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Circumcision as an Index of Jewish-Christian Argumentation  
Regarding Covenant and Salvation in the First  
Two Christian Centuries

Amy Ross Scheinerman

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
New York, New York

1984

Referee: Professor Lawrence A. Hoffman

Rabbi says: Great is circumcision for despite all the commandments that Abraham our father fulfilled, he was not considered perfect until he was circumcised, as it is said: *walk before Me and be perfect*. Another illustration of the supreme importance of circumcision: were it not for circumcision, the Holy One would not have created the universe, as it is said: *Thus says the Eternal, If My covenant be not day and night, I did not appoint the ordinances of heaven and earth*.

Nedarim 3:11

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### Acknowledgements

I chose to work in the area of early Jewish-Christian relations for two reasons. The first reason was because I had very little knowledge of Christianity and wished to study the Christian New Testament and Church Fathers. This topic provided me with an opportunity to do this. The second reason was because I wished to broaden my exposure to early tannaitic literature. This, too, was made possible through this study. Dr. Lawrence Hoffman generously took on this project despite the fact that it was not within the areas with which he is most familiar. He put in a great deal of time and expended much effort helping me define a topic and locate secondary sources. He is a pre-eminent scholar and teacher. Throughout, he has been a constant source of encouragement and support. I am indebted to him for all he has done for me as my teacher and advisor, providing wise guidance and counsel.

I wish to thank, as well, Dr. Norman Cohen, who provided special help with this thesis. In addition, it is appropriate to thank all my teachers at HUC-JIR. All those with whom I have studied here have benefited me; their influence is felt in this thesis but also goes far beyond it. I am indebted to them as well.

I am blessed with a wonderful family. They have all contributed to this thesis and to much more. I thank my parents, Elinor and Andrew Ross for supporting me in all my endeavors. Their love and compassion is a source of strength. My thanks go to my brother, Peter Ross, as well, who is loving, caring and supportive. Lastly (and mostly), I am indebted to my husband, Ed. Words can never articulate all the ways in which he has helped me, nor can they ever adequately express my appreciation to him

for all he has done and for all that he is. I am truly blessed to have  
such a happy wife.

## Introduction

In the second century of the Common Era, the Church Father Justin wrote: "The purpose of [circumcision] is that you [Jews] and only you might suffer the afflictions that are now justly yours; that only your land be desolate, and your cities ruined by fire; that the fruits of your land be eaten by strangers before your very eyes; that not one of you be permitted to enter your city of Jerusalem."<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the Mishna was being compiled. In it we read: "Rabbi says: Great is circumcision for in spite of all the virtues that Abraham our father fulfilled he was not called perfect until he was circumcised, as it is said, Walk before Me and be perfect. Another illustration of the supreme importance of circumcision: were it not for it the Holy One blessed be He would not have created His universe, as it is said, Thus says the Eternal, If My covenant be not day and night I had not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth."<sup>2</sup>

It is neither remarkable nor startling that the Church Fathers and the rabbis should view the rite of circumcision differently. It is not even surprising that they would find themselves diametrically opposed to one another's theological beliefs and religious attitudes. What is of great interest is precisely what they did say about circumcision and in what ways they differed. How did they interpret its meaning? What did it come to represent for each group? What did they reveal about their own beliefs in what they said about circumcision?

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<sup>1</sup>Justin, "Dialogue with Trypho," trans. Thomas B. Falls, *The Fathers of the Church* (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), p. 172.

<sup>2</sup>Mishna Nedarim 3:11.

In this study we will ask these questions and more: Did Jews and Christians read one another's religious texts? To what degree did Jewish and Christian scholars interact with one another? What affect did the course of this theological discussion have on the development of the Jewish liturgy for the circumcision ceremony?

In order to attempt to answer these questions, we will examine the Jewish and Christian writings which pertain to circumcision, through the first two centuries of the Common Era. Beyond the Hebrew Bible and Christian New Testament, we will examine the Jewish texts Mishna, Tosefta, Sifra de-be Rav, Sifrei be-de Rav, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, and Midrash Bereshit Rabbah and the early Church Fathers (the Apostolic Fathers, Justin, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian and Origen).

A study such as this is inherently limited. We have today what is probably only a fraction of the texts written during the first two centuries of the Common Era. We would like to think that the more important and influential texts survived. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that survival was, at times, a matter of chance and that certain texts became influential because they survived. Problems of proper translation always figure into the study of texts, particularly ancient texts because there are so many terms whose precise meaning and thrust cannot be adequately determined. Often times, we make educated guesses as to a particular term's meaning based on its use in other contemporary texts. In the end, however, there remains a degree of uncertainty.

What is more, we deal here only with written remains which are actually few in number. These writings do not tell us how people lived, how many Jewish Christians practiced circumcision, how many did not, whether Jews and Christians in the second century met together socially, whether they debated theological issues. Even Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* cannot be considered solid evidence that Jewish and Christian scholars met face to face to debate religious matters; rather, Justin's *Dialogue* may reflect nothing more than the popular literary genre of the dialogue.

The texts do give us hints as to how people lived and what issues they actually confronted. Circumcision is a good example. Paul complained often that "Judaizers" were attempting to promote circumcision among Christians. It is difficult to determine, however, just how widespread and serious this effort was. We cannot ignore the fact that preachers and apostles then, as now, are wont to exaggerate issues that illustrate important theological points. We will argue that Paul and the Church Fathers after him, used circumcision as a springboard to compare Judaism's covenant with the new, spiritualized Christian covenant and to promote the notion that only believing Christians could attain salvation.

Our approach will be inductive. We will survey the entire scope of the material in order to provide the reader with a sense of the breadth of the writings on circumcision. In addition, we will attempt to organize and analyze the material relevant to our study in order to deal with it in depth. At times this approach may seem cumbersome, and it may appear that much extraneous material has been included. Our purpose is

two-fold: to provide the reader with a complete picture of what was written about circumcision in the first two centuries; and to organize and attempt to reconstruct the argument as it progressed. Toward this aim we will attempt to survey, organize and analyze all the material pertaining to circumcision, stopping to compare and contrast the Jewish and Christian approaches toward circumcision.

It is our thesis that circumcision came to hold a position of great theological significance by the end of the second century not so much because of its inherent qualities, but because of what it came to represent to Jews as a result of Christian claims. Circumcision came to possess central symbolic significance in the debates concerning the status of the Jewish covenant (which according to Paul was obsolete) and the "new" covenant claimed by Christianity. The "old" covenant was forged by circumcision; the "new" covenant was made by faith. So, too, did circumcision represent the argument between Jews and Christians concerning salvation. Jews believed in an עֲוֵלָה (world-to-come) which awaited Jews who obeyed God's commandments as revealed in the Written Torah and in the Oral Torah. Christians claimed that true salvation could be attained only through faith in Jesus as the messiah. Hence, circumcision came to represent the Jewish mode of salvation through *mitzvot*: it became the quintessential salvific *mitzvah*.

We find no concrete evidence that Jews and Christians read one another's documents, heard one another's sermons or engaged in face-to-face theological debate. However, we do see evidence that Christians and Jews were attuned to one another's claims concerning circumcision. Circumcision had been the defining ritual for a Jewish male for many

centuries. Paul opposed circumcision in the early Church in an attempt to promote Christian universalism as against Jewish particularity. Moreover, he considered circumcision to have merely symbolic, and not salvific, value. For Paul, circumcision represented the whole of Jewish law and ritual practice which he rejected as invalid and obsolete since Jesus. The early Church Fathers reinterpreted Paul's claim that circumcision was merely a "sign," giving it an entirely new meaning. Justin and Tertullian contended that the mark of circumcision distinguished Jews as such, setting them aside to receive divine punishment. It may be that this belief is connected with the devastating outcome of the Bar Kochba rebellion of 135 C.E., which many of the early Church Fathers witnessed.

The rabbis, in response, elevated, and at times glorified, circumcision in the Mishna and in midrash, treating it as a salvific and covenantal act. Circumcision is indeed a sign: a sign of the covenant which Jews alone share with God. The liturgy for circumcision reflects this notion quite strongly. Circumcision is the אוֹת הַבְּרִית (sign of the covenant) which is closely associated with messianic fulfilment. Salvation is attained through observance of *mitzvot* and faith is understood as the belief which leads one to observance.



## Chapter 1

### The Christian New Testament on Circumcision

#### 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter we will examine all the passages in the Christian New Testament which employ the word "circumcision." They will be surveyed, organized and analyzed in order to determine the attitudes toward, and theological beliefs pertaining to, circumcision which are reflected in the Christian New Testament. It is presumed that this will reveal much about Christianity in general and, when compared with Jewish writings of the same period, will illuminate the area of early Jewish-Christian relations.

The word circumcision occurs in the Christian New Testament on 53 occasions. It appears seventeen times as a verb,  $\kappa\epsilon\iota\tau\acute{\alpha}\nu\omega$ , 'to circumcise,' and 36 times as a noun,  $\kappa\epsilon\iota\tau\omicron\upsilon\eta$ , referring to the act of circumcising, the mark of circumcision or the operation itself. One might think, therefore, that circumcision was an oft-discussed and crucial topic of debate in early Christianity.

In actuality, however, the numerical total of 53 is deceptive. Frequently, the term is used repeatedly in the same passage. For example, the term translated "circumcision" appears in its nominal form six times in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and six times in the fourth chapter of Romans, yet these twelve occurrences only constitute two shorter passages which are, themselves, part of one larger discussion in which the responsibilities of a Christian are contrasted with those of a Jew. Viewed from this perspective, the terms for 'circumcise' and 'circumcision' occur in the Christian New Testament



as the subject of, or a major focus of, two protracted discussions, the first being in Romans, as mentioned above, and the second occurring in the Epistle to the Galatians, in which the term appears thirteen times. In Galatians, the author contrasts the obsolescent law of the Jews with the new faith of the Christian, pointing out that circumcision has been rendered useless and ineffective since the death of Jesus. Both of these pericopae will be discussed at length further on.

### 1.2 The Circumcised Ones

Outside these two prolonged discussions, the terms περιτεμνω, and περιτομή appear 24 more times. In five of these cases, the term employed refers to Jews. We might translate here "the circumcised ones." Circumcision was apparently the distinguishing mark for Jews. In the Book of Acts 10:45, for example, the term οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοὶ (the believers from among the circumcised) refers to Jewish-Christians, as opposed to pagan Christian proselytes:

While Peter was still saying this [that God speaks to all, not only Jews, and that Jesus rose after three days...] the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. And the believers from among the circumcised (οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοὶ) who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, "Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ..." [Acts 10:45]<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, in the Epistle to the Colossians 4:11, the expression οἱ ὄντες ἐκ περιτομῆς ("the men of the circumcision") is employed to distinguish once again between Christians who were born Jews and those

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<sup>3</sup>All translations of Christian New Testament passages are from the Revised Standard Version.

who were previously pagans. In Colossians 3:11, it is not entirely clear that those who are circumcised are necessarily Jews:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.... Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones (ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ), holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience,... [Colossians 3:11]

Yet the thrust of the author's words is clear: Christianity offers a new and unique universality in which all previous distinctions of nationality, race, belief and social status are erased. This sentiment is underscored strongly and clearly in the Epistle to the Ephesians 2:11-16, where "the circumcision" seems to refer to "the people of the covenant of circumcision": the Jews. The author stresses the unification of all peoples in Jesus and the obliteration of their distinctions through the cancellation of Jewish law.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the common-wealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. [Ephesians 2:11-16]

One cannot help but ask, when reaching the passage cited above, whether the "blood of Christ" which unites all Christians replaces the blood of circumcision which unites all Jews in the covenant with God. Further,

is the "abolition of commandments and ordinances" intended to invoke an image of the Jewish commandment which is fulfilled in human flesh through circumcision?

The fifth passage is Romans 15:8, in which "the circumcised" are the Jews, and Jesus's mission to the Jews is discussed in the context of its affect on the Gentiles:

Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written: "Therefore I will praise thee among the Gentiles [Psalms 18:49] and sing to thy name..." [Romans 15:8]

We have seen, then, that circumcision is a distinguishing mark for Jews, an operation which not only fulfills a religious precept, but also marks them as Jews in the eyes of Gentiles. Circumcision therefore stands in opposition to the Christian emphasis on universalism.

### 1.3 Anecdotal and Historical Accounts: the Gospels

We find four passages in which the act of circumcision is recounted as history or anecdote. Two of these occur in the Gospel of Luke, in which John's circumcision and Jesus's circumcision are recounted without comment. Inasmuch as both were male children born to Jewish women, it is not surprising that they should be circumcised. Concerning John's circumcision we read:

And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they would have named him Zechariah after his father, but his mother said, "Not so; he shall be called John." And they said to her, "None of your kindred is called by this name." [Luke 1:59]

We see here that circumcision and naming are closely associated, as they are in Jewish ritual practice today. There is no reason to doubt that John's was a standard Jewish circumcision, although this passage reveals nothing about the liturgy which accompanied the surgical procedure. Similarly, Jesus was circumcised and named on the eighth day.

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. [Luke 2:21]

By the time of Paul, however, circumcision for Christians was no longer assumed to be a necessity for followers of Jesus. Many scholars attribute this to Paul's own reluctance or even active opposition to circumcision. A plausible and, certainly, unsurprising hypothesis, given the fact that it was Paul who actively sought to steer the Christian movement in a direction away from Judaism. Nonetheless, Paul has Timothy, a close associate who helps him proselytize to Gentiles, circumcised. Timothy was born to a Jewish mother and a Greek father.

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.  
[Acts 16:3]

Apparently Timothy had not been circumcised as an infant, as prescribed by Jewish law. Paul, it would appear, wished to have Timothy appear legitimately Jewish in the eyes of the diaspora Jews he and Timothy would encounter on their journey. Clearly, Paul fears the animosity and rebuke of the Jewish community, despite the fact that his goal is to proselytize Gentiles rather than Jews. This suggests that Jews had a certain standing among the Gentiles in the community-at-large and could therefore make Paul's mission uncomfortable, if not impossible. It also

suggests that Paul's and Timothy's legitimacy as apostles was measured, at least in part, by their authenticity as Jews. Circumcision was seen as the mark of an authentic Jew. Without it, Timothy was not legitimate.

The contention that Paul sought to make Timothy appear to be a legitimate Jew is confirmed by a passage found in First Corinthians, which is customarily credited to Paul's own hand:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law-though not being myself under the law-that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law-not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ-that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. [1 Corinthians 9:19-23]

Bring suggests that Paul's efforts to have Timothy circumcised are plausible simply on the grounds of custom. Since Timothy was born to a Jewish mother, it was customary that he be circumcised in the manner of the Jewish rite.<sup>4</sup> Bring's explanation seems untenable. If the "custom" provided such strong motivation, surely Timothy would have been circumcised on the eighth day of life or at some point during his childhood. In fact, he grew to adulthood without ever undergoing the operation. Further, Paul rails against circumcision and against all Jewish law as he does so strongly (in many passages which we will discuss shortly) that it seems highly unlikely that he would concede to mere "custom." In fact, Paul implies the very reverse: that obedience to the law, and particularly to circumcision, is sinful.

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<sup>4</sup>Ragnar Bring, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Eric Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1961), p. 64.



Another explanation for this episode must be sought. We note that it is curious that the text of Acts 16 should read "because they knew his father was Greek" rather than "because they knew his mother was Jewish." We suggest that the fact of the intermarriage of Timothy's parents brought Timothy's commitment to Judaism and Jewish practice into question. Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to demonstrate that Timothy identified himself as a Jew. This would have given both Paul (already circumcised) and Timothy entree into diaspora Jewish synagogues and perhaps the informal right to discuss and preach on Jewish ritual practices and their theological significance.

Further support is lent to the hypothesis that Timothy's circumcision was motivated by political expediency by contrasting Timothy with Titus. Paul not only rejects the suggestion that his helper Titus (born of Gentile parents) be circumcised: in fact, he fashions a complex argument against it. According to the accounts in Acts 15 and Galatians 2 (which will receive greater attention shortly), Paul claims that Gentiles do not require circumcision in order to become Christians. It would therefore appear that Paul's support of Timothy's circumcision is indeed an act of political expediency rather than religious conviction.

We will return to the question of Paul's view of the function and significance of circumcision shortly. Before we do, it is worth mentioning the fourth passage in which circumcision is recounted as an historical act. It speaks of God's covenant with Abraham. In Acts 7 the apostle Stephen recounts the history of the Jews since Abraham:

And God spoke to this effect, that his posterity would be aliens in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and ill-treat them 400 years. 'But I will judge that nation

which they serve,' said God, 'and after that they shall come out and worship me in this place.' And he gave him the covenant of circumcision. And so Abraham became the father of Isaac, and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs... [Acts 7:8]

It is significant to note that the text employs the term διαθήκη περιτομῆς, "the covenant of circumcision." Here, circumcision is acknowledged as a covenantal act, a claim which will be rejected by the early Church Fathers, particularly Justin, Tertullian and Origen.

Aside from the two anecdotal accounts of the circumcisions of John and Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, the only other reference to circumcision in the Gospels concerns the rabbinic ruling that circumcision may be performed on the Sabbath because it takes priority over the Sabbath work restrictions. In the Gospel of John 7:22-23, the author argues that if one may perform a circumcision on the Sabbath then surely it is permissible for Jesus to heal a man on the Sabbath.

Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers) and you circumcise a man upon the Sabbath. If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken [cf. Leviticus 12:3] are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement. [John 7:22]

Rabbinic legislation affirmed that performing a circumcision was of greater priority than Sabbath work restrictions. In Mishna Shabbat 18:3 we read that one may assist in a childbirth, call in a midwife, tie off and cut the umbilical cord and perform a circumcision on the Sabbath.

אין מ'לגין בהמה ביום טוב אבל מלגין. ומ'לגין אי  
ה' עבד גמול, וקורין לה חמשה מחקים, למקום, ומחללין עליה

אם השבת, וקושרין את הטבר; דג' יום' פאר, אף חותכין. וכל  
צרכי מילה דזין אגדת

They may not deliver cattle on a Holyday, but they may give help. They may deliver a woman on the Sabbath and summon for her a midwife from any place whatever, and they may profane the Sabbath for her sake and tie up the navel; R. Jose says, They may even cut it. And they may perform on the Sabbath all things necessary for circumcision. [Shabbat 18:3]

The association of circumcision with assistance in childbirth and cutting the umbilical cord suggests that circumcision may have been viewed as a saving or healing act in some sense. Surely, the exception made for childbirth is due to the danger to the mother and child's lives. Is circumcision also an act which insures health and safety? We know that many centuries later, many superstitious notions of demons who attack uncircumcised babies were prevalent in Jewish communities and that many folkloristic customs were adopted to protect the infant from Lilith and all other evil demons who sought to spirit him away before the seal of circumcision was administered to protect him.<sup>8</sup> A red ribbon tied to a baby carriage is but one vestigial remnant of these customs. But did such notions operate in the first century Jewish mind? When we examine the writings of the early Church Fathers in chapter three we shall see that Clement of Alexandria and Origen, in the late second century, believed this to be so. If Christians held this belief, it is certainly possible that Jews shared it. It may even be the case that the early Christians acquired this belief from Jews.

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<sup>8</sup>Gershom Scholem, "Lilith." *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 1972, XI, pp. 245-249.



It is not entirely clear in what way healing may be analogous to circumcision. We recall how, in Exodus 4:24-26, Moses was saved when his wife Zipporah circumcised their son Gershom. This is the most concrete example. Yet it must be pointed out that the text is not clear as to whether Gershom's circumcision saved Moses or Gershom, himself, from danger.

וַיְהִי בַדֶּרֶךְ בְּמִלּוֹן וַיִּפְגְּשׁוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמָּיִת. וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרֶף וַתִּבְרַח  
אֶת צֶרְפָּה בְּנֶה וַתִּפְּץ עָרְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֵתָן - דָּמִים אֵלַי לִי.  
וַיִּרְץ מִמֶּנּוּ אֵל אַחֲרָה חֵתָן - דָּמִים לְחַיִּיתָ.

At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone. Then it was that she said, "You are a bridegroom of blood," because of the circumcision. [Exodus 4:24]

Here circumcision is a salvific act.

In Genesis 17 God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising Abraham both progeny and the Land of Israel. In exchange, it would seem, Abraham is commanded to circumcise himself, his male offspring and all the homeborn slaves in his entourage. We suggest that one might argue that Genesis 17 teaches that circumcision ensures one progeny and title to Eretz Yisrael. It thus saves in a broader sense: one will survive at least to have progeny or at least through one's progeny.

Salvation aside, the Mishna makes it clear that circumcision is permitted on Shabbat. Mishna Shabbat 19:1 tells us that one may even make the instrument used to perform the circumcision on the Sabbath, a task which involved many proscribed activities.

רַבִּי אֵלִיעֶזֶר אָמַר, אִם לֹא הָיָא כְּלִי מַעֲרֵי שַׁבָּת הָיָא בְּשַׁבָּת  
מְאֻהָה; וּבִסְכָּנָה מְכַסְּתָּהּ עַל פִּי עַדִּים וְעוֹד אֲמַר רַבִּי אֵלִיעֶזֶר,

כורתים עדים לעשות פחמין לעשות כל גרלם. כלל אחר רבי עקיבא,  
 כל מלאכה שאפשר לעשותה מערב שבת אינה דוחה את השבת,  
 ולא אפשר לעשותה מערב שבת דוחה את השבת.

R. Eliezer says, If one had not brought the instrument on the eve of the Sabbath, he may bring it openly on the Sabbath; and in time of danger he may cover it in the presence of witnesses. (And) R. Eliezer said further, They may cut wood to make charcoal to forge an instrument of iron. R. Akiba laid down a general principle: any act of work that it is possible to do on the eve of Sabbath does not override the Sabbath, but what it is impossible to perform on the eve of the Sabbath overrides the Sabbath. [Shabbat 19:1]

One might argue that circumcision is not mentioned at all in this passage, but it must be pointed out that Shabbat 18:3 which precedes it and 19:2 follows it deal specifically and undeniably with circumcision. Further, while our text ends:

והא אפשר לעשותה מערב שבת דוחה את השבת.

variant manuscripts read:

מילה שאי אפשר לעשותה מערב שבת דוחה את השבת.

And finally, Mishna Shabbat 19:2 makes it clear that every aspect of performing a circumcision is perfectly permissible on the Sabbath:

עושין כל צרכי מילה בשבת, מוהלים ופורעין וחוצצין ונותנין צלה  
 איסכאנית וכחין...

They may perform on the Sabbath all the things that are necessary for circumcision: circumcising, tearing the corona, sucking, and placing upon it a bandage and cumin.... [Shabbat 19:2]

There can be no doubt concerning the rabbinic ruling. And there is little doubt that this law, codified in approximately 200 C.E. was known and operative in the first century as well.

The text of John 7 does not suggest that healing and circumcision are equivalent. Rather, the author provides the following rationale for circumcising on the Sabbath: one circumcises on the Sabbath in order to avoid breaking the unqualified law stated in Leviticus 12:3 that a male must be circumcised on the eighth day. There is no biblical law concerning healing. But perhaps the context of this passage provides the answer. Jesus is in Galilee celebrating Sukkot with the Jews there. He has decided not to make the customary pilgrimage to Jerusalem fearing that he might be killed because he has claimed authority in Jewish law without rabbinic office. In John 7:16-18 Jesus is quoted as explaining that his authority comes directly from God, not from himself, implying that it supercedes that of the Jewish legal authorities in Jerusalem.

There are, then, two possible explanations for the passage. The first is that Jesus is condemning the Jews' desire to kill him on the Sabbath as being against the law of Moses (see vv. 1,19). In other words, those who oppose Jesus's violation of Sabbath law would, themselves, be transgressing the very same law were they to kill him on the Sabbath. This explanation is supported by Jesus's contention that the people, themselves, do not even observe Moses's law, yet they object to his seeming violation of it.

More likely, the issue is Jesus's claim to the authority to interpret Jewish law. The author is comparing the rabbinic dictum that circumcision overrides the Sabbath, which came indirectly to the Jews

through the rabbis who received it from Moses (and at that, he points out, it wasn't even originally Moses's law, but rather was known to the forefathers) with Jesus's own authority, which comes directly from God. It is clear, the listener concludes, that Jesus's authority is superior to that of the rabbis since it comes directly from God and not via many intermediaries.

We have reviewed all the references to circumcision which are found in the Gospels. The Gospels contain only the anecdotal accounts of the circumcisions of John and Jesus (in Luke 1:59 and 2:21, respectively) which are mentioned without commentary and the passage in John just discussed. All other references to circumcision are contained in either the Book of Acts or the Epistles attributed to Paul. These include five passages mentioned earlier in which "the circumcised ones" is used merely to connote the Jews. From such passages, we have already begun to detect that the Christian sense of universalism is contrasted with Jewish particularity and that circumcision is a symbol of the exclusive and particularistic character of Judaism. Of much greater interest to this study are passages in which the religious meaning and purpose of circumcision are discussed and debated, and in which circumcision receives a wholly new and Christian understanding.

#### 1.4 The Book of Acts and the Epistles

There are fewer than a dozen passages which explicate the early Christian, and essentially Pauline, view of circumcision. Included are the two protracted discussions contained in Romans and Galatians, which we mentioned above. Of the other relevant passages, two are found in the Book of Acts and the remainder in the Epistles attributed to Paul. Hence circumcision appears to be a largely Pauline matter of concern.

We will discuss three broad categories. First, references to a "circumcision party": those among the early Christians who maintained that circumcision was necessary. Second, we find a number passages in which circumcision is described as useless and no longer necessary for Christians. Third are passages in which a "true" or "new" circumcision through Jesus is discussed; here, circumcision takes on a metaphorical and abstracted meaning. We will discuss each category in turn.

#### 1.4.1 The Circumcision Party

We begin with the passages which refer to a "circumcision party." Who were these people? Why did they promote circumcision? How did Paul react to them? The references which concern us are Acts 11:2, Titus 1:10 and Galatians 2.

The Book of Acts chronicles the growth and expansion of the nascent Christian movement from the time of the death of Jesus until the time during which Paul preached in Rome. It covers the concerns and doings of the Jerusalem Church as well as the activities of its apostles and Paul, the self-appointed apostle to the Gentiles.

In the tenth and eleventh chapters of the Book of Acts we are presented with a picture of Peter, the Palestinian apostle, preaching in Caesarea to a group composed of Jews and non-Jews. In Acts 10:34-38 Peter contends that God is accessible to Jews and Gentiles alike and that God shows no partiality to Jews. Further on, the Gentiles in the crowd of listeners "receive the Holy Spirit," much to the amazement of the Jews, despite the fact that they are not circumcised members of the people of Israel:

"While Peter was still saying this the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. "And the believers from among the



circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. <sup>46</sup>"For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, <sup>47</sup>"Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" <sup>48</sup>And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days. [Acts 10:44-48]

Peter baptizes the Gentiles presumably at God's command. The ostensible inference to be drawn here is that baptism functions for Christians as circumcision does for Jews: in sociological terms, it legitimates and formalizes entrance into the group. The Gentiles are now Christians although they have not undergone circumcision. Similarly, a male child born to a Jewish mother is considered Jewish prior to being circumcised. The circumcision functions to bring him formally into the covenanted community. Here, baptism has brought the Gentiles into Peter's community. We further note that the Gentiles received a divine communication of some sort (verse 44) prior to their baptism.

Having baptized and thereby converted the Gentiles without benefit of circumcision, Peter then faces the opposition of οἱ περιτομῆς, "the circumcisers." The text reads:

Now the apostles and the brethren who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcision party criticized him, saying, "Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?" But Peter began and explained to them in order: "I was in the city of Joppa praying; and in a trance I saw a vision, something descending, like a great sheet, let down from heaven by four corners; and it came down to me. Looking at it closely I observed animals and beasts of prey and reptiles and birds of the air. And I heard a voice saying to me, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat.' But I said, 'No, Lord; for nothing common or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' But the voice answered a second time from heaven, 'What God has cleansed you must not call common.' This happened three times, and all was drawn up again into heaven. At that very moment three men arrived at the house in which we were, sent to me from Caesarea. And the Spirit

told me to go with them, making no distinction. These six brethren also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. And he told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, 'Send to Joppa and bring Simon called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, 'John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.' If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?" When they heard this they were silenced. And they glorified God, saying, "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." [Acts 11:1-18]

Peter's response to this group is clear. He has taken a decisive turn away from Jewish law and ritual. He has rejected, among other things, *kashrut* and circumcision for conversion. He believes that God has altered the "standard operating procedures" through direct communication with the Gentiles ("the Holy Spirit fell upon them") and with himself, in the form of a dream. What is equally clear is that Peter's claims are a direct challenge to the rabbis' claim to interpreting God's word. Peter has claimed direct revelation, not only to himself but to non-Jews. This, more than anything else, would have threatened the rabbinic community, whose authority rested on its exclusive claim to interpret God's word. *Pirke Avot* which, perhaps more than any other document, elucidates the early rabbinic worldview begins with these words:

משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע ויהושע לזקנים  
 וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים מסרה לאנשי כנסת הצדוקה הם אמרו  
 שלשה דברים: הן מתנים בין הכהנים ותלמידים הרבה ודעו  
 סוף עתה.

Moses received the Torah on Sinai, and handed it down to Joshua; Joshua to the Elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in

judgement; raise up many disciples; and make a fence around the Torah. [Avot 1:1]

Peter contradicts this fundamental claim to a monopoly on divine authority. In one short speech, Peter has effectively challenged the three cardinal areas of rabbinic purview:

- (1) to uphold biblical laws: Peter insists on eating "unclean" animals;
- (2) rabbinic claims to interpret God's word: Peter claims that the Holy Spirit fell on Gentiles (not even Jews, let alone rabbis); and
- (3) rabbinic prerogative to determine personal status: Peter not only baptizes the Gentiles but rejects the prescribed conversion ritual of circumcision.

