralise countervailing calls for the Gentile Galatians to be circumcised. Much scholarly work this century has gone into investigations of the identity of Paul’s “opponents” in Galatia.⁶ Without

⁴ Although reading literally that with which Paul was entrusted as “the gospel of uncircumcision” (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς ἀκροβυστίας; 2:7) might initially suggest such an endorsement, it is better read as “the gospel to the uncircumcised,” since 2:9 definitely suggests territory rather than content.

⁵ E.g. Longenecker, *Galatians*, lxxix.

⁶ See summary of positions in Longenecker, *Galatians*, xciv.

spending much time on the detail of the arguments, we can generate a rough description of this group. Clearly, the characteristic which concerns Paul the most is that these people are encouraging the Galatians to be circumcised. It is this matter which the apostle raises as soon as he begins to pen his postscript:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised--only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. (6:12-13)

Naturally, Paul disparages both the consistency and motives of this group, but the main point to be noted is simply that their agenda, in Paul's view, reduces to one item: persuade the Galatians to be circumcised. That this runs contrary to Paul's "gospel" is apparent in the epistle's opening argument, where Paul accuses the Galatians of "turning to a different gospel" (1:6).

Whether this group advocating circumcision is comprised of Christian Jews⁷ or circumcised Gentile Christians⁸ is debated. Given the fact that this group is in danger of being "persecuted" (6:12), ostensibly by non-Christian Jews, the first suggestion appears more plausible, though the potentially ambiguous status of the second group in Jewish eyes does not allow it to be ruled out entirely. In any event, it seems likely that these so-called "Judaizers" (i.e. those advocating Jewish practices) support their call to circumcision by appealing to the

⁷ E.g. J. Louis Martyn, "A Law-Observant Mission to Gentiles: The Background of Galatians," *SJT* 38 (1985), 316; Longenecker, *Galatians*, xcv.

⁸ E.g. Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, trans. F. Clarke (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1959), 89; Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 208; Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 90.

Abrahamic narrative, pointing to the importance of circumcision as a seal of the covenant. J. Louis Martyn describes their message in this way:

it is probable that they spoke at some length about 'the blessing of Abraham', indicating that when God blessed Abraham, he did so in such a way as eventually to bless those Gentiles who by circumcision and Law observance become Abraham's true descendants.⁹

J. Christiaan Beker argues similarly, noting that "the Judaizing interpretation of the Abraham story has a compelling logic. Abraham's circumcision defines the domain of the messianic blessing in Christ and marks the proper line of salvation history."¹⁰ Consequently, it is the story of Abraham which Paul must interpret differently in order to champion his insistence on the non-necessity of physical circumcision.

The Argument from Abraham

Paul's interpretation of the Abrahamic narrative (Genesis 12-17) in Galatians (3:6-29) is paralleled in many respects by an exposition of the same story in Romans (4:1-25). We will begin by outlining the Galatians text, following that with an exploration of the similarities and differences in the Romans passage.

Galatians

The central proof-text, cited practically verbatim from the LXX, opens Paul's argument in Galatians: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Ἀβραὰμ ἐπίστευσεν τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην; 3:6; LXX Gen 15:6).¹¹ The conclusion to be drawn

⁹ Martyn, "Law-Observant," 319.

¹⁰ J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 52.

¹¹ In the LXX, the name Ἀβραὰμ follows ἐπίστευσεν.

from this follows with force: “Know,¹² therefore, that those who believe, these are sons of Abraham” (3:7). It is important to recognise that this emphasis on the “faith” (πίστις) of Abraham is no innovation on Paul’s part: for instance, Philo can designate the patriarch Ἀβραὰμ ὁ πιστός (*Post.* 173). However, Richard Longenecker notes that there are two recurring emphases in the Jewish understanding of Abraham: 1) the attribution of righteousness stems from his faithfulness *under testing* (particularly his readiness to offer Isaac as a sacrifice) and 2) Abraham’s faith of Gen 15:6 is coupled with his acceptance of circumcision and the covenant recounted in Gen 17:4-14.¹³ These twin emphases can be demonstrated by reference to several Jewish texts from the Second Temple period. In singing the praises of Abraham, Sirach draws attention to both circumcision and testing:

He kept the law of the Most High,
and entered into a covenant with him;
he certified the covenant in his flesh,
and when he was tested he proved faithful. (Sir 44:20)

As a second example, 1 Maccabees notes that Mattathias, on his death-bed, appeals to Abraham in order to exhort his sons to “show zeal for the law”: “Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?” (1 Macc 2:52). When we realise that this Mattathias is the one who, just previously, was engaged in forcibly circumcising those Jewish boys who remained uncircumcised (1 Macc 2:45-6), we can see that these interpretations of Abraham’s “faith” in Gen 15:6 are distinctive from that adopted by Paul.

From Paul’s point of view, “those who are characterised by faith”

¹² Taking Γινώσκετε as an imperative rather than an indicative (so Betz, *Galatians*, 141).

¹³ Longenecker, *Galatians*, 110.

(οἱ ἐκ πίστεως; 3:7,9) can be contrasted with those “who are characterised by works of law” (ὅσοι...ἐξ ἔργων νόμου εἰσίν; 3:10), a division of those characteristics which previous formulations insistently hold together in their evaluation of Abraham. It is impossible to embark here on a discussion of the significance of “works of the law” for Paul: suffice it to say that the “law” cannot bring about righteousness before God (3:11), a situation due in part to the fact that the “promise” (i.e. the blessing of the Gentiles; see 3:14) precedes the law (3:17-18; see also 3:19,23-4). Rather, acceptance of the “promise” is made on the basis of “faith” (see 3:14,22): since Paul exegetically establishes that Christ is the singular descendant of Abraham (3:16), it is by belonging to Christ through faith that one truly becomes Abraham’s offspring (3:26,29).

Now, when we look back on this highly compressed summary of a rather complex argument in Galatians, it is clear that Paul emphasises the “faith” of Abraham, linking it to the “faith” by which people belong to Christ Jesus. In the course of this argument, he denies the efficacy of “law” to accomplish this end. Although it certainly falls under this broad rubric of “law,” the inadequacy of Abraham’s circumcision is not mentioned *per se*. However, in a parallel discussion of Abraham in Romans 4:1-25, this point is made abundantly clear.

Romans

The discussion of Abraham’s “faith” in Romans bears directly on the issue of circumcision and uncircumcision. Just before he picks up the example of Abraham, Paul drives home the point observed above in Galatians: a person is justified “by faith” (πίστει) and not by works of law (3:28). Yet Paul is more adamant about the irrelevance of ethnic

distinctions, stating explicitly that God is God not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles (3:29). Consequently, “he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith” (3:30).

By shifting terms from v.29 to v.30, Paul makes it clear that Gentiles are accepted *qua* Gentiles--that is, there is no need to put on the mantle of Jewish law, specifically with respect to the matter of circumcision. From the contrast of Ἰουδαῖοι and ἔθνη (“Jews” and “Gentiles”) in 3:29, the language pair changes to περιτομή and ἀκροβυστία (“circumcision” and “uncircumcision/ foreskin”) in 3:30. These terms are used elsewhere in the NT as simple circumlocutions for “Jew” and “Gentile”,¹⁴ but their use here emphatically makes the point that no change in “circumcision status” is required in order to be justified by faith. Paul is quite aware of the implications of this statement, since he immediately anticipates the objection that such faith “nullifies” (καταργεῖν) the law (3:31). This does not follow, insists Paul, and he adduces the example of Abraham as proof.

As we saw in Galatians, Paul is quick to introduce Gen 15:6, the text which grounds his understanding of Abraham: “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (4:3). He then begins by contrasting such “faith” with the generic category “works” (4:2,4,5,6). Yet Paul’s aim is not a simple polemic, identifying “Jews” with “works” and “Gentiles” with “faith”. Rather, he intends two things: 1) to emphasise that both circumcised and uncircumcised are reckoned to be righteous only on the basis of *faith*, and 2) to break apart the assumption

¹⁴ E.g. ἀκροβυστία and περιτομή in Eph 2:11; see the study of these terms by Joel Marcus, “The Circumcision and the Uncircumcision in Rome,” *NTS* 35 (1989), 67-81.

that God's blessing is imparted *only* within the boundary marked by circumcision.¹⁵ It is this second objective which is of particular interest to us.¹⁶

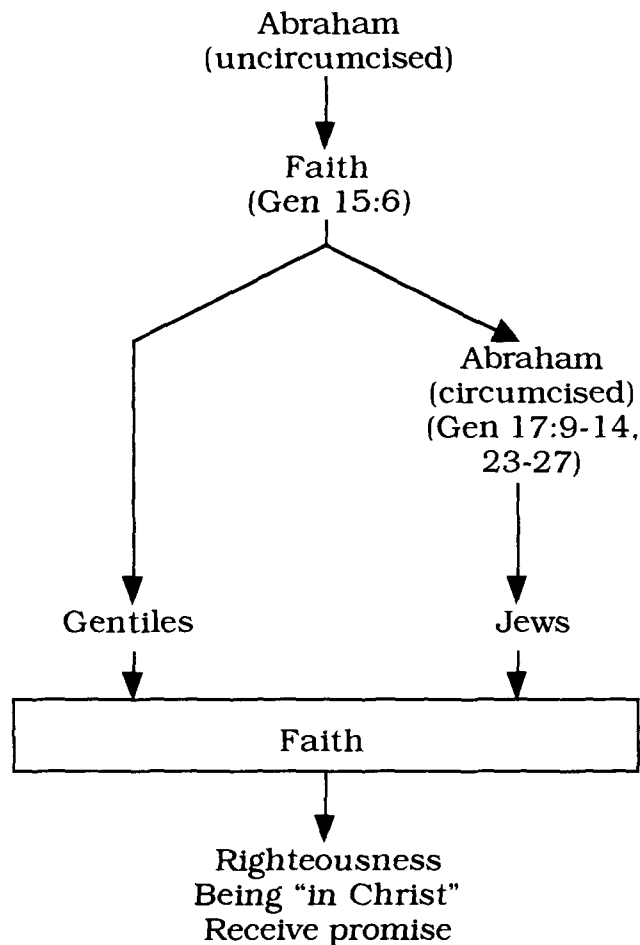
At this point, Paul launches into an explanation of how promises given to Abraham, who was commanded by God to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant, can have application to uncircumcised Gentiles:

Is this blessing, therefore, upon the circumcised [only], or also upon the uncircumcised? For we say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How, then, was it reckoned? While being in a state of circumcision or that of uncircumcision? Not in a state of circumcision but in a state of uncircumcision! And he received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness which depends on the faith which he had while in a state of uncircumcision, that he might be the father of all who believe while uncircumcised, so that righteousness is reckoned to them, and a circumcised father to those who are not only characterised by circumcision but also hold to the example of faith which our father Abraham had while in a state of uncircumcision. (4:9-12)

The logic here is straightforward, and can be illustrated in schematic form:

¹⁵ Although the distinction is fine, (1) and (2) are not tautological. The first point refers to *means* by which one is reckoned to be righteous; the second point refers to the *permissible domain* of such activity.

¹⁶ James D.G. Dunn has focussed on this second element in much of his work; see "What was the Issue between Paul and 'Those of the Circumcision'?" in *Paulus und das antike Judentum*, eds. M. Hengel and U. Heckel (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1991), 311.



Paul makes a simple appeal to chronology: since Abraham's faith precedes his circumcision as recorded in Genesis, this adumbrates the reckoning of righteousness to "the uncircumcised," and establishes Abraham as the father of believing Gentiles.¹⁷ "The circumcised"--that is, the Jews--are not excluded in this scenario; however, Paul makes it clear that they are included on the same basis as Gentiles, and that their circumcision is of no advantage in this respect. Abraham is indeed their father, but only if they imitate his example of "faith while in a state

¹⁷ Similarly Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Narrative Thought World* (Louisville, KY: W/JKP, 1994), 47: "In Paul's view, circumcision is not seen as the essential thing that establishes the covenant with Abraham, for Genesis 15 precedes Genesis 17."

of uncircumcision” (4:12).¹⁸

It is certainly no accident that Paul omits the notion of Abraham’s circumcision as a “seal of righteousness” (4:11) in his letter to the Galatians, since such vocabulary may very well have been turned against him. Even in Romans, however, where the issue of Gentile circumcision is not apparent, the apostle is careful to provide justification for Abraham’s circumcision¹⁹ without undermining his argument: only in this way would it be possible for *both* Gentiles and Jews to identify themselves as descendants of Abraham in the present time. True, it is ultimately the faith of an uncircumcised Abraham which has significance, but by being able to point to both an uncircumcised *and* a circumcised Abraham, Paul strengthens his emphasis on the inclusion of Jew and Gentile without needing to adjust that ethnic identification.

The Argument Concludes and Questions Begin

On the basis of the above argument, Paul concludes: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is valid as anything, but [only] faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). He goes on to repeat virtually the same statement in his postscript to the letter: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but [only] a new creation” (6:15). A third statement, found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, parallels the previous two: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but [only] obeying the commandments of

¹⁸ So also Michael Cranford, “Abraham in Romans 4: The Father of All Who Believe,” *NTS* 41 (1995), 85: “The unifying characteristic of God’s people is not that they are all physically descended from Abraham, but that they all have faith.”

¹⁹ Note the εἰς τό + *infinitive* construction in 4:11 as a way of indicating purpose (BDF §402[2]).

God" (1 Cor 7:19). In each case the positive element which contrasts the negation of the circumcision/uncircumcision distinction differs,²⁰ but the utter irrelevance of that distinction is consistent. In summary, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is a decisive factor in salvation.

Having arrived at this description of Paul's position, then, we are prepared to ask those questions which will formally launch us into this study. If Paul is persuaded that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has salvific significance, then why are metaphorical vestiges of this vocabulary retained when speaking about the "new community" in Christ? Why does Paul pick up the notion of a "spiritualised" circumcision at certain points in his letters? The remainder of this thesis will focus on three specific texts (Rom 2:25-29; Phil 3:3; Col 2:11-12) in an effort to address these questions.

²⁰ One can imagine that the emphasis in 1 Cor 7:19 ("obeying the commandments of God") would not have advanced Paul's position in Galatia.

CHAPTER THREE

CIRCUMCISION OF THE HEART AND THE DIALOGUE WITH DEUTERONOMY: ROMANS 2:25-29

“For the apparent Jew is not [a Jew], nor is the circumcision which is apparent in the flesh [circumcision], but rather the secret Jew [is a Jew] and a circumcision of the heart which depends on s/Spirit and not the written code [is circumcision], whose praise does not come from people but from God” (Rom 2:28-29). Although the verses themselves are somewhat elliptical, the meaning is clear: there is a “true” circumcision which affects the heart, and “Jewishness” is defined by inward, not outward, qualities. My thesis in this chapter is that the circumcision imagery which appears here leans heavily on Jer 4:4 and Deut 10:16. In fact, all of Romans 2 is built on Deuteronomic themes such as obedience to the commandments of the law, and reward and punishment. However, the way in which Deuteronomy identifies the people of God is subtly transformed by Paul, and his treatment of the circumcision metaphor is indicative of that perspective. In order to investigate more carefully the place of this image in Paul’s argument, we need to examine these verses not only in the immediate context of vv.25-29, but also in the entire context of Romans 2. As a result, we will move gradually from macroscope to microscope, starting with the thrust of the chapter as a whole, and working our way toward the specific circumcision metaphor in vv.28-29.