Who, precisely, are the members of this "circumcision party"? They are commonly understood to be conservative Jewish-Christians, though it is not entirely clear what a "Jewish-Christian" is. Most likely it means individuals of Jewish background who leaned toward rabbinic Judaism, yet were deeply involved in the life and growth of the early Church. This view is supported by a passage in Galatians 2:

But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For because certain men came from James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. [Galatians 2:11-12]

Cephas, an apostle to the Jews is apparently intimidated by the "circumcision party." In their presence, he refrains from eating with Gentiles who do not observe the laws of *kashrut*. Yet earlier in the chapter Paul notes that the same Cephas gave his approval for Paul and



Barnabas to allow Gentile Christians to remain uncircumcised. In this passage, Paul criticizes Cephas's inconsistency, attributing it to the power of the circumcision party. Apparently, the members of the circumcision party favor retaining at least some Jewish ritual practices.

Acts 15:1-5 implies that the circumcision party is composed of Pharisees:

But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses." [Acts 15:1-5]

Here, however, we lack the term *περιτομῆς* which we found in Acts 11:2. Rather, we find a group, identified as the *φαραισαῖοι* (the Pharisees) who promote the necessity of circumcision. It is interesting to note that the *φαραισαῖοι* also practice a charge (*παραγγελλεῖν*) to the potential convert to keep the law of Moses. This corresponds to the dictum in b. Yebamot 47a that one should inform the convert of the heavier and lighter commandments to which s/he will be obligated:

תנו דבין בר שא ליתגיר בזמן הנה אחרים ש: זה דאית  
 שאל דהתגיר, כי אנה יוצא שאל בזמן הנה דו"ס בחובים  
 סחובים ומסורין אין עליהם אס אחר יוצא אין כגא'  
 מקבלין אותו מ"ג ומודיעין אותו חצות חצות קלות ומקצת חצות  
 חמורות ומודיעין אותו מן לך שבה ופאה ומעט דני ומודיעין  
 אותו ענין של חצות.

Our Rabbis taught: If at the present time a man desires to become a proselyte, he is to be addressed as follows: "What reason have you for desiring to become a proselyte; do you not know that Israel at the present time are persecuted and oppressed, despised, harassed and overcome by afflictions?" If he replies, "I know and yet am unworthy", he is accepted forthwith, and is given instruction in some of the minor and some of the major commandments. He is informed of the sin [of the neglect of the commandments of] Gleanings, the Forgotten Sheaf, the Corner of the Poor Man's Tithe. He is also told of the punishment for the transgression of the commandments. [b. Yebamot 47a]

This law lends further credence to the contention that the circumcision party was composed of Jewishly grounded, rabbinically oriented individuals.

In Titus 1:10 we see another reference to the *περιτομῆς*. Sandmel notes that the Book of Titus is not generally considered to be an authentically Pauline document.<sup>6</sup> Rather, he says, it was written 100 years later. We are not qualified to judge the date of this text. However, even if it does date to the second half of the second century C.E. it still reveals a great deal about early Christianity's view of circumcision. In this passage, the members of the *περιτομῆς* are living in Crete. Obviously, they are not the Pharisees of Acts 15:5. If Sandmel's dating is correct, there were no longer Pharisees when Titus was written. Thus it seems more likely that the term *περιτομῆς* refers to those with an inclination toward rabbinic Jewish practices, who wish

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<sup>6</sup>Samuel Sandmel, *The Genius of Paul* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Company, 1958).

to follow the prescriptions of the Pharisees and later, the rabbis.

The Titus passage re-inforces the notion that the central issue is one of authority. The author opposes the circumcision party on the grounds that they have no right to teach their beliefs to Christians. It is clear that they are but one of a number of groups espousing ideas the author considers untrue.

For there are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party; they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach.  
[Titus 1:10]

We are given an example of the incorrectness of the opposition's ideas which can only strike the modern reader as extreme and simplistic:

One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons." [Titus 1:12]

The author concludes by recommending that his audience reject "Jewish myths" (presumably circumcision among them) in favor of the proper Christian way.

The theme of submissiveness to authority is emphasized repeatedly throughout the three chapters of this short epistle:

2:3-5 women to husbands

2:9 slaves to masters

3:1 to rulers

Submission to the proper authority is, in fact, the overriding concern throughout. Circumcision, in this context, serves as a focal point for the various groups' differing claims to authority. Does one submit to rabbinic authority or to the authority of the apostle, a new Christian authority which now openly challenges the traditional Jewish authority?

This sense is supported by five passages which express the belief that the rite of circumcision is unnecessary for Christians and ultimately will avail them nothing. We begin by examining the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts which recounts an important meeting of the "Jerusalem Council"; and the second chapter of Galatians, which has been identified with this same event.<sup>7</sup> The scene is one of confrontation. The leaders of the fledgling Church have convened in Jerusalem to discuss a dispute concerning circumcision which has arisen among the missionaries outside Judea and those whom they have encountered in their work. Present at the meeting are: the elders of the Church, whose identity is obscure; Cephas and James, who are the apostles to the Jewish-Christians and who operate primarily in Palestine; and Paul and Barnabas, apostles to the Gentiles who have been proselytizing outside Palestine. It is worthwhile to quote the account in full. Due to its length, we have included it as an appendix.<sup>8</sup>

As was mentioned earlier in connection with the reference to a circumcision party in Acts 11:2, it is tempting to identify the circumcision party with the Pharisees mentioned in Acts 15:5. This would suggest tremendous overlap between the Jewish community and early Christians in the first century: One could be wholly involved in the activities, beliefs and life of the Christian community, yet be considered a Pharisee. In fact, since Christianity had not yet broken away entirely from Judaism, there undoubtedly was an overlapping of loyalties in many instances. Bligh suggests, in this regard, that the

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<sup>7</sup>J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1921).

<sup>8</sup>See Appendix A.

Apostolic Council marks a turning point. Its decision to exempt Gentiles from the requirement of circumcision (Acts 15:19 and Galatians 2:3) indicates to Bligh that "the Church was not to remain a sect within Judaism" any longer.<sup>9</sup> Bligh's interpretation assumes a considerable amount of self-awareness on the part of those who are termed "the elders" of the Council. Implied in his thesis is their understanding that they were about to break with Judaism (since circumcision was considered the defining rite of a Jew) and travel a new road. Bligh may well be correct. Surely to reject circumcision both for converts and for newborns was to fly in the face of a millennial Jewish tradition. It was also an *a fortiori* rejection of the authority structure of the community which supported circumcision and rabbinic legislation.

Lightfoot provides a different reconstruction. He posits a power struggle between the Jewish Church in Jerusalem and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. He presumes that those in Palestine regard themselves as Jews and therefore accept the authority of Jewish laws and tradition, including circumcision. In fact, Lightfoot proposes a rivalry between Cephas and James, the Palestinian apostles to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas, the apostles to the Gentiles. It seems likely that Lightfoot concludes this on the basis of Galatians 2, in which the author (who identifies himself as Paul) recounts a direct confrontation with Cephas (Galatians 2:11-21) claiming that Cephas opposed Paul because Cephas had capitulated to the pressures of the "circumcision party." Lightfoot concludes that both Acts 15 and Galatians 2 affirm that the conference arrived at the following two resolutions: first, the exemption of

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<sup>9</sup>John Bligh, *Historical Information for New Testament Students* (London: Burns and Oates, 1967), p. 77.

Gentiles from the law of circumcision and second, official recognition of Paul's apostolic authority by the "Jewish Church."<sup>10</sup> This is surely true with respect to Acts 15. We note, in particular:

Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues. [Acts 15:19-21]

There is another way to view the issue of the Circumcision Party, which culminated in the meeting of the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem. Let us first examine Galatians 2, which sheds light on this alternative interpretation. Again, due to its length, Galatians 2 is included as an appendix.<sup>11</sup>

That Titus was not compelled by the Council to undergo circumcision affirms Lightfoot's first point: the exemption of Gentiles from circumcision (verse 3). In verse 9 the author (presumably Paul) contends that James, Cephas and John, apostles authorized by the Church in Jerusalem, gave their authorization to Paul and Barnabas to preach to the Gentiles. The scene suggests a third hypothesis: a carving out of missionary territory, even a truce, rather than an official stamp of approval.

The text of Galatians 2 contains a speech Paul presumably made to Cephas before the members of the Apostolic Council concerning the issue of circumcision. There is no suggestion at its conclusion, however, that Paul received the official recognition from this body, as Lightfoot

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<sup>10</sup>Lightfoot, p. 24.

<sup>11</sup>See Appendix B.



claims. Rather, the passage ends with the end of the speech. There is no summary statement or hint that a specific decision in Paul's favor was made at the meeting. We would expect Paul to record an official affirmation of his policy had one been forthcoming. Whether or not Paul actually wrote Galatians (and this passage in particular), Lightfoot's theory of a power struggle between rival missionary factions seems well-founded. After all, it was the job of a missionary to interpret (by preaching) the Christian message. This is an inherently influential position. It would be surprising if there had been no disagreements.

In this context, circumcision is a logical focal point for disagreement. Circumcision served to identify one as a Jew; moreover, as a Jew who considered himself bound by covenant to God as a member of the people Israel. It was an act whose meaning was highly particularistic. Hence we find several Christian New Testament passages in which being circumcised (i.e. being Jewish) is contrasted with belonging to a universal, all-inclusive group: the Christians community. We saw this in connection with Colossians 3:11 and Ephesians 2:14-16 earlier:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming.... Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones (ἐκλεκτοὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ), holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness and patience.... [Colossians 3:5-12]

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. [Ephesians 2:14-16]

The message seems to be: by circumcision one can be a member of the Jewish group. However, to be a member of the universalistic Christian group now, one must forego one's membership in the Jewish group. This entails rejection of any overt, particularistic act which identifies one as a Jew. Obviously this includes circumcision.

Again, this presumes a Christianity which is attempting to break away from Judaism, consciously and actively. At the very least, to circumcise one's son (or, as a convert, to be circumcised in adulthood) in the first century was further to align oneself with the authority figures of the Jewish community.

Why would Paul actively oppose the Jewish authority structure? As a missionary to the Jews<sup>12</sup>, early in his Christian career, Paul had been sharply spurned and rejected:

The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him. And Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.'"

And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord spread throughout all the region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. [Acts 13:44-50]

Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue, and so spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. [Acts 14:1-2]

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<sup>12</sup>For example, Acts 9:20, 17:1-3, 18:19 and 19:8.



Acts 18:5-6 suggests that it is precisely this rejection by Jews which motivated Paul to redirect his missionary activities to Gentiles:

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon you heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." [Acts 18:5-6]

There is no reason to doubt that Paul was not spurned, scorned and even vilified in Jewish communities. After all, he preached the heretical belief of Jesus's messiahship and he ridiculed the Pharisees. There is also no reason to doubt that Paul's harsh treatment by Jews may well have embittered him. It may account for his many tirades against Judaism and, in particular, his famous accusations of Jewish hypocrisy with respect to observing religious laws.

Before moving on to a detailed discussion of Paul, let us summarize what we have seen thus far. We have examined Acts 11:2, Titus 1:10 and Galatians 2. We noted that a good deal of concern is expressed about a group within the Church which promotes circumcision for Gentile proselytes. Paul takes a strong stand against them, taking his case to the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem. The Council decides in his favor, rendering the judgement that circumcision is, indeed, not a Christian requirement. We further noted that Bligh views the Apostolic Council meeting as a turning point for Christianity. It is the point at which Christianity consciously decided to emerge as a separate entity, a religion outside Judaism rather than a sect within it. Lightfoot, in contrast, interprets this incident as evidence of a fierce rivalry between James and Cephas, the apostles to the Jews, and Paul and

Baranabas, the apostles to the Gentiles. The council's decision to abide by Paul's interpretation promotes Paul's authority in the early Church and thereby has far-reaching implications for the development of Christianity. We further noted that circumcision serves as a logical focal point for Christian attempts to identify Christianity as a separate entity from Judaism. This attempt was championed by Paul. His personal background and negative encounters with Jews in his apostolic activities may well have contributed to his desire to break away from Judaism.

#### 1.4.2 The Effect of Circumcision

Paul is seriously concerned with the ramifications of circumcision. Is it salvific? If not, what will bring salvation? If not circumcision, then what effect will circumcision have on people? In order to understand Paul's view on circumcision, we must understand Paul. Therefore, we begin this section with a brief account of Paul's background and connection to the Jewish world, as well as a lengthier discussion of his view of salvation. Following this, we will examine passages in which the effects, merits and dangers of circumcision are discussed.

We begin with a question: to what extent was Paul's stance against *halachah* motivated by the Jews' rejection of his own theological teachings and to what extent was it mediated by his general philosophical outlook? We pause in our survey of Christian New Testament passages containing terms for circumcision in order to discuss Paul's general perspective and viewpoint, since they are essential to understanding the passages which remain to be discussed.

The details of Paul's life are unclear. Sandmel points out that Paul was born not in Palestine, but rather in the Greek world. Based on the New Testament claim that he studied at the feet of Rabban Gamaliel [Acts 22:3], there are those who contend that Paul spent much of his life in Jerusalem, but this is not generally accepted. In fact, the Christian New Testament itself claims he made only two (or perhaps three) short visits to Jerusalem, the second in connection with the Apostolic Council meeting discussed earlier. In Galatians 1:15-22, which is presumably written by Paul, himself, Paul makes the statement that he was not in Jerusalem until three years after his conversion. Yet Acts 7:58 and 8:1-3 place Paul in Jerusalem already at the execution of Stephen. It is unclear from these contradictions just what relationship Paul enjoyed with Palestinian Judaism as a young man and subsequently with the Jewish-Christian Church in Jerusalem as an apostle.

The Book of Acts attributes the following words to Paul:

I am a Jew, born at Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as you all are this day. I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering to prison both men and women, as the high priest and the whole council of elders bear me witness. From them I received letters to the brethren, and I journeyed to Damascus to take those also who were there and bring them in bonds to Jerusalem to be punished.... [Acts 22:3-5]

On the basis of this admission of persecuting Christians<sup>13</sup>, Bligh writes, "Since he was entrusted with authority to persecute Christians...he was probably an ordained rabbi."<sup>14</sup> There is no basis upon which to draw this conclusion, particularly in light of the fact

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<sup>13</sup>See also Acts 22:19

<sup>14</sup>Bligh, p. 76.

that our knowledge of rabbinic ordination in this period is obscure.<sup>15</sup>

Undoubtedly, Jewish tradition and contemporary teachings (Pharisaic or rabbinic) must have influenced him. Fitzmyer<sup>16</sup> attributes great importance to this component of Paul's life. He bases this on Paul's having been circumcised (Philippians 3:5-6), his self-identification as a Jew (2 Corinthians 11:22) and the claim in Galatians 1:14 to having been a Judaic scholar. Yet, we must ask why a Jewish scholar (let alone one who studied at the feet of Gamaliel) would be at home with Aramaic and Greek, but not Hebrew, and would quote from the Septuagint.

It is generally accepted that Paul initially preached to Jews. Many passages in the Christian New Testament describe Paul preaching in synagogues both in the Near East and throughout Asia Minor:

And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God; but when some were studdorn and disbelieved, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them, taking the disciples with him, and argued daily in the hall of Tyrannus. This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. [Acts 19:8-10]

At times, it appears that he addressed Jews who were not connected with the Christian movement:

...but they passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisidia. And on the sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: "Men of

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<sup>15</sup>Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Jewish Ordination on the Eve of Christianity," ed. Joseph Wiebe and Geoffrey Wainwright, *Ordination Rites Past and Present* (Rotterdam: 1980).

<sup>16</sup>Joseph A. Fitzmeyer Jr., *Pauline Theology: A Brief Sketch* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

Israel, and you that fear God listen...." [Acts 13:14-16]

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and for three weeks he argued with them from the scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, "This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ." [Acts 17:1-3]

And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there; but he himself went into the synagogue and argued with the Jews. [Acts 18:19]

It is also clear from the text that Paul was frequently opposed and reviled by the Jews:

The next sabbath almost the whole city gathered together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with jealousy, and contradicted what was spoken by Paul, and reviled him. [Acts 13:44-45]

Now at Iconium they [Paul and Barnabas] entered together into the Jewish synagogue, and so spoke that a great company believed, both of Jews and of Greeks. But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brethren. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord, who bore witness to the word of his grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands. But the people of the city were divided; some sided with the Jews, and some with the apostles. When an attempt was made by both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers, to molest them and to stone them, they learned of it and fled to Lystra and Derbe, cities of Lycaonia, and to the surrounding country; and there they preached the gospel. [Acts 14:1-7]

...and he [Paul] argued in the synagogue every sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, "Your blood be upon you heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." [Acts 18:4-6]

In fact, the Book of Acts even contains an account which describes Paul being stoned by Jews of Antioch and Iconium:

But Jews came there from Antioch and Iconium; and having persuaded the people, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. [Acts 14:19]

Perhaps even more helpful to our understanding Paul's attitude toward circumcision than is his Jewish background, is the influence of Hellenism on Paul. In this regard, Sandmel offers a fascinating reconstruction of Pauline thinking.<sup>17</sup> Let us examine Sandmel's thesis, for it may prove illuminating for our study. Sandmel points out that Paul, born into the Greek world, would have been raised as a thoroughly Hellenized Jew, regardless of whether or not he also received rabbinic training. He lived, studied, and was converted to Christianity outside Palestine. As a Hellenistic Jew, Sandmel continues, Paul would have invested Jewish religious terms such as "sin," "righteousness," "faith" and "repentance" with Greek meanings. For Paul, "sin" would not have held the same connotation it would have for a Palestinian Jew. Paul would have shared neither the religious assumptions nor the goals of Palestinian Jewry.

As an especially relevant example of these differences, let us look at "sin." For the Pharisees and their functional descendants, the rabbis, a sin is either a tangible act which violates a proscribed behavior or is the failure to perform a prescribed behavior, such being defined as God's commandments revealed to Moses and interpreted by the rabbis. For Paul, however, sin was a state of being, the essential physical nature of humankind. One is essentially flawed by virtue of one's physical nature. A Jew can repent from Jewish sin by asking God's forgiveness and, if possible, offering a sacrifice. But a Christian

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<sup>17</sup>Sandmel.



cannot repent from-or correct-this condition alone since one cannot change human nature. In Paul's formulation, only Jesus can atone for people's sin.

Sandmel compares Paul's understanding of salvation with Philo's. Both Paul and Philo, he asserts, share the same Greek notion of salvation: Salvation is the triumph of the mind over the body. It is the conquering of the inherently and fatally flawed physical self through mental processessies.

For Philo, salvation is attained through Torah. Torah imparts truth and teaches one to train the mind to dominate the body. Traditional religious rites and beliefs take on a purely symbolic and didactic significance for Philo. Circumcision is reduced to a symbol for pruning passion from the body. In this way, Philo is able to assert the importance of Torah and the necessity for observing *mitzvot*. Torah is the key to ultimate truth and *mitzvot* pave the path to salvation, albeit a salvation with a distinctly Hellenistic flavor.

Both Philo and Paul were Hellenists. They differed not so much in their beliefs regarding salvation as in their loyalties. Philo was not prepared to turn his back on the Jewish community by rejecting the *mitzvot* and the authority of the rabbis. He reinterpreted many religious rites as symbols but adamantly upheld the obligation of every Jew to observe them due to the demands of tradition and for the sake of community cohesion. Paul lacked such a loyalty to the Jewish community and to Judaism. Sandmel argues that Paul's first loyalty was to Truth as he saw it. Therefore he was prepared to reject anything in Judaism which contradicted his beliefs. If Truth, as Paul understood it, led him away

from Judaism, then so be it. Sandmel attributes Paul with having Hellenized Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

"...Paul gave Christianity a new direction which resulted in its detachment from Judaism. Paul could well have done so had he been a Palestinian Jew or an Ethiopian Jew or a Roman Jew."<sup>19</sup>

Paul's ethnic background did not matter. He was first and foremost a Hellenist. His Jewishness was secondary. Hence he felt no particular obligation to support Jewish tradition as Philo did.

Paul could accept circumcision as a symbol, as Philo had, but could not accept the imperative of performing a symbol. In fact, he believed that to do so only distracted one from the true goal. Paul believed that Torah was temporal. It was given in history; time existed prior to Sinaitic revelation. Thus it is not the essence of God. In fact, Torah was given through intermediaries-angels-according to some accounts. Thus it could hardly be viewed as binding. Paul preferred what he called the "law of nature" [Romans 2:14-15 and 7] which prompts one to act out of concern for salvation. In Paul's formulation, salvation can only be obtained through Jesus because only Jesus can atone for human sin.

Paul requires a new reference point on which to focus the manifestation of Truth, as he understands it. He finds this in Jesus as Christ. Paul understands Jesus's crucifixion to be a means to transforming the physical ("natural") in human beings into the spiritual ("pneumatic"). Interestingly, Paul laid greater stress on Jesus's death than on the resurrection. This is probably because his brand of

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<sup>18</sup>Sandmel, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

salvation emphasized the conquering (i.e. death) of the physical nature. The crucifixion is the fulfillment of the salvific goal of separating the body from the mind or spirit and of putting the first aside in favor of the latter.

It is also important to point out that Paul believed that the second coming of Jesus would be the climax of the new era which began with Jesus's birth. Since the fundamental human problem demanding correction was not Jewish sin (i.e. human *action*) but rather Greek sin (i.e. human *nature*), only an apocalypse could bring about the needed change. Torah cannot prepare one for the apocalypse any more than it can modify human nature. It is likely that Paul thought that observance of Jewish law merely provided one with a false sense of security and distracted one from the "true" goal.

Paul, like Philo, relegates law to the primary principle of attaining salvation. To say that law was "mediated by angels" is most likely another way of expressing this idea. In Hebrews we read:

Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his own will.

For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come, of which we are speaking. It has been testified somewhere, "What is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that thou carest for him? Thou didst make him for a little while lower than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet." Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, would make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified have all one origin. [Hebrews 2:1-11a]

It is clear from this passage that its author is concerned with salvation through observance. However, Sandmel has pointed out that Hebrews is not authentically Pauline. He believes it was written some 100 years after Paul. We are not in a position to judge the date and authorship of Hebrews. Even if it is a later text, it is most likely the author's understanding of the phrase "mediated by the angels" or "given through the angels" as used in Galatians 3:19 and Acts 7:53. Unfortunately, the thrust of "given through the angels" is less clear as it is used in Galatians and Acts. In any case, if circumcision is merely a symbol and not an authentic commandment, as Paul maintains, then why, Paul asks, should one bother to observe a symbol?

Sandmel's thesis explains why Paul, as Acts 15 and Galatians 2 describe, would oppose the circumcision of Gentiles. To circumcise them would serve no constructive or salvific purpose. Even more, it appears that Paul may have encouraged Jews as well to forego circumcision:

And when they heard it, they glorified God. And they said to him, "You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; they are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs. [Acts 21:20-21]

This is entirely consistent with Sandmel's reasoning.

However, we must ask: why would Paul, an ardent and presumably

sincere Hellenist, have Timothy circumcised?<sup>20</sup> There seems to be here an obvious contradiction. Again, the most reasonable explanation is expediency. Paul wished to avoid the recriminations to which he would be subjected by the Jews were he to bring Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman, with him into the diaspora synagogues uncircumcised. Yet if Paul truly believed as Sandmel suggests, would he not have opposed circumcision at all costs? Perhaps Paul thought that to become embroiled in heated debates with the Jews over Timothy's lack of circumcision was more distracting from the ultimate goal than to submit to circumcision this once was. According to Acts 16:3 which recounts this episode, Timothy was circumcised at the beginning of Paul's second missionary journey, which Bligh<sup>21</sup> dates at 49 or 50 C.E. According to Bligh, 1 Corinthians, Galatians and Romans were written during Paul's third missionary journey and Philipians and Colossians were written while Paul was in Roman captivity for the first time. All of the Pauline passages which discuss the issue of circumcision in theological detail derive from the third missionary journey and the first Roman captivity which followed it.

Viewed from the historical presepective, we may see here evidence of development in Paul's thinking. It may be that early in his career Paul had Timothy circumcised in order to avoid undue confrontation with the Jews and in order to gain legitimacy in their eyes as a Jew. In time, however, as his philosophical and theological ideas developed and matured, he realized that circumcision was inconsistent with his view of salvation and must be opposed on principle. Thus, in Acts 21:21, which

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<sup>20</sup>Acts 16:1-3.

<sup>21</sup>Bligh.



dates to the end of the third missionary journey, we find Paul opposing circumcision for Jews as well as Gentiles.

We read in First Corinthians a definitive statement in which circumcision is characterized as irrelevant to the Christian:

Only, let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Every one should remain in the state in which he was called. [1 Corinthians 7:17-20]

At first glance, it appears that this passage confirms Sandmel's thesis. Neither "circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision" because circumcision is merely a symbol, a distraction. It is not true salvation nor is it a vehicle to salvation. We should examine the context in which the statement appears, however. The writer of the epistle (presumably Paul) is advising the members of the Church in Corinth not to change their situation in any drastic way. Those who are married should remain so. Those who are single should not marry. Those who are circumcised should not try to remove the scars of the operation. Paul is sure that the second coming of Jesus is imminent; in verse 29 he remarks that "time is short." Major changes involving circumcision or marital status would only serve to distract one from preparing for the apocalypse. Hence, Sandmel's thesis is upheld.

Paul, as Sandmel noted, is concerned first and foremost with salvation as he understands it. In Acts 15 we encounter the notion that circumcision brings salvation. This idea is credited to those from Judea who are criticized by the apostles Paul and Barnabas for encouraging Gentile converts to Christianity to observe the rite of circumcision.



But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." [Acts 15:1]

And again in verse 5, the Pharisees are made to assert the necessity for circumcision. True, salvation is not mentioned here, but when the apostle Peter addresses the Council, he confirms that the underlying issue is, indeed, salvation:

The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." [Acts 15:6-11]

Salvation, it is claimed, comes through grace alone. It is not reserved for Jews alone; Jews, though distinguished by the mark of circumcision, are not set aside for divine salvation. Rather, all people have equal access to salvation: faith has replaced circumcision as the mechanism.

Yet in Galatians 5, Paul is made to say that one who is circumcised is obligated to observe all the *mitzvot*. The full passage reads:

Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you. A little leaven leavens the whole lump. I have confidence in

the Lord that you will take no other view than mine; and he who is troubling you will bear his judgment, whoever he is. But if I, brethren, still preach circumcision, why am I still persecuted? In that case the stumbling block of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves! [Galatians 5:2-15]

Initially, this passage seems to contradict the conclusion in verse 6 that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail" and the statement in Galatians 6:15 "for neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision..." Lightfoot explains that "circumcision is the seal of the law" and therefore:

He who willingly and deliberately undergoes circumcision enters upon a compact to fulfil the law. To fulfil it therefore he is bound, and he cannot plead the grace of Christ, for he has entered on another mode of justification.<sup>22</sup>

Does this mean that Paul recognized a separate, yet equally effective, mode for attaining salvation? Does this place Jewish ritual observances and *halachah* on a par with Christian faith and Jesus's grace in Pauline thinking? It may be that his passage reflects a transitional period in which Paul acknowledged that the "old way" of *mitzvot* was, in its time, the way to seek salvation, but it has now being surpassed by a new and superior mode. Alternatively, we might understand this as a sarcastic way of saying that Jews have made the wrong choice and must now live with their decision. Lightfoot points to the phrase *ὑπὸ πνεύματι* in Galatians 5:5 which is alternatively rendered "for through the Spirit" (Revised Standard Version) and "by the Spirit" (Lightfoot). He implies that a comparison is intended here, which asserts not only the superiority of the Christian way, but the obsolescence of the Jewish

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<sup>22</sup>Lightfoot, p. 203.

way:

St. Paul had before pronounced a direct and positive condemnation of circumcision. He here directly qualifies this condemnation. Circumcision is neither better nor worse than uncircumcision in itself (see especially 1 Cor. vii 18-20, Gal. vi 15). The false sentiment which attends it, the glorifying in the flesh, makes the difference, and calls down the rebuke.<sup>23</sup>

He further states that

Circumcision, under the law and to the Jews was the token of a covenant. To the Galatians under the Gospel dispensation it had no such significance. It was merely a bodily mutilation, as such differing rather in degree than in kind from the terrible practices of the heathen priests.<sup>24</sup>

The central issue in the comparison, he notes, is the contrast between the Spirit on the one hand and the law (which symbolizes the flesh) on the other. Flesh and law are closely allied since both move in the sphere of outward, material things. Law provokes the flesh. It distracts from the spirit. Therefore it must be renounced.

The liberation mentioned in Galatians 5:13 is the freedom from the physical self (symbolized by circumcision) to pursue a purely spiritual salvation. Hence the metaphor of slavery and bondage versus freedom is employed: The Christian desires freedom from the law (i.e. *halachah*) in order freely to become a slave to Christianity and thereby attain ultimate freedom. Bring notes in this regard:

The liberation is freedom from the necessity of seeking one's own righteousness; but it is also freedom to serve in love (Gal. 5:14). Here on earth that freedom is realized in a constant conflict between "the flesh" and the Spirit, between "the old man" and "the new." Being a slave of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19; 7:22; 9:17) is not bondage under external constraint, for the Christian does the will of God from the

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 207.

heart (cf. Eph. 6:6). He is freed from the slavery of sin in order to become a servant of righteousness (Rom. 6:17,22).<sup>25</sup>

The dichotomy is clear. Faith has replaced the observance of *mitzvot*. Grace has replaced circumcision as the means to salvation.

Bring claims, on the basis of Paul's presumed Pharisaic background [cf. Acts 22:3] that Paul thought he had merely received a "new interpretation" which was consistent with the rabbinic model.<sup>26</sup> Bring's hypothesis seems highly unlikely. The epistles attributed to Paul frequently speak of a "new way" and here, in Romans 6:15, a "new creation" or a "new creature" (*κτίσις*). Lightfoot<sup>27</sup> connects this term with the notion of a ה'ר'ג ה'ר'ג (new covenant) implying that the Jewish covenant has been violated in favor of a new contract facilitated by Jesus's life and sealed by his death. It is not clear how Lightfoot moves from *κτίσις* (creation) to *διαθήκη* (covenant); perhaps through the similarity in the Hebrew of ה'ר'ג and ה'ר'ג. He does not say. However, the implication is clear. Christianity is a new entity, not a continuation or modification of Judaism. Bring rightly points out that Paul does not want to "liberate the gospel from the Old Testament" but rather to show that the Hebrew Bible testifies to righteousness by faith rather than law.<sup>28</sup> Paul intends to maintain the text of the Bible but to reinterpret it in such a way that he steers the Christian community away from Judaism<sup>29</sup>: Christianity will no longer accept even the most basic tenets and practices of Judaism.

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<sup>25</sup>Bring, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>27</sup>Lightfoot.

<sup>28</sup>Bring, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup>Sandmel makes this claim as well.

Bring affirms this when he points out the incompatibility of salvation through faith, as Paul prescribed, and salvation through law:

If they sought to combine faith with such a means of salvation as righteousness by the law, faith would no longer be active. In that case they had forsaken faith. Being united with Christ meant *not* to seek righteousness through the law. Whoever sought righteousness and life through the law, therefore, had forsaken grace and faith.<sup>30</sup>

Lightfoot concurs that this marked the dividing line between the two communities, Jews and Christians:

Even the profession of Jesus as Messiah by the Christians was a less formidable obstacle to their intercourse with the Jews than their abandonment of the law.<sup>31</sup>

Lightfoot's statement has far-reaching implications. Does he mean to tell us that Jews were concerned only with keeping the law and did not care about belief? Does he mean to imply that Judaism is a purely legalistic and ritualistic tradition in which beliefs play little or no role? Would he conclude that Jews would be more likely to accept, and interact with, Jewish-Christians who observed circumcision, *kashrut* and other Jewish rituals, but who professed Jesus as the messiah, than with those Jews who shared their theology but did not observe many Jewish laws? We see here revealed more of Lightfoot's attitude toward Judaism than we do of Paul's, most likely. Polan points out that Paul feared that circumcision would mitigate the universality of the salvific effect of Jesus's sacrifice.<sup>32</sup> Circumcision was understood to mark the unique covenant the Jews enjoyed with God. Hence Paul actually went further

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<sup>30</sup>Bring, p. 237.

<sup>31</sup>Lightfoot, p. 222.

<sup>32</sup>S.M. Polan, "Circumcision," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967, III, pp. 878-9.



than to claim circumcision was "unnecessary" and "worthless." He sought to show the Galatians<sup>33</sup> that it was wrong and sinful to observe the law, because observance of the law undermined the Christian presumption of salvation through faith.

Before leaving Galatians 5-6 we ask: who are those who, according to Galatians 6:12, attempt to compel the Christians to adopt the rite of circumcision? They are often identified with the derogatory term "Judaizers." The text reads οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι. Hirsch, Munck and Harvey all point out that this is the present passive form, indicating a group which is currently submitting to circumcision.<sup>34</sup> These, they conclude, must be adult Gentiles who are converting to Christianity. This contradicts the Tübingen School of thought which had argued that the "Judaizers" were Jewish-Christians who maintained close ties to the Jerusalem apostles. The presumption is that the Jerusalem apostles favored circumcision. This is based on the theory that there was a fierce rivalry between Peter and Paul. However, as we noted, Acts 15 does not support this contention. Bring concurs with Munck. He attempts to paint a picture of relative harmony among the Christian apostles. He depicts each as working in a different geographical locale and all committed to the same enterprise. The "Judaizers," Bring explains, did favor circumcision and certain other Jewish ritual observances, but did so only in order to avoid persecution. This is supported by Galatians 6:12. Bring attributes this to the fact that Judaism was a recognized religion in the Roman Empire. If Christians could identify themselves as

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<sup>33</sup>See Lightfoot on Galatians 2.

<sup>34</sup>Robert Jewett, "The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation," *New Testament Studies*, 17 (1970-71), pp. 198-212.



a sect of Judaism (perhaps as a messianic offshoot) then they would receive the same protection afforded the Jews.<sup>35</sup> This is a compelling explanation because it speaks to what must have been urgent human fears and needs toward the end of the first century, C.E. Christianity, as an illicit religion would have endangered its adherents. Hence they existed in a liminal state between Judeo-Christianity (where Christianity was seen as a Jewish sect) and the assertion of an independent Christian theology and religious-legal system as implied by Paul's preachings.

Jewett presents a difference approach. He asks why Hellenists would wish to enter the Jewish covenant at all. He suggests that the promise of perfection inherent in the covenant of circumcision would have appealed to them.<sup>36</sup> He notes that the term *ἐπιτελειῶτε* is employed in Galatians 3:3. Here the writer criticizes the Christians for even entertaining the thought that there might be some validity to the law. In verse 3, we read:

οὕτως ἀνόητοί ἐστε? ἔναρξάμενοι πνεύματι νῦν σαρκὶ  
ἐπιτελειῶτε?

Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you  
now ending with the flesh? [Galatians 3:3]

Jewett translates *ἐπιτελειῶτε* as "complete." However, "finish" or "end" is more likely, in contrast with "having begun." Jewett bases his translation on the Septuagint reading of Genesis 17:1, in which God commands Abraham בְּנֵי אֱבְרָהָם, to be complete. The Septuagint

<sup>35</sup>Bring, p. 287.

<sup>36</sup>Jewett, p. 207.

renders ר'נן as τελείως. Hence Jewett reads ר'נן into Galatians 3:3. The use of ר'נן or τελείως in Genesis 17:1 is followed immediately by the making of a covenant between God and Abraham which includes the commandment to observe circumcision on the eighth day of life. Thus Jewett connects the notion of perfection-through-circumcision to Paul's argument of faith-versus-law in Galatians 3. He notes that the promise of perfection would have had a powerful appeal to people familiar with Greek mystery religions. In fact, Betz<sup>17</sup> terms Galatians a "magical letter" because both curse and blessing were carried in it. The Galatians were called upon to choose between salvation and condemnation.

Jewett's idea, though intriguing, seems fatally flawed. Even if we could accept the extended association from ר'נן in the Hebrew, to τελείως in the Septuagint, to the juxtaposed idea of covenant, to circumcision which is a condition of the covenant, to σαρκί (flesh) mentioned in Galatians 3:3, to ἐπιτελεῖσθαι which is more likely "end" than "complete" in this context anyway, we would still have to explain why Hellenists would accept the notion that bodily mutilation can bring spiritual perfection. In fact, Paul states in Galatians 5:12:

I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves!  
[Galatians 5:12]

Surely he must have believed that bodily mutilation would repulse the Galatians. Thus Jewett's idea does not seem highly likely.

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<sup>17</sup>Hans Dieter Betz, "The Literary Composition and Function of Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *New Testament Studies* 21 (1975), pp. 353-379.

The fifth and sixth chapters of Galatians complete the argument begun in Galatians 2, 3 concerning circumcision. In Galatians 2,3 Paul asserted the dogma that Jesus had brought a new route to salvation, a road paved with faith rather than obedience to law. He justified this with the example of Abraham, quoting the famous phrase in Genesis 15:6 והאברהם א'היה ו'תשברו לו צדקה. Abraham earned salvation through faith, Paul claims. Since the verse quoted above precedes Abraham's circumcision, Paul has reasoned that circumcision is not necessary and that Abraham was justified purely through faith:

Thus Abraham, "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." So you see that it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. [Galatians 3:6-9]

Having said this, it is a small step to assert, as Paul does in verses 8,9 that those who follow Abraham's example of faith are superior to those who obey the law: they are the true followers of Abraham's tradition.<sup>38</sup> They are the true Israel, inheritors of Abraham's covenant with God.<sup>39</sup> This being the case, chapters five and six logically conclude that to perform the circumcision rite and obey Jewish law is to reject the route to salvation mapped out by Abraham's faith.

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. [Galatians 5:4-6]

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<sup>38</sup>Galatians 3:14.

<sup>39</sup>Galatians 6:16 and 3:29.

In fact, it is tantamount to rejecting Jesus who confirmed that faith is superior to the law. As Bring writes:

The Israel which rejected Christ misused and perverted the law. A new way for salvation of the chosen people, through the conversion of the Gentiles, corresponds to a new way of understanding and applying the law as fulfilled in Christ. If the Gentiles were to practice circumcision and observe the law, they would adopt apostate Israel's conception of the law. Using the law and circumcision as a means of attaining righteousness was tantamount to rejection of Christ.\*\*

The Jews' failure to obey the law is an oft-recurring theme in the Epistles. Bring implies that Paul was a continuation of Judaism—perhaps a correction of a contemporary veering from the "straight path." Bring's claim supports his contention that Christianity is the legitimate continuation of the inheritance of Abraham, the true Israel after Jesus and that Judaism is a perverse vestige of an obsolete religion. He would probably cite Romans 3:21-26 to support his claim. As we have shown, however, Paul seemed to know he was creating something altogether new and different and reveled in it. Calling for an end to circumcision reflects awareness. It may have been expedient, however, for Paul to couch his theological claims as a legitimate continuation of Judaism rather than as a new entity; to do so would have given the apostle one foot in the door to begin with.

The theme of Abraham's justification by faith is repeated in the Epistle to the Romans. Chapters two through four deal with the heart of the matter in detail: It is better to be a Jew who obeys the law than to be a Christian and hope to be justified by faith alone. Paul calls on the example of Abraham to support his argument. We find Paul's

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\*\*Bring, p. 75.

dissertation on Abraham in Romans 4.<sup>41</sup>

In Romans 4, Paul argues that Abraham was credited with righteousness prior to his circumcision on account of his faith in God. He clearly refers to Genesis 15:6: והאמן ביהוה ויחשבה לו צדקה. Circumcision, it is claimed, came afterward and was an entirely separate matter. It functioned to *seal* the righteousness which had already been imputed to Abraham. It was not, in itself, the righteousness. Hence Abraham is the father of all those who believe, as he did, rather than of all those who are circumcised. Further, Paul argues, the promises of the Land and progeny rewarded Abraham's faith, not his circumcision.

Paul here terms Abraham's circumcision "a sign or seal".<sup>42</sup> These terms will become very important when we turn to examine the Church Fathers, Jewish texts and circumcision liturgy. Best<sup>43</sup> comments that circumcision is only a sign of the Scriptures which God has *entrusted* to the Jews<sup>44</sup> but which do not *belong* to them. As Bring<sup>45</sup> has noted, Paul did not want to "liberate the gospel from the Old Testament" but rather to show that the Bible testifies to righteousness by faith rather than law. As Wilken has noted:

During the first three centuries Christian thinkers were forced to develop a systematic and thoroughgoing interpretation of the Old Testament. Christian tradition made clear that the Old Testament was to be kept in the Church. Marcion's attempt to discard it was never widely accepted. Christians claimed that they were rightful inheritors of the patrimony of Israel and believed that they were faithful to this inheritance. At the same time, Christians knew they were not the same as Jews and had to

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<sup>41</sup>See Appendix C.

<sup>42</sup>Romans 4:11.

<sup>43</sup>Ernest Best, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 34.

<sup>44</sup>See Romans 3:2.

<sup>45</sup>Bring, p. 10.

demonstrate not only their faithfulness to the Old Testament, but also the new import of their teaching, since, in Barnabas's words, we follow the 'new law of the Lord Jesus Christ' [Barnabas 2:6]. In short, Christian interpreters had to show what was *old* and what was *new* about the Christian revelation and interpretation of the Bible.<sup>46</sup>

But the matter goes much deeper. A *seal* to righteousness is not, as Bring<sup>47</sup> points out, a *means* to righteousness. Circumcision itself cannot bring salvation. It can only symbolize salvation attained through another means.

Paul seems to understand the function of circumcision in Jewish tradition as a human confirmation of the obligation to obey the law in order to participate in God's covenant with Abraham:

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God. [Romans 2:25-29]

I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. [Galatians 5:3]

If one was circumcised yet failed to observe properly the other Jewish statutes, one had abrogated his side of the covenant. In this regard, Best comments:

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<sup>46</sup>Robert L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 16.

<sup>47</sup>Bring, p. 34.



Since God had also prescribed *the law* for his people, *circumcision* became the outward sign of one who lived by *the law*. Paul argues that this connexion between *the law* and *circumcision* cannot be severed and that therefore to *break the law* render's the Jew's *circumcision* invalid, and he becomes subject to God's judgement in the same way as the Gentile who has not been circumcised.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, the circumcision is not a guarantee of salvation if it is not accompanied by obedience to the law. This implies that circumcision is merely a symbol, a mark of an oath or pledge to live by *halachah* rather than a covenant in and of itself.

Paul's conclusion is stated clearly in Romans 2:29:

He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God. [Romans 2:29]

Circumcision of the flesh will avail one nothing. Circumcision (the commitment to be part of the covenant made between God and Abraham) is a matter of the heart, not the flesh. It means nothing to circumcise yourself (i.e. sign the contract) if you do not fulfill its terms. The contract is voided by your failure to live up to it. The signature (i.e. the circumcision) then means nothing. It is as if you had never signed at all. The circumcision becomes ἀκροβυστία (uncircumcision). Hence, Paul writes:

ἡ περιτομή οὐδὲν ἐστίν, καὶ ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδὲν ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ τήρησις ἐντολῶν Θεοῦ.

For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. [1 Corinthians 7:19]<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>Best, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup>Here Paul talks about the ἐντολῆς (commandments) rather than the νόμος (the law). The term νόμος is used in the Romans 2:25-29 passage quoted above. It is clear that νόμος refers to *halachah*, the Jewish formulation of God's will, while ἐντολῆς are those moral dicta which

Fitzmyer points out that Paul sought to do away with the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles and surely we see that here. Paul's overriding concerns are the sinful nature of humankind (as Sandmel aptly pointed out) and the importance of salvation. Thus he compares Jews, who have circumcision, to Gentiles, who do not:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one... [Romans 3:9,10]"

Hence, salvation is in the universal domain. All have equal access. But Paul controls the mode; he has determined that one must have faith in Jesus as the messiah.

#### 1.4.3 "The New Circumcision"

Paul then takes the next logical step. Having interpreted circumcision as a "sign" or "symbol" through exegesis on Genesis 15:6, he speaks about an abstract, theological circumcision which Christians can attain. This circumcision gives priority to the spirit over the flesh. This new circumcision, a circumcision of the faithful, is the "true circumcision":

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in the flesh. Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But

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Paul considers still binding on Christians. It is not within the scope of this study to examine the distinction between *ἐντολῆς* and *νόμος*, but a cursory reading of the epistles suggests that the *ἐντολῆς* are similar to the Noahide laws, while the *νόμος* refers to *halachah*.

whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. [Philippians 3:2-12]

The confidence spoken of here is undoubtedly the confidence of being assured salvation (in Jewish terms קצו נסיון) because one is circumcised. Paul expressed the belief that bodily circumcision is worse than useless: it is a "loss," a detriment. Only faith will assure salvation.

These ideas are echoed in Colossians 2:11-15:

In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, having canceled the bond which stood against us with its legal demands; this he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him. [Colossians 2:11-15]

We see that Paul, having attacked the tradition of circumcision, has also planted the seeds of a different spiritual circumcision which derives from faith rather than action. The Church Fathers will develop this idea extensively, as we will see in chapter three. The rabbis will, in their own way, respond to Paul's assertion; we will examine their responses in chapters four and five.

### 1.5 Summary

In this chapter, we have surveyed all the passages in the Christian New Testament in which a term connoting circumcision appears. We have seen that the terms περιτέμνω and περιτομή are used incidentally to refer to Jews ("the circumcised ones") as anecdotal or biographical facts, and as an important focus of Paul's theology. In the case of references to "the circumcised ones," we examined Colossians 3:11 and Ephesians 2:11-16. We saw that the term "the circumcised ones" emphasized Judaism's particularity as against Christianity's universalism. The anecdotal accounts of the circumcisions of John and Jesus in the Gospel of Luke illustrated that circumcision was assumed to be necessary during the lifetime of Jesus. It was only later, during Paul's apostleship, that its practice became an issue. The discrepancy between Timothy's circumcision and Titus's exemption may reflect a transitional period. Timothy, born to a Jewish woman, was circumcised for the sake of custom and political expediency. Titus was made an example to Gentile proselytes, however. Paul staunchly rejected the suggestion that he ought to be circumcised. We also examined the argument concerning Shabbat observance (John 7:22) in this section and pointed out that the ostensible question was whether or not circumcision possessed salvific power. We cited Mishna Shabbat 18:3 and 19:1,2 which give circumcision priority over Shabbat and Exodus 4:24-26 which suggests that Gershom was saved by being circumcised. We further suggested that underlying the issue raised in John 7:22 may be the question of authority: Whose authority takes precedence? Is it that of the rabbis or that of Jesus, who claimed direct revelation from God?

Next we examined the references to circumcision contained within the Book of Acts and the Epistles. We noted that they fall into three broad categories. The first category contains those passages which speak of a circumcision party (Acts 11:2, Titus 1:10 and Galatians 2). Who are these people? Are they Jewish-Christians? Pharisees? We could not identify them with certainty; however, we did point out that the passages in which they appear give evidence of Christianity breaking away from Judaism. The authority of the Jewish tradition and the Pharisees or rabbis who legislated concerning circumcision was not only questioned, but rejected by Paul. For him, this was not merely a political issue but also a theological one.

We then looked at the accounts of the meeting of the Apostolic Council (Acts 15:19 and Galatians 2:3) at which Paul argued against the need for Christians to become circumcised. Bligh argued that the significance of these accounts lies in the fact that they give evidence that the Church had decided not to be a Jewish sect any longer. Lightfoot contended that these passages reflect a power struggle between Cephas and James, the apostles to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas, the apostles to the Gentiles. We suggested a third interpretation, based on the fact that the Galatian account fails to record an official decision in Paul's favor. We suggested that these accounts may reflect a carving out of missionary territory. Circumcision was a vehicle for defining one's field of authority, identity and loyalties.

We also asked what Paul said specifically about the effects of circumcision, its merits and its dangers. We began with an extensive comparison of Paul's and Philo's views of salvation. We noted that both

shared a Hellenistic conception of salvation. Both saw religious laws and rituals as mere symbols of greater truths. Their difference lay in their loyalties. Since Philo maintained a strong attachment to the Jewish world, he interpreted the performance of *mitzvot* as a didactic vehicle for attaining truth and salvation. Paul, however, did not maintain an attachment to Judaism. He saw no merit in performing symbols-of-truths. Most likely, he viewed rituals and legal considerations as distractions from the pure pursuit of truth. He made Jesus's crucifixion his ground, rather than Judaism. We also noted that Paul's early experiences with Jews in his attempts to convert them undoubtedly influenced him in a negative manner.

Paul argued that circumcision represents the old, obsolete mode of salvation which is Jewish law. In 1 Corinthians 7:17-20, he termed circumcision, a symbol of all of Jewish law, irrelevant for Christians. Salvation is attained through grace alone. Righteousness is imputed for faith, as testified to in the Hebrew Bible [Genesis 15:6]. Circumcision is not only useless, but actually an impediment to real salvation. Under this new condition, brought by Jesus's death, circumcision functions as a distraction from the pure pursuit of faith. It reflects a preoccupation with the flesh which undermines the spiritual quest for salvation. Bring claimed that Paul believed his interpretation to be consistent with the rabbinic model. We rejected Bring's thesis, since many passages depict Paul castigating and denying not only rabbinic rulings but also the traditional Jewish authority structure. Lightfoot implied that Judaism was concerned with acts alone and did not care about belief. This, too, we rejected as merely a polemical statement.



Jewett suggested that circumcision was considered to perfect or complete the human body and therefore should have appealed to Hellenists who esteemed physical perfection. We pointed out, however, that in Galatians 5:12, circumcision is termed mutilation.

We then discussed, at length, the contention made by Paul in Romans 4 that Abraham was justified by faith.

Finally, we discussed Paul's re-interpretation of circumcision. Paul abstracted circumcision to mean a commitment to seek salvation which ruled out observance of the *halachah*. Hence he could write about a "new circumcision" which was a matter of the heart, rather than the flesh. The new circumcision was both spiritual and universal.

Throughout this chapter we have seen that circumcision comes to represent much more than the procedure it is. It symbolizes Jewish law, the belief in salvation through observance and loyalty to rabbinic authority. In the next chapter we will explore the past three centuries of Christian scholarship on Pauline Christianity and circumcision in the early Church. We have referred to several Christian scholars in this chapter. In chapter two we will treat the world of Christian New Testament scholarship systematically, giving a general overview as well as exploring several narrow and related areas of interest.

## Chapter 2

### Christian Scholars on Pauline Christianity and Circumcision

#### 2.1 Introduction

We noted in the preceding chapter that the bulk of serious discussion about the meaning and significance of circumcision falls within the domain of the Epistles credited to Paul's hand. Of the nearly twenty-five pericopae studied, more than fifteen appear in the Epistles. Virtually all others are found in the Book of Acts and are related directly to Paul's missionary activities. It is therefore important for us to examine Pauline theology more closely and to survey the Christian scholarship on Paul and his writings. This, then, will be the goal of this chapter.

Claude G. Montefiore pioneered Jewish scholarship in early Jewish-Christian relations. Having seen various schools of thought emphasize, respectively, the Pharisaic or "rabbinic" influence on Paul, the Hellenistic influence, the revelatory influence, the apostolic experience as it influenced him and even hints of the psychological aspect, Montefiore leveled the following criticism at the Christian scholars' attitude toward Paul's background:

Anything you disliked or disagreed with in Paul's writings, any weakness or crudity in argument or theory, any superstition or credulity, you called a Rabbinic survival, and the whole matter was explained, excused or set aside. All the good things, or the things which you happened to think good and true, were new and original and Christian and Pauline...<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Claude G. Montefiore, *Judaism and Saint Paul* (London: Max Goschen, 1914), p. 20.

Montefiore further claimed that the scholarship in the field of early Christianity with which he was familiar reflected the bias of the people who had done it. Christian scholars, he maintained, had been taught to disdain Judaism, the rabbis and the Talmud. Few if any, he asserted, could even read primary rabbinic texts themselves. He then launched into a defense of rabbinic Judaism, noting that Christian scholars missed the "spirit" of rabbinic Judaism in reducing it to mere dry legalism. He goes so far as to write that "Faith and works were part of a single whole."<sup>51</sup>

Montefiore criticizes Jewish scholars as well. He castigates them for doing the same thing: for looking to find fault with Christianity. In the end, Montefiore calls for an objective approach to scholarship. He writes:

Some of us have come to realize that there are varieties of saintliness, different types of righteousness, and that one must not judge any religion by the picture drawn of it by an antagonist or a convert.<sup>52</sup>

## 2.2 Christian Scholars: A Chronological View

With Montefiore's criticism in mind, we embark on a brief survey of the Christian scholarship pertaining to Paul. Christian scholarship on Paul can be divided roughly into centuries. Prior to the eighteenth century, scripture was held to be a mine of credal proof texts. E. Earle Ellis notes that at this time "exegesis became the servant of dogma."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>53</sup>E. Earle Ellis, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 17.

The eighteenth century, however, brought a reaction from pietists and rationalists who sought to separate exegesis from credal conclusions, though for differing reasons. Philology, which ruled the academic world, ruled Christian scholarship as well. J.S. Semler and J.D. Michaels are generally credited with pioneering the development of literary-historical criticism. They pioneered the examination of the cultural influences on Paul. Philology served historical criticism, however, because these scholars sought to demonstrate the disparity between Paul's non-Jewish ideas and the very Jewish ideas of the Jewish-Christian party.

With the nineteenth century came the rise of the Tübingen School of thought in Germany. These nineteenth century German exegetes ruled the Christian academic world for a long time. It was their tendency to call into doubt the authenticity of the Epistles. In fact, they cast doubt on all but five letters, arguing on essentially literary grounds. The "ultra-radicals" within the Tübingen School questioned whether any literature now extant is genuinely Pauline in origin. They noted that the Book of Acts knows no Pauline letters. They further pointed out that discrepancies in Romans and Galatians suggest several authors, though Christian tradition ascribes both to Paul. F.C. Bauer claimed that Paulinism was essentially the Hellenization of Christianity, a claim very similar to Sandmel's. He even claimed that Paulinism was a second century gnostic party which produced the letters in question in order to assert its own authority. In the end, Ellis notes, the radicals convinced only themselves.

Ferdinand Christian Bauer, who is one of the leading figures in the Tübingen School and the author of *Symbolik und Mythologie*, sought to test the authenticity of the Epistles (the overriding concern of scholars in the nineteenth century being the question of authenticity) through "positive criticism." He asked: What is the document's true historical setting and meaning? Bauer's work was ruled by Hegelian philosophy and so he sought the dialectic. As a Hegelian, he viewed all historical movements in three parts: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. As an example of this we take 1 Corinthians 1:10-13:

I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement. For it has been reported to me by Chlo'e's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apol'los," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? [1 Corinthians 10:13]

The *thesis*, according to Bauer, is Paul as the apostle to the Greeks. Paul is in conflict with the "narrow Jewish Christianity" of the original disciples, who comprise the *antithesis*. The *synthesis*, or solution to the conflict is that the threat of Gnosticism provoked catholic unity late in the second century.

Bauer's Hegelian idealism led him to view Paul as the Hellenizer of Christianity. He explained his thesis in terms of the "Spirit" given Paul through his union with the Christ. This distinctive union was forged by faith.

Bauer pioneered the literary hypothesis that the Christian New Testament was written over the course of several centuries and reflects

the development of the Church from the initial opposition between Paul and the primitive Church in Jerusalem to the unified Catholic Church.<sup>54</sup>

More conservative scholars, who are identified with the Tübingen School, such as J.C.K. von Hofmann, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and A. Ritschl, attacked Bauer's views. They rejected the conflict theory, preferring to emphasize early Christian apostolic unity. Much of their work was done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, a group of German scholars sought a unifying concept to explain all the Pauline writings, which often seemed disparate, if not contradictory. The "Reformation" they led emphasized "justification by faith" and "righteousness" as the criteria for judging whether a given letter was authentically Pauline. Among these scholars was R.A. Lipsius who distinguished between two views of redemption: the juridical view which spoke of "justification" and the ethical view which he associated with the phrase "new creation" (κτίσις). Herman Lüdemann took Lipsius's dichotomy one step further. These two views of redemption, he asserted, rested on two corresponding views of humankind. The juridical view was grounded in the early Jewish legalistic approach. It is to be contrasted with the later ethical-physical transformation from flesh to spirit through communion with the "Holy Spirit." The underlying polemic in his legal-versus-moral distinction need not be spelled out. Richard Kabisch's contribution to this enterprise was to define redemption more succinctly as the deliverance from coming judgment. Albert Schweitzer built on Lüdemann's and Kabisch's work. He recognized Paul's Jewish thought patterns,

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<sup>54</sup>Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (Virginia: John Knox Press, 1959).



emphasizing the Jewish nature of his ideas even to the exclusion of all other influences. In this manner, he opposed Bauer who emphasized only the Hellenistic dualisms of flesh/spirit, light/dark, dying/rising, etc. Schweitzer maintained that Paul interpreted Jesus's death as eschatological. When the world did not, in fact, end, Paul posited a "physical mysticism." He created sacraments whereby all could share in the resurrection. The union effected by the sacraments guaranteed the believer salvation in the *parousia*. Schweitzer's work set the stage for twentieth-century eschatologically oriented scholarship.

Before we move into the twentieth century, let us look at the British and American scholarship of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century British and American scholars, led by J.B. Lightfoot, tended to relate Paul to contemporary Jewish thought, as had Schweitzer. F.W. Farrar and H.St.J. Thacheray were prominent in this regard. In general, they accepted the epistles as genuine, in disagreement with the Tübingen School's reconstruction. There were exceptions, of course. The Americans B.W. Bacon and A.C. McGiffert judged the Pastorals to be inauthentic. The British scholars followed Lightfoot in placing them after Acts.

Scholarship in the twentieth century was dominated by what might be termed the "History of Religion" school. Christian scholars focused on new questions: What was the relation between Paul and Jesus? What were the sources of Paul's thought? What role did eschatology play in Paul's theology? The question of authorship remained in the forefront, but the literary conjectures of the Tübingen School were dismissed. Johannes Munck complained that the historical conjectures derived from

them should have been revised accordingly, since the literary analysis on which they were based had been called into question.<sup>88</sup> The result is that early Christianity is reduced to a rivalry between Jewish-Christians, who are essentially Jewish except for their belief that Jesus is the messiah, and the Gentile Christians, who are represented by Paul.

Munck proposed an historical revision. He suggested that the Jerusalem Church, dominated by the original disciples, had no interest in excluding or "Judaizing" Gentiles. In this he differed from earlier Hegelians who had proposed a conflict between the Jerusalem Church and Paul. Munck maintained that it was uniquely Paul's conviction that Gentiles should be brought to Christianity first. This was the only area in which he disagreed with the Jerusalem Church.

W. Wrede, who wrote *Paulus* (1905), asserted the thesis that Paul was not a true disciple of Jesus. In actuality, according to Wrede, Paul was a second founder of Christianity. This notion found a large audience in the twentieth century and served to fuel a great deal of argument. Those who wished to defend Christian unity in the early Church argued vociferously against it. Others found it intriguing and plausible.

During the twentieth century, many parallels between Paul and contemporary social and religious currents were noted. R. Reitzenstein and W. Bousset pointed out parallels between Pauline Christianity and the Greek mystery religions. R. Bultmann pointed out the affinity of Paul's literary style to the stoic diatribe. Gnostic elements were

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

pointed out by Lightfoot, Bousset, Bultmann and J. Weiss. Bultmann brought existential thought to his scholarship. W.D. Davies<sup>86</sup> examined Paul in the context of first century apocalyptic Judaism. W.C. van Unnik took this idea so far that he claimed Paul grew up in Jerusalem rather than Tarsus. This view is not generally regarded as correct.