Romans 2 and the Epistle's Opening Chapters

When examining Romans 2, we must be careful not to isolate it as some sort of summary of Paul's thought, without referring to other sections of the epistle. Most importantly, as most commentaries point out, we must recognise that chapter 2 forms part of the argumentative crescendo which peaks in Paul's proclamation of the solution to the human dilemma of sin: "But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed..." (3:21). The importance of 3:21-26, with its emphases of faith, redemption through Christ Jesus, and righteousness, is apparent.¹ Yet it is precisely the evident importance of this later text which creates problems for interpreters of chapter 2: if the righteousness of God is "apart from law" (3:21), and the efficacy of works in attaining justification is denied (3:20,27), then why does Paul spend the bulk of chapter 2 seemingly summoning his audience to good deeds and a "doing" of the law in the light of final judgment?

Klyne R. Snodgrass, in an article on this chapter, focusses his attention on exactly this tension.² He begins by remarking on the frequent brevity of recent interpreters' comments on Romans 2, and notes the "difficulty that it caused interpreters throughout history."³ When the text is addressed, Snodgrass observes, numerous attempts are made to evade the implications of the passage; for example,

1. To say that Paul is speaking only hypothetically *as if* the law could be fulfilled and *as if* the gospel had not come. What Paul really believes one finds in 3.9f. and 3.20f.

¹ See James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), 163, on the "centrality" of this passage; John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM, 1989), 106, calls it a "major turning point."

² Klyne R. Snodgrass, "Justification by Grace--To the Doers: An Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul," *NTS* 32 (1986), 72-93.

³ *Ibid.*, 73.

2. To say that Paul was speaking of Gentile Christians who fulfil the law through faith in Christ and a life in the Spirit.
3. To view this section and other texts speaking of judgement as unexpurgated and unnecessary fragments from Paul's Jewish past.
4. To view this chapter as merely a contradiction in Paul's thought which must be allowed to stand.
5. To suggest that Paul only means to say in 2.14-15 that Gentiles have a law and therefore are responsible and will be judged. There is only one outcome for both Jews and Gentiles on the basis of works and it is negative.⁴

Perhaps the best example of discomfort with this text is that of J.C. O'Neill, who "omitted all of chapter 2 as irrelevant to Paul's purpose and viewed it as a missionary tract of Hellenistic Judaism which was added by a later hand."⁵ Such a radical re-arrangement of the text is surely unjustified, but it is demonstrative of the frustration experienced by some in linking this passage to other currents in Paul's theology.

My own position is that the references to a "doing" of the law in Romans 2 indeed pertain to Gentile Christians. Nevertheless, the Gentiles appear primarily as "foils" for Jews whom Paul accuses of failing to live up to the law which they were given. Thus, Paul does not attempt a systematic presentation of the status of these Gentiles at this juncture; rather, he acknowledges their existence "so as to make Israel jealous" (if we may employ language from Rom 11:11). Nevertheless, these are conclusions, not arguments: the way forward lies in examining the basic thrust of Romans 2, specifically analysing the function of the circumcision metaphor in 2:25-29, and working back from there to the Deuteronomistic framework of the chapter and the identification of the

⁴ Ibid. Snodgrass offers references for each of these positions.

⁵ Ibid. The reference is to J.C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1975), 40, 53, 264f.

Gentiles who appear throughout it.

The Envisioned Audience

One of our preliminary considerations has to do with the envisioned audience of the chapter, beginning as it does (2:1) with sharp criticism of those who judge...whom? For what reasons? In the previous section (1:18-32), Paul describes in dismal terms the plight of those who, although they “knew God,” failed to respond appropriately with honour and thanks (1:21), and thus were swallowed up in their own sin. The references in this passage to idolatry (1:23,25) and the corruption of sexual relations (1:26-27) suggests that the perspective which Paul takes is that of a Jew condemning Gentile behaviour.⁶ The language contains many strong echoes of Wisdom of Solomon: for example, its assertion that people should have recognised God through the things which have been created (Rom 1:19-20; cf. Wis 13:1-9), and its disparagement of idolatry (Rom 1:23,25; cf. Wis 14:8-11, esp. v.27: “For the worship of idols not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil”).

Nevertheless, the lack of an explicit indicator of the target audience in 2:1 (and, for that matter, 1:18-32) has led to disagreement over whether Jews alone or both Jews and Gentiles are addressed in 2:1-16. C.E.B. Cranfield is representative of the view that, in all probability, Jews are in focus here, marshalling evidence such as contact with Wisdom of Solomon, the persistent Jew/Greek dichotomy, and the awkwardness of 2:17 in designating a shift in audience.⁷ Others in this

⁶ So Dunn, *Romans*, 53.

⁷ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, I-XIII*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 137-9.

camp concur that while the subject of the address is grammatically ambiguous, the tenor of the passage provides extensive circumstantial evidence for suggesting that this person is primarily conceived as a Jew.⁸

On the other hand, a number of scholars dissent, arguing that the lack of explicit identification is intentional, and that Jews and Gentiles are considered together here as a prelude to their both being “under sin” (3:9).⁹ In his analysis of the diatribal form in Romans, Stanley Stowers defends this position vehemently, maintaining that “it is anachronistic and completely unwarranted to think that Paul has only the Jew in mind in 2:1-5 or that he characterizes the typical Jew.”¹⁰ Neil Elliott, in defending the thesis that Romans is directed only to a *Gentile* audience, builds on Stowers’ analysis, insisting that Gentile Christian hearers are drawn into Paul’s admonitions here.¹¹

It is helpful to sift through the various points of view at this juncture, since our perception of the “target audience” in this chapter will set the stage for subsequent interpretation. First of all, it is generally acknowledged, given the ambiguity of the text, that Gentile Christians might very well feel themselves to be addressed by 2:1. Rom 1:18-32 would not depict them, since they turned to God from idols (cf. 1 Thess 1:9), and a consequent feeling of moral superiority is

⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 78; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*, trans. S. Hafemann (Louisville, KY: W/JKP, 1994), 38; Matthew Black, *Romans*, 2d ed., New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 44; Ziesler, *Romans*, 81.

⁹ C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2d ed., Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A&C Black, 1991), 41; Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 49; Glenn N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1-4*, JSNTSup 39 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 47-9.

¹⁰ Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBLDS 57 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 112.

¹¹ Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's Dialogue with Judaism*, JSNTSup 45 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 125-6.

certainly possible. Still, Cranfield is right in observing that 2:17 is hardly an initial address to Jews, though it targets that group specifically. Thus, it is best to see a shift in audience taking place in stages: in 2:1-11, both Jews and Gentiles are implicitly addressed and held responsible for their deeds. Although both Jews and Gentiles also play a role in 2:12-16, the emphasis in this section on “law” signals that Paul’s attention has turned toward the Jews, a movement which is spelled out clearly in 2:17.¹² Consequently, in the course of the chapter there is a narrowing of the focus until it rests exclusively on the Jews as a group.

Having looked at the broader questions of the place of Romans 2 in the context of the epistle and the audience which Paul wishes to address, we now turn to a survey of Rom 2:1-24, concluding with a detailed analysis of 2:25-29 in an effort to uncover the function of the circumcision metaphor which Paul employs.

Rom 2:1-11: Reward According to Deeds

In the opening section of this chapter, Paul articulates the view that since God judges justly according to one’s “deeds” (ἔργα), one should not presume that any exemption is possible. The δὴ (“therefore”) of 2:1 is seen by some as problematic, since it is unclear how the “judge’s” lack of defence is inferred from the existence of those who not only do evil things, “but even applaud others who practice them” (1:32). As a result, many suggestions have emerged in the scholarly literature in an effort to

¹² See Dunn, *Romans*, 79, who states that 2:1-11 serves “as an overlapping section binding the two more specific indictments of 1:18-32 and 2:12-3:8 together.”

an effort to eradicate the difficulty,¹³ but such stretches are unnecessary. As a general explanation, Cranfield is correct to say that the *διό* refers back to 1:18-32 as a whole,¹⁴ but he mitigates its force by feeling compelled to link the sinful activity of the previous section to all people, rather than to “Gentile sinners.” To be sure, Paul will make such an equation almost immediately, but the rhetorical effect of 2:1 depends on creating an attitude of “judgment” in the audience; i.e. ensuring that the sins of 1:18-32 are viewed as “someone else’s.” Consequently, to draw an inference from the preceding passage which has applicability for the hearer is to generate a sense of shock. Dunn rightly mentions Nathan’s indictment of David (“You are the man,” 2 Sam 12:7) as having similar force.¹⁵ Stowers claims that this “sudden turning” is “completely in tune” with the diatribal style of address which follows.¹⁶

The accusation which Paul levels (2:1b) is that the one who passes judgment on another for performing certain deeds is guilty of “doing” (*πράσσω*) the same things; thus, the judgment returns to condemn the judge. This position is immediately bolstered (2:2) by an appeal to common knowledge (*οἶδμεν*, “we know”):¹⁷ the judgment (with overtones of “condemnation”) by God of those who do such things is “just” (*κατὰ ἀλήθειαν*; lit. “according to truth”). For anyone familiar with Israel’s Scriptures, the affirmation of divine judgment on the evildoer would be immediate and undeniable (see, for example, Isa 13:6-16; Zeph 1:14-2:3;

¹³ E.g. 2:1 is a gloss, 1:32b is parenthetical, *διό* should be emended to *δὲ*; see summary in Cranfield, *Romans*, 140-1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 79.

¹⁶ Stowers, *Diatribes*, 93.

¹⁷ The NRSV’s attempt to attribute the content of 2:2 to Paul’s interlocutor by interpolating “You say” at the beginning of the verse is unnecessary.

Mal 4:1; Wis 3:10,18). Consequently, Paul continues to press the logic to its ultimate conclusion: if 1) people are condemned by God for certain actions and 2) you yourself perform these actions, then 3) you will be condemned by God. Indeed, asks the apostle rhetorically (2:3), do you really think that you will escape such logic (and such judgment)?

At this point, Paul accuses his audience of “despising” (καταφρονέω; Dunn “thinking lightly of”¹⁸) the kindness (χρηστότης), forbearance, and patience (μακροθυμία) of God, characteristics which are intended to lead the people to repentance (2:5). The echo of Wis 15:1 is strong: “But you, O God, are kind [χρηστός] and true, patient [μακροθυμός] and ruling all things in mercy.” Yet it is the following line in Wisdom of Solomon with which Paul enters into debate: “For even if we sin we are yours...” (15:2). Rather than emphasising the fact that God’s kindness and patience provide leeway for the sinner, Paul makes the point that God’s graciousness has an intended end, which cannot be ignored with impunity.

This strict rule of recompense is reinforced by a scriptural citation, taken almost verbatim from LXX Ps 61:13 and Pr 24:12: God is one “who will repay according to each one’s works” (2:6). The following four verses (2:7-10), arranged into a chiasm,¹⁹ spell out in more detail the common Jewish notion that good deeds are rewarded and evil deeds are punished. Still, it is noteworthy that these effects are universal: punishments and rewards alike are meted out “to the Jew first and also to the Greek”

¹⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 83.

¹⁹ The complicated chiasmic arrangement proposed by Kendrick Grobel, “A Chiasmic Retribution-Formula in Romans 2,” in *Zeit und Geschichte*, ed. E. Dinkler (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1964), 255-61 is strained and unnecessary. He may very well be right that Paul is drawing on traditional Jewish material (259), but a basic 4-point chiasm (vv. 7&10, 8&9) is more plausible.

(Rom 2:9,10).

Jouette M. Bassler, in her consideration of divine impartiality in the Pauline corpus, notes that Rom 2:11 (“For God shows no partiality”) acts as a transitional verse, summing up the preceding argument and thematically anticipating what is to come.²⁰ Picking up on the phrase Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι in 1:16 and 2:9-10, she declares that “the entire argument of this unity is firmly bracketed by statements that express one aspect of the idea of God’s impartiality--disregard for group distinction.”²¹ In short, the judgment of God is based on deeds, not on ethnic categories. It is with that theme that Paul launches into the next section of his argument.

Rom 2:12-16: Doers of the Law Justified, Not Hearers

At this juncture the “law” appears for the first time in Romans, but, lining up with the notion of God’s impartiality, strict possession of that law makes no difference in the retribution for sin: “For as many as sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and as many as sinned under the law will be condemned through the law” (Rom 2:12). The characterisation of Gentiles (as those “without” or “outside of” the law) vs. Jews (as those “under” or “within the realm of” the law) is transparent, but that distinction is seen to be of no ultimate consequence. Although it is possible that κριθήσονται of v.12b could be softened to “will be judged,” the idea of condemnation is commonly associated with the term,²² and the fact that it stands parallel to

²⁰ Jouette M. Bassler, *Divine Impartiality: Paul and a Theological Axiom*, SBLDS 59 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 137.

²¹ Ibid., 135.

²² BAGD, s.v. “κρίνω,” 6b; e.g. Rom 2:1,3.

απολούνται permits us to assume a negative outcome.²³ Here, at the very moment when he introduces the “law,” Paul makes the point that whether one is “without” or “under” the law is irrelevant in the face of sin.²⁴

Elaborating on his assertion that those Jews who sin will be condemned, Paul claims “that the hearers [οἱ ἀκροαταί] of the law are not righteous before God, but the doers [οἱ ποιηταί] of the law will be justified” (2:13). In the phrase “the hearers of the law” there is a striking echo of the verses which precede the “Shema” of Deut 6:4-9 (“Hear, O Israel...”).²⁵ Referring to God’s commands and decrees, Moses exhorts the people, καὶ ἀκουσον, Ἰσραήλ, καὶ φύλαξαι ποιεῖν... (LXX Deut 6:3). Cranfield notes that שמע/ἀκούειν can certainly have a “fuller sense” in the Hebrew Bible, but that Paul alludes to its attenuated form “which falls short of heeding and obeying.”²⁶ Interestingly, other characteristically “Jewish” New Testament books such as Matthew and James also employ the ἀκούω/ποιέω contrast (see Mt 7:24-27; Jas 1:22-25). In Romans, Paul uses the terminological opposition to explain that although people may be ἐν νόμῳ (2:12), and thus be ἀκροαταὶ νόμου (2:13), this is insufficient: they must be ποιηταὶ νόμου in order to be righteous.

²³ Contra Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 134-42, who interprets 2:12 as antithetical, rather than synonymous, parallelism: “God will destroy the wicked but he will measure out reward and punishment by degree to each of those who attempt to live within the law” (140). Stowers reads too much positive content into ἐν νόμῳ, while downplaying the negative conclusions which Paul must draw from ἡμάρτον.

²⁴ So Dunn, *Romans*, 96: “his main emphasis is that there is *no* distinction so far as the final outcome of a sinning life is concerned.”

²⁵ So George P. Carras, “Romans 2, 1-29: A Dialogue on Jewish Ideals,” *Biblica* 73 (1992), 197.

²⁶ Cranfield, *Romans*, 154.

As 2:17-24 will demonstrate,²⁷ Paul does not believe that all Jews fit that description.

Rom 2:17-24: Jewish Style and Substance Do Not Correspond

The basic thrust of Rom 2:17-24 can be spelled out rather straightforwardly: given his association with the law, the Jew claims a particular advantage, but the fact that he transgresses this law undermines his assertion. A few details in this passage which sharpen Paul's accusation are worth noting.

Paul begins with the observation, "But if you call yourself a Jew..." (Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ...; 2:17). The suggestion here that the individual may well be a Jew "only in name" is a foreshadowing of the contrast of the Jew ἐν τῷ φανερώ/ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ which is introduced in 2:28-29.²⁸ As Paul makes abundantly clear, to "call yourself" (ἐπονομάζῃ) something or to "trust yourself" (πέποιθας... σεαυτόν) to be something (2:19) is insufficient when not supported by corresponding actions. These "claims" (2:17-20) all revolve around possession of the law; that is, as Paul says, ἔχοντα τὴν μόρφωσιν τῆς γνώσεως καὶ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐν τῷ νόμῳ, "having the embodiment of knowledge and truth in the law" (2:20). Yet as the succeeding statements make clear, Paul accuses the Jew of not obeying the very law which he possesses.