The effect of the past two centuries of scholarship is being felt. Today's scholars acknowledge a diversity of factors which influenced Paul's thinking. Fitzmyer, for example, published *Pauline Theology* in 1967. In his book he lists five significant areas of influence on Paul. First he mentions Paul's Pharisaic or "rabbinic" background. He notes the claim that Paul was trained in Jerusalem, citing Philippians 3:5-6, Galatians 1:14 and 2 Corinthians 11:22. Fitzmyer next points out that the Hellenism pervaded the atmosphere of the ancient Near East during Paul's lifetime. Paul, he notes, lived in Damascus, Tarsus and Antioch between his conversion and first mission. He spoke Aramaic as his primary tongue and Greek secondarily, according to Fitzmyer. He notes in this regard, Paul's use of Greek political, commercial and legal terms. Third, he recognizes revelation as a source of influence on Paul, citing Galatians 1:16. Fitzmyer credits revelation with having prevented Paul from discarding the Bible as had the Marcionites. Fourth, Fitzmyer credits early Christian tradition (the *kerygma*), including its liturgy, hymns, confessional formulae and theological terminology, with having had an effect on Paul's thinking. Finally, Fitzmyer writes about the apostolic experience, to which he attributes great importance. We have mentioned Fitzmyer in detail to demonstrate just how far Christian

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<sup>86</sup>W.D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1970).

scholarship has come from the early days in which Paul was entirely gnostic or solely Hellenistic.

For our purposes, Fitzmyer's organization is more useful. Since we wish to determine to what extent Paul was influenced by, and reacted to, the contemporary understanding of circumcision, we will wish to distinguish between Jewish, Hellenistic, gnostic and other influences. Let us therefore present a sociological view of Christian scholarship.

### 2.3 Christian Scholars: A Sociological View

We begin with those scholars who posited a strong Hellenistic influence on Paul. They are identified primarily with the "History of Religion" School. We include here Usener, Dieterich, Anrich, Bousset, Cumont and Reitzenstein. These scholars pointed out that Paul lived most of his life in Hellenistic cities, where he undoubtedly observed the practice of Hellenistic mystery cults and was influenced by their theological concepts. This school of thought tends to regard Pauline thought as an amalgamation of mystery religions and the prophetic faith of ancient Israel.

Reitzenstein, as was noted above, pointed out what he considered the "non-Jewish" character of Pauline thought. He wrote about "gnostic" dualisms which abound in the Pauline epistles. Most popular are: πνεῦμα (spirit)/ψυχή (physical creatureliness); πνεῦμα (spirit)/σάρξ (flesh); ἔργα (work)/πίστις (faith). (Today, scholars are more conservative in appending the title gnostic; dualisms are not always considered evidence of gnosticism.<sup>57</sup>) He also pointed to the concern with ὁσιότητες (mystical

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<sup>57</sup>R. McL. Wilson, "'Jewish Gnosis' and Gnostic Origins: a Survey," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 45 (1974), pp. 177-89.

knowledge) which Paul said Christians could attain."<sup>5</sup> Reitzenstein further claimed that the notions of the deification and rebirth of Jesus, manifest in the Christian understanding of the resurrection, were essentially Hellenistic ideas. Finally, Reitzenstein pointed to vocabulary and concepts in Paul which Reitzenstein considered to be evidence of Hermetic writings.

We noted in the previous chapter Sandmel's claim that Paul's notion of salvation was, like Philo's, Hellenistic. He based this on his conclusion that Paul considered sin to be the fundamental condition of humankind: people are physical in nature and thereby flawed. To overcome sin is to overcome the flesh, to become entirely mind or spirit. Like Reitzenstein and his colleagues in the History of Religion School, Sandmel has sought to prove that some of Paul's notions were thoroughly Hellenized.

In contrast, H.J. Schoeps<sup>6</sup> has suggested that Paul received Hellenism via diaspora Judaism. He received a filtered version of Hellenism which would have taken, as its first priority, the continuation of Judaism. This is very similar to what Sandmel claimed Philo did: he made Hellenism a servant to Judaism rather than the other way around.

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<sup>5</sup>Evidence for this supposition includes the following references: 1 Corinthians 15 (spiritualizing the resurrection), 2 Corinthians 11:4 (preaching of a different Jesus), 1 Corinthians 2:8 (demonic world-rulers), Galatians 4:3,9 (enslavement to στοιχεῖα), Romans 8:20ff. (fall of creation), 1 Corinthians 2:14 and 15:44 (dualism of ψυχικός and πνευματικός), and Ephesians and Colossians in general.

<sup>6</sup>H.J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961).



There are numerous scholars who, like Schoeps, have written about the Hellenistic-Judaistic influence upon Paul. Among them are James W. Parkes<sup>66</sup> and Adolf Deissman.

Parkes (and Montefiore) identified views of Paul which did not coincide with the Palestinian schools of Judaism. These they attributed to diaspora Judaism. For example, the notion of a deified messiah (which Reitzenstein attributed to pure Hellenism), a generally pessimistic attitude toward humanity and the universalist doctrine of salvation. Deissman called Paul a "Septuagint Jew" and the Septuagint an "East-West" book. He sees in Paul the reflection of the Septuagint's views. He sees in the Septuagint the influence of Hellenism. Deissman also pointed out that the Septuagint evidences a movement toward piety which is especially clear in Jeremiah 3:19, Isaiah 18:7, 55:5 and 61:1. So, too, did Paul stress propaganda and mission to the Gentiles. As another example, Deissman claimed that the Septuagint tended to ethicize Judaism by stressing moral law, apart from the covenant. Paul, too, preached about moral law and the abrogation of the covenant. Finally, Deissman points to a move toward increased legalism (*nomos*, law) in the Septuagint. The word νόμος is frequently rendered *δικαιοσύνη*, a term Paul uses continually.

There are a few scholars who have studied the Palestinian-Judaistic influence on Paul, but they have not made tremendous head-way on the whole. Their claim that Paul spent a great deal of time in Jerusalem hinges on the R. Gamaliel legend in Acts 22:3. Despite the obvious appeal of this legend, most Christian scholars acknowledge that

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<sup>66</sup>James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (London: The Soncino Press, 1934).



the rest of the Christian New Testament implies that Paul grew up outside Palestine and visited Jerusalem on two, or at most three, occasions; each visit lasted for only a fortnight in duration.

While it is generally accepted that Paul was not a "rabbinist," as Davies and O. Michel have claimed, there is little doubt that Paul was influenced, at least indirectly (i.e. through diaspora Judaism) by Palestinian Judaism. We see strong methodological evidence of this. He engages in rabbinic exegesis, using biblical prooftexts and applying the seven hermeneutical principles of Hillel, according to Schoeps.<sup>61</sup> Schoeps further claims that Paul uses midrash in a far more authoritative manner than the rabbis and that he expresses similar concerns: חמ 73' (the evil inclination) and מאק מוס (merit of the ancestors).

Schweitzer, G.F. Moore and Goguel have examined the apocalyptic elements in Paul, attributing them to the influence of Palestinian Judaism. Schweitzer considered the apocalyptic to be a sectarian, and therefore isolated, phenomenon in Judaism. Moore placed it outside rabbinism, terming it non-normative.

The eschatological elements in Paul also testify to the influence of Palestinian Judaism on his thought. In particular, the notion of a personal messiah, the coming Day of Judgement and the doctrine of two aeons have been pointed out by Schoeps<sup>62</sup> as evidence in this regard, but they are questionable.

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<sup>61</sup>Schoeps.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

## 2.4 Problems with the Scholarship

We noted in the preceding chapter that Paul spoke of a metaphorical circumcision, spiritual in nature and somewhat mystical. It would seem that he undoubtedly was influenced by the Hellenism which pervaded his world. There is evidence of this in the texts we examined. We noted that Paul contrasted the Jewish circumcision of the flesh with the Christian spiritual circumcision. Reitzenstein had pointed out Paul's use of the πνεῦμα/σάρξ (spirit/flesh) dualism. He took this to be evidence of gnosticism, but, as Hoffman<sup>63</sup>, Wilson, Jonas<sup>64</sup>, Scholem<sup>65</sup> and others have pointed out, gnosticism may be viewed as a mode of thought related to the cultural backdrop which was prevalent in the first century C.E. rather than as a separate religion.

It is very difficult to define precisely what is Hellenistic, what is gnostic and most of all, what is Jewish in Paul. These terms do not connote cut-and-dry concepts, theologies and beliefs. For example, there was a time when Gnosticism was considered a sect, or group, with specific secret practices. Later, scholars decided that gnosticism was a religious trend which pervaded the Near East in the first century B.C.E. and first century C.E. It was distinguished by its concern with ἑνῶσις (secret knowledge), dualistic god-concept (the demi-urge) and use of literary dualism. Some scholars claimed that the use of literary dualisms reflected gnosticism. This led to the conclusion that virtually

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<sup>63</sup>Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Censoring In and Censoring Out: a Function of Liturgical Language," *Ancient Synagogues, the State of Research*, ed. Joseph Gutmann (California: Scholars Press, 1981).

<sup>64</sup>Hans Jonas, "Gnosticism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. III (1967), pp. 336-342.

<sup>65</sup>Gershom G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977).

every human endeavor in the first two centuries was gnostic. Dualisms alone do not spell gnosticism. The meaning ascribed to the dichotomy must be considered. The use of dualisms may be merely a matter of literary style; it need not reflect more serious gnostic meaning.

Often unsupported conclusions are reached on the basis of literary form. The use of the term *ἑνῶσις* is a good example. It is too rash to presume that its mere presence permits the conclusion that the *ἑνῶσις* spoken of is the same as that of the Greek mystery religions. One must determine what *ἑνῶσις* meant to the writer who used it. Similarly, it is tempting to find Hellenism in Paul's use of the term *μυστήριον* (mystery).<sup>66</sup> We might expect scholars to conclude that this reflects the influence of the Greek mystery cults. In fact, some do.

Fitzmyer, however, whose scholarship was born in the age of "the Jewish influence" writes: "*Mysterion* is an eschatological notion derived from Jewish apocalyptic sources..."<sup>67</sup> His is the age of apocalypse, Qumran and sectarianism. Therefore he identifies *μυστήριον* with אִיּוֹ and סֵתֵר, citing Daniel 2:18-19, 27-30 and 4:6. Fitzmyer *may* have fallen prey to two academic pit-falls: First he has drawn extensive conclusions about a world of influence based on the use of one term, *μυστήριον*. Second, he has sought to fit Paul into a world of thought illuminated for him by his teachers and popular in the contemporary world of academia (namely apocalyptic Judaism) even when that fit does not appear tenable. Unfortunately, young scholars are often drawn into a world of analysis with a host of presumptions that

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<sup>66</sup>See, for example, 2 Thessalonians 2:7, 1 Corinthians 2:1-2,7, Ephesians 6:19 and Colossians 1:27, 2:2.

<sup>67</sup>Fitzmeyer, p. 22.

need to be re-examined. They do not have the opportunity to do so, or fail to do so, because they are overly-influenced by the conviction of their teachers. This may account for Fitzmyer's thesis.

## 2.5 Specific Issues

We now turn to specific academic discussion which pertains to the issue of circumcision. We will begin with the general question of salvation, then move to the issue of whether sacraments played an important role in the early Church and what bearing this has on circumcision. Finally we will look at the rite of baptism which has been compared with circumcision.

In the first chapter, we spoke of Paul's notion of salvation. Sandmel suggested a Hellenistic conceptualization based on his understanding of what salvation meant to Hellenistic Jews. Sandmel has noted that the Hellenistic Jews of the diaspora adopted allegory from the Stoics, who took ancient legends about deities and refashioned them to mirror human nature. The deities were associated each with a human feature, such as the mind, the physical senses, the emotions and so on. The Jews treated the biblical legends in a similar fashion. Adam came to represent any mind, while Abraham was taken to symbolize the good mind. Abimelech was seen to symbolize the foolish mind. By reinterpreting the Bible in this manner, the Jews were able to lay claim to Greek ideas retroactively. In actuality, they had read the Hellenistic ideas into the Bible. The end result was that diaspora Jews could remain loyal to Judaism and comfortable in Greek culture.<sup>66</sup> With a holy text which spoke pure Hellenism, they needn't have felt the conflict of Jewish tradition

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<sup>66</sup>Sandmel, p. 12.

and Hellenistic culture.

Philo epitomizes the Jewish quest to reconcile Judaism with Hellenism. His treatment of Abraham is instructive because it demonstrates how the reconciliation was effected. Philo portrayed Abraham as the savior.<sup>68</sup> He was more than a man; indeed God talked to Abraham as one talks to a friend. Abraham was exalted in Philo's mind because he had the correct concept of God. It was this special knowledge which allowed Abraham to perfect himself, thereby becoming more than human. Goodenough claims that Philo presented Abraham to the Gentile world as a saving force. Having achieved the ultimate goal of leaving the physical world of passion for a true vision of God, Abraham could help others to live beyond the written law, to live by the natural law of God.

It is crucial to note how, according to Philo, Abraham attained salvation. Abraham is to be revered because he suppressed his physical passions. The episode with Hagar is interpreted by Philo to teach this.<sup>70</sup> Circumcision symbolizes the excising of physical and emotional passion, hence Abraham's circumcision plays an important role in the biblical narrative. Philo wrote in *De Migratione Abrahami* 89-94:

It is true that receiving circumcision does indeed portray the excision of pleasure and all passions, and the putting away of the impious conceit, under which the mind supposed that it was capable of begetting by its own power: but let us not on this account repeal the law laid down for circumcising... If we leap and observe these, we shall gain a clearer conception of those things of which these are the

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<sup>68</sup>Erwin R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935).

<sup>70</sup>Abraham engaged in sexual intercourse with Hagar only in order to conceive. After this, he did not touch her again. Philo further points out Abraham's emotional restraint with respect to Sarah's barrenness; he did not become extremely or uncontrollably upset.



symbols; and besides that we shall not incur the censure of the many and the charges they are to bring against us.<sup>71</sup>

It is our goal as humans, Philo taught, to follow the example of Abraham. Only by excising our passions can we attain true salvation. The route to this salvation is through law, a notion Goodenough attributes to Greek thought.<sup>72</sup> Torah, the Jewish law, reveals ultimate truths necessary for salvation. Obedience to the law is then a prerequisite for attaining salvation because it leads one down the correct path. Philo not only identified Abraham with salvation, but Jewish law with the Natural Law of God. Goodenough writes:

When one turns to Philo's notion of Jewish Law it is clear that Jewish apologetic fervor has been the inspiration of this intensified stress upon Law in general. By magnifying Law, and orienting Jewish Law with Natural Law as the Law of God, the Jew could present his religion as the solution of the Greek problem, or of the mystic search of the Hellenistic Age.<sup>73</sup>

In Goodenough's opinion, Philo is engaged in a polemic against "allegorists" who have abandoned law altogether. They sought deeper meanings in texts through allegory but considered the literal meaning, along with any obligations it implied, useless.<sup>74</sup> According to Goodenough, there was a small segment of the Jewish community which

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<sup>71</sup>From *De Migratione Abrahami* 89-94 as quoted in Goodenough, *By Light, Light*, pp. 83-84.

<sup>72</sup>Goodenough, *By Light, Light*.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>74</sup>In this context, circumcision serves as a barometer not only for Christian scholarship, as we attempt to demonstrate here, but for the theologies of Philo and Paul as well. Circumcision is under attack in the first century, C.E. Where Philo chooses to defend it with allegory, Paul opts to discard it in favor of a "new," spiritual covenant. Philo made Abraham the paradigm of salvation attained through obedience to *mitzvot*. Paul also interpreted Abraham as the model of the trans-physical human, but one who attained salvation through faith rather than through observance.



could be termed allegorists.

Paul might be termed an allegorist. His use of allegories is well known. In fact, however, he does not engage in extensive symbol exegesis with regard to Abraham. It is doubtful that he read Philo's works, although Philo preceded him by a few decades. Their geographical separation was significant; Philo was in Egypt. Yet Paul did speak about salvation and natural law and claimed that the rite of circumcision was useless vis-a-vis salvation. In Goodenough's<sup>75</sup> view, Philo used Judaism as a vehicle for expressing a mystical theology. In contrast, Davies argues that

...it is not the case that Philo used Judaism for the sake of expressing a mystic theology, but rather that he used the ideology of the mysteries for the sake of Judaism.<sup>76</sup>

Paul, like Philo, Davies tells us, used the Greek mysteries to strengthen his ground of belief: the Gospel.

The point is: Which was taken as ultimate belief, the Bible or Hellenistic ideas? Goodenough argues forcefully for Hellenism in the case of Philo as Sandmel does for both Philo and Paul. It is difficult to believe, with Davies, that Paul was essentially a "rabbinist" who was open to the influence of the mysteries. Were this true, how could he have dismissed not only rabbinic legislation but even biblical commandments so readily? Davies dislikes Goodenough's thesis because it implies "a discontinuity between Jesus and Paul, because obviously Jesus was not influenced by the mysteries."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup>Goodenough, *By Light, Light*.

<sup>76</sup>Davies, p. 98.

<sup>77</sup>Davies, p. 99.

The heart of the matter, then, is a modern theological problem for Davies. His primary concern seems to be the fear that Paul may have been a second founder of Christianity, as Wrede said. Davies prefers the interpretation of Schweitzer, whom he places at the other end of the spectrum. Schweitzer places Paul within the framework of eschatological and apocalyptic Judaism. Paul's ultimate concern is union with the messiah. Baptism, rather than faith alone, is the mechanism which facilitates the union. Here, Davies expresses disappointment, stating that Schweitzer's view is overly "mechanical." Presumably, Davies would prefer faith to baptism. But, inasmuch as Schweitzer demonstrates continuity between Jesus and Pauline mysticism, Davies is comfortable.<sup>78</sup>

Several points can be made about this argument. The first is that, at times, a scholar's analysis may be mediated by the conclusions s/he wishes to draw. In the case of Davies, he made it quite clear that he preferred to demonstrate a continuity between Jesus and Paul, rather than to admit that Paul's outlook and beliefs were significantly different than those of Jesus.

Second, we must be very careful when discussing the meaning of technical terms, such as *circumcision*, *salvation* and *baptism*, as well as academic analytical terms such as *gnostic*, *eschatological* or *apocalyptic*. In the case of religious terminology, what we think circumcision meant to one, it may not have meant to another. For example, many have compared baptism to *mikvah*, both being water-initiation rituals. Yet *mikvah* did not necessarily hold the same meaning for the Pharisees or rabbis as baptism did for Paul. And baptism for

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<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

Paul may have been different than baptism for Jesus or Peter or the early Church Fathers. Salvation is another case in point. Though Philo and Paul shared similar notions of salvation, observance of the law was a fundamental prerequisite for one, while it was a sinful distraction for the other.<sup>79</sup> Hence circumcision was a symbolic enactment of attaining salvation for the one while it was a stumbling block for the other. We have also seen, through the example of gnosticism, that terms like *gnostic*, *apocalyptic* and *messianic* are neither adequately defined nor completely understood in their ancient contexts. Many peoples were expecting an apocalypse of one sort or another in the first century. On what basis, then, does Davies associate Paul with Jewish apocalyptic?

We see, then, that circumcision can be a barometer of Christian scholarship. It seems reasonably clear from the extant text of the Christian New Testament that Jesus and his disciples did not concern themselves with the issue of circumcision. They were all circumcised because they were Jews and accepted it as a time-honored rite. Whether they believed it would bring them any measure of salvation is unknown, since the only references to circumcision in the Gospels are anecdotal in nature.

With Paul, however, circumcision became an issue writ large because Paul sought to convert Gentiles. Obviously circumcising significant numbers of adults is considerably different than circumcising infants. There is a great deal of evidence that Paul's views differed greatly from those attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. His salvation was predicated on a Hellenistic, rather than Palestinian-

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<sup>79</sup>See Galatians 5:11-12.

Judaistic view of humankind.

The treatment by Christian scholars of Paul's interpretation of circumcision accords with their overall view of Paul. Those who, with Davies, wish to affirm his continuity with Jesus go so far as to identify his rejection of circumcision with the opinion of R. Joshua, recorded in b. Yebamot 46a, that converts need not undergo circumcision. They ignore the fact that the ruling was with R. Eliezer b. Hyrcanus who required both circumcision and immersion. Those scholars who posit that Paul was heavily influenced by Hellenism and the Greek mystery religions, emphasize the use of terms such as *γνῶσις* (gnosis) and *μυστήριον* (mystery). Many shy away from the obvious conclusion that Paul was the true founder of Christianity, having veered far afield from the groundwork laid by Jesus and his contemporary disciples.

Let us look, now, into the question of sacramentalism in general and the specific case of *mikvah* versus baptism. It has often been claimed that baptism replaced circumcision as the initiatory rite in the Christian religion. It has further been claimed that baptism and *mikvah* are essentially the same rite, baptism being a Christian adaptation of the Jewish ritual of immersion which is also a requirement for conversion.\*\*

Davies, not surprisingly, champions this view. Recall that Davies prefers the view that Paul is on the same thought-continuum as Jesus. Therefore he compares the Jewish treatment of proselytes with converts to Christianity. טביל (immersion) in the one is termed βάπτισμα (baptism) in the other. He quotes R. Joshua and R. Eliezer b. Hyrkanos

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\*\*Davies.

in their argument concerning whether וּסְמִיךְ (circumcision) or וּסְמִיךְ (immersion) is essential for conversion. He further notes that conversion to Judaism was accompanied by ethical teaching and cites b. Yebamot 47a.<sup>11</sup> By demonstrating continuity with Jewish practices of the first few centuries of the Common Era, Davies believes he has proven Paul's continuity with Jesus. Davies does not discuss the meaning of וּסְמִיךְ (immersion) in Jewish ritual or the meaning of βαπτισμα (baptism) as a Christian rite. He limits himself to comparing the external features of the acts. Similarly, the instruction prescribed in b. Yebamot 47a is not "ethical." It involves *mitzvot*: religious legal obligations of the Jew. Thus it seems inherently different from the ethical instruction of Christian proselytes, particularly in light of the fact that the status of Jewish law is an underlying issue of circumcision.

Fitzmyer identifies Paul with the early Church by attempting to demonstrate that Paul inherited the rite of baptism from the early Church. He cites confessional formulae used by Paul in Romans 10:9 and 1 Corinthians 12:3, but two one-line references are not convincing. Fitzmyer notes that baptism connects one somehow to Christ and this connection makes one heir to Abraham's promise. Hence it is baptism which entitles one to claim religious lineage to Abraham. By implication, baptism has replaced circumcision as the central initiatory rite and, moreover, is universal (in contrast to circumcision's exclusivity). Note, for example, Galatians 3:23-29:

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<sup>11</sup>See page 23 above.

Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. [Galatians 3:23-29]

Yet one is constantly confronted with images and claims of newness. Paul consistently emphasized the difference between his beliefs and Judaism, differences which burst the boundaries of Judaism. A rite which made one a Christian such that "there is neither Jew nor Greek" could never be compatible with Jewish tradition, which is highly particularistic. Even more, it demonstrates a conscious desire to move in another direction.

Fitzmyer also notes that Paul identified baptism with Jesus's death. He cites Mark 10:38 and Luke 12:50 as examples. Jesus's death as baptism marked his "rebirth" in heaven alongside God. The Christian ritual of baptism was then a spiritual rehearsal of this event, whereby the initiate was re-born to Jesus just as Jesus had died and been re-born to God. Romans 6:2-6 connects baptism to death and supports this interpretation:

By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. [Romans 6:2-6]

We see here, further, that it is the sinful physical self, which is to die in the baptism allowing the spiritual self to be born (or re-born).



Again in First Corinthians we see this theme, here associated with a "new creation":

For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. [1 Corinthians 15:16-17]

Even if Paul did inherit baptism from the early Church, as Fitzmyer contends, it would appear that he invested it with new meaning. Sin was the enemy to be purged through baptism. Re-birth of the spirit in imitation of Jesus's resurrection following the crucifixion marked the suppression of one's physical passions and urges.

We look, as well, at sacramentalism which also figures into the circumcision discussion. A sacrament is generally considered to be a visible sign, or symbol, of an invisible grace. Sacraments became increasingly important as the Church developed, eventually occupying a central ritualistic and liturgical role. We ask, at this juncture, whether circumcision was a Jewish sacrament and what implications the answer to this question holds for our study.

The discussion begins with Christian sacraments. Gavin<sup>22</sup> explains that there are two schools of thought concerning the origins of Christian sacraments. The predominantly German school, led by Kirsopp Lake, holds that sacraments antedate Christianity, finding their source in the mystery cults of that period. This would imply that Judaism could have been similarly influenced by the mystery cults and had its own sacraments. Gavin therefore sets out to prove that Tannaitic Judaism did, indeed, have sacraments.

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<sup>22</sup>F. Gavin, *The Jewish Antecedents of the Christian Sacraments* (New York: Ktav Publishing Company, 1969).

The second school of thought prefers to see sacraments as a later development. While this school acknowledges Christianity's debt to Judaism, it minimizes the role of sacraments in early Christianity.

Gavin, siding with the first school of thought, claims that Jewish ritual contains elements of sacramentalism. He points to the use of material means toward the promotion of a proper relationship between God and humans (i.e. sacrifices), the conception that sin can be erased by material means (i.e. atonement offerings) and the ascription of effective power to rites and ceremonies. Gavin seems to pin his claims on the sacrificial cult. One is tempted to ask whether Gavin would say that Jewish sacramentalism died abruptly with the destruction of the Second Temple in 69 C.E.

Gavin quotes Frankel's opinion:

"Circumcision cannot be quite regarded as a sacrament like Christian Baptism, for in Judaism the principle maintains that by one's birth as a Jew he already belongs to the community. Yet none the less is it a sacred injunction, which, according to the Talmudic view, is the consummation and realization of all the commandments. Through circumcision entrance into the fellowship is achieved. It was the son's personal consecration by means of an act established by God, the sign of the covenant ordained for all time. Hence circumcision attained a significance comparable to that of a sacrament..."<sup>1</sup>

Frankel has distinguished between an important religious rite which confirms a given status (circumcision) and a religious rite which actually imparts the status (a sacrament). Circumcision, he has argued, is not a sacrament, because it does not make a child a Jew.

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<sup>1</sup>*Zeitschrift für die religiösen Interessen des Judentums*, Berlin, 1844, 66-67 as quoted in Gavin, p. 16.

Yet, as Gavin notes, circumcision, together with ritual immersion, does make a Gentile proselyte a Jew and thereby entitled to share in Jewish salvation. Gavin compares baptism with the Jewish rituals for conversion. He first shows the parallel between the "running/living" waters mentioned in the *Didache*<sup>84</sup> to the פ"ן פ'ן of Leviticus 14:5, 50-52; 15:13 and Numbers 19:17. However, Leviticus 14:5 speaks of purification from the uncleanness of leprosy, Leviticus 14:50-52 of purification from the impurity brought by a plague, Leviticus 15:13 from the אב, (seemingly an abnormal genital discharge) and Numbers 19:17 of purification from having come in contact with a corpse. In none of these cases is initiation into Judaism or circumcision discussed. Gavin next compares the instruction presented for the Christian convert<sup>85</sup> with that required for a Jewish proselyte.<sup>86</sup> This was discussed above. Gavin next claims that both טביל (immersion) and baptism wash away uncleanness and evil, though he does not support his claim in the case of טביל. Fourth, he maintains that both rites bring about a new status with God. Surely they bring a new social status and a new status within the religious community. Finally, Gavin quotes b. Yebamot 48b in which a convert is compared to a newborn child, who bears no guilt for sins. Baptism does affect this atonement, according to Christian doctrine, but it is unclear that טביל is the agent which affects such "cleansing" in Judaism. More than likely, the statement in b. Yebamot 48b refers to the fact that since a Gentile proselyte was not *obligated* to observe *mitzvot* prior to

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<sup>84</sup>*Didache*, chapter 7.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup>See b. Yebamot 47a, page 23.

his/her conversion, s/he bears no guilt for having not observed them prior to the conversion. Hence Gavin has not convincingly demonstrated a continuity between Christian baptism and the Jewish rituals for conversion.

Goodenough also argues that circumcision is, indeed, a sacrament. He further notes: "A sacrament, we are insisting, consists essentially in the act, and in the emotional associations of the act, not in its etiological explanations."<sup>7</sup> Goodenough proceeds to discuss the etiology in detail, but never mentions the "emotional associations." He writes, for example, that circumcision finds its origin in a fertility rite which guaranteed the fertility of the race by mingling blood with wine. Further, covenants were customarily sealed with blood. These two functions combined in circumcision, particularly in the third part of the ritual, וְיָצַק. Here, blood and wine are mingled in a dramatic acting out of the covenant. Goodenough compares this with Greek ceremonies which involved the binding of two people together (presumably a covenantal relationship) and which were consummated with the mingling of blood and wine, as in the Roman *assartum*.<sup>8</sup> This etiology, however, does not explain or take into account the meaning or the function of circumcision to Jews in the first and second centuries.

Goodenough aptly points out, as have many others, that Philo ascribed symbolic meaning to circumcision.<sup>9</sup> Laws were only the bodies of their inner meanings, or souls. Circumcision was merely the symbolic representation of excising pleasure and the mind's conception of itself

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<sup>7</sup>Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1956), vol. 6, p. 144.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 6, p. 145.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 20.

as sufficient.

Philo did not promote circumcision because he actually believed that circumcision would promote the salvific goal. He promoted it as a symbolic, didactic reminder of the goal of salvation and because it was deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. The texts attributed to Paul, in contrast, suggest the sincere belief that baptism actually effected a spiritual change in the individual.

In the final analysis, we must examine later texts which clarify the second century Jewish and Christian views of circumcision before it is possible to determine whether circumcision had sacramental value. Therefore, in the next chapter we will examine the early Church Fathers' views on circumcision. Chapter four will be devoted to reviewing the first two centuries' rabbinic writings on circumcision through the extant texts: Mishna, Tosefta, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Sifra, Sifrei and Bereshit Rabbah. Finally, in chapter five we will attempt to bring all this material together in order to examine how the ideas and arguments concerning circumcision in the first two centuries shaped the Jewish liturgy for circumcision.

## Chapter 3

### The Early Church Fathers on Circumcision

#### 3.1 Introduction

The early Church Fathers, whose work begins as early as the late first century, build on the framework laid by the Pauline Epistles. In general, the Church Fathers expound upon Paul's notion of "justification by faith," stressing the importance of ethical behavior (the Natural Law of God) and deprecating Jewish ritual observance.

Many references to circumcision are made merely in passing and are not helpful to our study. We will restrict ourselves to those passages which illuminate the developing Christian viewpoint(s) on circumcision. We shall survey the texts of the early Church Fathers in chronological order.

#### 3.2 The Apostolic Fathers: The Letter of Baranabas and the Didache

We begin with the Apostolic Fathers. Here we find the *Didache*, the earliest Christian manual known, and the *Letter of Barnabas*, also known as *The Epistle of Barnabas* or *Pseudo-Barnabas*.

The *Didache*, whose author is unknown, is dated to the late first century or early second century according to its language and subject matter. It originated in either Egypt, Syria or Palestine. Scholars term it an early Christian manual, or perhaps part of one which is also known by the titles "The Teaching of the Apostles" (as it is designated by several ancient writers) or "The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles" as the manuscript calls itself. The oldest manuscript known dates to 1056 C.E. and was uncovered by Bryennios in 1805. Only one complete manuscript has



been discovered, although parts of the *Didache* have been incorporated into patristic writings and other Church manuals and fragments of a Latin translation were found by Gebhardt.

Wilde<sup>88</sup> points out that the *Didache* has two parts. The first six chapters give evidence of an author of Jewish origin. In the second part, which includes chapter 7, the author clearly distinguishes between Christianity and Judaism, changes the fast days prescribed by the Jewish calendar and regulates a Christian schedule for prayer.

It is in the latter section that we read about baptism:

But concerning baptism, thus shall ye baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* [italics theirs] in living (running) water. But if thou hast not living water, then baptize in other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm. But if thou hast neither, then pour water on the head thrice in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let him that baptizeth and him that is baptized fast, and any others also who are able; and thou shalt order him that is baptized to fast a day or two before.<sup>89</sup>

This passage has received much of Gavin's attention, as was mentioned in the preceding chapter.<sup>90</sup> He made much of the mention of "living waters," identifying it with חַיִּים מְרִינִים in the Hebrew Bible. The passage is too vague to deduce a great deal. It recites a procedure which seems significantly different from טבילת, which requires complete immersion in a *halachically* legitimate body of water. The author indicates that, in the end, pouring water over the initiate's head three

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<sup>88</sup>Robert Wilde, *The Treatment of the Jews in the Greek Christian Writers of the First Three Centuries* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1949).

<sup>89</sup>"The *Didache*," trans. J.B. Lightfoot, ed. J.R. Harmer, *The Apostolic Fathers* (London: MacMillan and Company, 1981).

<sup>90</sup>See page 87 above.

times is sufficient.

The *Didache* does not mention circumcision. The author of the *Didache* does not even bother to counsel against it. Perhaps this is an indication that by the time it was written, circumcision was no longer practiced by any born Christians or proselytes to Christianity.

The *Letter of Barnabas* is also considered to have been written by a Jew who converted to Christianity. Based on the fact that Clement of Alexandria and Origen quote it, the author is thought to have been an Alexandrian.<sup>83</sup> Harnack dates it to 130 C.E.<sup>84</sup> Others date it either to 70-79, based on a reference to Vespasian, or to later than 150, based on a possible reference to Bar Kochba.<sup>85</sup> Many consider it to pre-date the *Didache*. The overriding theme of the epistle is opposition to Judaizing tendencies. The author goes so far as to attack the Christian New Testament claim that the Hebrew Bible was designed by God to prepare for the coming of Christ. In this regard, the author claims that the Hebrew Bible "never enjoyed divine favor, that Jewish customs and ceremonies were the result of misunderstanding and diabolical deception, that the Law was never meant to be taken literally and historically, but only in a spiritual and allegorical sense."<sup>86</sup> The Church rejected this view, as it rejected the Marcionite claim that Christianity must abandon the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>83</sup>Wilde.

<sup>84</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup>"The Letter of Barnabas," trans. Francis X. Glimm, *The Fathers of the Church: The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Christian Heritage, 1947).

<sup>86</sup>Wilde, p. 87.

The author of the *Letter of Barnabas* argues for a more spiritualized religiosity. In chapter 9, he refers to the Lord as having circumcized the hearing and the hearts of Christians, citing references in the Hebrew Bible; for example:

המלך יהוה והסמ צדקות לבבכם אש יהודה ושלבי ירושלים  
כן תצא כאלו חמתי וגזרי ואין מכה מפני רע מעליכם

Circumcise yourself to the Lord, remove the foreskins of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem; lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of your evil acts. [Jeremiah 4:4]

In 9:4 he maintains that circumcision is not a Christian requirement:

But the circumcision in which they trust has also been abolished. For he said that circumcision was not of the flesh. But they were mistaken because an evil angel was teaching them [vain] cleverness."<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in 9:6 he argues:

But you will say: the people surely has been circumcised to seal [or: for a seal] the covenant. Yes, indeed, but every Syrian and Arab and all priests of the idols have been circumcised; are they also [part] of the covenant?"<sup>18</sup>

It is worth noting that circumcision is termed a *seal* to the covenant. We saw this in Romans 4:11. The notion that circumcision is a "sign" or a "seal" rather than a covenantal act is an important theme developed further by other Church Fathers. The author of the *Letter of Barnabas* also stresses the abstracted notion of the circumcised heart, mentioned in Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6 and in the Jeremiah 9:24-25.

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<sup>17</sup>The *Letter of Barnabas*.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*.

These brief passages exhaust the supply of material in the Apostolic Fathers pertaining directly to circumcision.

### 3.3 Justin

Next we encounter a discussion of circumcision in Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*. Everything which is known about Justin's life is derived from his writings. Justin was born Flavia Neapolis, the son of Greek parents. It would appear that he came from Shechem, a Samaritan city. This would suggest a pre-disposed hostility toward Jews and Judaism due to the bitter relations between the Samaritans and Jews.

Justin was schooled in philosophy, studying in particular Platonism and Stoicism. He is believed to have taught Christian philosophy in Ephesus until approximately 135, at which time he set out for Rome. It was Justin's life work to reconcile Christianity with Plato by demonstrating that Christianity fulfils the highest Platonic ideals.

Justin wrote the *Dialogue with Trypho* sometime after writing *Apologia I*. Thus it dates to 150 C.E. or later. However, the scene for the *Dialogue with Trypho* is a discussion which took place at Ephesus between Justin and a Jew named Trypho, shortly after the end of the Bar Kochba rebellion, in approximately 135 C.E. Some have attempted to identify Trypho with Rabbi Tarphon<sup>99</sup> but few seriously accept this. Falls suggests that Trypho was a refugee from the war.<sup>100</sup> However, it seems more likely that the *Dialogue* is more a literary genre than the transcription of an actual discussion. In this regard, Trypho is the representative of Jewish tradition which is forcefully defeated in

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<sup>99</sup>Justin and Wilde.

<sup>100</sup>Justin.

debate by Christian religious views. The work was composed and written down a generation later, between 155 and 161 C.E. in Rome.<sup>181</sup>

Justin's *Dialogue* is helpful both as it reveals the complete separation of Judaism and Christianity following the Bar Kochba rebellion and as a reflection of Christian attitudes toward Jewish law and ritual. In addition we see in it a reflection of the Jewish attitude toward circumcision filtered through Justin's eyes.

In chapter 10 of the *Dialogue* (and again in chapters 46 and 47) Justin has Trypho express his conviction that Christians cannot be saved because they do not observe God's *mitzvot*. Where might Justin have learned of this belief? Judaism never held that Gentiles were obligated to observe *mitzvot*. Hence they certainly could not be punished for failure to do so. However, perhaps Trypho is expressing the belief that salvation was reserved for Jews and therefore conversion and observance of *mitzvot* were a prerequisite to salvation. Justin's reaction is predictable. He decries legalism and proposes instead a symbolic and spiritual interpretation of the Law.

In chapters 46 and 47 we find a lengthy discussion which illuminates the relationship between salvation and the observance of *mitzvot*. The discussion proceeds as follows: Trypho asks if Christians who choose to follow Mosaic laws (he does not specify which laws) can be saved. Justin replies by claiming that no human can possibly observe *all* the *mitzvot*, anyway, and that the generations from Abraham until Moses (i.e. between the time of Abraham's circumcision and covenant, and the giving of the Torah at Sinai) were all saved despite the fact that they

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<sup>181</sup>Justin and Wilde.

did not observe the *mitzvot* (since the Torah had not yet been given). Trypho responds by pointing out that, since the time of Abraham, the Israelites had had מִצְוָה (circumcision). At this juncture, Justin declares that circumcision was imposed as a punishment for "hardness of heart." Nonetheless, Justin goes on to admit that those who observe the *mitzvot* will be saved unless they force Gentile-Christians to observe them. He acknowledges here that there are Christians who disagree with him, implying that others believe *mitzvot* to be an impediment to salvation. Justin emphasizes that belief and faith are the true keys to salvation.

Justin treats the theme of the uselessness of *mitzvot*, here implied by the comment concerning the generations between Abraham and Moses, directly in chapter 19. He responds to Trypho's challenge that these generations had מִצְוָה (circumcision) which brought salvation by noting that the generations prior to Abraham did not, yet they enjoyed God's favor. He argues:

Nor do we approve of your useless baptism of the wells, which has no connection at all with our baptism of life. Thus has God protested that you have forsaken Him, "the fountain of living water, and have digged for yourselves broken cisterns which can hold no water." [Isaiah 1:16] You Jews who have circumcision of the flesh, are in great need of our circumcision, whereas we, since we have our circumcision, do not need yours. For if, as you claim, circumcision had been necessary for salvation, God would not have created Adam uncircumcised; nor would He have looked with favor upon the sacrifice of the uncircumcised Abel, nor would he have been pleased with the uncircumcised Henoch, who "was seen no more because God took him." [Genesis 5:24] The Lord and His angels led Lot out of Sodom; thus he was saved without circumcision....<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>182</sup>Justin, pp. 175-6.



Justin provides Noah and Malkitzedek as examples, pointing out that they did not keep Shabbat either, yet were pleasing to God. In chapter 23 he notes that Abraham was justified by God because of his faith before he was circumcised. Hence faith precedes *mitzvot* in priority. Further, it is faith, rather than law, which assures salvation. This is the same argument Paul presented in Galatians 3:6. Here, as Paul did in Romans 4:11, Justin claims that Abraham's circumcision was a sign, rather than the justification itself. This point is further supported by the fact that women are not circumcised yet they can be saved.

How, then, is a Christian saved? According to Justin, a Christian is saved by trusting in the "blood of salvation." Jesus brought a new, different and superior law. Faith in this new way is the road to salvation:

"Now friends," I continued, "I could prove how the eighth day has some mysterious meaning (made known to us by God through these rites), rather than the seventh, but lest you think I am wandering from the subject, understand what I now state, that the blood of circumcision is now abolished, and we now trust in the blood of salvation. Another testament, a new Law, has now come out of Sion."<sup>183</sup>

Like Paul and the Apostolic Fathers before him, Justin abstracts and spiritualizes circumcision. He also associates it with baptism, which turns out to be the mechanism for attaining this spiritual circumcision:

We, indeed, who have come to God through Jesus Christ, have received not a carnal, but a spiritual, circumcision, as did Henok and those like him. Through God's mercy we received this by means of baptism, since we had become sinners, and all men should likewise receive it."<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>184</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 212.

In fact, Justin claims that just as there are two circumcisions mentioned in the Hebrew Bible—that of iron knives associated with Moses and that of stone knives associated with Joshua—so, too are there two circumcisions in Justin's world: respectively, the circumcision of the Jews and that of the Christians.<sup>183</sup> According to Justin, the circumcision with iron knives associated with Moses is divine symbolic retribution for Israel's hardness of heart. In contrast, Jesus ("the stone") brought a new type of circumcision, circumcision of the heart:

We who have received the second circumcision with stone knives are indeed happy. For your first circumcision was, and still is, administered by iron instruments, in keeping with your hardness of heart. But our circumcision, which is the second, for it was instituted after yours, circumcises us from idolatry and every other sin by means of sharp stones, namely by the words uttered by the Apostles of Him who was the Cornerstone and the Stone not cut with human hands. Indeed, our hearts have been so circumcised from sin that we even rejoice as we die for the name of that noble Rock, whence gushes forth living water for the hearts of those who through Him love the Universal Father, and who proffers the water of life to those desiring it.<sup>184</sup>

In the passage above, circumcision removes sin. It is important to note that the image of ρ'π ρ'Ν (living waters) and life and death are found here as well. Gavin pointed to the "living waters" in the *Didache* and compared them with several passages in the Hebrew Bible, as noted in the previous chapter. Indeed, baptism is understood as the "living waters," the ritual which brings new life to the believer. Baptism marks a rebirth. Here, however, although the "living waters" are mentioned in conjunction with the new, Christian circumcision, there is no mention of baptism. Yet we quoted from chapter 43 above a passage

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<sup>183</sup>Jesus is often referred to as "the stone" in Christian New Testament.

<sup>184</sup>Justin, pp. 324-325.

which unmistakably implies that baptism has replaced circumcision. Hence we might be able to draw the conclusion that in the passage from chapter 114, quoted directly above, the "living waters" refer to baptism. If this is the case, Justin considers circumcision and baptism to be fundamentally equivalent: both mark the death of the sinful self.

Of even greater interest here, is Justin's contention that *mitzvot* are a punishment for Israel's "hardness of heart." In chapter 114, he noted that circumcision is administered with iron knives which symbolize this hardness of heart. This theme is expanded upon in chapter 18:

We, too, would observe your circumcision of the flesh, your sabbath days, and, in a word, all your festivals, if we were not aware of the reason why they were imposed upon you, namely, because of your sins and your hardness of heart. If we patiently bear all the evil thrust upon us by vicious men and demons, and still, amid indescribable tortures and death, ask mercy even for our persecutors and do not wish that anybody be requited with even a little of them, as our New Lawgiver decreed, why is it, Trypho, that we should not observe those rites which cannot harm us, such as the circumcision of the flesh, the sabbath, and the festivals?<sup>187</sup>

There is more to circumcision than meets the eye, Justin tells us. Circumcision is indeed a sign. It is a distinguishing sign given to Jews in order to set them apart from Christians and to facilitate divine punishment<sup>188</sup>: Only Jews would suffer certain afflictions, only Jewish land would lie desolate, only Jewish cities burned and so on. He wrote:

The purpose of this was that you and only you might suffer the afflictions that are now justly yours; that only your land be desolate, and your cities ruined by fire; that the fruits of your land be eaten by strangers before your very eyes; that not one of you be permitted to enter your city of Jerusalem.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>187</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>188</sup>*Ibid.*, Chapter 16, p. 172.

<sup>189</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 172.

We must recall that the *Dialogue* dates to shortly after the Bar Kochba rebellion. It may well have appeared to Justin that the disastrous defeat which the rebels suffered was a divine punishment. Further, Hadrian had usurped Jerusalem as *Aelia Capitolina*, to which no Jew was permitted access.

Justin has been very helpful. He has expressed quite clearly that he believes that Jews expect salvation due to circumcision. He has further spiritualized the notion of circumcision (circumcision of the heart) and proffered baptism as a replacement, claiming it is the true way to attain salvation. Faith has replaced observance of the law. Finally, he has made the hitherto unprecedented claim that Jews continue to be circumcised as a sign that will single them out for divine punishment. The punishment includes physical devastation and the loss of Jerusalem. Justin was an important figure in the early Church. His ideas were read and transmitted to many. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find others quoting him or expressing similar ideas.

Before leaving Justin, one more point should be made. The scene Justin paints for us is one of open dialogue and friendly discussion between Christians and Jews. Trypho leaves unconverted but on good terms with Justin. Does this reflect the true state of Christian-Jewish relations in Alexandria (and elsewhere) in the first half of the second century? Were Jews familiar with, and conversant in, Christian thought? Did they read Christian texts? Did they refute Christian theology? We shall attempt to answer these questions in chapters four and five as we examine the Jewish texts from the first two centuries and explore the liturgy for circumcision.

### 3.4 Irenaeus

Irenaeus was a contemporary of Clement of Alexandria, whom we will discuss next. By one estimation<sup>110</sup> he was born in approximately 120 C.E. By another<sup>111</sup> he was born about 140 C.E. He died sometime during the first two years of the third century. Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor. He left to serve as presbyter and then as bishop of Lyons in Gaul.<sup>112</sup> In his youth, he had been a disciple of Polycarp. He made it his life work to combat the heresy of gnosticism in the Church. Toward this end, he wrote *Adversus Haereses (The Manifestation and Refutation of the False Knowledge)* which has survived in a Latin translation, and *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* which exists in an Armenian translation.

Gnosticism was associated with Judaizing tendencies in the second century. Angelology, prescribed and proscribed foods, concern with genealogies and denial of the resurrection of Jesus and future judgement were all associated with both.<sup>113</sup> Gnostic groups often borrowed Jewish ideas. For example, YHWH was identified with the demiurge. This tended to obscure the lines between authentically gnostic groups (which held that there were two powers in the universe) and Judaism (which adamantly maintained its monotheistic stance but borrowed other gnostic images).

The Marcionites adopted the identification of YHWH of the Hebrew Bible with the demiurge. Marcion adamantly opposed Jewish influence. He taught that "the God of the Jews, the Creator, is not the God of the

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<sup>110</sup>Irenaeus, "Against Heresies," eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, I* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962).

<sup>111</sup>Wilde.

<sup>112</sup>Bligh.

<sup>113</sup>Wilde.

Christians, nor the Father of Christ."<sup>114</sup> Irenaeus's argument is largely directed toward the Marcionites, but in so doing he attacks all heresies, including Judaizing, in order to avoid being considered a Judaizer, himself.

Irenaeus's first task, therefore, is clearly to declare that there was, and is, only one God. The Creator God, the God of the Jews and the God of the Christians are all one and the same:

...and the whole range of the doctrine of the apostles proclaimed one and the same God, who removed Abraham, who made to him the promise of inheritance, who in due season gave to him the covenant of circumcision, who called his descendants out of Egypt, preserved outwardly by circumcision—for he gave it as a sign, that they might not be like the Egyptians—that He was the Maker of all things, that He was the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He was the God of glory,—they who wish may learn from the very words and acts of the apostles, and may contemplate the fact that this God is one, above whom is no other.<sup>115</sup>

Apparently, some claimed that two covenants in the Hebrew Bible (with Abraham and with Moses) implied two different gods. Irenaeus argues that both covenants were forged by the same God:

... both the Mosaic law and the grace of the new covenant, as both fitted for the times [at which they were given], were bestowed by one and the same God for the benefit of the human race.<sup>116</sup>

Irenaeus then attacks the gnostic claim that the Jewish ritualistic observance by some of the early apostles associated with the Church in Jerusalem is further proof of two gods. Irenaeus argues that Peter, James and John kept Mosaic law in order to prove that the two covenants came from the one God. It would appear that some 100 years

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<sup>114</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>115</sup>Irenaeus, 3:12:11, p. 434.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:12:11.



later, the nature of the disagreement between the Jerusalem apostles and Paul is still being debated. Irenaeus took advantage of the issue to disprove the gnostic claim that there are two gods:

But they clearly indicated, from the nature of the point debated by them, as to whether or not it was still necessary to circumcize the disciples, that they had no idea of another god.<sup>117</sup>

In *Against Heresies* 3:12:11 we saw that Irenaeus termed circumcision "the covenant of circumcision" and also termed it a "sign." Was it an actual covenant or merely the sign of a covenant? To understand his view of circumcision, let us examine his perspective on Jewish law first.

Irenaeus writes that God gave the Jews laws for two reasons. First, because of their stubborn nature. They would not subject themselves to God. Laws would compel them to do so (4:15:2 and 4:16:4). We noted that Justin considered *mitzvot* to be a punishment for "hard-heartedness"; this is a similar notion. In Acts 15:19 and 28, the Jewish laws are termed a "burden." One wonders if prayers such as האן האנק and פֿאַר דאָס are reactions to the suggestion that the *mitzvot* are a painful punishment. These prayers suggest, instead, that Torah is a gift of love, from God to Israel. The second reason Irenaeus gives for God having ordained laws for Israel is to improve and educate them.<sup>118</sup> For example, the law of sacrifices caused them to forget the idolatry they had witnessed in Egypt and to heed, instead, the voice of God. Not surprisingly, Irenaeus also saw the law of sacrifice as a foreshadowing of the ultimate and true sacrifice, Jesus.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 4:17:1.

In a similar way, circumcision was a symbol or foreshadowing as well. In 3:12:11 we saw that circumcision distinguished the Israelites from the Egyptians. As a result, they were saved and brought out of Egypt. For Irenaeus, all of Jewish history is merely foreshadowing for Christians. Just as the downfall of the Egyptians (through plagues and drowning in the Reed Sea) paved the way for the salvation of the Israelites, so the downfall of the Jews paves the way for Christian salvation. The difference is that Irenaeus holds the Jews responsible for their plight. In his time, Jerusalem lay in ruins and the Jews dispersed. He saw this situation as God's judgement upon the Jews for being sinful.

Irenaeus also follows Paul in identifying Christians as the true successors to Abraham. Like Paul and Justin, he attacks the Jews' claim to carnal descent from Abraham, declaring that faith has erased all distinctions between peoples. Abraham is important to Irenaeus, as to Paul and Justin. Abraham prefigured Christian faith, as the paradigm of salvation through faith. He demonstrates this from the fact that we read הוא היה בן אברהם in Genesis 15:6 before Abraham is commanded to undergo circumcision in chapter 17. Hence, Abraham attained salvation (הוא היה בן אברהם) through faith (הוא היה בן אברהם) before he was circumcised.

This is the extent to which Irenaeus discusses circumcision. It is not a central concern of his; it is only tangential to his view on Jewish law in general. His concern with Judaism is as a heresy which threatens to taint "pure" Christianity.

### 3.5 Clement of Alexandria

We look next at Irenaeus's contemporary, Clement of Alexandria. Clement lived from approximately 150 until approximately 215 C.E. He was born in Athens to Gentile parents. Originally he was a pagan philosopher who eventually converted to Christianity. He remained interested in pagan mythologies and deities. Clement came to direct the school of Christian studies in Alexandria. In his work *Stromata*, he attempts to construct true knowledge on the basis of faith. He, like Irenaeus, was concerned with the threat of gnosticism, and therefore carefully distinguished between proper Christian faith and gnostic beliefs.

Clement mentions circumcision in only one brief passage, which, for the sake of completeness, we quote here. In this passage, Clement is answering the charge that apostles seemed to say one thing but do another. He uses the case of Timothy and Titus for his example, which we discussed in chapter one. Paul had Timothy circumcised because he was born to a Jewish mother, but refused to have Titus, born to Gentile parents, circumcised. This inconsistency of policy was perplexing. Clement wishes to demonstrate that there is one overarching truth which explains this:

To illustrate: the noble apostle circumcised Timothy, though loudly declaring and writing that circumcision made with hands profits nothing [Romans 2:25 and Ephesians 2:11]. But that he might not, by dragging all at once away from the law to the circumcision of the heart through faith those of the Hebrews who were reluctant listeners, compel them to break away from the synagogue, he, "accommodating himself to the Jews, became a Jew that he might gain all." [1 Corinthians 9:19] ...<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Clement of Alexandria, "The Stromata, or Miscellanies," eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, II* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962).

Clement suggests that Paul's overriding concern was to convert Jews. In order to accomplish this goal, he had to avoid provoking their wrath. First he had to gain their trust. Only then would he be able to pull them away from Judaism toward Christianity. Circumcising Timothy was an act intended to cultivate the trust and favor of the Jews. It was, in Clement's terms, an "accommodation." It was not theologically or spiritually motivated, but rather politically inspired. Clement maintains that this is consistent with Paul's professed goal of converting as many Jews as possible to Christianity.

### 3.6 Tertullian

Tertullian lived from approximately 145 until 200.<sup>120</sup> He was born a Gentile in Carthage, educated in Rome, converted to Christianity in approximately 185<sup>121</sup> and became a presbyter some five years later. Early in his career, Tertullian was both an apologist and a polemicist. Some ten years after his conversion, however, his ideas already reflected the influence of Montanism. Shortly thereafter, he broke with the Church and founded his own group in North Africa. Tertullian has been labelled both rigid and compulsive with regard to morality and discipline.

In "An Answer to the Jews," written while he still identified with the Church, Tertullian deals with the question of what it means for circumcision to be a "sign." He also discusses the salvific quality of circumcision. His opinions are clear and concise.

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<sup>120</sup>Some say he actually lived from approximately 160 until 220.

<sup>121</sup>The later dating sets his conversion at 195 C.E.

Abraham, he notes, pleased God before his circumcision. Tertullian follows Paul, Justin and Irenaeus in their interpretation of Genesis 15:6. Tertullian is directly concerned with whether circumcision is a means to salvation. He says it is not:

For he had "accepted" circumcision; but such as was to be "a sign" of that time, not for a prerogative title to salvation.<sup>122</sup>

After all, he reasons, if circumcision brought salvation, would not Moses have had his son circumcised promptly on the eighth day, as God had commanded Abraham? Instead, Gershom was not circumcised until it was evident that he was in imminent danger:

Nay, but if circumcision altogether brought salvation, even Moses himself, in the case of his own son, would not have omitted to circumcize him on the eighth day; whereas it is agreed that Zipporah did it on the journey, at the compulsion of the angel.<sup>123</sup>

Curiously, he does not address the possible rebuttal that it was Gershom's circumcision which saved him.

For Tertullian, like Justin, circumcision is a "sign" which separates Jews in preparation for punishment by God. The punishment he describes resembles Justin's description quite closely: Jews will be barred from Jerusalem, their cities burned to the ground, the people scattered. Tertullian quotes Isaiah's description of the judgement which will befall Judah in order to make his point sound authentic:

For circumcision had to be given; but as "a sign," whence Israel in the last time would have to be distinguished, when, in accordance with their deserts, they should be

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<sup>122</sup>Tertullian, "An Answer to the Jews," eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, IV* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 153.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 153.

prohibited from entering the holy city, as we see through the words of the prophets, saying, "Your land is desert; your cities utterly burnt with fire; your country, in your sight strangers shall eat up; and, deserted and subverted by strange peoples, the daughter of Zion shall be derelict, like a shed in a vineyard, and like a watchhouse in a cucumber field, and as it were a city which is being stormed [Isaiah 1:7-8]."<sup>124</sup>

He also echoes Justin's second reason for circumcision: to punish Israel's hardness of heart.

This, therefore, was God's foresight—that of giving circumcision to Israel, for a sign whence they might be distinguished when the time should arrive wherein their above-mentioned deserts should prohibit their admission into Jerusalem: which circumstance, because it was to be, used to be announced; and, because we see it accomplished, is recognized by us.<sup>125</sup>

The passage continues by contrasting Israel's temporary circumcision with Christianity's permanent, spiritual circumcision which will bring salvation:

For, as the carnal circumcision, which was temporary, was inwrought for "a sign" in a contumacious people, so the spiritual has been given for salvation to an obedient people....<sup>126</sup>

Tertullian then quotes Jeremiah 4:4<sup>127</sup> which speaks of "circumcision of the heart."

The inner or spiritual circumcision of which Tertullian speaks reminds one immediately of Paul's statement in Romans 2:29 that "real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal" and Justin's remarks about Christianity's spiritual circumcision.

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<sup>124</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>127</sup>See page 93.



Tertullian connects the end of the former circumcision with the coming of a new law brought by Jesus. It would appear that he accomplishes this on the basis of Isaiah 1 and 2. In the first chapter of Isaiah (which, we noted above, Tertullian uses to describe and support his contention that Jews are to be punished) we read a lengthy description of the devastation to be wrought against Judah. In chapter two of Isaiah, we find Isaiah's famous passage about restoration. Obviously, Tertullian has read messianic meaning into Isaiah 2 and associated the teaching in verse 3 with the "new law." The new law, he contends, refers to a new, spiritual circumcision.

Therefore, as we have shown above that the coming cessation of the old law and of the carnal circumcision was declared, so, too, the observance of the new law and the spiritualized circumcision has shone out into the voluntary obedience of peace.<sup>128</sup>

Tertullian's position is clear. Circumcision is not a means for salvation for the Jews. It was ordained rather as a punishment for being stubborn and stiff-necked and to be a sign to single out the Jews for further punishment. True salvation comes through the new, spiritual circumcision of Christianity which replaces the former carnal circumcision.

### 3.7 Origen

Finally, we meet Origen. Origen lived from approximately 185 until 253.<sup>129</sup> He lived in Alexandria and was a student of Clement. At the age of 18, Origen succeeded Clement as the director of the school of Christian studies there.

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<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>129</sup>Wilde.

Origen was not particularly concerned with circumcision any more than his mentor Clement had been. In *Contra Celsus* (*Against Celsus*), Origen debates Celsus the pagan, who claims to know everything there is to know, even tangentially, about Christianity. Origen finds that Celsus's Achilles' heel is Judaism. This leads to a discussion of Jews and Judaism, though this is not the major thrust of *Contra Celsus*.

Origen mentions that circumcision began with Abraham. He also makes the startling claim that it "was discontinued by Jesus, who desired that His disciples should not practice it..."<sup>130</sup> The reason that this statement is so startling is that not only do the Gospels never mention this, but neither does Paul make such a claim in the Epistles. It is as if Origen has grown up with the Christian notion of a "new law" that was brought by Jesus from the very start<sup>131</sup> and therefore has deduced that Jesus must have felt this way.