The four parallel phrases in 2:21-22 (each begins with substantive

²⁷ I am consciously bracketing the discussion of the "Gentiles" of 2:14-16 for the time being--they are examined in detail at the end of this chapter.

²⁸ Cranfield's objection that we should not make "too much" of this connection (*Romans*, 164) is puzzling. He warns that the claims in vv. 17-20 are not merely ironical, but that they seem to be sincere claims "which were actually being made by [Paul's] fellow Jews." Still, that is precisely Paul's point: the real advantage of these claims is undermined by transgression of the law, and the question of the identity of the "true Jew" arises.

masc. sg. participle, concludes with verb in 2nd p. sg.) may be read either as statements or as questions; scholars generally take them as the latter.²⁹ The pattern opens generally with an indirect indictment of the teacher of the law: does the one who teaches (cf. διδάσκαλον νηπίων in 2:19) not teach himself? The following two phrases specify particular *elements* of that teaching which are found in the Decalogue but whose practice is suspect: stealing (κλέπτειν; Deut 5:19) and committing adultery (μοιχεύειν; Deut 5:17). The final question, which refers to τὰ εἰδωλα, likely alludes to the Decalogue's prohibition of idolatry,³⁰ but the specific occurrence of βδελύσσεσθαι (or its noun form, βδέλυγμα, "something abhorrent") with idolatry has parallels elsewhere (e.g. Deut 7:25-26; 27:15; 29:17; Isa 2:8,20; Dan 11:31; Wis 14:11). What Paul means by the charge ἱεροσυλεῖς is unclear: the term usually refers to "robbing a temple" (2 Macc 9:2; *Ant.* 17 §163), but can also have the broader implication of "committing sacrilege."³¹ Given the lack of specificity of the other terms used in this section, it is probably best to read ἱεροσυλεῖς in this more general sense.³²

Having dealt with the literary pattern and vocabulary, we still face this question: what stands behind these accusations for Paul? If Paul really wanted to characterise the Jew as a transgressor of the law (Rom 2:23,25,27), would he not have been on safer ground to choose less prominent points of law, or to focus on motives?³³ The most satisfactory resolution to this question is to say that Paul's accusations fit with the

²⁹ Ibid., 167-8.

³⁰ So Dunn, *Romans*, 114.

³¹ Ibid.

³² So Cranfield, *Romans*, 167-8.

³³ See Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 2d ed. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1987), 98.

“diatribal” tenor of the passage, and that there are close parallels in the prophetic literature and works from the Second Temple period.³⁴ Paul is not insisting that *all* Jews are guilty of these particular violations, but by pointing to the reality of flagrant offences he makes plausible his (eventual) claim of widespread culpability. The citation from Isa 52:5 which concludes this section adds an ironic flourish: rather than being instructors in law-based morality for the Gentiles (i.e. οἱ τυφλοί, οἱ ἐν σκότει, οἱ ἄφρονες, οἱ νήπιοι of 2:19-20), the Jews, due to their transgressions, actually cause the Gentiles to blaspheme the name of God.

Rom 2:25-29: The “True” Jew and the Circumcision of the Heart

Having traced Paul’s argument up to this point, we are now in a position to examine in detail the concluding section, which introduces the topic of circumcision. Paul’s initial statement appears to respond to an implicit objection--about the value of circumcision--made by his Jewish dialogue partner: “For circumcision is of benefit if you practise the law; but if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (2:25). The first question which must be asked pertains to the term περιτομή: how does it function here? What kinds of ideas does the symbol of circumcision evoke? It is helpful to look ahead to 3:1, where Paul once again discusses the “benefit of circumcision”: Τί οὖν τὸ περισσὸν τοῦ Ἰουδαίου ἢ τίς ἡ ὠφέλεια τῆς περιτομῆς? The fact that here ὁ Ἰουδαίος is placed in parallel with ἡ περιτομή gives an indication that “circumcision” functions as a shorthand for “Jewish identity.” As

³⁴ See references in Dunn, *Romans*, 113-4.

our survey of Jewish literature from the Second Temple period demonstrates, circumcision is often considered to be the “defining characteristic” of the Jew. It represents God’s covenant with Abraham, and it is this notion of “chosenness” which Paul brings into play here.

Not too much should be made of the specific nuance of πράσσειν here (vs. ποιεῖν, φυλάσσειν). In commenting on 2:3, Dunn surmises that it may be possible to distinguish between πράσσειν and ποιεῖν, “πράσσειν having a more general sense and ποιεῖν denoting a more deliberate act.”³⁵ Yet the fact that πράσσειν describes the “judge’s” activity in 2:1, and ποιεῖν that same activity in 2:3, suggests that the variance is stylistic and not semantic. More likely, all of these terms are used interchangeably to describe a “carrying out” of the law’s commands. Nevertheless, it is plausible to suppose that the appearance of πράσσειν in 2:25 is intended to recall its earlier uses in 1:32 and 2:1,3. Whereas its previous occurrences describe the doing of *evil*, for which even those who “judge” are condemned (2:1), in 2:25 the Jew is instructed to practise *the law*, by which the benefit of circumcision is maintained. Thus, the insistent contrast of Romans 2--between doing good and doing evil--is carried on.

Now, in fact, that contrast is applied to circumcision: while the benefit of circumcision is *underscored* by practising the law, it is *undermined* by transgressing that law. Παραβάτης, “transgressor,” draws attention back to the summary statement of 2:23: διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου τὸν θεὸν ἀτιμάζεις. Paul’s point in 2:17-24 is to identify the Jew, who claims certain privileges by virtue of possessing the law, as one who

³⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 81.

breaks that law (e.g. κλέπτεις, μοιχεύεις, ἱεροσυλεῖς; 2:21-22).

Consequently, the εἰάν of 2:25b introduces no mere potentiality, but a reality for which Paul has already argued.

Clearly, the outcome which Paul presents for such transgression is scandalous for a Jewish listener: ἡ περιτομή σου ἄκροβυστία γέγονεν. Translating ἄκροβυστία as an abstract noun, “uncircumcision,” obscures somewhat the fundamental imagery of the phrase, which is literally “your circumcised glans becomes a foreskin.”³⁶ This describes the result of *epispasm*, a process by which the remaining skin on the penis was stretched forward and held in place in order to “reverse” one’s circumcision.³⁷ It is this activity which was apparently undertaken by certain apostate Jews in the Maccabean period, who “removed the marks of circumcision, and abandoned the holy covenant. They joined with the Gentiles and sold themselves to do evil” (1 Macc 1:15). It was a deliberate rejection of one’s Jewish identity. According to Robert G. Hall, “practice of epispasm prevailed throughout the Hellenistic and Roman ages and attained a plateau of popularity in the first century CE.”³⁸

Surely Paul’s intimation that to transgress the law is to find oneself in a position analogous to that of the one who undergoes *epispasm* would be “shocking to many Jews.”³⁹ This declaration stands in contradiction to the confident assertion that “even if we sin we are yours” (Wis 15:2), but it is precisely this confidence against which Paul

³⁶ Marcus, “Circumcision and Uncircumcision,” 75.

³⁷ See Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm--Circumcision in Reverse,” *Bible Review* 8 (Aug 1992), 54.

³⁸ Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writing,” *JSP* 2 (1988), 71.

³⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, 121.

has been railing throughout Romans 2. Rather than allowing for a measure of flexibility with respect to transgression in the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, Paul affirms that breaking the law puts an individual outside the sphere of God's people, a shift in status represented by a metaphorical "uncircumcision."

Just as remarkable as the alleged possibility of "uncircumcision" is Paul's insistence that the converse is also conceivable: "Therefore if the uncircumcised person should keep the ordinances of the law, will not his uncircumcision be reckoned as circumcision?" (Rom 2:26).⁴⁰ The phrase φυλάσσειν τὰ δικαιώματα, "to keep the ordinances," echoes the language of the Septuagint. It appears often in Ezekiel (positively in 11:20; 20:19; 43:11; negatively in 20:13,18,21) and particularly in Deuteronomy (4:40; 6:2,17; 7:11,12; 10:13; 17:19; 26:17; 28:45; 30:10,16). The Deuteronomic references are particularly illuminating, because of the connection which is established between "keeping the ordinances" and God's maintenance of the covenant. For example, Deut 7:12 exhorts the Israelites: "And it will be that when you hear all these ordinances [τὰ δικαιώματα] and you keep [φυλάξητε] and do them, the Lord your God will also guard [διαφυλάξει] the covenant and the mercy [given] to you, just as he swore to your fathers." The emphasis here is on the mutual responsibility which exists to uphold the covenant. Paul, on the other hand, relentlessly pushes forward the logic: if "keeping the ordinances" suffices to maintain the covenant with God, then will not such activity even identify the *uncircumcised person* as a member of that covenant?

⁴⁰ Stephen Westerholm, "Letter and Spirit: The Foundation of Pauline *Ethics*," *NTS* 30 (1984), 235, notes that Paul's argument "is admittedly one which most Jews of his time would have rejected."

It is worth clarifying at this point that Paul is surely *not* making the general argument that Gentiles enter the community of God on the basis of their deeds--such a claim would fly in the face of the apostle's repeated assertion of the sole efficacy of faith. Instead, Paul is rhetorically exploiting only one facet of the situation, looking at it from the vantage point of a non-Christian Jew. *How* the uncircumcised individual gets to the point of "keeping the ordinances" is not presently Paul's concern. Rather, Paul leads his Jewish interlocutor through a syllogism: if the benefit of circumcision is linked to law-obedience (2:25), then the obedient Gentile possesses a status which the transgressing Jew forfeits (2:26-27). The point of this exercise is to reinforce the notion of Jewish sinfulness before God, with the Gentile serving as a foil which shames the Jew.

The *nature* of the identification of the "uncircumcised person" as "circumcised" is governed by Paul's use of the word λογισθήσεται, "will be reckoned." The verb has quite a wide range of nuances, and can, in some contexts, simply indicate the general activity of human thought or opinion.⁴¹ However, the implication here is substantially stronger: it is a reckoning which has eschatological significance. The best parallel is found in Rom 9:8, where Paul is discussing those who are counted as "children of God": οὐ τὰ τέκνα τῆς σαρκὸς ταῦτα τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ ἀλλὰ τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας λογίζεται εἰς σπέρμα. Both passages contain λογίζεσθαι + εἰς constructions, the suggestion in both cases being that identification with God's people (ἡ περιτομή/ τὸ σπέρμα) ultimately is based not on external factors but on other considerations (φυλάσσειν τὰ δικαιώματα/ ἡ

⁴¹ See BAGD, s.v. "λογίζομαι," 2-3.

ἐπαγγελία). Paul's point, then, is that "the uncircumcised person," without undergoing any physical alteration, is in fact part of the ranks of the circumcised!

Of course, the irony of this allegation is not lost on the Jewish reader: how can the uncircumcised person, by the very fact of his *being* uncircumcised, possibly "keep the ordinances"? Conversely, the fact that Paul can make such a statement demonstrates that his understanding of φυλάσσειν τὰ δικαιώματα here is not "strict obedience to the entire litany of commandments," at least with respect to circumcision.⁴² "Keeping the law" has somehow been redefined, and this new conception surfaces at a number of places in Romans 2.

One such place is the statement which immediately follows: καὶ κρινεῖ ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία τὸν νόμον τελούσα σὲ τὸν διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς παραβάτην νόμου (2:27). Several points deserve clarification and expansion here. First of all, the fact that ἡ ἀκροβυστία is described as being ἐκ φύσεως is simply Paul's way of emphasising the Gentile identity of the individual: he is uncircumcised "by virtue of his birth [as a Gentile]." Second, the theme of "judgment" (or in this case, as elsewhere, "condemnation") recalls the opening discussion of Romans 2. There, Paul calls to attention "all those who judge" certain behaviour, since by their participation in the same activities they indict themselves (2:1-2). By contrast, 2:27 implies that the future judgment (κρινεῖ) which will be undertaken by "the uncircumcised person" is legitimate, since he "fulfills [τελέω] the law."

Once again, we have this notion of the uncircumcised person

⁴² Rightly Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 104 n54: "...Paul's concept of the law is extremely flexible...; in fact he has only the moral content of the Torah in view here."

keeping the law, this time phrased suggestively in the language of “fulfilling” (τελοῦσα). Clearly, Paul is not interested in spelling out concretely what he means by this terminology. Rather, the phrase functions as part of Paul’s dichotomy: the uncircumcised person fulfills the law, while the circumcised person (who also has the benefit of the written code)⁴³ is a transgressor of that same law. As we saw already in 2:25, the status of the Jew as “transgressor” has been pointed out repeatedly. What Paul has in mind with respect to the coming judgment/condemnation of the transgressor which will take place is not clear. Most likely, the irony of the situation is the most significant: the one who can be described as “lacking the law” fulfills the law, while the one who has that law in written form (and a physical mark of the covenant as well!) is guilty of its violation.

At this point in the argument (2:28-29) we reach Paul’s climactic summary:

- A. οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν
 B. οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερῷ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομή,
 A'. ἀλλ' ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος,
 B'. καὶ περιτομὴ καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι,
 A". οὗ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.

Literarily, the sentence presents a basic contrast between that which is “apparent” or “outward” (φανερός) and that which is “hidden” or “inward” (κρυπτός). The ‘A’ elements form the skeleton of the assertion with their discussion of “the Jew,” while the ‘B’ elements supplement the claim with more detail pertaining to “circumcision.” While A” may appear at first to break the symmetry of the pattern, its connection to A and A’ is clear. The relative pronoun οὗ certainly refers back to ὁ Ἰουδαῖος (it

⁴³ διὰ here indicates attendant circumstance; i.e. the written code and circumcision are present to the one who is a transgressor.

cannot be connected with the feminine ἡ περιτομή), and the underlying Hebrew pun on “praise” (תָּרַן) and “Jew” (יְהוּדִי)⁴⁴ establishes a further link. Thus, A” balances the structure and offers a suitable conclusion to the declaration.

With respect to the *meaning* of 2:28-29, much of our interpretation hinges on B’. A and A’ are descriptive and suggestive, but effectively create categories without content. B alludes to the known entity of physical circumcision, but it remains to be seen why physical circumcision is inadequate. Consequently, understanding περιτομή καρδίας and construing ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι are crucial to interpreting this passage.

As we saw in the first chapter, circumcision metaphors are scattered throughout Jewish writings of the Second Temple period. However, rather than one of these documents being Paul’s source for such imagery, it is much more plausible that all of them share a common source: the Hebrew Scriptures. The parallel use of σάρξ and καρδιά as loci for circumcision (or uncircumcision) is found in several passages. Ezekiel rebukes the people of Israel for admitting foreigners, described as υἱοὺς ἄλλογενεῖς ἀπεριτμήτους καρδία καὶ ἀπεριτμήτους σαρκί in the LXX, into the sanctuary of the Lord (Ezek 44:6-8). Jeremiah also employs these terms, but here includes Israel in his accusation. The prophet reports the Lord’s intention to attend to “all who are circumcised in the foreskin” (πάντας περιτετμημένους ἀκροβυστίας αὐτῶν), including those of Egypt, Judah, Edom, and other nations (Jer 9:25-26). The reason for such attention is clear: ὅτι πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἀπερίτμητα σαρκί, καὶ

⁴⁴ Cranfield, *Romans*, 175, points to Gen 29:35 and 49:8, and claims that the word-play was “well known in Judaism.”