Origen also answers the implication made by the author of the *Letter of Barnabas* that all circumcisions have the same meaning by explaining that just as sacrifices to one god mean something different than do sacrifices to another god, and δικαιοσύνη (righteousness) means different things to Epicureans and Stoics, so too ῥη (circumcision) means something different to Jews than to Colchians, Egyptians and Arabian Ishmaelites who also practice it.

The Jews say that the circumcision performed on the eighth day is the principal circumcision, and that which is performed according to circumstances is different; and

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<sup>130</sup>Origen, "Against Celsus," eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, IV* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. 405.

<sup>131</sup>This is to say that Jesus, himself, called for an end to Jewish laws, including circumcision, while instituting a new set of norms for Christian behavior.

probably it was performed on account of the hostility of some angel toward the Jewish nation who had the power to injure such of them as were not circumcised but was powerless against those who had undergone the rite.<sup>122</sup>

Origen posits a pseudo-anthropological explanation for circumcision. He says that it was considered to provide protection from a hostile angel. It is not clear whence he arrived at this idea. One possibility is from the story of Gershom's circumcision in the fourth chapter of Exodus. In this chapter we learn that Gershom was not circumcised on the eighth day and, in fact, was not circumcised until he was in imminent danger.

וְהָיָה בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּחַלּוֹן וּמִסְעָדוֹ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֶשׁ הַמַּיִמוֹת וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה  
צֶרֶת וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶת צִרְתָּהּ בְּנֶה וַתִּלְעָץ אֶרְגְּלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר  
כִּי חֲתָן-בָּמִים אַתָּה לִי וַיִּרְץ מִמֶּנּוּ, אִלּוּ אִמְרָה  
חֲתָן-בָּמִים לְמִלּוֹת.

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision. [Exodus 4:24-26]

Origen acknowledges that this power was real and persisted until Jesus. Jesus's own circumcision (Luke 2:21) caused the dissolution of the angel's power so that circumcision was no longer necessary. He wrote:

For this angel might have had power, I think, over those of the people who were not circumcized, and generally over all who worshipped only the Creator; and this power lasted so long as Jesus had not assumed a human body. But when he had done this, and had undergone the rite of circumcision in His own person, all the power of the angel over those who practice the same worship, but are not circumcized, was

<sup>122</sup>Origen, p. 564.

abolished; for Jesus reduced it to nought by (the power of) His unspeakable divinity. And therefore His disciples are forbidden to circumcize themselves, and are reminded (by the apostle): 'If ye be circumcized, Christ shall profit you nothing [Galatians 5:2].'<sup>133</sup>

Clearly, to uphold the necessity of circumcision is to reject the power and divinity of Jesus. It is curious that Origen would use the Galatians passage in such a distorted fashion. In this passage Paul, speaking explicitly in his own name alone says that if one observes circumcision (and believes according to Judaism, presumably) Jesus will not bring that one salvation because he lacks faith in Jesus:

Now I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who receives circumcision that he is bound to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. [Galatians 5:2-6]

Origen's primary contribution to the discussion is his curious insistence that Jesus opposed circumcision. He also affirms for us the belief that circumcision provides some measure of protection (in his terms, from a hostile angel). He further follows Paul in claiming that Jesus had absolved all people of the need for such circumcision.

### 3.8 Summary

Although we lack an abundance of material on circumcision among the writings of the Church Fathers of the first two centuries, we can derive some valuable information from what we do find. In Paul's day circumcision was a real and tangible question. There were Christians

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<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 565

undergoing circumcision and Jewish-Christians promoting it. By the time the *Didache* was written, and certainly by the time of Justin, Judaism and Christianity were separate entities pursuing separate futures. We see this in the approach of the early Church Fathers toward circumcision. No concern is expressed that Christians might actually be practicing this ritual. Circumcision is an "historical relic" to Christians. Origen goes so far as to claim that Jesus instructed his disciples not to become circumcised (this, despite the fact that as Jews they would have been circumcised at birth). Rather, the discussion concerning circumcision has become abstracted and circumcision, itself, symbolic. The author of the *Letter of Barnabas* speaks only of a spiritual circumcision and circumcision of the heart and hearing which are extremely abstract notions, hardly related to circumcision itself. Irenaeus sees circumcision as a "sign," or "symbol," foreshadowing Christian salvation. He says that circumcision, as a ritual practice, was meaningless and is now obsolete; it served only to point to the future salvation which ascribes to Christians.

Circumcision still stands, metaphorically, at the crossroads of salvation and law. As it did for Paul, circumcision seems to symbolize for the Church Fathers the Jews' continued reliance upon *mitzvot* as their means to salvation. Circumcision is contrasted with faith as, for example, in Justin's discussion of Abraham. However, observance of Mosaic laws in general, like circumcision in particular, is no longer a threat to Christianity. Rather, circumcision serves merely as a launching pad for asserting the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. We hear more the sound of a rallying cry than of a defense.

The most salient feature of the discussion added by the Church Fathers is the interpretation they assign to circumcision as a "sign," as Paul termed it in Romans 4:11. Paul held symbols to be outer shells containing inner truths. It was the truths they contained which were of value. The symbol (in this case, circumcision) served no purpose after the truth was known. Justin and Tertullian, however, vehemently maintain that circumcision was a "sign" in the sense of a negative distinguishing mark upon the Jews. Through the mark of circumcision, God could easily recognize and punish them for their sinfulness. Both claim that undergoing circumcision is, in itself, a punishment for the Jews' contumacious character. Further, it marks Jews for divine retribution. This is radically different from Paul's meaning of a "sign" or "seal" to the covenant.

Why would Justin and Tertullian interpret circumcision as a sign of this sort? One explanation is that Justin, living and writing shortly after the Bar Kochba rebellion, saw the unfortunate condition of Jewry and presumed God's hand was at work. He makes it clear that he is talking about the present and not in theoretical terms about the future: "The purpose of this [sign] was that you and only you might suffer the afflictions that are *now* [emphasis ours] justly yours..."<sup>134</sup> In contrast, however, Tertullian sees the punishment as a future event: "For circumcision had to be given; but as a 'sign,' whence Israel *in the last time* [emphasis ours] would have to be distinguished...."<sup>135</sup> Tertullian is most likely referring to the 'final judgement' when he writes "in the last time." He certainly does not confirm Justin's view

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<sup>134</sup>Justin, p. 172.

<sup>135</sup>Tertullian, p. 154.



of the contemporary situation.

The Church Fathers express very little concern over the covenant God made with Abraham. For Paul, as we saw, this was an important matter. Paul felt compelled to assert Christianity's universalism against Judaism's exclusivistic claim to having a covenant with God. Among the Church Fathers who discussed circumcision at all, only Irenaeus even mentions the covenants of the Hebrew Bible. Covenants, however, are peripheral to his main thesis; he cares little about covenantal theology. By the end of the second century, most Christians were of Gentile background and exclusivistic Jewish claims were not important to them. For people who considered themselves the 'true Israel' and the spiritual descendants of Abraham, the practice of circumcision was by now a moot question. This does not mean that circumcision was no longer debated. In fact, it was. After approximately 135 C.E., however, the discussion was theoretical (i.e. a matter of theology) rather than practical.

Before leaving the Church Fathers, we should address the question of circumcision's power to bring salvation. Justin makes it clear that there are people who associate salvation and circumcision. He goes to great lengths to prove that salvation is attained outside the observance of *mitzvot* in general, and circumcision in particular. In fact, he asserts that baptism is the Christian's source of salvation, having replaced circumcision. Tertullian, as well, states that circumcision does not bring salvation. Where Justin spoke of baptism, he speaks of a new, spiritual circumcision for the Christian. Irenaeus notes that circumcision protected the Israelites in Egypt and saved them from the

disaster which befell the inhabitants of that land. Origen explains in detail that circumcision, up until the time of Jesus, afforded one actual physical protection from a hostile angel. The author of the *Letter of Barnabas* spoke of such an angel. Hence we have a clear picture that, in the second century, there were people who believed that circumcision had, and continued to, protect people and bring them salvation.

One last point may be brought up again here. Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* suggests a lively interchange between Jewish and Christian scholars. Does this reflect an authentic situation? It is not clear from the documents themselves, nor do the scholars claim to be sure, just what degree of contact the early Church Fathers had with Jews and Judaism. However, when we examine Jewish writings from the first two centuries in the next chapter, we may obtain a somewhat clearer picture.

## Chapter 4

### Jewish Writings on Circumcision in the First Two Christian Centuries

#### 4.1 The Questions

In order to learn whether Jews were aware of the Christian claims made in relation to circumcision, we now look to discover what Jews were saying about circumcision in the first two centuries. We recall, at this juncture, the inherent limitations of such a study. We are dealing with written remains alone—for both Christians and Jews—and it is unclear how complete a picture they present. Moreover, should we find texts which suggest that Christians and Jews were aware of one another's religious claims (as, for example, the setting of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* might suggest) it would still be difficult, if not impossible, to know whether there was direct contact between the two groups or whether knowledge of one another's religion was indirect and hear-say. Justin's *Dialogue* is a case in point. While some scholars point to it as proof that Jews and Christians met and debated theology, others say that the dialogue was a popular literary genre and that the *Dialogue* proves Justin's knowledge of Judaism was, in fact, superficial. In addition to this problem, it is not always certain who is responding to whom. Did Christians such as Justin derogate circumcision as a "sign" in response to Judaism's interpretation that it was a covenantal act, or did Judaism respond to Justin?

#### 4.2 A Biblical Overview

With these problems in mind, we turn now to look at the Jewish literature of the first two centuries. We will begin with a brief overview of the biblical background for circumcision and then view what

the writers of the Mishna, Tosefta, Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Sifra, Sifrei and Bereshit Rabbah wrote.

The Bible provides the backdrop not only for the Jews of the first two centuries, but for the Christians as well. We first encounter circumcision in connection with Abraham in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis. In this passage, God makes a covenant with Abraham, promising him progeny and land. Abraham is commanded to circumcise all the males in his domain on the eighth day of life:

וַהֲרִי אֲבָרָם בְּחֶמְשֵׁים שָׁנָה וְתִשַׁע שָׁנִים בָּרָא יְהוָה אֶל־אֲבָרָם וְאָמַר אֵלָיו אֲבְרָם לֵשֵׁן הָיָה  
 תָּמִים: וְהָיְתָה בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאָרְכָּה אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאֹד  
 מֵאֹד: וְכָל אֲבָרָם עָלִישָׁנָה וְדָבָר אֶתְּ אֱלֹהִים לְאֹמֶר:  
 אֵלֵי יְהוָה בְּרִיתִי אֵשֶׁר וְהָיִיתָ לְאֵב רָמֵן טָמִים: וְלֹא־תִקְרָא  
 עוֹד אֶת־שִׁמְךָ אֲבָרָם וְהָיָה שִׁמְךָ אֲבָרָהם כִּי אֲבִי־רָמֵן  
 טָמִים טָהוֹרָה: וְהִסְרֵתִי אִתְּךָ בְּמֵאֹד מֵאֹד וְעִתִּידָה לְטָמִים  
 וּמְלָכִים מִמֶּנּוּ יָצֵא: וְהָקַמְתִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ  
 וּבֵין עֲרָקָה אֲחִיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם לְהַחֲיוֹת לְךָ  
 לְאֱלֹהִים וְלִעֲרָקָה אֲחִיךָ: וְעָשִׂיתִי לְךָ וְלִעֲרָקָה אֲחִיךָ  
 אֵת אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם אֵת בְּלִי־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן לְאֶחָת עוֹלָם וְהָיִיתִי  
 לָכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים: וְאָמַר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־אֲבָרָהם וְהָיָה אֵת  
 בְּרִיתִי חֲשֹׁמֶר אִתְּךָ וְעֲרָקָה אֲחִיךָ לְדֹרֹתָם: נָתַתִּי בְּרִיתִי  
 אֲשֶׁר חֲשֹׁמֶר בֵּינִי וּבֵינְכֶם וּבֵין עֲרָקָה אֲחִיךָ וְכָל  
 לָכֶם בְּלִי־אֶרֶץ: וְהִמְלַחְתִּים אֵת בְּשׁוֹרְ עֲרָלְכֶם וְהָיָה לְאֶחָת  
 בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵינְכֶם: וּבְדִשְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים יִמּוֹל לָכֶם בְּלִי־אֶרֶץ  
 לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם יֶלֶד בֵּית וּמִקְנֵתֵיכֶם מִכָּל בְּדֹבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא  
 מִן־עֶרְקָה הוּא: וְכָל יֶלֶד בֵּיתֵךָ וּמִקְנֵת בֵּיתֵךָ בְּסָפֶק  
 וְהָיְתָה בְּרִיתִי בִּבְשׁוֹרְכֶם לְבְרִית עוֹלָם: וְעָרַל וְכָר אֲשֶׁר  
 לֹא־יִמּוֹל אֶת־בְּשׁוֹר עֲרָלֹתָ וְהָיְתָה רִגְשֵׁךָ הָיָה מִשְׁפָּחָה  
 אֶת־בְּרִיתִי נָסִי:

<sup>1</sup>When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am El Shaddai. Walk in

My ways and be blameless. <sup>2</sup>I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous."

<sup>3</sup>Abram threw himself on his face, as God continued speaking to him. <sup>4</sup>"As for Me, this is My covenant with you: You shall be the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup>And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup>I will make you exceedingly fertile, and make nations of you; and kings shall come forth from you. <sup>7</sup>I will maintain My covenant between Me and you, and your offspring to come, as an everlasting covenant throughout the ages, to be God to you and to your offspring to come. <sup>8</sup>I give the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession. I will be their God."

<sup>9</sup>God further said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your offspring to come, throughout the ages. <sup>10</sup>Such shall be the covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your offspring to follow: every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup>You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. <sup>12</sup>At the age of eight days, every male among you throughout the generations shall be circumcised, even the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your seed. <sup>13</sup>The slave that is born in your household or bought with your money must be circumcised!—Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. <sup>14</sup>An uncircumcised male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin—such a person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant."  
[Genesis 17:1-14]

We note that it is unclear whether circumcision is the covenant itself (verses 10 and 13 indicate it is) or whether circumcision is the means for consummating the covenant. In verse 11 we read וְהָיָה לְאֵלֶיךָ בְּרִית. This suggests that the circumcision in this covenant functions much like the divided animals described in Genesis 15:10 which guaranteed God's promises of progeny.

Let us further note that Genesis 17 begins with God's words to Abraham: וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל אַבְרָהָם God's command to Abraham to be complete, or perfect, is significant because circumcision will later be seen as the means to that perfection.

In Genesis 21:4 we see that God's promise has come to fruition. Isaac is born and, on his eighth day of life, he is circumcised, "just as God commanded."

Further on, we read the story of the circumcision of the men of Shechem, who agreed to undergo circumcision in order for Shechem to be able to marry Dinah. We learn here that circumcision is a prerequisite to the social/marital intermingling of this group with Jacob's clan. It would seem that circumcision "converts" them in some sense.

We have already read the puzzling story of Gershom's circumcision in Exodus 4. Moses' son, Gershom, was apparently not circumcised on the eighth day. In the Book of Exodus we read that Moses, returning to Egypt, stopped along the way at an inn. The text is unclear at this point:

וַיְהִי בַדְרֹךְ הַלַּיְלָה וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְרָךְ הַחֵיטָל.  
וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרֶד וַתְּכַרֵּת אֶת עֲרֻלַּת בְּנֶהּ, וַתֹּאמֶר בְּרָעָיו  
וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֵתֶן-דָּמִים אֲנִי עֹלָה.  
וַיִּרְשׁ מִמּוֹן, אֵל אֲמִרָה: חֵתֶן-דָּמִים לְחַיֵּית.

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision." [Exodus 4:24-26]

We cannot be certain whether the direct object of וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ and וַיִּבְרָךְ הַחֵיטָל is Moses or his son Gershom. We suggest that verse 24 is connected with verse 25, so that the object of וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ and וַיִּבְרָךְ הַחֵיטָל is the same as the object of the circumcision in the second verse; namely, Gershom. It is clear that Zipporah's action wards



off the danger. One might argue that Moses is the one who is endangered for having failed to circumcise Gershom. Yet Moses never does perform the circumcision: Zipporah circumcises the boy. It seems more likely that it is the uncircumcised male who is endangered. The author of the *Letter of Barnabas* and Origen interpret Exodus 4:24-26 in this manner, holding that a hostile angel stood prepared to molest any uncircumcised male but that one's circumcision served to prevent the angel from harming him.

In Exodus 12:44 we learn that only circumcised slaves may eat the *pesach*. Those who are uncircumcised may not. Again, circumcision appears to "convert" one from being a נכר (stranger) to one of the group:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן: זֶה חֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח, כֹּס בֶּן  
 נֹכֵר לֹא יֵאָכֵל גֵּי. וְכֹל עֶבֶד אִישׁ מִקֵּנְתוֹ כֹּסֹס וְחֵלֶת  
 אֲתוֹ, אִם יֵאָכֵל גֵּי.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the law of the passover offering: No foreigner shall eat of it. But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he has been circumcised. A resident hireling shall not eat of it. [Exodus 12:43-45]

In the Book of Leviticus we read God's commandment to circumcise male children on the eighth day repeated within the context of a dissertation on the ritually unclean state of a woman who has just given birth.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup>Leviticus 12:3



Here, circumcision of the heart is not prescribed as a cure for being stiff-necked. The effect, however, is the same as we saw in Deuteronomy 10:16: to love God.

Outside the Torah, the expression "circumcising the heart" is used twice by the prophet Jeremiah. We have already quoted Jeremiah 4:4 (see page 93 above) and we also point out Jeremiah 9:24-25:

הנה ימים באים נאום יהוה , ופקדתי על כל חטא בערלה .  
 על מצרים ועל יהודה ועל ארץ ארם ועל בני צמון ועל חמא ועל  
 כל קצוץ פאה הימים באהר כי לא האים ערלים ולא בית ישראל ערל .

Lo, days are coming—declares the Lord—when I will take note of everyone circumcised in the foreskin: of Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all the desert dwellers who have the hair of their temples clipped. For all these nations are uncircumcised, but all the House of Israel are uncircumcised of heart. [Jeremiah 9:24-25]

This is a difficult passage to comprehend. It is clear that Israel is being compared unfavorably with the other nations. Although the people are circumcised of foreskin, they are not "circumcised of heart."

The only other biblical use of circumcision is found in the Book of Joshua. God commands Joshua to have the Israelites circumcised with flint knives just after they cross through the Jordan River as they prepare to offer the *pesach* sacrifice. It was this event, which the Bible calls ליל to which Justin<sup>137</sup> referred. The fifth chapter of the Book of Joshua explains at length that all Israelite males were circumcised in the wilderness upon their release from Egypt but that none had been circumcised since. Hence, an entire generation remained uncircumcised.

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<sup>137</sup>Justin, pp. 324-5.

Psalm 118 contains the term סִנֵּךְ in verses 10, 11 and 12. Most likely this is a metaphorical use of "to circumcise" which might be translated, as the Jewish Publication Society edition does, "I will cut them down." Clearly, it does not mean "circumcise" in the usual sense.

#### 4.3 The Mishna, Tosefta, Sifra and Sifrei

The early rabbinic sources contain numerous references to circumcision. The vast majority are technical and legalistic in nature, or mention circumcision only in passing. Inasmuch as they are not polemical, apologetic or dogmatic in nature, they do not seem to reflect an abiding concern on the part of the rabbis to defend the institution of circumcision against Christian theological attack.

We noted in chapter one, for example, that circumcision overrides the observance of Shabbat. Mishna Shabbat 18 and 19 clearly stipulate that all aspects of the circumcision operation are permitted on Shabbat. No rationale is offered. Tosefta Shabbat 15:10 also discusses this issue.

Another category of passages stems from the laws in Exodus 12:43-45 concerning who may eat of the *pesach*. According to the Torah, while "strangers" (גֵּרִים) may not partake, circumcised slaves of Israelites may. Mishna Pesachim 8:8 records a disagreement between the Schools of Shammai and Hillel as to whether the circumcision of the proselyte converted on the eve of Passover renders him ritually unclean and thereby ineligible to eat of the *pesach*.

זר שנתגר בערב פסח : גי' שח' אומר, אכל ואכל  
 אר פסחו אדרג. וגי' הלל אומר, הפורש מן העדלה  
 כפורש מן הקדרה

Concerning a proselyte who was converted on the eve of Passover, the School of Shammai say he must immerse [himself] and then he may eat his Passover offering in the evening. The School of Hillel say that one who separates [himself] from the foreskin [that is, one who is circumcised] is like one who separates from the grave [that is, the convert is ritually impure]. [Pesachim 8:8]

In the Tosefta, the same situation is discussed. Here, the question is whether the proselyte must wait until the פסח י' to participate.<sup>138</sup>

Circumcision is again mentioned in conjunction with Passover in Tosefta Keritut 1:1. In this brief passage we learn that purposeful failure to observe either is punished by כרת.

Sifra (Parashat Tazriya 1) contains a lengthy discussion of circumcision in the context of a woman's state of ritual impurity after giving birth. The rabbis ask whether it is the child, himself, who renders the mother ritually impure. Another voice questions whether it is logical that the child could make the mother ritually impure yet not be unclean, himself. It is also asked why circumcision is assigned to the eighth day. The answer is that the soul (נשמה) is created. This is followed by a protracted discussion concerning whether circumcision may be performed at night or only during the day. The question of Shabbat circumcision is brought up again here. The passage closes with the famous disagreement between Hillel and Shammai regarding the

<sup>138</sup>See Tosefta Pesachim 7:12,13.

necessity for דם גרית in the case of a circumcised proselyte. Shammai held that it was necessary; Hillel claimed it was unnecessary. We note that the term דם גרית (blood of the covenant) is used here to refer to the blood spilled in lieu of a complete circumcision operation.

The term דם גרית appears in the Tosefta as well. In Tosefta Shabbat 15 it has a slightly different connotation. Here we find a story illustrating that the strict prescription to circumcise on the eighth day can be eased for health considerations. Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel ruled that if a woman bore three sons and all of them died as a result of their circumcision, the fourth should not be circumcised. In fact, if each of the sons of three sisters died as a result of circumcision, the son of a fourth sister is not circumcised. R. Nathan then tells the story of a woman whose two sons died from circumcision. The third was brought to R. Nathan looking rather jaundiced. R. Nathan recalls:

נסתקלת בו ולא מצאתי בו דם גרית On this basis, R. Nathan instructs that the circumcision be postponed until he recovered. As a result, when the circumcision was performed, the child survived and was named for R. Nathan. When R. Nathan says:

לא מצאתי בו דם גרית what does he mean? Is this shorthand for "I did not find that he had enough blood in him to perform a *brit milah*," in which case גרית is short for גרית מילה? We are reminded of the Christian claim that circumcision was a symbol of Abraham's covenant with God rather than the mechanism whereby Abraham was brought into the covenant. It is tempting to assert that the term דם גרית reflects the belief that the circumcision is the covenant



and the blood spilled as a result of the operation is the blood of a covenant actually being made at that moment. However, this passage says nothing else that would clearly support such a contention. We will have to look further.

Naturally enough, circumcision is mentioned in the context of discussions on conversion. We take, for example, Sifrei de-be Rav (Parashat Shallach 108). The convert, we are told, brings a blood sacrifice ( פ'נ'נ ) just as the Israelites offered the blood of an animal. The implication is that the blood of the circumcision is a "sacrifice." This is underscored when we read:

רג' אומר: מה יראה שם באו עבדית אלא ב' גברים -  
במילה ובגילת והרצית קרבן - אף הערים.

Rabbi says: What about Israel who is brought into the covenant in three ways: through circumcision, through immersion and through the favorable acceptance of a sacrifice. So, too, the Gentiles.

Rabbi's words are clear: circumcision, immersion and God's acceptance of the sacrificial offering constitute the mechanism whereby both Israelites and proselytes enter the Jewish covenant with God. Significantly, the text goes on to say:

כיוצא בהם, א' מה יראה שם באו עבדית אלא ב' גברים -  
במילה ובגילת והרצית קרבן - אף הערים.

Similarly, just as Israel [enters the covenant] through [the] blood [of circumcision] and through peace offerings, so, too, the Gentiles [enter the covenant] through [the] blood [of circumcision] and through peace offerings.

Clearly, offerings were no longer possible at the time this midrash was composed. The only alternative was through the נס. Variant readings give us נסה נס. The implication is that the blood of circumcision functions as a sacrifice which confirms the covenant.

In the midst of a discussion on Yom Kippur observance in Sifra (Parshat Acharei Mot 1) the midrash comments that a convert is a גר גר. Again, the covenantal quality of conversion is stressed. Tosefta Avodah Zarah 3:11 tells us that circumcised servants of Gentiles are assumed to be Gentiles themselves. We see from this that circumcision alone is not enough to make one a גר גר. It must be accompanied by the intent of becoming a Jew; it must be לשם לשם. Hence לבי is also a requirement. The School of Shammai ruled that הכרת-ק is required even in the case of a previously circumcised convert.

There is a passage in Mishna Avot which finds its way into several other texts in various forms. In Pirke Avot we read:

רבי אליעזר המודעי אומר: הוחלל את הקדשים והחלל את המועדות והחלל את חברו גרים והחלל גריתו של אברהם אבינו והחלל פנים בתורה של כהעכה אל על פי שש גידו תורה ומצוות טובים אין לו חלק לעולם הבא.

R. Elazar of Modiin said: Whoever desecrates the holy things, despises the festivals, publicly shames another person, makes void the covenant of Abraham our father or interprets the Torah not according to *halachah*, even if he is knowledgeable in Torah and has good deeds to his credit, he has no portion in the world-to-come. [Avot 3:15]

According to Elazar of Modiin, there are five transgressions which automatically deprive one of life in the world-to-come. They are: desecrating holy things, despising the festivals, shaming someone in public, making void the covenant of Abraham, and interpreting the Torah incorrectly. Hertz<sup>133</sup> considers this passage to have been directed against gnostic and Jewish-Christian sectarians. He wrote: "Many of those 'Liberal' Jews rejected all religious authority, and their attitude opened the door to spiritual nihilism."<sup>134</sup> If we are to understand this passage as does Hertz, then ג'יתו של אברהם אבינו, an expression used here for the first time, certainly seems to refer to circumcision. To void this covenant is to attempt to "undo" the circumcision by removing the scar. One thereby forfeits his membership in the covenantal community. Further, without circumcision, one cannot attain salvation, חוק לעולם הבא. Hertz explains that the other four violations all concern rabbinic authority. We might add that the phrase על פי שש לו מעשים טובים may be directed against Jewish-Christians or Pauline Christians who were familiar with the Torah (Paul quotes from the Septuagint) but held that moral dicta were the only laws God really commanded; that since the time of Jesus all else was inconsequential.

Sifrei refers to the passage in Avot twice in Parshat Shellach. First, let us look at Sifrei Shellach 101:

וכי תשג ואל תעשן ע"ז היתה בקלל כל המצוות  
שהצבור מביאים עליהם ופרי הכתוב מוציאם מכללם

<sup>133</sup>*Sayings of the Fathers*, trans. and ed. Joseph H. Hertz (New York: Behrman House, 1945).

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

להחמיר עליה ולגון בקבוצה שיהא צבור מביא עליה  
בר מצוה ושעיר זחלאג לכך נאמרה ברשה לו.

וכי תשאו ולא תעשו וא': געלט הכתוב מדבר. אתה אומר ע"ל  
או אינו אלא אחת מכל מצוות האמורות בתורה. תל ויהיה אם  
מצוה העדה נעשה לשמאל יחד הכתוב מצוה לו בפני עצמה ואילו  
זו ע"ל אתה אומר ע"ל א אינו אלא אחת מכל מצוות האמורות בתורה  
תל וכי תשאו ולא תעשו [את כל המצוות האלה] גאו כל המצוות  
לעצמם על מצוה אחת. מה הצורך על כל המצוות שורק ע"ל  
ומפר גרית ומשנה פנים בתורה (ואילו לו ע"ל שפורק ע"ל ומפר גרית  
גרית) אף הצורך על מצוה אחת שורק ע"ל ומפר גרית  
ומשנה פנים בתורה. [ואילו לו ע"ל שפורק ע"ל ומפר גרית  
ומשנה פנים בתורה] שנאמר לעבור גריתו וא'. ואין גרית  
אלא תורה שנאמר אלה גברי הקרית. ו' אומר ג' אומר  
כאן כל ונאמר להלן כל. מה כל האמור להלן ג' אומר  
גבר אף כל האמור כאן געלט בדבר.

וכי תשאו ולא תעשו The scripture speaks of idolatry, but  
perhaps I might say it refers to all the commandments which  
are spoken in the Torah. The Torah teaches:  
ויהיה אם מצוה העדה. It is written in the singular. This  
commandment stands alone. And what is it? Idolatry. You say  
idolatry, but perhaps I might say another one of all the  
commandments which are spoken in the Torah. Therefore the  
Torah teaches וכי תשאו ולא תעשו [אג כל המצוות האלה]. All the  
commandments are mentioned to teach one commandment. Just as  
whoever transgresses all the commandments breaks the yoke  
and makes void the covenant and interprets the Torah not in  
accordance with *halachah*, so too, one who transgresses one  
commandment breaks the yoke, makes void the covenant and  
interprets the Torah not in accordance with *halachah*. [And  
what is this idolatry which breaks the yoke and makes void  
the covenant and interprets the Torah not in accordance with  
*halachah*?] As it is said: If there is found among you, in  
one of the settlements which the Lord your God is giving  
you, a man or woman who has affronted the Lord your God and  
transgressed His covenant—turning to the worship of other  
gods and bowing down to them, to the sun or the moon or any  
of the heavenly host, something I never commended—...  
[Deuteronomy 17:2-3]. And "covenant" can only mean the  
Torah, as it is said: These are the words of the covenant.  
Rabbi says: it says here כל and it says כל further  
on. Just as כל used further on refers to idolatry so,  
too, כל here refers to idolatry. [Sifrei  
Shellach 101]<sup>11</sup>

Here we encounter a discussion on idolatry, inspired by Numbers 15:22. The midrash asks whether the forbidden behavior mentioned is idolatry (since לעשות is in the singular) or perhaps all the commandments in the Torah, since the verse ends את כל המצוות האלה. Then the midrash uses language similar to that of Avot 3:15:

מה העובר על כל המצוות כורק עול ומפר גרית  
ומעלה פנים בתורה.

Just as one who transgresses against all the commandments and breaks the yoke and voids the covenant and interprets Torah incorrectly....

We do not find the full expression גרית של אברהם אבינו and, in fact, no specific mention of circumcision. Since מפר גרית is followed by the distinctive phrase ומעלה פנים בתורה we are tempted to identify it with גרית של אברהם אבינו in Avot 3:15. Further, כורק עול certainly implies a rebellion against divine authority as does מפר גרית.

Yet the passage does not, as we noted, mention circumcision. It speaks instead of idolatry, drawing on Deuteronomy 17:2-3 which associates עובר גרית with idolatry (וישק ויער אלהים אחרים וישתחו להם).

The next passage we shall examine is Sifrei Shallach 102. Here, the midrash interprets Numbers 15:31:

<sup>141</sup>This and all Sifrei passages are from M. Friedmann, *Sifre de-be Rav* (Vienna: Druck von J. Holzwarth, 1864).

כי דבר יהוה גלה ואת מצותו הפר הכרת  
תכרת הקפס יהוה עונה בה.

Because he has spurned the word of the Lord and violated His commandment, that person shall be cut off—he bears his guilt. [Numbers 15:31]

The midrash reads:

כי את דבר יהוה גלה. כל צדוקי ואת מצותו הפר  
לה אפיקורוס. דא כי אג דבר יהוה גלה: לה המלכה פנים  
בתורה ואג מצותו הפר לה המפר ברית גמר מכאן אחר  
רג' אלעזר החופץ החחול אג הקדש והמבלע את  
החופצות והמפר בריתו של אברהם אבינו אל על פי  
ש"ס גידו מצוות הרבה כדי הוא לדחות מן העולם. אחר  
כל התורה כולה אני מקבל חול מדבר לה [להו] כי אג  
דבר יהוה גלה אחר כל התורה אחר מפי הקודש ודבר  
לה מפי צדק אחר [להו] כי דבר יהוה גלה [דא]  
כי דבר יהוה גלה. רג' מאיר אחר: לה הולד ואינו שוק  
לאחרים. ר' נתן אחר לה היכל לעמוד ואינו לומד.  
ר' נהוראי אחר לה שלם השליח על דת כל עיקר.  
רג' שמעון אחר על הכתוב מדבר שנאמר: כי אג  
דבר יהוה גלה. שגילה על דבר הירושלמי, שנאמר למשה  
מפי הגבורה אנכי יהוה אלהיך וגו'. על יהיה סך  
אלהים אחרים על פני.

כי את דבר יהוה גלה. This refers to the Sadducee and  
ואג מצותו הפר refers to the Epicureans. Another  
explanation of כי את דבר יהוה גלה: This refers to those who do  
not interpret the Torah according to *halachah*  
(משנה פנים בתורה) and ואת מצותו הפר refers to those who  
make void the covenant of the flesh (ברית גשר). From  
this, R. Elazar of Modiin said: whoever desecrates the holy  
things, despises the festivals and makes void the covenant  
of Abraham our father—even if he has many *mitzvot* to his  
credit—he deserves to be thrust out of the world. [Sifrei  
Shallach 102]

The rabbis associated גלה with מגלה in Avot 3:15. This led them to  
seek a one-to-one correspondence between the phrases in Numbers 15:31



and those in Avot 3:15. The phrase ואת מצותו הפך, they tell us, refers to those who make void the ברית גשר. The midrash then quotes Avot 3:15 either incorrectly or drawing on a different version. There is no doubt that the ברית גשר and של אברהם are one in the same. And there can be little doubt that the אבנו is circumcision, the "covenant [which is made in] the flesh."

Sifrei also records an alternative version of Avot 3:15. The phrase מאשים אובים is deleted as is בתורה. In addition, מצות is substituted for תורה and the punishment is אין לו חלק לעולם הבא rather than ספחות מן העולם. It is well accepted that עולם הבא is implied by עולם. Parallels can be found in Tosefta Sanhedrin 12:9, b. Sanhedrin 99b and Avot de Rabbi Nathan 1:26 and 2:35. Thus we have another clue that circumcision was a means to attaining salvation (in Jewish terms עולם הבא) in the second century.

In Nedarim 3:11 we find a long tribute to circumcision which seems to have been inspired by R. Elazar b. Azariah's comment that God finds the uncircumcised state repulsive. We read:

רבי ישמעאל אומר, גדול מילה שנכתב עליה שם עשרי גריות.  
 רבי יוסי אומר, גדולה מילה שדוחה את הישגת החמורה.  
 רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר: גדולה מילה שלא נפלה לו  
 מטה הכדיק עליה מלא טעם. רבי נחמיה אומר: גדולה מילה  
 שדוחה את הנאצים. רבי אומר: גדולה מילה של החלום  
 שדוחה אברהם אבינו לא נקרא שם עד שחל, שנאמר,  
 כחנניך לפני ויהי תמים. ולא גדולה מילה שאמרו היא  
 לא גרף הקדוש ברוך הוא את עולם, שנאמר: כה  
 אמר ה', אם לא גרף יומם וליה חוקות שמים  
 וארץ לא שחתי.

R. Ishmael says, Great is circumcision whereby the covenant was established thirteen times. R. Jose says, Great is circumcision since it overrides the stringent Sabbath. R. Joshua b. Karcha says, Great is circumcision since it was not suspended for Moses the righteous for so long as an hour. R. Nehemiah says, Great is circumcision which supersedes the laws of leprosy. Rabbi says, Great is circumcision for in spite of all the virtues that Abraham our father fulfilled he was not called perfect until he was circumcised, as it is said, Walk before Me and be thou perfect. Another illustration of the supreme importance of circumcision: were it not for it the Holy One Blessed Be He would not have created His universe, as it is said, Thus saith the Eternal, If My covenant be not day and night I had not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth. [Nedarim 3:11]

This is a fascinating and crucial passage. R. Ishmael contends that thirteen covenants were made; not the one commonly discussed by Christians, but thirteen. The seventeenth chapter of Genesis, in which God makes a covenant with Abraham and commands him to circumcise himself contains a form of the term סדן thirteen times. R. Elazar b. Azariah concludes, apparently on this basis, that thirteen separate covenants were each established through circumcision. R. Yosi compares circumcision to Shabbat and says it is of greater import since it overrides Shabbat. R. Joshua ben Karcha's comment seems to refer to the circumcision of Gershom in Exodus 4. He implies that it was Moses, rather than Gershom, who was in danger.

Most interesting is Rabbi's comment concerning Abraham. Not only did Abraham fulfill many *mitzvot*, according to Rabbi, but he was not considered שלם (complete) until he had undergone circumcision. He quotes Genesis 17:1: התחלך לעבד אתי ואתה תהיה תמים. Rabbi is suggesting that male human beings require circumcision in order to be complete and that to be uncircumcised is to be somewhat less than fully (or perfectly) human.

Finally, he makes the boldest assertion of the passage: the entire world was created in order to make circumcision possible. Circumcision, and all it represents, becomes the pinnacle of creation. Actually, this is not surprising since, as we are seeing, circumcision has come to represent the Jewish covenant with God through Abraham, human physical and spiritual perfection, obedience to God's commandments (as well as to rabbinic authority) and salvation (הוא פסח). One cannot help but think that circumcision has come to mean so much precisely because Christians claimed it meant nothing at all:

Only, let every one lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God. Every one should remain in the state in which he was called. [1 Corinthians 7:17-20]

Tosefta Nedarim 2:5-7 quotes Rabbi's two sayings, adding between them:

דבר אחר: גדולה מזה שקולה כנגד כל מצוה  
 גורמת שבטורה שנאמר: וְעָתָּה דָּם הַגִּבּוֹרִית  
 אשר כרת יהוה עמכם וְאֵל.

Another explanation: [So] great is circumcision that it is equal to all the works of creation which are in the Torah, as it is said: Here is the blood of the covenant which God makes (כרת) with you [Exodus 24:8]. [Tosefta Nedarim 2:5-7]

The expression פג ה'ג'ת from Exodus 24:8 reminds us of the earlier tannaitic passages in which פג ה'ג'ת was also associated with circumcision. This additional section bolsters Rabbi's second point.

The use of the term כרת in Tosefta Nedarim 2:5-7 connects the notions of circumcision and covenant, both linguistically and in substance. The blood which is shed when the circumcision is actually cut is likened implicitly to the blood of animals halved when a covenant is made. The cutting action is crucial for it is covenantal itself: the covenant is *cut* in flesh.

The tannaitic passages we have seen thus far are restricted to the Mishna, Tosefta and exegetical midrashim Sifra and Sifrei. They indicate clearly that פג ה'ג'ת and פג ה'ג'ת are terms for circumcision, that circumcision is rewarded with פג ה'ג'ת, and that circumcision brings some sort of completion or perfection to the human being. However, these passages are extremely terse and do not elaborate on these themes. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to make any further conclusions based on them.

#### 4.4 Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael and Midrash Bereshit Rabbah

In the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael and Midrash Bereshit Rabbah we find far more extensive and helpful material. While both treat the Torah text in a line-by-line manner, as do Sifra and Sifrei, they are far more aggadic in their approach. Unlike Mishna and Tosefta, they concentrate on theological issues, eschewing legal questions. Hence, they are "free" to engage in polemics to a much greater extent than Mishna, Tosefta, Sifra or Sifrei.

In the previous chapter, we saw that Justin spoke about the belief that circumcision brought salvation. From the words of the *Dialogue* it is not clear just what sort of salvation he had in mind. The Midrash Bereshit Rabbah suggests that circumcision does, indeed, have salvific power. In one passage, circumcision earns the sons of Ptolemy physical protection by an angel of God. In two other passages, circumcision is rewarded with עולם הבא. These are dissimilar rewards in this respect: one is physical protection in this world, the other entails a promise of life in the next. However, on another level, both are divine redemptive rewards for having fulfilled the divine prescription.

In Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 46:10 we are told that the sons of Ptolemy circumcise themselves in accordance with the commandment they read in the Book of Genesis. As a result of their circumcisions, an angel of God protects them in battle.

וּנְחֵמְתֶם אֶת בְּשַׁר עֲרֵלְתְּכֶם. כְּנוּמִי הִיא תְּלוּיָהּ בְּאֵל. מַדְשָׁה בְּחוּבָה  
וּבְיוֹאֵס בֵּן תְּלָמִי הַחֶמֶק שֶׁהָיוּ יוֹשְׁבֵי וְקוֹרֵין בְּסֵפֶר בְּרֵאשִׁית. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהֵיטָעוּ  
לְפָסֶק הַלֵּב וּנְחֵמְתֶם הַפֶּק לֵב פְּנֵי לְבוֹתָם וְהִתְחַל בּוֹכָה וְכֵן פְּנֵי  
לְבוֹתָם וְהִתְחַל בּוֹכָה. הָיָה לֵב מֵה עָצְמוּ וְלֵב מֵה עָצְמוּ. אַחֲרֵי יוֹמִים  
הָיוּ יוֹשְׁבֵי וְקוֹרֵין בְּסֵפֶר בְּרֵאשִׁית וְכִיּוֹן שֶׁהֵיטָעוּ לְפָסֶק וּנְחֵמְתֶם  
אֶת אֶחָד לְחִבְרֵי אֵילָן אַחֲרֵי אֶחָד עֵץ אֵילָן אַחֲרֵי אֶחָד  
וְכֵן עָלָה אֶת הַדָּבָר לֵב לֵב. כִּיּוֹן שֶׁהֵיטָעוּ אֶת  
הַלֵּב וְאֶת הַלֵּב. בֵּינָם עָלָה נְאֻם בְּשַׁר עֲרֵלְתְּכֶם וְכֵן הוּסָף  
שִׁמְיוֹ. אַחֲרֵי יוֹמֵיו. מֵה פֶּקֶדֶן עַל הַקִּדּוּשׁ בְּרֵךְ הוּא  
אַחֲרֵי לֵב פִּינָח: בְּשַׁר שִׁצָּא לְחֵמְתָה עָצְמוּ עַל מִצְוָה  
מִסֹּאֵן וִירָד מִלֵּאֲוֹן וְהִצִּילוּ.

And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin. It [the prepuce] is like a sore hanging from the body. Once Monabaz and Izates, the sons of King Ptolemy, were sitting and reading the Book of Genesis. When they came to the

verse, 'And you shall be circumcised,' one turned his face to the wall and began to weep, and the other turned his face to the wall and began to weep. Then each went and had himself circumcised. Some time later they were sitting and reading the Book of Genesis, and when they came to the verse 'And you shall be circumcised,' one said to the other, 'Woe to you, brother!' to which he replied, 'Woe to you, brother, but not to me.' Thus they revealed the matter to each other. When their mother learned about it she went and told their father: 'A sore has broken out on our sons' flesh and the physician has ordered circumcision.' 'Then let them be circumcised,' said he. How did the Holy One, blessed be He, requite them? Said R. Phinehas: When he went out to battle a band of enemies attacked him, and an angel descended and rescued him. [Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 46:10]<sup>142</sup>

It would seem that Monabaz and Izates circumcised themselves in order to convert. The fact that we are told that they were inspired to do so by reading the Book of Genesis and, in fact, wept when they read the commandment and realized it had not been fulfilled through them, implies that their acts were motivated by a desire to obey God's will as expressed in the Torah. Hence, the protection which they received accrued to them due to their obedience to God's commandment.

Is this passage intended to answer Christianity's rejection of circumcision? The Christian claims that circumcision availed Christians (and in particular, proselytes) nothing<sup>143</sup> as well as Justin's and Tertullian's claims that circumcision no longer brought redemption or salvation may find their answer here. Irenaeus claimed that circumcision saved the Hebrews from physical harm at the hands of the Egyptians only as a foreshadowing of Christian salvation. The midrash cited above seems to refute Irenaeus's contention by asserting the

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<sup>142</sup>This and all Midrash Bereshit Rabbah passages are from J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965).

<sup>143</sup>1 Corinthians 7:17-20.



benefits of circumcision to all who submit themselves to the ritual.

We further note that the midrash quoted above uses the term להציל for "to save." This term implies salvation in a physical sense, but can readily be abstracted to spiritual salvation. In the Book of Exodus, the term להציל is used many times to connote the bodily redemption of the people from slavery in Egypt.

ומאז גאיתי אל פרעה לעבד בשמך הוץ לעם הזה  
והצלתם לא הצלתם את עמך.

Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, it has gone worse with this people; yet You have not *delivered* Your people at all. [Exodus 5:23]

ואחרתם לבח פסח הוא ליהיה אשר פסח על בתי -  
בני ישראל במצרים בגבול ארץ מצרים ואת  
בתניו הציל ויקד העם וישתחוו.

You shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but *saved* our houses." [Exodus 12:27]

ו'אמר יתרו: גרוך יהיה אשר הציל אתכם מיד מצרים  
ומיד פרעה אשר הציל את העם מתחת יד מצרים.

"Blessed be the Lord," Jethro said, "who *delivered* you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh, and who *delivered* the people from under the hand of the Egyptians...." [Exodus 18:10]

We find passages in the Psalms which support the contention that להציל means "to save one from death":

הנה דין יהוה אל יראיו למיחלים לחסדו  
להציל ממות נפשם ולחיותם ברעג.

Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, who wait for His faithful care to save them from death, to sustain them in famine. [Psalm 33:18-19]

כי הצלת נפשי ממות העל רגלי מדחי להתהלך לפני  
אלהים באור החיים.

For you have saved me from death, my foot from stumbling,  
that I may walk before God in the light of life.  
[Psalm 56:14]

In the book of the prophet Isaiah we find an opening for a more  
abstracted or spiritualized notion of להציל:

והיה עמדת ועד עתה צבא גאון מצרים  
כי יצקו אל יהוה מפני עושים וישלח להם מושל  
ורב והצילם.

They shall serve as a symbol and reminder of the Lord of  
Hosts in the land of Egypt, so that when [the Egyptians] cry  
out to the Lord against oppressors, He will send them a  
savior and champion to deliver them. [Isaiah 19:20]

The association of עושה with להציל, in light of later Christian  
claims that Jesus was the עושה, may have inspired Bereshit  
Rabbah 46:10 and, in particular, the use of להציל here.

In the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Beshallah 4,<sup>144</sup> the rabbis  
suggest that Israel's salvation at the Reed Sea may have been God's way  
of repaying their ancestor Abraham for having circumcised himself. In  
this same passage, it is suggested that the event at the Reed Sea may

<sup>144</sup>See Appendix D.

also have been a repayment for Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. This is supported by the linguistic connection between וַיַּקְטֹבֶהָ ("he cleaved the wood for the burnt offering" [Genesis 22:3]) and וַיַּקְטֹבֶהָ ("the waters were cleft" [Exodus 14:21]). It is important to note that whether or not the salvation at the Reed Sea is to be ascribed to Abraham's circumcision or his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, in either case the ideas of "commandment" and "covenant" are crucial. The midrash makes clear at the outset that Abraham has been repayed for performing a commandment:

גְּלוּת מִצִּיּוֹן שָׁמַע אֲבִרָהּ אֲבִינּוֹ אֵין קוֹרֵעַ לָהֶם אֶת הַיָּם.

The question is: which commandment? The rabbis even quote Jeremiah 33:25 which speaks about a בְּרִית (covenant). They identify this covenant as the covenant of circumcision, which Abraham observed. In saving Israel at the Reed Sea, then, God was merely fulfilling the divine end of the contract.

Further on, in the same midrash, we read Shemayah's opinion that God divided the Reed Sea for Israel because of the אֱמוּנָה (faith) which Abraham had demonstrated. Shemayah's perspective on faith is that faith is manifest in action, it is the faith lived through obedience to God's commandments. In fact, faith expressed through action is the theme of this entire midrash. It opens with a picture of Moses standing with the Israelites at the shore of the Reed Sea, unable to cross its raging waters. The Egyptians are in hot pursuit behind them. God castigates Moses for standing still and praying:

אמר הקד"ה למשה : משה בני נתונים בצרה הים סוגר  
ושונא רוצח ואתה עומד ואומג בתפלה מה תצנן אלי ?

The Holy One blessed be He said to Moses: "Moses, My son, My children are in trouble, the sea is closing [in on them] and the enemy is pursuing [them], yet you stand there reciting long prayers. Why do you cry out to Me?"

The answer, we know is הם אג נלך. The expression of faith as manifest through prayer is insufficient. Moses must act. The Jew must act. The Jew must obey God's *mitzvot*. It is true that faith brings salvation:

כבי נ"א האמנה שהאמין ב' אברהם אביהם  
שאקרע להם את הים ...

So worthy is the faith with which Abraham their father believed in Me that I will divide the sea for them....

but it is faith which is manifest through observance of God's commandments.

In Mekhilta Beshallah 7 the rabbis applaud faith. Treating the verse ו'אמ'ן ב'יהוה ובמשה עבדו they expound on the greatness of faith. The אמנה of which they speak (אמנה) is the same as the term employed in Mekhilta Beshallah 4)<sup>145</sup> is the faith which leads to the observance of *mitzvot*:

<sup>145</sup>See Norman J. Cohen "Analysis of an Exegetical Tradition in the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael: The Meaning of Amanah in the Second and Third Centuries." *AJS Review*, 9 (1984), to appear. He treats the question of the meaning of אמנה as well as the possible anti-Christian polemical use of this passage. For the text of Mekhilta Beshallah 7, see Appendix E.

שכל המקבל ע"יו מצוה אחת באמנה כדאי הוא שתשרה עליו  
רוח הקדש.

Whoever accepts [the obligation to fulfill] one commandment is deserving of having the holy spirit rest on him.

The term רוח הקדש cannot but remind one of the "Holy Spirit" of Christianity. Are the rabbis consciously comparing the Christian road to salvation (through faith alone) to the Jewish way (faith expressed through observance of *mitzvot*)?<sup>146</sup> Paul had claimed that Gentile proselytes could receive the Holy Spirit without even baptism, let alone circumcision. Here, the רוח הקדש is seen as a reward for fulfilling one of the divine commandments, the very commandments Paul considered obsolete.

Moreover, Mekhilta Beshallah 7 makes it clear that the redemption at the Reed Sea is not the real thrust of their message. Abraham, they note, was rewarded for his אננה not only with this world, but also עולם הבא (the world-to-come). The redemption at the Reed Sea prefigures the future redemption. The rabbis then bring Psalm 92:2-3 which reads:

אב עבודת ע"הוה ולמחר לשמך ע"יו.  
ע"ה"ב בקר חסדך ואמונתך בלילות.

<sup>146</sup>What is further striking, in this regard, is that the rabbis are utterly silent concerning Genesis 15:6: אב עבודת ע"הוה ולמחר לשמך ע"יו. Bereshit Rabbah offers no interpretation of this verse at all. It may be that this verse troubled the rabbis and so they avoided it. Yet, given the very nature of midrash, it would not have been a difficult task to reinterpret Genesis 15:6 in accordance with the ideas promulgated in the Mekhilta.

It is good to praise the Lord, to sing hymns to Your name, O Most High, to proclaim Your steadfast love at daybreak, Your faithfulness each night.... [Psalm 92:2-3]

This world is identified with "night," while the "morning" connotes צוה הבא. Hence, faithfulness of the sort Abraham exhibited (i.e., through observing God's commandments) is rewarded with צוה הבא. In Sifrei Shellach 102 we saw evidence that circumcision might be associated with the reward of צוה הבא. Here, that notion is made explicit.

This is not the only text through which the rabbis express the view that obedience to the commandment of circumcision is rewarded with צוה הבא. In Bereshit Rabbah 90:6 and again chapter 95, the rabbis comment on Genesis 47:25. In the Genesis verse, the Egyptians thank Joseph for having saved them from the seven year famine. Their use of the term ח"ת"ו (as opposed to merely ח"ת"ו) signifies that Joseph had given them not only life in this world, but also life in the world-to-come as well:

ר' שמעון אמר ח"ת"ו אין כתוב אלא ח"ת"ו. נתת  
לנו חיים בעולם הזה ובעולם הבא.

R. Shmuel said: the text does not say ח"ת"ו but rather ח"ת"ו [signifying that] Joseph gave the Egyptians life in this world and in the world-to-come.

The additional letter ה signifies that the Egyptians have been doubly blessed. And to what do we attribute this? The midrash tells us that Joseph told the Egyptians to circumcise themselves. The fact that they enjoyed צוה הבא, as revealed through the use of ח"ת"ו, teaches that they must have been circumcised.



Bereshit Rabbah 91:5 also discusses the idea that Joseph told the Egyptians to circumcise themselves.<sup>147</sup> It is not explicitly stated that the circumcision of the Egyptians is part of a conversion process. Joseph's refusal to feed uncircumcised people and the Egyptians' resentment over being ruled by a Hebrew suggests that the rabbis may have intended to imply conversion. According to the midrash, after Joseph tells the Egyptians to circumcise themselves they rush to Pharaoh to complain (at having to lower themselves by becoming like the Hebrews?) and Pharaoh confirms that this is the only way they will be *saved* from the famine.

Irenaeus argued that the mark of circumcision was given to the Hebrews to distinguish them from the Egyptians. This distinction led to their salvation. In contrast, Justin and Tertullian claimed that the mark of circumcision set Jews aside for punishment. In the present passage from Bereshit Rabbah, the Egyptians seem to object to becoming, or appearing to be, Hebrews by circumcising themselves. Yet this is precisely the remedy to their problem. It is only by becoming circumcised that Joseph will feed them and *save* them from starvation. What is missing is the suggestion that the salvation offered them by Joseph is any more than the physical, this-worldly provision of food.

Next, we examine the issue of covenant. Is circumcision a "sign" or "symbol" or is it a covenant, itself? Bereshit Rabbah 46:9 states explicitly that acceptance of circumcision is necessary to prove that one accepts God's divinity. In this passage God tells Abraham:

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<sup>147</sup>See Appendix F.

ה' יודן אמר: אם מקבלין בניך אלהותי אין הוות  
 להם עאלוה פטרון ואם לאו אין הוה להם עאלוה  
 פטרון, אם נכנסין בניך לארץ מקבלין (עליהם)  
 אלהותי ואם לאו אין מקבלין אלהותי, אם מקבלין  
 אג הימיה הן מקבלין אלהותי ואם לאו אין מקבלין  
 אלהותי, אם מקבלין בניך אג הימיה יכנסו לארץ ואם  
 לאו אין נכנסין לארץ.

R. Judah said: "God said, 'If thy children accept My Divinity, I will be their God and Patron; if not, I will not be their God and Patron. If thy children enter the Promised Land, they accept My Divinity; if not, they do not accept My Divinity. If they accept circumcision, they accept My Divinity; if not, they do not accept My Divinity. If thy children accept circumcision, they will enter the Promised Land; if not, they will not enter the Promised Land.'" [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:9]

Clearly, those who reject circumcision also reject God and will not be allowed to enter Eretz Yisrael. Paul had made the issue of circumcision one of authority, as we noted in chapter one. In John 7:16-18, Jesus is quoted as claiming that his authority comes directly from God. There is here an implicit comparison to the "indirect authority" of the Pharisees or rabbis. In the second and third centuries, when Bereshit Rabbah was compiled, this issue may still have been a sensitive one. Hence the rabbis who wrote Bereshit Rabbah explicitly affirm that the commandment of circumcision (and all related legislation, presumably) was dictated by God.

Further, this pericope sees circumcision as a condition which must be fulfilled in order to enter the Land of Israel. The midrash reminds us that God promised the Land to Abraham's offspring<sup>148</sup> as part of a covenantal contract. Circumcision, we are told, is the human obligation

<sup>148</sup>See Genesis 17.

pertaining to the covenant. Hence the Israelites with Joshua underwent circumcision just prior to their conquest of Eretz Yisrael:

ר' ברכיה ור' חלבן בשם ר' אבין בר יוסי כת וכו'  
הדבר אשר מלך יהושע. דבר אחר דברים יהושע  
ותלן, אחר דברים ומה אתם סבורין שאתם  
נכנסין לארץ ערלים, כן אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא,  
לאברהם: ונתתי לך ולעזרק אחריך ולזו עס  
מנת ואתה אג גרית תשאר.

R. Berekiah and R. Helbo in the name of R. Abin b. R. Jose said: It is written, And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: Joshua spoke a word to them, and circumcised them. 'What think you,' said he upbraiding them, 'that you will enter the Land uncircumcised?' Thus did the Holy One, blessed be He, say to Abraham, 'And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, etc., provided that you fulfil the condition, And as for thee, thou shalt keep My covenant.' [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:9]

Moreover, circumcision as a covenantal act assures one of progeny, which is also included in the promise made in Genesis 17:

ואתנה גרית ולו. ר' חננא בשם בר קפרא ישב אברהם  
בין גלגלה שיה נאמר כאן ערלה ונאמר ערלה  
באילן. מה ערלה שנאמר באילן מקום שצוה פירות  
אל ערלה שנאמר באדם, מקום שצוה פירות.  
אמר עיה ל חנינה וכו' כגר נתנו גלגלות  
שוות לאברהם אברהם, אלא ואתנה גרית ביני ובינך  
ואתנה אותך במאג מאג מן הארבע אותך במאג מאג,  
ואתנה גרית ביני ובינך.

And I will make my covenant, etc., R. Huna said in Bar Kappara's name: Abraham pondered and drew an inference: *orlah* (foreskin) is said here and *orlah* occurs in reference to a tree: just as *orlah* in the case of trees refers to the place where it yields fruit, so *orlah* employed in reference to man means the member which produces offspring [fruit]. Said R. Hanina to him: Had then reasoning by analogy already been given to Abraham? Surely not! But [he learned it from

God's promise]: And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly: hence, with [that member through which] I will multiply thee exceedingly, I will make my covenant between me and thee. [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:4]

It is not surprising, then, to learn that one who disguises the mark of circumcision is considered to have broken the covenant. Bereshit Rabbah 46:13 tells us:

ואת ברית הבר לכה המעוק, תני המעוק, זכין ל'מחול'  
 ל' יודה אומר לא ימחול מפני שהוא עולה כבושה  
 אמרו לפני ל' יודה והלא הרבה היו בימי בן  
 כובדה וכלום בנים חולרים ומוראים הרב  
 המחול ימחול אפילו ל' ול' פעמים את ברית הבר  
 לכה המעוק.

He has broken my covenant. This refers to one whose circumcision is disguised. It was taught: He whose circumcision is disguised must re-circumcise. R. Judah said: He does not re-circumcise, because it is a suppressed foreskin. They said to R. Judah: Yet there were many in the days of the son of Kosiba who re-circumcised and yet gave birth to children after that. Hence it is written, He shall surely be circumcised—even four or five times: He hath broken My covenant—viz. he whose circumcision is disguised. [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:13]

This passage suggests that Jews did attempt to remove the marks of circumcision. We know that from the time that Antiochus IV Epiphanes, King of Syria, rescinded the law of Moses by royal decree in 167 B.C.E.,<sup>149</sup> Hellenism exerted an anti-circumcising influence on Jews. The passage in Avot 3:15 (see page 128 above) which warns against those who נפר בריתו של אברהם אבינו also seems to reflect circumstances in which Jews are either neglecting circumcision or actively seeking to

<sup>149</sup>Bickerman, p. 93.

remove, through surgery, the evidence of having been circumcised. In this case, Bereshit Rabbah 46:13 comes to remind its audience that one who is circumcised, yet removes the mark, must be re-circumcised in order to be a part of the covenant.