πᾶς οἶκος Ἰσραὴλ ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίας αὐτῶν. This statement follows an extensive description of the wrongdoing of the people of Judah (see 9:1-16), deeds which are apparently linked to their characterisation as ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίας (see reference to ἡ καρδία αὐτῶν ἡ κακή in 9:14). Evidently, merely to be περιτετμημένοι ἀκροβυστίας is insufficient to escape the judgment of God.

Connected with these metaphorical images of “uncircumcision” are those LXX passages which contain either the imperative to “circumcise your hearts,” or the declaration that God will perform such a circumcision. An example of the latter in the pseudepigraphical literature was noted in the first chapter: in *Jub.* 1:23 God asserts that if the people of Israel turn to him, he “will circumcise the foreskin of their heart and the foreskin of the heart of their seed....” The dependence of this text on Deut 30:6 has been observed, and the Deuteronomic text has also been suggested as a parallel to Rom 2:29.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is important to note that while the Hebrew text of Deut 30:6 is translated “the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants...,” the LXX reads περικαθαριεῖ, “will purify” rather than the more specific περιτεμεῖ, “will circumcise.”⁴⁶ Likely, περικαθαρίξειν should be understood in the particular sense of “to remove as a means of purification”,⁴⁷ but the distinction should not simply be overlooked. The same tendency takes place in the targums: both Tg. Onqelos and Tg. Ps.-J. render Deut 30:6 “the Lord your God will remove the obduracy of your

⁴⁵ Deut 30:6 appears in the margin of NA²⁷ as a cross-reference for Rom 2:29.

⁴⁶ Noted by Le Déaut, “Circoncision du cœur,” 184; Akio Ito, “Romans 2: A Deuteronomic Reading,” *JSNT* 59 (1995), 26, falls into the trap of translating Deut 30:6 from the MT, not the LXX.

⁴⁷ LSJ renders it “purge entirely.”

heart and the obduracy of the heart of your offspring,"⁴⁸ thereby effectively obscuring the original circumcision imagery. We will return to this later when discussing the possible nuances of περιτομή καρδίας; for now, it is enough to say that, given the discrepancy in vocabulary, Deut 30:6 is not the most immediate parallel for Rom 2:29.

Nevertheless, there are two significant passages in which the people of Israel are exhorted to "circumcise their hearts." One such text is Jer 4:4, which appears in the context of Judah being recalled to the LORD: περιτμηθήτε τῷ θεῷ ὑμῶν καὶ περιέλεσθε τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τῆς καρδίας ὑμῶν.... Although τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν τῆς καρδίας ὑμῶν is strictly the grammatical object of περιέλεσθε, "take away/remove," rather than περιτμηθήτε, "circumcise," this is a case of synonymous parallelism; i.e. one circumcises oneself to God by removing the foreskin of one's heart. There are a number of elements in the context surrounding this verse which are suggestive when examined in the light of our investigation of Romans 2. First, the bulk of the admonitions which are directed against Judah (see Jer 2:1-3:10) are subsumed under the basic charge of idolatry. In fact, in the cadence of Rom 1:23 (καὶ ἥλλαξαν τὴν δόξαν τοῦ ἀφθάρτου θεοῦ...) we find an echo of Jer 2:11: εἰ ἀλλάσσονται ἔθνη θεοὺς αὐτῶν; ... ὁ δὲ λαός μου ἥλλάξατο τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ....⁴⁹ This creates very interesting links with Rom 1:18-32 and the "idols" of 2:22. Another thought-provoking parallel appears just prior to the command to "be circumcised." In Jer 4:2, one of the conditions placed upon the people of Israel is that if they swear, Ζῇ κύριος μετὰ ἀληθείας ἐν κρίσει καὶ ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ("The Lord lives

⁴⁸ Taken from Bernard Grossfeld, *The Targum Onqelos to Deuteronomy* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988), 84-5. See Chap.10 n.6.

⁴⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 119, notes the parallelism.

with truth in judgment and in righteousness”), then εὐλογήσουσιν ἐν αὐτῷ ἔθνη καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ αἰνέσουσι τῷ θεῷ ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ (“by him the nations will bless and praise God in Jerusalem”). To be sure, Paul believes that τὰ ἔθνη have, to a large degree, already begun to “praise God,” but the proximity of this statement in Jer 4:2 to the circumcision imperative in 4:4 may have highlighted the significance of the circumcision metaphor.

The second key passage is Deut 10:16: καὶ περιτεμεῖσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν καὶ τὸν τράχηλον ὑμῶν οὐ σκληρυνεῖτε ἔτι. In the light of the repeated σκληρ- terms, it is clear that such a “circumcision of the heart” is intended to remedy the “hardness” by which the Israelites are characterised. The context spells this out in various ways: the people are to fear God, walk in his ways, love him, and serve him (Deut 10:12). The set of imperatives concludes with a call to law-obedience, φυλάσσεσθαι τὰς ἐντολὰς κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου καὶ τὰ δικαιώματα αὐτοῦ (10:13). This Deuteronomic link between περιτομή καρδίας and φυλάσσειν τὰ δικαιώματα seems to echo strongly at the end of Romans 2.

Yet there is another side to the exhortation to “circumcise your hard heart” in Deut 10:16. The statement which immediately precedes it makes reference not to observance of the Mosaic legislation, but to the status of Israel as God’s chosen people: πλὴν τοὺς πατέρας ὑμῶν προεῖλατο κύριος ἀγαπᾶν αὐτούς, καὶ ἐξελέξατο τὸ σπέρμα αὐτῶν μετ’ αὐτοὺς ὑμᾶς παρὰ πάντα τὰ ἔθνη κατὰ τὴν ἡμέραν ταύτην (10:15). Thus, while what constitutes the “circumcision of heart” is elaborated in concrete ways, the “sign” function of circumcision is also important: in metaphoric fashion, Israel is being called to renew its circumcision, that which symbolised the covenant and their designation as “chosen.” In summary, then,

περιτεμεῖσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν has two related aspects: 1) removing those things which stand as impediments to law-observance, and committing oneself to obedience, and 2) re-affirming inwardly the outward mark of the covenant with God.

Both Jer 4:4 and Deut 10:16 contain this two-fold emphasis on proper actions and covenant status. How, then, does this affect our understanding of περιτομή καρδίας in Rom 2:29? It is clear that the “circumcision of the heart” which Paul describes is bound up with activity which is in line with the Mosaic law. The uncircumcised person is depicted as “keeping” (2:26) or “fulfilling” (2:27) the commands of the law, while the Jewish person, by contrast, is a “transgressor of the law” (2:25,27). So far, Paul writes very much in the spirit of Israel’s Scriptures. Yet, a major departure appears in the way in which Paul separates the “circumcision” which is ἐν τῷ φανερώ ἐν σαρκί from that which is καρδίας. Both Jeremiah and Deuteronomy understand the “circumcision of heart” as something which symbolically *renews* the sign of physical circumcision, not as something which *replaces* it. Here, Paul makes the contentious point that “circumcision of the heart,” and expressly *not* the “circumcision of the penis,” is that which defines “the Jew.”

Still, what Paul means by περιτομή καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι remains to be seen. On the one hand, the ἐν phrase parallels ἐν τῷ φανερώ ἐν σαρκί in 2:28. Yet if all Paul wished was a contrast with “outwardness” and “flesh,” one would think that his use of καρδία would have made that point. Translating the phrase “a circumcision of the heart which is spiritual and not literal” (NRSV) raises the question of

redundancy: how can one have a “literal” circumcision of the heart? As well, if Paul wanted simply to invoke the familiar πνεῦμα-σάρξ dichotomy, it is unclear why πνεύματι is subsequently paralleled by γράμματι.

One observation may help to clarify the issue. First, the appearance of γράμματι in 2:29 must be understood in the light of γράμματος in 2:27. In 2:27, γράμμα is said to be a possession of the Jew, and must mean something like “the law in a written form.”⁵⁰ Reading further with this connotation in mind, we see that ἐν πνεύματι actually plays on the two possible senses which are attributed to it in the scholarly literature. On first appearance, ἐν πνεύματι is linked with ἐν σαρκί: this “circumcision of the heart” is explicitly not something outward, but inward. Yet in tandem with οὐ γράμματι, understood as “not having to do with the written code,” another facet of ἐν πνεύματι emerges. As 2:27 has explicitly stated, one can have “the written code” and physical circumcision and yet be a transgressor of the law. On the other hand, it is the Spirit, and not the “written code,” upon which the one who has been “circumcised in heart” is dependent.⁵¹ With the same idea in mind, Paul writes later in the epistle that Christians have been set free δουλεύειν...ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος καὶ οὐ παλαιότητι γράμματος (7:6).

To summarise our examination of Romans 2, Paul makes the argument that there are Jews who do not keep the law, and thus jeopardise their very status as Jews. The use of the circumcision metaphor in 2:25-29 drives this home: those who are physically circumcised, yet fail to keep the law, are somehow uncircumcised; while those who lack physical circumcision yet obey the law are counted as

⁵⁰ So Westerholm, “Letter and Spirit,” 234.

⁵¹ In a similar vein, see Ziesler, *Romans*, 93.

“true Jews.” The two aspects of the circumcision metaphor which appear in the Jewish Second Temple literature recur here: (1) status/identification as a Jew is linked to (2) the “removal” of something from the heart (i.e. ceasing disobedience and keeping the law). As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Paul, while making this argument, underscores one prominent Deuteronomic theme (reward for good deeds vs. punishment for bad) while repudiating another (Israel’s exclusive election). In the following section I will explain how this Deuteronomic framework undergirds the development of Romans 2.

The Dialogue with Deuteronomy

Before going any further, we need to explain why it is that one would even *think* of looking to Deuteronomy as a source for Paul’s thought in Romans 2. Reference has already been made to the possible allusion to Deut 6:4 in Rom 2:13, to the frequency of φυλάσσειν δικαιώματα in Deuteronomy, and to the importance of Deut 10:16 in understanding the circumcision metaphor of Rom 2:29. Still, there are other indicators which point us in the same direction. Richard Hays’ work on the scriptural “sub-texts” of Romans highlights the importance of Deuteronomy in Paul’s thought. Commenting on Rom 10:5-10, Hays claims that “Paul exposit Deuteronomy [esp. 30-32] in such a way that its latent sense is alleged to be identical with the manifest claims of his own proclamation.”⁵² Reflecting later on such claims, he affirms that

⁵² Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 83.

“Deuteronomy is to Romans as the acorn is to the oak tree.”⁵³

Consequently, it is at least initially *plausible* that we investigate a possible Deuteronomic framework for Romans 2.

Once we start looking in the direction of Deuteronomy, other patterns emerge. One such link is the φανερός/κρυπτός contrast which appears in Rom 2:28-29. In our examination of that text earlier, we noted the A-A'-A" pattern of the text, in which the Jew who is φανερός is distinguished from the Jew who is κρυπτός...οὐ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ. The same parallelism is conspicuous in Deut 29:28 (29:29 LXX): τὰ κρυπτὰ κυρίως τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν, τὰ δὲ φανερά ἡμῖν καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις ἡμῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ποιεῖν πάντα τὰ ῥήματα τοῦ νόμου τούτου.⁵⁴ Of course, the sense in Deuteronomy is that the people of Israel have been given something “visible” or concrete to do: obey the law’s commands. If we are right in reading Rom 2:28-29 in the light of Deut 29:29, the irony is clear: Paul accuses Jews of failing “to do all the words of the law,” and maintains that their advantageous possession of τὰ φανερά cannot compensate for their deficiencies in τὰ κρυπτά, the domain which truly belongs to God (see Rom 2:16).

When we scan the remainder of Romans 2, still other similarities appear. In 2:5, Paul declares that by demonstrating such hardness (σκληρότης) and an unrepentant heart, people are storing up wrath for themselves. In the LXX, the term σκληρότης appears only in Deut 9:27 in the sense of “hardness” or “stubbornness,”⁵⁵ and the context suggests

⁵³ Richard B. Hays, “On the Rebound: A Response to Critiques of *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*,” in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. C.A. Evans and J.A. Sanders (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 87.

⁵⁴ This is the only occurrence in the LXX where these two terms are made parallel.

⁵⁵ Note also the σκληρ- terms in Deut 10:16 (see above), and in 9:6, 13, 27; 31:27.

that Paul may very well be offering an ironic interpretive twist. In Deut 9:25-29, Moses describes how he intervened for the people of Israel before God, subsequent to the debacle of the golden calf. Moses implored God not to destroy Israel, successfully pleading with him to “pay no attention to the stubbornness [τὴν σκληρότητα] of this people,” since they were *God’s* people (9:27,29). By picking up the same term in Rom 2:5, Paul seems to imply that his hearers are putting themselves into a similarly culpable situation, but that no “group exemption” from punishment is forthcoming.

The contrast of rewards and punishments contained in Rom 2:7-10, while certainly a theme which pervades much of Israel’s Scriptures, is characteristically Deuteronomic.⁵⁶ The references to “life” as a reward (ζωὴ αἰώνιος [Rom 2:7] is foreign to LXX Deuteronomy, but cf. ζώη/ζάω in Deut 30:6,15,16,19[!],20) and the retributions of “wrath and anger” (ὀργὴ καὶ θυμός; cf. Deut 29:28) and “anguish and distress” (θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία; cf. Deut 28:53,55, 57) suggest that Paul’s argument has been influenced by Deuteronomy.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, as we have seen previously, any accompanying notions of Israel’s exclusive privilege as the people of God (e.g. Deut 30:1-5,20) are left behind: punishments and rewards alike are meted out “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom 2:9,10).

⁵⁶ Generalising on this point, Ito, “Romans 2,” states that “[i]n a sense we can regard Romans 2 as a Pauline version of the list of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 27-30 where the covenantal overtones are apparent” (25).

⁵⁷ With respect to θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία, Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, argues that Isa 8:22 is a “stronger verbal echo” (43), but he fails to indicate why he considers this echo to be “strong” and that of Deuteronomy 28 to be “faint.” Rather, the fact that a number of terms from Rom 2:7-10 can be matched with passages from Deuteronomy 28-30 suggests to me that this echo is the more likely one. In support of my position, see Ito, “Romans 2,” 25-6.

A final example⁵⁸ is Bassler's observation, in connection with the declaration of God's impartiality in Rom 2:11, that the concept of an impartiality "that transcends ethnic distinctions" is evident in Deut 10:17.⁵⁹ In that passage, the fact of God's impartiality is linked to his concern for justice for the orphan, widow, and "stranger" (Gk. προσήλυτος; LXX Deut 10:18). Thus, we possibly have another Deuteronomic echo in Rom 2:11, with the term προσήλυτος (stranger/proselyte) helpfully serving to reinforce Paul's message that the actions of each person are judged by God without partiality, whether that person be Jewish or Greek.

Certainly, we cannot ignore Akio Ito's caveat that "[a]ll these allusions or similarities to the book of Deuteronomy may not appear particularly impressive if each is considered in isolation."⁶⁰ Yet, as he goes on to say, *together* they form substantial evidence for a Deuteronomic framework for Romans 2.⁶¹ How does this help in our investigation? The twin themes which pervade the book of Deuteronomy are those of Israel's election and its covenantal responsibility to do what the law commands. If disobedience takes place, punishment and exile are certainly within the realm of possibility, but restoration is almost always on the horizon (see Deut 30:1-5; 32:36-43). Indeed, as Paul takes

⁵⁸ Ito, "Romans 2," 26-7, suggests an additional significant parallel between Deut 30:14 ("But the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it") and Rom 2:14-15a (Gentiles, who "do the things of the law," have the "work of the law" written "in their hearts"). While initially plausible, it is difficult to maintain that Paul alludes to the "doing" of Deut 30:14 here while dropping that phrase (apparently in an attempt to avoid its implications) when he cites it explicitly in Rom 10:8.

⁵⁹ Bassler, *Divine Impartiality*, 13; 256 n53.

⁶⁰ Ito, "Romans 2," 27.

⁶¹ Ibid. Ito limits the Deuteronomic parallels to chapters 27-30; I believe that a broader frame of reference is justified.

great pains to point out in Romans 9-11, Israel as a nation has not been abandoned by God. Thus, although God may call the people to “circumcise their hearts” and leave behind their stubborn disobedience (Deut 10:16), their “chosenness” is affirmed (10:15), perhaps with reference to the Abrahamic covenant (10:22).

Coming out of this context, Paul's employment of circumcision metaphors in 2:25-29 creates affinities with the Deuteronomic vision, but significantly reinterprets that vision. Deuteronomy operates with the assumption of Israel's election, of which physical circumcision is a central symbol.⁶² Deuteronomy's summons to law-obedience is premised on such a presupposition. In logical terms, election is a necessary condition for obedience which God will reward with “life.” Paul's introduction of metaphorical circumcision as the defining characteristic of “the Jew” does *not* reverse this logical sequence; i.e. that by “doing the law” one can insinuate oneself into the elect community. Rather, Paul uses the example of obedient behaviour by Gentile Christians⁶³ which is in tune with the Jewish law--the Deuteronomic imperative--to call into question a narrow understanding of the “people of God”: if these Gentiles “keep the ordinances of the law,” does this not critique their castigation as “uncircumcised”? Indeed it does: in the final analysis, physical circumcision counts for nothing,⁶⁴ but only a “circumcision of the heart” which depends on the Spirit and results in the fulfillment of

⁶² Despite the fact that Deuteronomy itself does not mention physical circumcision, we are not justified in suggesting that its connection with “covenant” is being played down (*contra* Betz in discussion of Dunn, “Issue,” 313, who questions “die...enge Verbindung zwischen Bund, Bescheidung und Gesetz” since “Beschneidung im Deuteronomium nicht direkt erwähnt [ist]”).

⁶³ See below on identifying these Gentiles as “Christian.”

⁶⁴ To be sure, physical circumcision has “benefit” in the interim (Rom 3:1), but only insofar as it is a seal of righteousness by faith.

the law. Thus the polyvalence of the circumcision metaphor in the first century allows Paul to 1) reinterpret the covenantal relationship to God by admitting Gentiles through an inward, not an outward, sign (i.e. it is a circumcision of the “heart” and not of the “flesh”); and 2) make the point that a key indicator of this new reality is the Gentiles’ ability to “keep the ordinances of the law” (i.e. they have the “circumcised heart” of Deut 10:16).

As an extension of this idea, one theme which Hays finds in Romans is a “jealousy” theory based on Deut 32:21, which explains “God’s surprising decision to bring many Gentiles to salvation before reclaiming unfaithful Israel.”⁶⁵ It is precisely this notion of a “jealousy theory” which I believe explains the presence of Gentiles in Paul’s argument in Rom 2:25-29 and 2:12-16, and offers a solution to the nagging problem of the status of these Gentiles before God.

The Gentiles in Romans 2: Christian or Occasionally Moral?

The debate over whether the Gentiles whom Paul introduces into the argument in Romans 2 are Christian or simply “moral” usually bogs down over the interpretation of 2:14-16. Consequently, I believe that progress can be made by concentrating on the Gentile who appears in the text which has been the specific focus of this discussion (2:25-29), and moving from there to the more ambiguous passage.

Throughout 2:25-29, Paul contrasts the figures of Jew and Gentile, generally using the unmistakable rubric of ἡ περιτομή and ἡ ἀκροβυστία. Of course, in the light of the potentiality expressed by the εἰάν clause of

⁶⁵ Hays, “On the Rebound,” 88.

2:26, we might write off this Gentile as a hypothetical construction necessary to Paul's argument. From there on, however, such assignments become much more difficult. Heikki Räisänen argues that "such an imaginary Gentile would be of no use for Paul's polemic against the Jew," and wonders how a "non-existent Gentile" could engage in condemnation (2:27).⁶⁶ As well, the statement that ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ ἰουδαίῳ receives praise from God (2:29) is not put as an abstract possibility. Thus, although there is disagreement on this point, it seems most likely that Paul is thinking of Gentile Christians here.⁶⁷

How does this affect our understanding of the Gentiles described in 2:14-16? Having said that "the doers of the law will be justified" (2:13), Paul appears to have denied righteousness to the Gentiles, since they are ἀνόμως, "without the law" (2:12). However, the argument immediately turns to the task of demonstrating that this is *not* the case. Rather, Paul claims, "when Gentiles, who by nature do not have the law, do the things of the law, these who do not have the law have [lit. "are"] a law in themselves" (2:14). First to be addressed is the knotty grammatical problem of whether φύσει, "by nature," refers to the way in which the Gentiles a) do not have the law, or b) do the things of the law. In other words, is it that the Gentiles "by their nature [i.e. being Gentiles] do not have the law," or that they "naturally do the things of the law"? The modifier sits neatly between the phrases τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα and τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, and numerous scholars have championed one reading or the other. Those who advocate the reading "naturally do the things of the law" argue that from a grammatical standpoint, if φύσει had

⁶⁶ Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 104.

⁶⁷ So Dunn, *Romans*, 125.

been intended to modify τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα it would have been included *within* the participial phrase, pointing to Rom 2:27 as an example.⁶⁸ As well, some scholars suggest that such a rendering is supported by the Stoic theory of the “law of nature,” to which Paul is appealing.⁶⁹ Supporters of the alternate reading generally appeal to the *meaning* of φύσει elsewhere in Paul: for example, in Gal 2:15 there is a reference to those who are “Jews by nature” (φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι).⁷⁰ With respect to the grammatical caveat, it is not unknown for Paul to place a modifier *after* a substantive participle,⁷¹ and it is possible that φύσει may occur where it is in order to separate the nominative τὰ... and accusative τὰ... phrases. My view is that the latter reading is the more likely.⁷² Paul’s point is that Gentiles, who are by definition ἀνόμως, are somehow able to do the law.

Continuing on, Paul points out that such people “are a law in themselves” (ἐαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμος). The meaning of this phrase is the precise opposite of that which the English idiom superficially suggests: these people do not have “their own law” (NEB), but rather have no need of “the guidance and sanctions of external law.”⁷³ Cranfield helpfully adduces a text from Aristotle in support of this interpretation: he describes the “refined and well-bred man,” οἷον νόμος ὧν ἐαυτῷ (Nic. Eth. 1128a 31-2).⁷⁴ On the question whether νόμος refers specifically to the

⁶⁸ E.g. Dunn, *Romans*, 98.

⁶⁹ See John W. Martens, “Romans 2.14-16: A Stoic Reading,” *NTS* 40 (1994), 55-67; also Black, *Romans*, 48.

⁷⁰ See Cranfield, *Romans*, 156-7.

⁷¹ Ibid., 157n2.

⁷² Also supported by Snodgrass, “Justification,” 80; Hays, *Echoes*, 44; Achtemeier, *Romans*, 44-5; Carras, “Dialogue,” 197-8; Stowers, *Rereading*, 115-6.

⁷³ Cranfield, *Romans*, 157.

⁷⁴ Ibid., n3.

Jewish law or to a universal moral code, Dunn's insistence that "the whole point of what Paul is saying here would be lost if νόμος was understood other than as a reference to *the* law, the law given to Israel,"⁷⁵ creates a false dichotomy. True, the logic of Paul's argument demands that the Gentiles in question do those things which are prescribed in Israel's law; otherwise, they are useless as a counter-example. However, since the Jewish law, stripped of those specific acts which Paul regards as irrelevant for Gentiles (e.g. circumcision), is a codification of those norms which are implicit in God's creation, there is no need to make a sharp distinction.

How it is that Gentiles, who do not have the Jewish law, can have a law "in themselves" is further explored: "Such people demonstrate that the work which the law requires [τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου] is written on their hearts, their conscience testifying as well, and amongst themselves their thoughts accusing or even defending on the day when God, through Christ Jesus, judges human secrets according to my gospel" (2:15-16). These verses contain a series of obstacles to interpretation. First of all, what does Paul mean by the phrase τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου, used only here in his letters? The plural τὰ ἔργα τοῦ νόμου, "works of the law," is used repeatedly (e.g. Rom 3:20,28), but always with negative overtones which are out of place here. Dunn translates "the business of the law" as a way of indicating that Paul is referring not to the manifold details of the law, but to that which "the law is really (or should be really) concerned with."⁷⁶ Here Dunn is on the right track, but rather than looking ahead

⁷⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 99.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

to the following chapter for a contrast with τὰ ἔργα τοῦ νόμου,⁷⁷ there is better preparation for τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου in the use of ἔργον in Rom 2:6,7. There, the emphasis is on “deeds” generally, and particularly on “doing good,” and it is this *general* emphasis on “doing what is good” (see τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν in 2:10) which Paul wants to continue here. Of course, what is “good” is ultimately contained within the law, and thus Paul claims that certain Gentiles, who formally lack the law, are aware of this “good work” which the law declares to be normative.

The manner of this “awareness,” the fact that the “work which the law requires” is γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, is another source of controversy. Is there an allusion to Jer 31 [LXX 38]:31-34 here, or not? The verbal similarities between the two texts are clear. In his promise of a “new covenant” with Israel, the LORD declares, Διδούς δώσω νόμους μου εἰς τὴν διάνοιαν αὐτῶν καὶ ἐπὶ καρδίας αὐτῶν γράψω αὐτούς (LXX Jer 38:33). At first glance, there appears to be a high probability that Paul has the Jeremiah passage in mind at this point in the argument. Nevertheless, the *context* from which the Jeremiah parallel is drawn makes some scholars uneasy.⁷⁸ With its reference to a “new covenant,” it is difficult to see how Paul would *not* connect this text to the new experience found in Christ. But is Paul talking about Gentile *Christians* in Rom 2:14-15, or more widely about morally upright Gentiles?

The majority view is that in vv.12-16 Paul is *not* referring to Gentile Christians, but rather is using the illustration of Gentiles who

⁷⁷ Here Dunn is pushing too hard his over-arching thesis which identifies τὰ ἔργα τοῦ νόμου as Jewish “boundary markers” which Paul wants to set aside.

⁷⁸ E.g. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 105.

occasionally happen to do decent things.⁷⁹ The point is made that Paul does not unfurl his “solution” to the problem of human sinfulness until 3:21, and thus to read Christian experience into 2:12-16 is premature. This position is usually supported by taking φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν of 2:14 to mean “naturally do the things of the law.” The principal opponent of this view is Cranfield, who insists that Paul is talking about Gentile Christians. He notes that accounting for “the positive element” throughout Romans 2 is highly problematic,⁸⁰ but rejects the “moral Gentile” interpretation in the light of Paul’s statements on the ubiquity of human sinfulness (e.g. Rom 3:9,20,23).⁸¹ On the contrary, he claims, viewing the ἔθνη of vv.12-16 as Christians makes the best sense of that passage, and is supported by the argument in vv.26-29.⁸²

Yet the position put forward by Cranfield has a serious weakness: if the ἔθνη of vv.12-16 are Christians, then why is it that on the day of God’s judgment “their thoughts will do more accusing than excusing”?⁸³ Cranfield’s interpretation of τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων--that “these Gentile Christians will know that their lives fell very short of the perfect fulfilment of the law’s requirement”⁸⁴--rings hollow. However, Cranfield has fallen into the trap of assuming that the ἢ καὶ construction immediately elevates the importance of κατηγορούντων over ἀπολογουμένων. Dunn concurs, claiming (without citing support) that the implication of the phrase “is that Paul expects the former to be

⁷⁹ E.g. Thomas H. Tobin, “Controversy and Continuity in Romans 1:18-3:20,” *CBQ* 55 (1993), 310.

⁸⁰ Cranfield, *Romans*, 151.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

more the rule and the latter more the exception.”⁸⁵ But the parallel of 2 Cor 1:13a may be introduced here: οὐ γὰρ ἄλλα γράφομεν ὑμῖν ἄλλ’ ἢ ἃ ἀναγινώσκετε ἢ καὶ ἐπιγινώσκετε (“For we do not write to you except that which you both read and also understand”). In this text, the second term, ἐπιγινώσκετε, is clearly the emphatic member of the pair: Paul desires that the Corinthians not only read, but ultimately understand what he is writing to them. In Rom 2:15, Paul is making an ironic point: the thoughts of those “law-less” Gentiles who have τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου written on their hearts accuse, yes, but surprisingly even *defend* them. These individuals do, indeed, have a defence (ἀπολογεῖσθαι), whereas in both Rom 1:20 and 2:1 those who do what is wrong are described as being “without defence” (ἀναπολόγητοι).

A final consideration concerns the proximity of καρδία and κρυπτός in both 2:15-16 and 2:29. Once again working backward, if we are correct in identifying ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος whose heart is circumcised (2:29) as a Gentile Christian, can the terms καρδία and κρυπτός in 2:15-16 also be read as clues to Christian identity? The judgment of τὰ κρυπτά (2:16) clearly seems to be related to 2:29: in both cases, that which is “inward” is seen as having ultimate importance. The use of καρδία in 2:15 is more problematic, but even here an interesting pattern emerges. While some scholars argue that the phrase τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν simply means that Gentiles have an “awareness” of God’s law, Paul tends to use expressions of “seeing” or “knowing” to make that point. For example, “that which can be known about God is made apparent among them” (1:19), and his invisible qualities “have

⁸⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 102; similarly Tobin, “Controversy,” 310; Martens, “Stoic,” 64.

been seen" from the creation of the world. In other instances, Paul talks about people "knowing God" (1:21) or "knowing the ordinance of God" (1:32). Where Paul discusses the καρδία in Romans 1 it is described as ἀσύνετος, "senseless" or "foolish" (1:22), or as possessing evil desires (1:24). In the following chapter, Paul's rebuke of τὴν σκληρότητά σου καὶ ἀμετανόητον καρδίαν (2:5) continues with the same negative characterisation, and possibly alludes to the σκληροκαρδία of Deut 10:16. Consequently, I find it implausible that Paul would use the "heart," which to this point has been depicted negatively to symbolise rebelliousness against God, to describe in (moderately) positive terms people who are not "in Christ."

In conclusion, then, I maintain that Cranfield *et al.* are correct in identifying the ἔθνη of 2:14-16 as Christians.⁸⁶ Also, since this discussion began by contemplating the possibility of an allusion to Jer 31[LXX 38]:33 in Rom 2:15, we can say that this passage may very well inform Paul's thought. In fact, it is possible that the phrase γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν in 2:15 may well echo another scriptural text, this one from Deuteronomy: καὶ ἔσται τὰ ῥήματα ταῦτα, ὅσα ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαί σοι σήμερον, ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ σου καὶ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ σου (Deut 6:6). In this section of the "Shema," Israel is exhorted to have "these words" (i.e. God's commands and decrees) "in her heart." And so, the ironic tack which Paul takes is this: there are Gentiles who fit this Deuteronomic description. What about you Jews?

Having made these points, we must immediately say that the

⁸⁶ So also Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 121; Ito, "Romans 2," 33; N.T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *SBL 1992 Seminar Papers*, ed. E.H. Lovering, Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 192 n12.

identification of the Gentiles in Romans 2 as Christians is by no means in the foreground of Paul's argument. The "Gentiles who do the things of the law" act principally as a foil for those Jews who ostensibly do *not* do the things of the law (as 2:17-24 articulates in detail). Nevertheless, we need not stoop to Räisänen's inflammatory rhetoric, insisting that "law-fulfilling Gentiles...are used as convenient weapons to hit the Jew with."⁸⁷ Rather, we can use the paradigm of the "jealousy theory": "by the transgression [of the Jews] salvation has come to the Gentiles, in order to make them jealous" (Rom 11:11b). In other words, the law-obedience of Christian Gentiles is presented in order to "provoke" non-Christian Jews to faith in Christ. This brings us back to the metaphor of circumcision in 2:25-29. The metaphor, by labelling observant Gentiles as "circumcised" and transgressing Jews as "uncircumcised," serves to exhort Jewish listeners to recover their true covenantal status, as those circumcised "in heart and flesh."

⁸⁷ Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, 106. It should be noted that Räisänen does not believe that these Gentiles are Christian.

CHAPTER FOUR

“WE ARE THE CIRCUMCISION”: DEFENDING GENTILE-CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN PHILIPPIANS 3:3

Paul's bold declaration, allying himself with a largely Gentile Christian congregation in Philippi, that “we are the circumcision” (3:3) certainly stands out as a striking instance of the metaphorical use of circumcision. My position, however, is that this title is not one of Paul's own choosing: it is forced upon him by the necessity of countering the claims of those who would promote physical circumcision as basic to membership in the people of God. As a result, the apostle invests no time in spinning out the implications of the metaphor; rather, he simply appropriates the term for his own community, thereby appropriating as well the implications for privilege and divine favour which his “opponents” had associated with it. This chapter examines in detail the significance and function of the circumcision metaphor in Phil 3:2-6.¹

²Beware the dogs, beware the workers of evil, beware the mutilation! ³For *we* are the circumcision, those who serve/worship by the spirit of God, and who boast in Christ Jesus and who do not trust in the flesh, ⁴although I also have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else should think it wise to trust in the flesh, I have all the more

¹ One of the issues which continues to rage around the interpretation of Philippians is that of its literary integrity (see, for example, David E. Garland, “The Composition and Unity of Philippians: Some Neglected Literary Factors,” *NovT* 27 [1985], 141-73). Based on various literary and thematic considerations (see Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987], 39-40), proposals have been made for partitioning the letter into separate fragments. While I acknowledge this debate as part of the scholarly literature, it can be safely set aside for this study. My interest in Philippians is limited to a defined text (3:2-6) which no one, to my knowledge, has argued to be composite. Since my work operates within the boundaries of this passage, the question of the epistle's literary integrity can (and will) be left to others.

reason: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, according to the law a Pharisee, ⁶according to zeal persecuting the church, according to righteousness based on law, blameless.
(Phil 3:2-6)

The passage opens forcefully (3:2) with a three-fold βλέπετε, combined with an alliterative series describing those people whom the Philippians are to “beware”:² τοὺς κύνας...τοὺς κακοὺς ἐργάτας...τὴν κατατομήν. Immediately questions arise: does this describe one group, or several? What is the relationship between this group (or these groups) and the Philippian Christians? On the one hand there is the view of Darrell J. Doughty, who sees the three terms as descriptive of three different groups (pagans, rival Christian missionaries, and Jews), and argues that this is a generic deutero-Pauline castigation of anyone outside the faithful community.³ A much more common (and, in my opinion, more reasonable) position holds that the same group is targeted by all three epithets, although it is unclear whether Paul rails against an identifiable group with which the Philippians were acquainted,⁴ or merely against the perceived threat of certain activities.⁵ As Davorin Peterlin points out, such a distinction “is not known, and ultimately irrelevant.”⁶

The first two terms (“dogs” and “evil workers”) are pejorative in a

² It is unclear why Davorin Peterlin renders βλέπετε as “consider” as opposed to “beware” (following G.D. Kilpatrick, “ΒΛΕΠΕΤΕ Philippians 3.2,” *BZAW* 103 [1968], 146-8), while still lobbying for a “note of caution” (*Paul’s Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church* [Leiden: Brill, 1995], 95). “Beware” communicates this sense of danger, and does not necessarily imply that the “opponents” are presently within the community (see following discussion).

³ Darrell J. Doughty, “Citizens of Heaven: Philippians 3.2-21,” *NTS* 41 (1995), 103-4.

⁴ Martin, *Philippians*, 140.

⁵ So David A. deSilva, “No Confidence in the Flesh: The Meaning and Function of Philippians 3:2-21,” *Trinity Journal* 15 (1994), 30.

⁶ Peterlin, *Disunity*, 95.

very general sense; they do not provide us with any distinctive characteristics of this group.⁷ The final term (“the mutilation”), however, clearly identifies the Philippians’ opponents as a circumcising faction.⁸ Paul is playing with the similarity between κατατομή (3:2) and περιτομή (3:3), with the former being regarded as a “perversion” of the latter. Κατατομή must be taken in this specific sense of “mutilation of the flesh” (i.e. those who practise and endorse physical circumcision, seen as a negative thing) in order to make sense of Paul’s subsequent protest that “*we* are the circumcision,” although the broader connotations of “cutting apart/destroying” either themselves or the community may be implicit.⁹ As Peter T. O’Brien notes, “those whom the apostle has in view when he uses this scathing description κατατομή must have insisted on circumcision as a special sign of belonging to the people of God; otherwise the wordplay (paronomasia) does not really make sense.”¹⁰

The polemical function of the circumcision imagery is clear from the appearance and emphatic placement of ἡμεῖς: “for *we* are the circumcision” (3:3); that is, *we* as opposed to these others who may claim to be, but are not. Paul’s use of περιτομή here as a predicate for “the Christian community” is unique in the context of his letters.

⁷ Contra Kenneth Grayston, “The Opponents in Philippians 3,” *ExpTim* 97 (1986), 171, who insists that the use of the term “dogs” indicates that Paul is railing against Gentiles and not Jews. Since Paul employs the term to *denigrate*, rather than *identify*, his opponents, Grayston’s argument is beside the point.

⁸ On this identification as “Judaizers” or a “circumcising faction,” see also Martin, *Philippians*, 140; deSilva, “No Confidence,” 33; Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 33-5, 357; Peterlin, *Disunity*, 80; Mikael Tellbe, “The Sociological Factors Behind Philippians 3.1-11 and the Conflict at Philippi,” *JSNT* 55 (1994), 100.

⁹ See BAGD, s.v. “κατατομή.”

¹⁰ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 357.

Consequently, what it is that Paul highlights in the Christian church as deserving the name “the circumcision” and what aspects of the circumcision metaphor are being emphasised demand further consideration.

The ἡμεῖς of 3:3 is immediately elaborated by means of three substantive participles: οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες καὶ καυχώμενοι ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες. The latter two characteristics, “boasting in Christ Jesus” and “not trusting in the flesh,” are clearly parallel:¹¹ Paul repeatedly stresses the fact that he can only boast in what God does through Christ Jesus (e.g. Rom 15:17; 1 Cor 1:28-31) and that his human capabilities offer him nothing about which to boast (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). Nevertheless, in a manner which is strikingly similar to that employed in 2 Cor 11:16-30, Paul, having acknowledged that he is among those οὐκ ἐν σαρκὶ πεποιθότες, goes on to claim that he has more reason to “trust in the flesh” than anyone else. This argumentative tack strongly suggests that from Paul’s point of view, one of the principles being promoted by the circumcising faction is that physical circumcision indicates favoured standing before God.¹²

The way in which Paul outlines his “fleshly credentials” supports this conclusion. It is not simply out of chronological necessity that the apostle opens the list with περιτομῇ ὀκταήμερος (“circumcision on the eighth day”; 3:5); the heritage which belonged to him by virtue of his birth (ἐκ γένους Ἰσραὴλ, φυλῆς Βενιαμίν, Ἑβραῖος ἐξ Ἑβραίων) could just have easily been presented first (cf. Rom 11:1). By starting with

¹¹ On this connection, see also deSilva, “No Confidence,” 35.

¹² So Tellbe, “Sociological,” 101: “the issue at stake was the prerequisite for membership in the one true people of God.”

circumcision, Paul accomplishes two things. First, since the ongoing necessity of circumcision is evidently one of the key issues at stake, Paul immediately establishes his authority to address the question, since he himself already meets this “requirement.” At any rate, he shares this common ground with his opponents; in order to surpass them, he appeals to his genealogy (besting any Gentiles) and his unimpeachable record of law-keeping (besting any Jews). If Paul himself were uncircumcised, his motives might be suspect; as it stands, he presents himself as eminently qualified to proclaim on the value of Jewish identity and practice.

Second, the specific reference to circumcision *on the eighth day* moves the discussion to the wider question of what continuing significance the *law* has in general. “Circumcision” by itself might suggest an ethnic identification; “circumcision on the eighth day” points unambiguously to Gen 17:12, and raises the issue of living in accordance with the commandments. This is verified by the fact that twice Paul explicitly turns his attention to the law, noting that he is κατὰ νόμον Φαρισαῖος and κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γεγόμενος ἄμεμπτος (3:6).

This dual effect--putting himself in a position to pronounce on the merits of physical circumcision and subsuming circumcision under the broader category of law--sets up Paul's audience for the reversals which appear in 3:7-11. That which was gain for Paul, he now considers loss because of Christ (3:7). In fact, he considers all of this to be refuse (σκύβαλα; 3:8), in order that he might not have ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ (3:9). Since the righteousness for which Paul longs is not that which is based on law, all of those things which are

associated with the law--including, as we have seen, circumcision--are declared insignificant.¹³ By consequence of this argument, even Paul's own circumcision is considered to be of no value; thus, why would anyone who aspires to be found "in Christ" participate in such a practice?

To this point, we have explored the importance of Paul's claim that those who are "the circumcision" "boast in Christ Jesus" and do not "trust in the flesh": since righteousness comes by faith in Christ, and not by means of the law, the former and not the latter is properly the object of one's boasting/trusting. Still, it remains to be seen what Paul means by the phrase which precedes: οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες, "those who worship/serve in the spirit of God." Is this synonymous parallelism with "those who boast in Christ Jesus," or can we specify further the nuance which Paul intends? The first difficulty which we encounter is a discrepancy in the manuscripts at this point. Should we read οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες, "those who serve/worship in the spirit of God" (so \aleph^* A B C D^c G K and the majority of the Byzantine and lectionary manuscripts), οἱ πνεύματι θεῶ λατρεύοντες, "those who serve/worship God in spirit" (so \aleph^c D^{*} P Ψ Vulgate and the majority of the Old Latin manuscripts), or οἱ πνεύματι λατρεύοντες, "those who serve/worship in spirit" (so \mathcal{P}^{46}). Although some have chosen to regard the shorter version in \mathcal{P}^{46} as original, given its early date (e.g. NEB), the lack of manuscript

¹³ Paul's connection of circumcision with the Jewish law undermines Grayston's suggestion that a "group of Gentile propagandists is promoting circumcision as an initiatory rite--not out of native Jewish conviction, but out of semi-magical belief in ritual blood-shedding" ("Opponents," 171).

support raises the possibility of omission due to “accidental oversight.”¹⁴ With respect to the other two options, the UBS committee prefers οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες, pointing to its ample textual support, and noting that the variant θεῷ may well reflect the desire to have an object for λατρεύοντες (as in Rom 1:9).¹⁵ While this forms a reasonable argument, it should be noted that the discrepancies, in this case, do not seriously alter the sense of the phrase. Even if οἱ πνεύματι λατρεύοντες is original, it is probable that πνεύματι implies the involvement of the divine Spirit, and does not simply refer to an interior human process (see πνεύματι in Rom 8:13,14).

Having made this assessment of the manuscript evidence, we now turn to an analysis of the phrase “those who serve/worship in the spirit of God.” The verb λατρεύειν, “to serve/worship,” is used in the LXX to denote “the service rendered to God by Israel as his peculiar people.”¹⁶ Specifying further, the term is used almost exclusively of the cultic sphere; that is, of carrying out religious duties.¹⁷ Thus, Paul can designate ἡ λατρεία, taken to mean “the temple cult,” as a possession of “the Israelites” (Rom 9:4). While Paul does not spell out in any detail what this “service/worship” looks like when it becomes the domain of Christians, the main point appears to be the simple fact that this domain of “legitimate service of God” has shifted.

Paul’s statement that such service takes place “in/by the spirit of God” is ambiguous. Without a preposition, the dative πνεύματι is open

¹⁴ So Bruce M. Metzger, *The Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, corr. ed. (London: UBS, 1975), 614.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 360.

¹⁷ See BAGD, s.v. “λατρεύω.”

to a host of interpretations: by (agency), in (manner), with (means). While impossible to pin down, the connotation of agency seems most appropriate, particularly when viewed in the light of the succeeding clauses which disparage human agency and elevate divine initiative.¹⁸ Paul is claiming that the presence of the Spirit of God within the Christian community allows it to carry out appropriate service to God. It is possible that the reference to πνεῦμα is intended to conjure up contrasts with γράμμα;¹⁹ that is, that Christians serve God by the Spirit, and not by the dictates of Jewish law. This possibility is heightened by the importance of “law” in the verses which follow (noted earlier). Consequently, the phrase οἱ πνεύματι θεοῦ λατρεύοντες is best understood as a declaration of the Christian community’s reliance on the Spirit, and on no external measures, in their obedience to God.

In light of all this, what has not yet been explained is the reason for Paul’s adoption of the title “the circumcision” for the Christian community to which he and the Philippians belong. In other words, how does the circumcision metaphor function here? Based on the argument outlined above, in which Paul denies any significance to physical circumcision, one might think that a Galatian slogan such as “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision” would be more fitting. Why, then, does Paul say ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἔσμεν ἡ περιτομή?

Although such a determination is admittedly a matter of speculation, it is plausible that Paul’s adoption of ἡ περιτομή is an attempt to defuse the rhetorical power of that phrase as a self-

¹⁸ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 360, comments on the emphasis on “grace” in the three participial clauses.

¹⁹ deSilva, “No Confidence,” 35, raises this possibility.

designation for his opponents. Since I have demonstrated that an advocacy of circumcision was one of the defining characteristics of this group, it is not unlikely that they would have used ἡ περιτομή as a way of distinguishing themselves *vis-à-vis* Paul's gospel.²⁰ In fact, the entire statement ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἔσμεν ἡ περιτομή would be entirely congruent on the lips of a spokesperson, exhorting Christian Gentiles to take this step. As a result, notions of a more complete faithfulness to God's will and a privileged status before God would have attached themselves to the term. It is these *associations* which Paul is seeking to appropriate, while arguing for an entirely different basis for their realisation. To paraphrase Paul: "That righteousness, which those who call themselves 'the circumcision' claim can be attained through circumcision of your bodies, is merely a 'righteousness based on law' which is nothing compared to the 'righteousness which comes through faith in Christ.' Thus, all their claims--in fact, even their title--properly apply to us, who worship in the spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and do not trust in the flesh."

By claiming the title of ἡ περιτομή for the Christian community founded on the basis of his law-free gospel, Paul provides the Philippians with a defence against τὴν κατατομήν and any potential inclinations to be circumcised. Yet Paul's approach is not to draw on "spiritualising" explanations for the circumcision metaphor, but rather simply to abstract the connotations of privilege and divine favour which adhere to the physical rite and transfer them to the community under his

²⁰ See Marcus, "Circumcision and Uncircumcision," 80 n3, discussing the situation in Rome: "Perhaps περιτομή began as the *slogan* of the Law-observant Jewish Christians, then became a term of abuse for them on the part of Gentile Christians, and finally was reclaimed by the Jewish Christians as a self-designation."

guidance.²¹ Consequently, it is *not* the case that “Here [Paul] defines what ‘circumcision of the heart’ means for him.”²² In this text in Philippians 3:3, Paul is not in the business of *definition*, but of *appropriation*. The participial clauses which follow Paul’s declaration ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἔσμεν ἡ περιτομή underline the apostle’s rejection of physical circumcision as a requirement, but do not fill out the title ἡ περιτομή with any positive content that is derived from the metaphor itself.²³ In short, the title is used as a vehicle to transport the claim of being the people of God from Judaizers to Gentile Christians, and thus short-circuit any attempt to base that “peoplehood” on physical circumcision.

²¹ Rudolf Meyer comments on the “completely new content” which Paul gives to περιτομή (“περιτέμνω, κτλ.,” in *TDNT*, ed. G.W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968], VI:83).

²² deSilva, “No Confidence,” 35.

²³ *Contra* Martin, *Philippians*, 142, who appeals to Rom 2:28-29.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE "CIRCUMCISION OF CHRIST" IN COLOSSIANS 2:11-12

The circumcision imagery of Col 2:11-12 appears without any introduction, is reinforced through dense repetition (...περιτμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροτοίῳ...ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ), and then disappears from the author's vocabulary. This fleeting reference generates two principal questions which will guide our examination of the text. First, what does the circumcision metaphor used by the author *mean*, particularly the enigmatic phrase "the circumcision of Christ"? Second, *why* is this particular metaphor introduced into the discourse at this point?

One preliminary issue which demands some comment before we embark on our investigation is that of the authorship of Colossians. Whether the epistle was actually written by Paul (as the prescript indicates), or whether it is a post-Pauline composition has been a matter of ongoing scholarly debate.¹ While the arguments made here are certainly affected by this discussion, it is impossible to delve into the details of the matter in a work of this kind. Consequently, I will take the position that while authorship of the letter by the apostle Paul himself is

¹ See an outline of the arguments in Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, WBC 44 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), xli-xlix. For a brief argument for Pauline authorship, see Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism*, WUNT 77 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1995), 6-7; on the opposing view, see A.J.M. Wedderburn's discussion in Andrew T. Lincoln and A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Theology of the Later Pauline Letters*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 58-63.

uncertain, there are distinct connections to Pauline thought. As a result, I will refer to the author of Colossians rather loosely as “Paul,” with an eye to assessing how the author’s treatment of circumcision imagery in Colossians fits with the patterns already identified in Romans and Philippians.

Analysis of Colossians 2:11-12

¹¹...in whom [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the stripping off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, ¹²having been buried with him in baptism, and in whom you were also raised along with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. (Col 2:11-12)

Careful analysis of this text proves to be a painstaking process, since these verses “pose certain exegetical difficulties for the Pauline expositor”²: grammatical ambiguities abound in this brief passage. Consequently, various interpretive possibilities must be presented and weighed along the way. Starting at the beginning, the ἐν ᾧ (2:11) must certainly refer back to Χριστός (2:8); though taking a slightly different form, it is parallel to the two instances of ἐν αὐτῷ in 2:9-10. As a result, there is no difficulty understanding περιετμήθητε, “you were circumcised,” as a passive which implies God’s agency.³

This emphasis on divine initiative is reinforced in the following phrase: the circumcision is performed περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ, by means of a circumcision “made without hands.” The term ἀχειροποίητος is not common Pauline vocabulary. In fact, it is used elsewhere in Paul’s

² Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church’s Lord and the Christian’s Liberty* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), 82.

³ So Murray J. Harris, *Colossians & Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 101.

letters only in 2 Cor 5:1, where the apostle describes the dwelling which believers have from God, οἰκίαν ἀχειροποίητον αἰώνιον ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς (“an eternal house made without hands in the heavens”). An architectural referent frequently accompanies (ἀ)χειροποίητος in the New Testament literature, most often contrasting the Jerusalem Temple with another “temple” which belongs to the spiritual realm (Mk 14:58; Acts 7:48; 17:24; Heb 9:11,24). Part of the scandalous nature of the claim, placed on the lips of Stephen, that οὐχ ὁ ὕψιστος ἐν χειροποιήτοις κατοικεῖ (“the Most High does not dwell in [houses] made with hands”; Acts 7:48) is the fact that χειροποίητα “is used in the OT for the graven images and idols the pagans made for themselves.”⁴ Thus, the physical structure of the Temple is implicitly classified along with other objects of idolatry.

Still, it is doubtful whether we can legitimately freight the phrase περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ, which describes a positive reality, with an “idolatrous” critique of physical circumcision.⁵ The closest parallel we have, in Eph 2:11, describes the Jews as “those who are called ‘circumcision’,” but quickly notes that this circumcision is ἐν σαρκὶ χειροποίητος, “made in the flesh with human hands.” Undoubtedly the phrase is intended to downplay the value of such “circumcision,” but the critique is mild at best. Consequently, the expression in Col 2:11 should be understood principally to emphasise the divine nature of this “circumcision,” since “something not made by hands is that which God himself creates.”⁶

⁴ Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, tr. W.R. Poehlmann and R.J. Karris, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 102.

⁵ The relative insignificance of polemic in the function of the circumcision metaphor is discussed in more detail later.

⁶ Lohse, *Colossians*, 102.

According to Colossians, this circumcision “made without hands” is performed ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, “in the stripping away of the body of the flesh.” Ralph P. Martin identifies this as the “key-phrase of this entire section,”⁷ yet its interpretation hinges on several points of grammatical uncertainty. The first of these concerns the construal of the initial ἐν. Murray J. Harris identifies three possible options: the ἐν may be a) instrumental, “by putting off”; b) temporal, “when you threw off”; or c) epexegetic, “consisting of the removal.”⁸ The distinction between (a) and (c) is very slight, with (a) suggesting that ἀπεκδύσις is a means to περιτομή, and (c) claiming a simple equation of the two. Even (b), which Harris prefers, is not so different, since the emphasis is likely still on the *nature* of the event, and not on the *time* at which it takes place. Accordingly, I prefer to take the ἐν... phrase as epexegetic, spelling out in more detail the character of περιτομή ἀχειροποίητος.

The term ἀπεκδύσις, and its cognate verb ἀπεκδύομαι, are unique to Colossians in the New Testament literature (2:11; 2:15; 3:9).⁹ Meaning “to strip off completely,”¹⁰ ἀπεκδύομαι is paired with its antonym, ἐνδύομαι, in 3:9 (ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον...καὶ ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον...), where the baptismal imagery of casting aside old garments and being clothed with new ones appears to be implicit.¹¹ In the light of this parallel, we need to explore what it is that is being cast off, τὸ σῶμα τῆς

⁷ Martin, *Colossians*, 76.

⁸ Harris, *Colossians*, 101; see other references there.

⁹ In fact, BAGD notes that ἀπεκδύσις is “found nowhere independently of Paul” until the 12th c. CE.

¹⁰ See Harris, *Colossians*, 101, on the intensive or perfective connotation of the ἀπ(ο)- prefix.

¹¹ See Martin, *Colossians*, 76.

σαρκός. The first thing to be recognised is that the author of Colossians very frequently uses the word σάρξ simply to refer to the physical body or to human earthly existence. For example, he comments that while he is absent “in flesh,” he is present in spirit (εἰ γὰρ καὶ τῇ σαρκὶ ἄπειμι, ἀλλὰ τῷ πνεύματι σὺν ὑμῖν εἰμι; 2:5; see also 1:24; 2:1), and instructs slaves to obey those who are their masters “according to the flesh” (τοῖς κατὰ σάρκα κυρίοις; 3:22). In a text which has a striking similarity to 2:11, Paul claims that Christ reconciled those who were once hostile to him ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου (1:22). Given particularly this last parallel, some scholars suggest that the phrase τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκὸς in 2:11 means “physical body,” and thus--since the Colossian believers cannot be said to have “died” in a literal sense--refers to Christ’s earthly body (as in 1:22).¹²

Nonetheless, we can allow that the term σάρξ may, in certain texts, mean “physical existence” in a neutral sense, without conceding that this must be its significance in Col 2:11. While the above sense is not unattested in the Pauline corpus, σάρξ is predominantly linked with *corrupted* human existence, that part of human nature which is profoundly sinful. These negative overtones do seem to be present in Paul’s use of σάρξ in Col 2:18 and 2:23, although they are not stressed. What evidence is there, then, for such a reading in 2:11? First of all, a variant manuscript reading points us in this direction. Some of the manuscripts (e.g. \aleph^2 D¹ Ψ 075) insert τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν following τοῦ σώματος, giving the reading “in the stripping away of the body of the sins

¹² C.F.D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon*, CGTC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 94-6; O’Brien, *Colossians*, 116-7. This suggestion will be picked up once again in the discussion of “the circumcision of Christ.”

of the flesh.” While there is no reason to suppose that this is the best reading, it attempts to clarify a strongly negative understanding of σάρξ in this context. A second observation offers even stronger support. In the discussion of ἀπεκδύσις / ἀπεκδύομαι above, mention was made of Col 3:9, in which that which was “stripped away” was τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον, some of whose deeds are elaborated in the preceding verse: ὀργήν, θυμόν, κακίαν, βλασφημίαν, αἰσχρολογίαν (3:8). Consequently, given the common use of ἀπεκδύσις / ἀπεκδύομαι and the similarity of the images which are presented in 3:9 and 2:11, it is reasonable to take σάρξ in 2:11 as representative of “the believer’s unregenerate nature which would tyrannize over him and hold him in bondage.”¹³

While Martin claims that ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός is the “key-phrase” of this passage, there seems to be little doubt that ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, “in the circumcision of Christ,” is the passage’s most difficult phrase. Narrowing down the problem, what is intended by the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ, “of Christ”? At the outset, it is again helpful to cite the list of possibilities which Harris produces.¹⁴ The first option takes τοῦ Χριστοῦ as an *objective genitive*, in which Christ is the object of the circumcision (i.e. “the circumcision performed on Christ/experienced by Christ”). A second position argues for a *subjective genitive*, in which Christ is the agent who effects the circumcision. The third and final choice which Harris offers is that of *possessive genitive*, which views the circumcision as something which “belongs” to Christ, and consequently also to those who are ἐν Χριστῷ. While my interpretation draws elements

¹³ Martin, *Colossians*, 77; similarly Lohse, *Colossians*, 102; Arnold, *Syncretism*, 296.

¹⁴ Harris, *Colossians*, 102.

from all three options, it aligns most closely with the first grammatical position (objective genitive). Before producing the evidence for that stance, it is necessary to sift through the arguments in favour of the other two viewpoints.

In the scholarly literature, the *subjective* reading has attracted a significant following. R. Le Déaut maintains that ἡ περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ is “la c[irconcision] (du cœur) que le Christ opère dans le fidèle.”¹⁵ Surprisingly, Clinton E. Arnold makes a similar statement without offering any evidence to support the point.¹⁶ While the suggestion seems plausible at first glance, a closer analysis of the text undermines its likelihood. Harris skeptically makes the point that, from this perspective, “the circumcision is simultaneously in or through Christ (ἐν ᾧ) and by Christ (τοῦ Χριστοῦ, subj. gen.).”¹⁷ This objection is not entirely valid, since the ἐν ᾧ need not (and, in my opinion, does not) imply agency; nevertheless, the question of agency is critical to the matter. It is clear that the agency which is implied by the passive verb forms in Col 2:11-12 is that of God as distinct from Christ:¹⁸ this is made apparent in the statement that ἐν [Χριστῷ]¹⁹ καὶ συνηγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν (2:12b). Here, God is expressly designated as the one who raised Christ from the dead, and who subsequently raises the believer together with Christ, despite

¹⁵ Le Déaut, “Circoncision du cœur,” 204.

¹⁶ Arnold, *Syncretism*, 297 and n161.

¹⁷ Harris, *Colossians*, 102.

¹⁸ So Lohse, *Colossians*, 103; see also O'Brien, *Colossians*, 116.

¹⁹ It is much debated whether the ἐν ᾧ of Col 2:12b has ὁ Χριστός (2:8) or ὁ βαπτισμός (2:12a) as its antecedent. Harris (*Colossians*, 104), makes the case for the latter, but his grammatic and thematic arguments are weak. Paul D. Gardner, observing the succession of ἐν αὐτῷ/ἐν ᾧ phrases and the parallelism with 2:11, makes a more convincing case for the former (“Circumcised with Baptism--Raised Through Faith”: A Note on Col 2:11-12.” *WTJ* 45 (1983), 173-6).

the fact that the believer experiences this ἐν [Χριστῷ]. As a result, if we view περιετμήθητε in 2:11 the same way, a subjective reading of τοῦ Χριστοῦ is incoherent.

The classification of τοῦ Χριστοῦ which Harris himself favours is possessive genitive, taking it in an adjectival sense to mean “Christian circumcision” (i.e. of the heart). This is closer to the mark, but Harris’ understanding of the phrase as “a circumcision that characterizes the followers of Christ” is too abstract.²⁰ It is true that this “circumcision of Christ” is experienced by his followers, but this is the case only because they participate in the prior “circumcision” which Christ himself underwent.

Thus, we come to the final option for τοῦ Χριστοῦ, that of objective genitive, in which Christ is viewed as the object or recipient of the circumcision.²¹ In other words, the reference here is to the death of Christ’s physical body, *and* the resulting triumph over sin and alienation (see 1:21-22: Καὶ ὑμᾶς ποτε ὄντας ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἐχθροὺς τῇ διανοίᾳ ἐν τοῖς ἔργοις τοῖς πονηροῖς, νυνὶ δὲ ἀποκατήλλαξεν ἐν τῷ σώματι τῆς σαρκὸς αὐτοῦ διὰ τοῦ θανάτου...). Several scholars argue that 1:22 is inadmissible as a parallel, since it specifies that τὸ σῶμα τῆς σαρκὸς belongs to Christ by qualifying the expression with αὐτοῦ, unlike 2:11.²² This objection is dealt with adequately by C.F.D. Moule, who explains that “conceivably the identification of the baptized with Christ is regarded as so close as to

²⁰ Harris, *Colossians*, 103.

²¹ See T.R. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, eds. G.F. Hawthorne and R.P. Martin (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 139.

²² Ibid., 102-3; Lohse, *Colossians*, 103 n68.

render a specifying pronoun out of place.”²³

Another clue which points to an objective reading is the series of συν- verbs found in 2:12-13: συνταφέντες...συνηγέρθητε...συνεζωοποίησεν. Peter T. O’Brien makes the point that these references to burial/resurrection are naturally preceded by an allusion to death.²⁴ As well, since the later events are those in which the believer participates *together with* Christ, it makes sense that this shared aspect also characterises the prior “death”: the believer dies with Christ (cf. 3:3; also Rom 6:3-4), and thus is circumcised with “the circumcision of Christ.”²⁵

Some interpreters skeptically wonder whether an audience would be able to make the leap from the elliptical image of circumcision to Christ’s death.²⁶ On the contrary, the fact of Christ’s death is a significant part of the argument in the first chapter of the epistle, which provides adequate preparation for the allusion. There, the author notes that God reconciled all things to himself, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ (1:20). As well, in a text which has been cited several times already, it is clearly indicated that the reconciliation which is in Christ comes about διὰ τοῦ θανάτου (1:21). In addition, the train of thought

²³ Moule, *Epistles*, 95. Ironically, this observation of the close connection between the experience of the believer and that of Christ undermines Moule’s final conclusion that “the circumcision of Christ” probably refers *only* to the physical fact of Christ’s death (96).

²⁴ O’Brien, *Colossians*, 117.

²⁵ Ibid. O’Brien comments that the language of circumcision “takes the place of συσταυρώω, ‘crucify together with,’ or some similar verb which would conform to the συν-verbs that follow” (117-8).

²⁶ E.g. Eduard Schweizer, *Der Brief an die Kolosser*, EKKNT (Zürich: Benziger, 1976), 111 n341: “Doch selbst abgesehen von V 13 wäre schwer denkbar, daß die Leser den Tod Jesu als seine »Beschneidung« hätten verstehen können”; Martin, *Colossians*, 85: “Would the Colossian readers make the intended connexion of thought, ‘circumcision of Christ’=His death; ‘you were circumcised’=you shared in the benefits of that sacrifice, unless there was some reason hidden in the background of the Colossian situation?”

which follows on from 2:11 continues to keep the crucifixion in focus: the damning χειρόγραφον is nailed τῷ σταυρῷ (2:14). Strikingly, this reference to the crucifixion is immediately followed by the declaration that God “stripped off” or “disarmed” (ἀπεκδυσάμενος) the rulers and authorities (2:15). The use of ἀπεκδύομαι, here in unambiguous association with the death and resurrection of Christ, lends strong support to the contention that ἡ περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ (which is parallel to ἡ ἀπεκδύσις in 2:11) alludes to Christ’s death.

Nevertheless, as has been suggested all along, the association of the believer with Christ is so close as to render implausible the claim that ἡ περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ refers *exclusively* to Christ’s human death (e.g. “when (Christ) stripped off his physical body, that is, in Christ’s own ‘circumcision’”²⁷). Rather, the believer follows in the footsteps of Christ, having experienced a circumcision which is analogous to that undergone by Christ. This is where Harris’ “possessive sense” enters, although in a modified manner. A more specific paradigm is proposed by Michel van Esbroeck in his analysis of Col 2:11. Van Esbroeck suggests that Col 2:9-15 is linked to the “cosmic hymn” of 1:15-20 by virtue of “le thème unique et très productif de la circoncision du premier-né le huitième jour.”²⁸ While I believe that van Esbroeck over-reads Gnostic influence on the passage, it is illuminating to think of the pattern of Christ as “first-born” (1:15) as informing 2:11--Christ himself is

²⁷ Moule, *Epistles*, 96. Harris, *Colossians*, 102, adduces O’Brien (*Colossians*, 116-7) as another example of this position. At points O’Brien does seem to lean in this direction, but he also stresses the participation of the believer in the experience of Christ.

²⁸ Michel van Esbroeck, “Col. 2,11 «Dans la circoncision du Christ»,” in *Gnosticisme et Monde Hellénistique*, ed. J. Ries (Louvain-la-Neuve: Institut Orientaliste de Louvain, 1982), 231.

circumcised in death, and his brothers who follow him are likewise circumcised with “the circumcision of Christ.”

Circumcision and Baptism

One of the derivative arguments which this text has spawned is the continuing debate over the relationship between “circumcision made without hands” and “baptism.” On the one hand, some strongly link the reference to ὁ βαπτισμός²⁹ in 2:12 to the preceding verse: “The circumcision of Christ which every member of the community has experienced is nothing other than being baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ.”³⁰ On the other hand, several recent voices are just as adamant that there is a significant distinction between the ideas of 2:11 and those of 2:12. J.P.T. Hunt maintains that “circumcision of Christ” is “not a periphrasis for baptism,”³¹ and Harris insists that “spiritual circumcision, not baptism, [is presented] as the Christian counterpart to physical circumcision.”³² While it is clear that for some the resolution of church practice is at stake, on this point it is best not to draw the lines too sharply. We can avoid identifying “spiritual circumcision” with “baptism” absolutely,³³ yet the context does suggest that there is at least some kind of temporal connection between the two.

²⁹ Though the manuscripts are divided over the readings τῷ βαπτισμῷ (“washing,” “immersion”) and τῷ βαπτίσματι (“baptism”), the former is generally accepted as the more difficult reading.

³⁰ Lohse, *Colossians*, 103. Commenting on 2:11, Lohse notes that “Baptism is called circumcision here” (101).

³¹ J.P.T. Hunt, “Colossians 2:11-12, the Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism,” *TynBul* 41 (1990), 242.

³² Harris, *Colossians*, 103.

³³ So also E. Ferguson, “Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity,” *SJT* 41 (1988), 491.

The Significance of Circumcision Imagery

To this point, I have demonstrated what I believe that Paul is saying in Col 2:11-12; nevertheless, I have not yet tackled the issue of *why* Paul uses the imagery of circumcision to make his point. Martin, in his commentary on Colossians, devotes several pages to this question, and a summary of his observations will serve as a helpful starting point.³⁴ Martin divides his assessment of the literature into several categories. First, there is the view (attributed to G. Delling and J. Jeremias) that Paul intends to set up Christian baptism as a replacement for the rite of physical circumcision. Martin cites several authors who agree with him that this is a difficult position to take, since it has virtually no support elsewhere in the New Testament, and also since there is evidence that *both* baptism *and* circumcision were part of certain Jewish initiation rites in that period.

A second interpretation, which Martin considers much more likely, is that "Paul is contrasting the outward, physical rite of circumcision with that to which it pointed forward, viz. a spiritual renewal of the heart."³⁵ From this perspective, Paul is explicitly drawing on prophetic anticipations (specifically in Deuteronomy and Jeremiah) of the new covenant which God would grant his people. In this way, the author intends "to expose the hollow mockery of any promise made to give man deliverance from evil which does not depend on the renewal of his inner life, the gift of the Spirit's dynamic and the conquering of the gravitational pull of the 'flesh', his unredeemed self-life."³⁶

³⁴ Martin, *Colossians*, 84-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

Finally, making a point which builds on his other observations, Martin suggests that the message that a circumcision of the heart is sufficient may be a means of countering “Judaizers” who insist on maintaining the literal rite. This viewpoint raises the issue of the role of polemic in Paul’s choice of metaphors. In other words, was Paul intentionally targeting an adoption (or potential adoption) of some form of physical circumcision by the Colossian community? Lohse maintains that this is indeed the case, arguing that since “baptism and circumcision are nowhere else in the NT compared with one another and since the comparison is distinctly delimited, there are sufficient grounds for the assumption that the author of Col adopted the term ‘circumcision’ (περιτομή) from the ‘philosophy’”;³⁷ that is, the author is responding concretely to an opposing point of view. According to Lohse, whatever form this “circumcision” now takes (as a result of influence by Hellenism and the mystery cults) it is this specific activity which Paul is critiquing.

On the other side, Arnold has serious doubts that the reference to circumcision arises for polemical reasons. He notes that “the reference to circumcision appears in a series of positive theological statements and is never mentioned in any part of the letter’s polemic.”³⁸ There is no focussed criticism of existing practices or systematic defence of alternatives. Circumcision is conspicuously absent from the Jewish-sounding list of items in which the Colossians are not to let themselves be condemned (2:16; ...ἐν βρώσει καὶ ἐν πόσει ἢ ἐν μέρει ἑορτῆς ἢ νεομηνίας ἢ σαββάτων; “in food and in drink or in the matter of festivals or new

³⁷ Lohse, *Colossians*, 101-2.

³⁸ Arnold, *Syncretism*, 297.

moons or sabbaths"). Thus it does not seem likely that a refutation of "illegitimate" circumcision is Paul's intent, or at least not a pressing concern. Why, then, does this particular metaphor appear?

As indicated above, Martin believes that Paul's use of the metaphor is at least partly due to the direct influence of texts such as Deut 10:16. Arnold concurs, stating that "Paul has here drawn on and adapted the OT tradition of the 'circumcision of the heart' (see Deut 10:16; Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4; Ezek 44:7,9)."³⁹ While this hypothesis is initially appealing, we must scrutinise the evidence in order to determine whether such a *direct* linkage can be demonstrated. In our discussion of Romans 2, the juxtaposition of ἡ περιτομή and ἡ καρδιά permits us to draw parallels with a number of LXX texts. However, it is not clear that ἀχειροποίητος = καρδίας, and apart from the overarching theme of an "aphysical" circumcision, there are no terminological connections between Col 2:11 and the above texts. Thus, while we may suppose that certain scriptural passages may have influenced Paul's thinking, nothing indicates that he is consciously engaged in working out the implications of those texts.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that at several points in the letter, Paul sounds very much like Philo. Earlier we examined Philo's own expansion of the circumcision metaphor, in which the "excision of pleasures" (ἡδονῶν ἐκτομή; *Spec.* 1.9) and the banishment of conceit (οἷσις) from the soul (*Spec.* 1.10) figure centrally. The author of Colossians is concerned with similar matters, exhorting the people to "put to death" (νεκρώσατε) the things of the earth (3:5), and reminding his listeners that they have "taken off" (ἀπεκδύομαι) the old person with

³⁹ Arnold, *Syncretism*, 297.

its practices and have put on the new (3:9-10). Thus, it is quite possible that in 2:11 Paul is appealing to a current of thought which is analogous to that found in Philo: the goal is the removal of that which is “fleshly,” “of the earth.” Philo would also agree that this “circumcision” is necessarily ἀχειροποίητος, “made without hands” (see 2:11), although the two writers would disagree over whether physical circumcision has continuing significance as a symbol. From this perspective, the language of “circumcision” draws on an understanding of the physical rite as the basis for its symbolism (“removal”, “cutting off”), without necessarily serving as a blunt critique of purported advocates of the rite.

In conclusion, Paul appears to use circumcision imagery in Col 2:11-12 *not* because he feels the need to combat the threat of physical circumcision, but primarily because he is thinking along the line of some Hellenistic Jews (e.g. Philo) in regarding circumcision as an appropriate symbol for the removal of that which belongs to the realm of “flesh.” While this may have logical connections to the theme of the “circumcision of the heart,” there is no evidence in Colossians that Paul views his own position specifically as an outgrowth of biblical texts. Rather, the imagery is simply part of his “vocabulary,” suddenly appearing and then disappearing without needing explanation or elaboration.

CONCLUSION

CIRCUMCISION AS METAPHOR IN PAULINE PERSPECTIVE

Having concluded our extended examination of the figurative use of circumcision in the Pauline literature, we now embark on the difficult task of extracting the similar and dissimilar threads which run through the fabric of Rom 2:25-29, Phil 3:3, and Col 2:11-12. Despite the sparsity of textual data, it is helpful to identify the principal ideas which might link and/or distinguish these texts. It is easiest to assess the areas of commonality, so our summary will begin there.

In very general terms, one theme which unites all three passages is the recognition of circumcision's ongoing significance *in some form*. Simply by drawing on the circumcision ritual metaphorically, Paul indicates that he cannot abandon it altogether. To be sure, various reasons might be adduced as to *why* complete abandonment is rejected as an alternative. Some scholars have suggested that Paul's strategy is part of his polemic against those who argue the continuing necessity of physical circumcision. For the most part I have countered the assertion that this is the *underlying* motivation, most specifically with reference to Col 2:11-12. It is significant to me that we do *not* find this strategy in Galatians, where, ostensibly, we might have most expected to find it. While I do raise the possibility that polemic stands behind Phil 3:3, even there Paul seems quite willing to turn the metaphor to his own ends. If we rule out the view that Paul fundamentally wishes to jettison

circumcision, but is constrained by those lobbying for maintenance of the literal rite, what remains?

Fundamentally, I believe that Paul is influenced by the covenantal implications of circumcision in Israel's history--covenantal implications which Paul sees now pertaining to the new Christian community. In a manner similar to that of the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Paul looks for a way to reinterpret this "sign of the covenant" so that it circumscribes a community with new boundaries.

Nevertheless, the three texts examined in this thesis do not demonstrate this conviction with equal intensity. The lengthy discussion of Rom 2:25-29 shows that Paul is indeed dealing with covenant boundaries and the definition of the "true Jew." The reference in Phil 3:3, while brief, appears to assume that "circumcision" can operate as shorthand for "those within God's covenant." By contrast, while Col 2:11-12 clearly depends on a recognition of the *significance* of circumcision as a ritual event, there is no evident exploitation of its connection with covenant. This fits with the Philonic parallels suggested for that passage, since Philo also shows very little interest in the connection between circumcision and covenant.¹ Does this indicate anything about the authorship of the epistle to the Colossians? It would be highly reductionist to claim that such a complex issue hinges on this one observation, yet with respect to this one point, the data suggest that Colossians manifests either a different aspect of Paul's thought or the perspective of another writer.

Another area of distinction between the texts concerns their

¹ Meyer, "περιτέμνω," VI:79, on *Spec.* 1.1-11: "It would seem that this form of apologetic rather suspiciously omits the covenant aspect of circumcision."

relative dependence on exegesis of the LXX for the derivation of the circumcision metaphor. The possible scriptural roots of the metaphor in Rom 2:25-29 were outlined in detail; such extensive parallels were lacking for the other two passages. Granted, this discrepancy may be simply due to the extended role of the circumcision metaphor in the argument of Romans 2, and thus the relative abundance of verbal parallels. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the brevity of the references in Phil 3:3 and Col 2:11-12 is significant. If, as was suggested at the very outset of the thesis, circumcision was viewed by various groups as the “premier mark of the Jew” at the turn of the era, then even a brief allusion would suffice to evoke the Jewish religious framework which Christianity had inherited and upon which Paul built his mission to the Gentiles. Thus, it is possible that the lack of explicit scriptural exegesis is due to an audience with less familiarity with those texts. Determining the composition of audience from such clues is notoriously difficult, but the apparent presence or absence of a scriptural derivation of the circumcision metaphor (present in Rom 2; absent in Phil 3, Col 2) does correspond with the larger patterns of scripture use in those letters.

The Way Forward

In the course of compiling an extended research project such as this, one becomes acutely aware of which avenues of investigation have been pursued, and which have been ignored. In order to keep the task manageable, I focused my energy on the available Pauline literature, undertaking only a brief survey of certain Jewish sources from the Second Temple period. One element which is conspicuously absent is

any assessment of the rabbinic material as a component of Early Jewish perspectives. Primarily this omission is due to considerations of length, particularly in light of the debates which continue to rage over the applicability of rabbinic material to the first century CE. Still, there are a number of interesting passages in that corpus which would bear investigation. For example, Geza Vermes has explored the developing Jewish emphasis on the sacrificial aspect of circumcision,² which may well illumine a text such as Col 2:11-12. Other areas of investigation remain which may shed more light on the discussion at hand.

Final Thoughts

Le Déaut, in an article on the theme of the circumcision of heart in the ancient scriptural versions (LXX and targums) and at Qumran, concludes by admitting that "this is nothing but a survey and the subject would merit a monograph, permitting an analysis of the various stages and an examination of their contexts, which is essential for evaluating the significance of the texts."³ While not quite a monograph, this thesis has contributed to Le Déaut's project by examining in detail three Pauline texts which draw on metaphorical conceptions of circumcision. Looking back over the breadth of the research, I am struck again by the various ways in which circumcision surfaces as a central Jewish symbol, and by the various ways in which Paul and other Christian writers come to terms with it as part of defining their own identity.

² Geza Vermes, "Baptism and Jewish Exegesis: New Light from Ancient Sources," *NTS* 4 (1957-58), 309-19.

³ Le Déaut, "Thème," 205: "Ceci n'était qu'un survol et le sujet mériterait une monographie permettant une analyse des diverses étapes et l'examen de leurs contextes, ce qui est primordial pour évaluer la portée des textes."

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