Both Sifra (Tazriya 1) and Tosefta (Shabbat 15) speak of the דַּם גִּרְתִּי. We understand the דַּם גִּרְתִּי to refer to the blood spilled through circumcision. Bereshit Rabbah 46:12 also speaks of דַּם גִּרְתִּי, mentioning an argument between Hillel and Shammai concerning whether a male born without a foreskin, or a proselyte, requires circumcision. In all cases the rabbis confirm that the דַּם גִּרְתִּי is required.

We see, then, that circumcision is a covenant in and of itself. Not only must a male born circumcised undergo a procedure whereby the דַּם גִּרְתִּי will flow, but those who attempt to remove the mark of circumcision are considered to have rejected the covenant.

The rabbis also confirm that circumcision completes or perfects the human body. Bereshit Rabbah 46 state that the foreskin is a blemish or defect:

כך אמר יקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם: אין בך פסולת אלא  
צדקה בלבד, ואבר אמתה ואצלך יהאם והיה תמים

God said to Abraham: 'There is nought unworthy in thee save thy foreskin: remove it and the blemish ceases.' Hence, Walk before Me, and be thou whole. [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:1]

Here, the foreskin is termed פסול (unfit); it is a פסול (defect).

Further on, we read:

היתהלך לפני והיה תמים. אמר לו לוי למחוננו שאמר  
 לה המלך עבדך לפני. ועברה לפניו ונתכרכמו  
 פניה. אמרה: אם תאמר שני מצא בך פסולת,  
 אמר לה המלך אין בך פסולת אלא ציפורן  
 אצבע קטנה שלך גדולה קימעה. העביר אותה ובטל  
 החוס. כך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם: אין  
 בך פסולת אלא הערה הנה. העביר אותה ובטל  
 החוס. היתהלך לפני והיה תמים.

Walk before me, and be thou whole. R. Levi said: This may be illustrated by a noble lady whom the king commanded, 'Walk before me.' She walked before him and her face went pale, for, thought she, who knows but that some defect may have been found in me? Said the king to her, 'Thou hast no defect, but that the nail of thy little finger is slightly too long; pare it and the defect will be gone.' Similarly, God said to Abraham, 'Thou hast no other defect but this foreskin: remove it and the defect will be gone.' Hence, Walk before me, and be thou whole. [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:4]

The same terms, פסול and תמים are employed to describe the foreskin.

In contrast, the circumcised male is complete. In Nedarim 3:11 we read Rabbi's opinion that circumcision made Abraham תמים in a way that fulfilling no other *mitzvah* could accomplish:

רבי אמר גדולה מצוה שכל המצות שעשה אברהם אבינו לא נקרא  
 עליו עד שחל שנאמר: היתהלך לפני והיה תמים

Rabbi said: So great is circumcision that despite all the commandments that Abraham our father fulfilled, he was not called תמים until he was circumcised, as it is said: Walk before Me and be whole.

The rabbis also draw an analogy to mustard and wheat, which need to be refined before they are complete. So, too, with man:

פסוסופור אחד שאל את ר' הושעיה אמר לו, אם חגיגה  
 החלה לפני מה לא ניתנה לאדם הראשון. אמר לו:  
 אם כן, לפני מה אותו האיש משה פאר ראשו וחמיו  
 לקט, אמר לו לפני שבע עשר גשלות, אמר לו אם כן  
 יסחף אותו האיש ציט ויקטע אגידיו. אמר לו: ולא יסחף  
 אתו אמתא. אמר לו: לכוזיאק חלק אי אפשר אלא כל מה



שנגרא גשט ימי גראטית צריכין עשיה נאן היחדע צריך  
 אמתק הטרומס צריך למתק החטים צריכס עהיטחין,  
 אפילו אדק צריך תיקון.

A philosopher asked R. Hoshaya: 'If circumcision is so precious, why was it not given to Adam?' 'If so,' he replied, 'why do you shave the corners of your head and leave your beard?' 'Because it grew with me in folly,' was the answer. 'If so, you should blind your eye and cut off your hands!' 'To such an argument have we come!' observed he. 'I cannot send you away empty-handed,' said he; '[the real reason is this:] whatever was created in the first six days requires further preparation, e.g., mustard needs sweetening, vetches need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and man too needs to be finished off.' [Bereshit Rabbah 11:6]

Adam is mentioned in Bereshit Rabbah 46:3 as well. Abraham asks God, as the philosopher asked R. Hoshaya (Bereshit Rabbah 11:6), why Adam was not born circumcised, if the foreskin must be removed anyway. Justin asked the same question in the *Dialogue*.<sup>188</sup> His solution was to assert that circumcision was unnecessary. The Rabbis defend God's having created Adam uncircumcised. In Bereshit Rabbah 11:6, as we have seen, circumcision is an act of perfecting. One might claim that it allows the human to participate in God's creation. In Bereshit Rabbah 46:3, God is made to tell Abraham, in essence, that circumcision is not required for those who do not acknowledge God's divinity. Hence the reader/listener is likely to conclude that those who do not circumcise (either Jews who ignore the commandment or Christians who reject it) are considered to reject God's authority and divinity as well.

<sup>188</sup> See page 96.

In Bereshit Rabbah 46:2 the rabbis assert that circumcision sanctifies the male reproductive organ:

יְהוָה בֵּן מֶלֶךְ גִּשְׁעָה שֶׁכִּיר אֶת בְּוִרְאָו. אֵלֶּךָ שֶׁלֹּא תִנְעֹל  
 דָּעַת גִּבְעֵי לְרִים, יְהוָה בֵּן מֶלֶךְ שֶׁכִּיר אֶת בְּוִרְאָו. אֵלֶּךָ שֶׁלֹּא תִנְעֹל  
 בֵּין הַגְּדִרִים, אֵלֶּךָ כִּי שִׁצָּא יִצְחָק מִלִּבָּהּ קְדוּשָׁה.

Why should he not have circumcised himself at the age of forty-eight, when he recognized his Creator? In order not to discourage proselytes. Then why not be circumcised at the age of eighty-five, when [God] spoke with him between the pieces? In order that Isaac might issue from a holy source. [from Bereshit Rabbah 46:2]

The rabbis relate this to the notion that, as a covenantal act, circumcision assured one of the progeny promised by God in Genesis 17 (see Bereshit Rabbah 46:4).

We have examined much of the forty-sixth chapter of Bereshit Rabbah. In the fifth section of this chapter Abraham is likened to a High Priest.<sup>181</sup> Even the slightest blemish would disqualify the High Priest from offering sacrifices to God in the Sanctuary. The rabbis appear to be asking here why it is that the foreskin must be circumcised? Circumcision of the ear or mouth, they respond, would render one unfit to offer sacrifices. So, too, would circumcision of the heart. Clearly, there is no conceivable physical operation which could be associated with circumcision of the heart; in fact, it is an "operation" only God performs, in contrast with circumcision of the foreskin. Why, then, do the rabbis bother to mention circumcision of the

<sup>181</sup>See Appendix G.

heart in this context? We suggest that this passage may be a polemical attack of Christianity's claim that spiritual circumcision of the heart is superior to bodily circumcision of the foreskin. The concern expressed in Bereshit Rabbah 46:9 that submission to circumcision is a measure of acknowledgement of God's divinity as well as the portrayal of Abraham as a model for proselytes who undergo circumcision in later life (Bereshit Rabbah 46:2) support our contention that the rabbis constructed Bereshit Rabbah 46 to defend the practice of circumcision and to counter Christian claims concerning the practice.

In this lengthy treatise (Bereshit Rabbah 46), which we have quoted in bits and pieces, the rabbis argue that circumcision completes the human body,<sup>182</sup> that circumcision is a covenantal act which earned the Israelites Eretz Yisrael and which assures Jews progeny, that one must submit to circumcision in order to prove that one recognizes God's divinity, and that an effort to remove the mark of circumcision is construed to be a betrayal of the Jewish covenant with God. If our contention that Bereshit Rabbah 46 is an anti-Christian polemic is correct, then the statement toward the end that one who circumcises at the heart cannot think, must have sounded either ironic or like sardonic humor to its audience.

Bereshit Rabbah 26:3 echoes many of these ideas. It is a fascinating passage:

אֵת שֶׁמֶת אֶת הָאֵם וְאֵת יִפְתָּ. וְהֵלֵךְ יִפְתָּ הָיָה אֵת זָכָר  
אֵלָּא בְּתַחֲלֵה אֵת דְּוֹשׁ שֶׁהָיָה זָכָר וְשֶׁנֶּאֱמַר מִהֵימָנָה  
וְשִׁיחָד הִקְדֵּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר זָכָר וְשֶׁאֵלֵכֶם מִצֵּר

<sup>182</sup>Is this as opposed to mutilating it? See page 50, above.

ממנו ושמיטש בכחונה גדולה ושגנה גית המקדש  
בתחמו. בר חטא אחר שמיטש אותיותיו תלה הקב"ה  
עבורתו מן החבול וצד הפלטה שם שנה.

Shem, Ham and Japhet. Surely Japhet was the eldest? [Shem, however, is written] first because he was [more] righteous [than the others]; also, because he was born circumcised, the Holy One, blessed be He, set His name particularly upon him; [other reasons for his priority are that] Abraham was to arise from him, he was minister in the High Priesthood, and because the Temple would be built in his territory. The son of Huta said: [Shem is written first] because the Holy One, blessed be He, suspended [punishment] for the generations from the Flood until the Separation according to the numerical value of his name, viz. three hundred and forty years. [Bereshit Rabbah 26:3]

We note first that the rabbis ascribe to Shem the place of honor usually reserved for the eldest because he is more righteous than his brothers. Immediately they mention that Shem was also circumcised. Is his circumcision the source of his righteousness? It would seem to be the case based on the juxtaposition of the צדק and נח. No other explanation of Shem's righteousness is offered. We are reminded of Paul's principle of "righteousness through faith." Here, we find an implication of "righteousness through circumcision." Let us look further. Shem is the progenitor of Abraham and he was a High Priest.<sup>183</sup> Also, Bereshit Rabbah 46:5 termed Abraham a High Priest. We recall that Bereshit Rabbah 46:2 held that Isaac was not born until after his conception was sanctified by Abraham's circumcision. Shem, like

<sup>183</sup>Paul termed Jesus a High Priest. It may be that Bereshit Rabbah 26:3 and 46:5 are responding to this by claiming that Christians cannot inherit the priesthood (after Jesus) because they lack the physical requirements: they are not circumcised. Jews also considered themselves a "nation of priests;" Bereshit Rabbah 26:3 and 46:5 may be communicating that only Jews are (physically) qualified to be priests.

Abraham, was made physically complete for his priestly role. We see, then, that Bereshit Rabbah 26:3 embodies many of the notions expressed elsewhere concerning circumcision; and many of these ideas might be understood as directed against Christian claims.

One passage remains to be discussed: a pericope in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Parashat Amalek 3.<sup>154</sup>

In this pericope, the rabbis have Moses assenting to Jethro's request that Moses's first-born son be given over to idol-worship. Moses agrees to do so in exchange for Zipporah's hand in marriage. This legend explains why Moses's son Gershom was, as yet, uncircumcised when his parents stopped at the inn on their journey from Midian to Egypt [Exodus 4:24]. According to R. Elazar of Modiin, to whom this legend is attributed, it was Moses who was endangered by his son's uncircumcised state. Later in the pericope R. Jose concurs, adding that God was angered not that Moses would delay the circumcision for the greater task of leading the Israelites out of Egypt, but because he delayed the circumcision in order to rest:

על שנתרשם ג'נה קודם למה ע"כ בקש המלאך  
להראו שאמר ויהי בדרך במדון ואז

Because he delayed the performance of circumcision, the angel sought to kill him, as it is said: And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place....

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<sup>154</sup>See Appendix H.

Clearly, the rabbis are uncomfortable with the obvious evidence that the great rabbinic paradigm—Moses—neglected to circumcise his own son. Consequently, there are hints throughout the midrash that Moses was only one hour late in performing this obligation or that he had relegated it to the greater priority of leading Israel out of Egypt.

However, R. Shimon b. Gamaliel offers an alternative interpretation at the end of the pericope.

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר לא ביקש יהושעא להרוג לנחמה  
אלא ליתן שטאמר כי חתן דמים אבד לי אומר  
זא וראה מי קרוי חתן משה או היתכן הוי  
אומר היתכן.

R. Shimon ben Gamaliel says: The angel sought to kill the baby, not Moses. For, as it is said: "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me." You must say, go and see who is called a "bridegroom": Moses or the baby? You must admit it is the baby.

Since the child is the one who bleeds from the circumcision, R. Shimon adduces that he is the חתן - דמים. Jastrow claims that חתן can connote "to covenant" or "to connect,"<sup>155</sup> hence, the חתן - דמים may be understood as referring to a covenant made with blood. This would be circumcision. Gershom, then, is the one brought into the covenant through the blood of circumcision.

R. Shimon's explanation of חתן - דמים may be viewed as an affirmation that circumcision is a covenantal act. In the context of this pericope, which begins with Moses's acquiescence to Jethro's wish that his first son with Zipporah be given over to idol-worship,

<sup>155</sup>Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Talmud*, I (Brooklyn: Traditional Press, Inc.), p. 514.



R. Shimon's interpretation comes to assert that, to the contrary, Gershom was brought into the Jewish covenant through circumcision.

The Mekhilta pericope under discussion also contains a variant version of Mishna Nedarim 3:11, which we examined above.<sup>186</sup> Most of the differences are relatively minor and do not affect the essential thrust of the passage. However, there is one striking omission. In Nedarim 3:11 we read:

רבי אומר גדולה מלה שכל המצוות בעשר אברהם  
אבינו לא נקרא שם עד שחם שנאמר הנהלך  
עמי והיה תמים.

Rabbi says: Great is circumcision, for despite all the commandments which Abraham our father observed, he was not considered (called) complete until he was circumcised, as it is said: Walk before me and be perfect. [Genesis 17:1]

This line is absent in the Mekhilta version. In its place, Rabbi is made to say:

רבי אומר גדולה מלה שכל זכויותיו של משה לא  
צמחו לו בשעת צרכו. הלא עקוב'א את ישראל  
ממצרים ואל שנתעצב במצרים שעה אחת  
בקט המלאך עהר'א, שנאמר: ויהי בדרכי במדון וזו.

Great is circumcision for despite all the merits of Moses, they did not avail him in his hour of need (trouble). When he went to bring Israel out of Egypt, because he was negligent for one hour regarding circumcision, an angel tried to kill him, as it is said: And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place [Exodus 4:24].

<sup>186</sup>See page 133.

In the Mishna, Rabbi praises circumcision for being the only *mitzvah* which made Abraham shle (complete). In the Mekhilta, however, no mention is made of either Abraham or the notion of physical completion. Moses, who is the subject of the pericope, is mentioned in place of Abraham, and his predicament in Exodus 4:24 (which is the topic of discussion in the Mekhilta passage) is discussed rather than Abraham's observance of *mitzvot*. It would seem that the rabbis who composed this Mekhilta passage found Nedarim 3:11 a convenient peg on which to hang their praise for circumcision. Since Rabbi's words carry the greatest weight, they function as the climax. The message is, once again, that circumcision affords protection. According to R. Elazar and R. Jose, Moses was endangered for having failed to fulfill the obligation to circumcise his son. According to R. Shimon, it is Gershom who is threatened. In either case, it is clear that performance of the ritual in obedience to God's commandment averts the danger.

#### 4.5 Summary

In this chapter we have surveyed the Jewish writings through the first two centuries of the Common Era in order to learn what Jews were saying about circumcision. Specifically, were there attempts to refute the claims made by the early Church Fathers? Does what we read lead us to believe that Jews were reading Christian religious texts or talking face-to-face with Christians about theological matters?

We began by reviewing the biblical references to circumcision. We noted the unusual story of Gershom's circumcision and the references to "circumcision of the heart" in particular.

In the Mishna, Tosefta, Sifra and Sifrei, we found that the majority of the passages which mentioned circumcision were primarily concerned with technical and legal questions pertaining to the performance of the ritual. Many passages exist within the context of discussions concerning purity, conversion and Shabbat observance.

We noted, in particular, that the term ג'ר ר'א is used several times and ג'ר ר'א once, hinting at the covenantal quality of circumcision. We also pointed out that Sifra referred to a convert as a ג'ר ר'א.<sup>157</sup>

In addition, we discussed two important mishnaic passages, which come to be quoted or paraphrased in later midrashic literature: Avot 3:15 and Nedarim 3:11. Avot 3:15 employs the term ג'ר ר'א ש'א אברהם א'א which we suggested referred to circumcision. Of particular interest is the assertion in Avot 3:15 that one forfeits one's share in the world-to-come by violating the covenant of Abraham. We suggested that this serves as evidence that circumcision was believed to bring a Jewish variety of salvation, ר'א ה'א. We also noted that Hertz interpreted this passage as an affirmation of rabbinic authority against all those who questioned the divinity of rabbinic legislation.

The second mishnaic passage of importance is Nedarim 3:11. Here the rabbis extol the greatness of circumcision. Of great interest is Rabbi's comment that Abraham was considered ר'א (complete) only by virtue of his circumcision.

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<sup>157</sup>See page 128.

Next we examined the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael and Midrash Bereshit Rabbah which discuss circumcision in greater theological depth than do the early tannaitic works. In this literature we found confirmations that circumcision is redemptive and salvific, that דִּין is a covenantal act in and of itself (rather than merely a "symbol" or "sign") and that any attempt to disguise the mark of circumcision is viewed as a breach of the Jewish covenant with God. We suggested that the strong reaction against those who undergo operations to remove the mark of circumcision, that is evident here, reflects an historical situation in which a dangerously large number (from the perspective of the rabbis) of Jews were engaging in this practice. We cannot estimate what percentage of the community may have been involved. However, given the role circumcision had come to play in the Jewish-Christian debate, representing the issues of authority (rabbinic versus Jesus) and covenant (the Jewish covenant versus the "new covenant" of Christianity), we may assume that the rabbis found any challenge to circumcision within the Jewish community particularly offensive and threatening.

We come, then, to the question which we posed at the outset. To what extent were Jews and Christians aware of one another's claims regarding circumcision in the first two centuries. To what extent did they read each other's texts. Did their scholars interact? The first point to be made here is that, since neither quotes the other or refers specifically to the other, we cannot know whether the Tannaim read the Christian New Testament and early Church Fathers or whether the early Church Fathers read Jewish literature of the same period.

We find hints that the Rabbis and Church Fathers were aware of general claims made by one another. For example, where the Church Fathers call circumcision a "symbol" the rabbis argue strongly that it is a covenantal act. However, the rabbis nowhere explicitly deny circumcision is a "symbol." Had we found passages which both denounced the claim that circumcision is a "symbol" as well as asserted that it is a covenantal act, we would have stronger ground on which to stand. This, however, does not exist. Hence, our conclusions are best termed "conjectures." It would seem that the rabbis were aware that Christians held circumcision to be merely a "symbol." However, since Philo made the same claim<sup>158</sup> it might be argued that the rabbis were responding to Hellenistic Jews rather than Christians.

We noted that several of the Church Fathers acknowledge the belief that circumcision brings salvation. The tannaitic literature of the first two centuries confirms this. We find several indications that circumcision is rewarded with קאן פסח. We suggest that for Jews, קאן פסח is equivalent to salvation: it is the ultimate religious goal. The disagreement as to whether circumcision entitles one to a share in the world-to-come serves to underscore the larger question of salvation which was so frequently discussed in the first two centuries. The fact that both the rabbis and the Church Fathers address the same issue seems to indicate that they were aware of one another's claims. The Christians state this explicitly. We propose on the basis of the texts examined here that the Jews were similarly informed.

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<sup>158</sup>Philo, as we noted in chapter one, held that fulfillment of the commandment of circumcision was nonetheless binding upon Jews.

We find no concrete evidence that Jews and Christians engaged in open debates, as the scenario of Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho* depicts. The rabbis and Church Fathers do not quote one another, nor do they refer directly and explicitly to the specific and narrower claims made by members of the other group with one possible exception, that being the question of why Adam was not born circumcised. This example aside, the points of contact between the two groups regarding circumcision are oblique. While we cannot, on the basis of this study, conclude that Jews and Christians read one another's literature and debated religious issues face to face, we can, with confidence, conclude that they were aware of one another's attitudes toward circumcision, covenant and religious authority.



## Chapter 5

### Toward a Conclusion

#### 5.1 Questions

We set out to study what Jews and Christians wrote about circumcision in the first two centuries of the Common Era. We sought to examine the claims made as well as the underlying attitudes expressed. We asked: Were Christians and Jews aware of one another's religious and theological claims regarding circumcision? Did they read one another's texts? Did they formulate their opinions solely based on their own theological perspectives or were their opinions, in part, a reaction to the claims made by the other group? Having explored these issues, we now ask how the discussions that took place in the first two centuries affected the development of the Jewish liturgy for circumcision.

#### 5.2 Summary of Findings

We have looked at the Christian New Testament (primarily the Book of Acts and the Pauline epistles were helpful) as well as the early Church Fathers, through Origen. We found that, for Paul, circumcision was an important matter more for what circumcision represented in the Jewish mind than for the actual procedure. Sandmel has compared Paul with Philo, his contemporary, demonstrating that both Philo and Paul reduced circumcision to symbolic significance, at best. Where Philo chose to align himself with Jewish tradition and Jewish communal interests, however, Paul decided to break with Judaism and pursue a different course. The implication for this discussion was the emergence of Christianity as a separate entity, no longer a Jewish sect.

Circumcision, then, functioned sociologically and philosophically to mark the bifurcation. When Christian proselytes did not undergo circumcision, they (in effect) made the statement that they did not consider themselves to be connected to the Jewish people. In refusing to circumcise Titus and in objecting to circumcision for Gentile proselytes, Paul stood philosophically opposed to Jewish tradition and Jewish religious beliefs concerning the Jewish covenant with God.

For the early Church Fathers, the question of an actual surgical procedure was already a moot point. By the beginning of the second century, Christians no longer even considered circumcision. For the Church Fathers, circumcision became a rallying point for Christian claims concerning the "new covenant" and salvation. They denied circumcision's covenantal quality. It was, according to the author of the *Letter of Barnabas*, who opposed Judaizing tendencies within the early Church, superseded by the spiritualized circumcision of the heart (rather than carnal circumcision) which seals the covenant. Justin, Irenaeus and Tertullian all termed circumcision a "sign." As a sign, it could not, in and of itself, be a covenantal act. Moreover, they gave the "sign" of circumcision an extremely negative interpretation: circumcision was a mark which distinguished Jews to receive divine punishment for being a stiff-necked people. Against this, they asserted the new Christian covenant which was sealed by a spiritual circumcision of the heart.

Salvation also plays an important role. Justin knows of the belief that circumcision brings salvation. Tertullian explicitly denies that circumcision brings salvation. Irenaeus acknowledges that circumcision

at one time brought Jews salvation but that this was only a foreshadowing of Christian salvation. Underlying their claims is the Pauline doctrine of "justification by faith": circumcision represents the Jewish mode of salvation through loyal performance of God's commandments. Therefore by its very nature it represents a rejection of the Christian way. For the Church Fathers, like Paul before them, circumcision epitomizes the Jewish way which Jesus's coming abrogated. It comes to symbolize the Jewish attitude toward God's commandments, the *mitzvot*.

What, then, do the Jews say about circumcision? It is interesting that there is much less defense of circumcision in the Jewish texts than we might expect. The vast majority of the material is of a legal nature and seems to ignore the theological questions. One might argue, however, that the emphasis on circumcision overriding Shabbat, and the strict requirement to perform circumcision on the eighth day of life except in very extreme circumstances, demonstrates circumcision under attack: the rabbis exalted circumcision and promoted the practice to such a degree (it even supercedes Yom Kippur) precisely because Christians denigrated it. True, we have no clear evidence that this is the case, yet one wonders why a procedure such as circumcision, and circumcision alone, would override both Shabbat and Yom Kippur.

Circumcision's priority over such holy days may center on the question of salvation. The Church Fathers Justin, Irenaeus and Tertullian, acknowledge the Jewish belief that circumcision brings redemption or salvation, though they, themselves, dispute this claim. The Mishna and Midrash Bereshit Rabbah confirm the Jewish assumption.

Hoffman has suggested that circumcision may have been seen as crucial in order that the child not die before he has been assured a portion of the world-to-come.<sup>188</sup> Hence, the prescription to circumcise overrides the proscripts of Shabbat and Yom Kippur.

An additional underlying issue is the question of religious authority. Paul had compared the Pharisees indirect revelation unfavorably with Jesus's direct communication from God. Circumcision comes to represent the Jews' obedience to Mosaic law and rabbinic legislation. It thereby symbolizes their rejection of Jesus's claims and Paul's interpretations. Origen states this most clearly. The Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael glorifies circumcision as it does all obedience to both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. No doubt, the question of authority was always a live issue but in the case of circumcision, we suggest that the theological questions of salvation, faith and covenant were of even deeper concern.

### 5.3 The Liturgy for Circumcision.<sup>189</sup>

Hoenig<sup>191</sup> interpreted the ceremony for circumcision as an anti-Christian polemic. He makes two significant claims. The first is that לְכָל אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה is a theological statement which refutes the claim of Luke 1:35 that Jesus was alone, of all men and women, uniquely sanctified at birth. In contrast, לְכָל אִישׁ וְאִשָּׁה implies that every individual is sanctified from birth.

<sup>188</sup>Personal communication.

<sup>189</sup>See Appendix I for liturgy for circumcision.

<sup>191</sup>Sidney B. Hoenig, "Circumcision: The Covenant of Abraham," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 53 (April, 1962), pp. 332-34.

Hoenig's second point is that by terming circumcision גְּרִיתוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוֹ as the liturgy does, it functions to refute Romans 4 (see Appendix C). The purpose of using Abraham as the pinnacle is to demonstrate that Abraham was considered meritorious for having circumcised Isaac (his circumcision on the eighth day being the model of the circumcision ceremony) rather than for his faith, as Christians argued from Genesis 15:6: וְהָאֵלֹהִים בֵּרַךְ אֶת אֲבִרָם וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרִיתִי עִמָּךְ

Romans 4 and the circumcision liturgy use similar language: seal, sign, covenant. Further, according to Hoenig, the phrase מַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים (good deeds) was added to underscore the importance of action (i.e. performance of *mitzvot*) as against faith. Hoffman<sup>182</sup> has suggested that מַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים means more specifically, salvific Jewish acts.

In fact, the circumcision liturgy provides ample evidence that circumcision is a covenantal act in and of itself, and that its ultimate goal is salvation. The father recited a blessing in which he acknowledges וּבְיוֹנוֹ לְהַכְנִיסוֹ בְּגִרְתּוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוֹ

Those gathered for the ceremony respond:

כֵּשֶׁם שֶׁנִּכְנַס לְגִרְתּוֹ, כֵּן יִכְנַס לְתוֹרָה וּלְחֻבָּה וּלְמַעֲשֵׂים טוֹבִים.

The child has clearly and unmistakably been brought into the covenant originally established with Abraham, through the ritual of circumcision.

We find the terms חֶתֶם (seal) and אֵימָה (sign) used to describe the circumcision in the long benediction following גִּזְרָת כָּרִי הַלָּזֶה. Here the liturgy speaks of Abraham's descendants:

<sup>182</sup>Personal communication.

וזלצאיו חתם באות ברית קדש.

The blessing makes clear that the circumcision is more than a sign of the covenant: the circumcision is the covenant-making act. Hence the blessing ends with the חת'מה:

גרוק אתה ה' כונת הגרית.

God "cuts" covenants with people (as with Abraham); so too, a covenant is made between the child and God through cutting: the circumcision. Further on we find numerous other references to גרית.<sup>163</sup> There can be no doubt that the circumcision is a covenantal act.

We also find confirmation that salvation is expected as a result of performing the circumcision. The ceremony opens with the following verses:

עִשׂוּצֶתְךָ קוֹיִתִּי ה'  
 שְׁבִרְתִּי עִשׂוּצֶתְךָ ה' וּמִצּוֹתֶיךָ עֲשִׂיתִי  
 אֵלֵיהֶוּ מֵאֲזַק הַגְּרִית יִנְהַ שְׁלֶךְ לִעֲבֹד  
 זָמַד עַל יְמִינִי וּסְמֹכְנִי  
 שְׁבִרְתִּי עִשׂוּצֶתְךָ ה'  
 שֶׁשׁ אֶנֶכִּי זֶה אֲחֶרְתֶּךָ כְּמוֹדָא שְׁלֵם דָּבָר  
 בְּלוֹם דָּבָר לְאִהְיֵי תוֹרַתְךָ וְאִין לֹא מְכֻשָׁם  
 אֲשֶׁרִי תִבְחַר וְתִקְרָב יִשְׁכֹּן חֲצִירִיךְ

<sup>163</sup>See text of circumcision liturgy, Appendix I.



Salvation is, at once, the theological focus of the ceremony. Elijah is introduced as the מלאך ברית<sup>16</sup> who, at some future time, may come to announce that the child about to be circumcised is the messiah. In speaking of Isaac, the liturgy reads:

ברוך אתה ה', אלֵהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ יְהוֹשֵׁעַ,  
אשר קָדַשׁ יְדֵי מִגְדָן וְחָק גִּשְׁרֵי שֶׁם  
וּצְאָיו חֶתֶם בְּרִית קָדֶשׁ.  
עַל כֵּן גִּשְׁרֵי זֶאֱתָה, אֵל חַי, חֶסֶדְנוּ, צוּרֵנוּ, עֹהֲרֵינוּ  
יְדִידוֹת שֶׁאֵין מִשְׁחָה, לְמַעַן בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר  
שֶׁם גִּבְרָתוֹ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה', כּוֹרֵת הַבְּרִית.

There can be little doubt that the circumcision about to be performed will actually (not merely symbolically) enter the child into the covenant and that this will result in his salvation (עֹהֲרֵינוּ יְדִידוֹת שֶׁאֵין מִשְׁחָה).

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<sup>16</sup>The title מלאך ברית may derive from Malachi 3:1:

הִנֵּה שְׁלַח מַלְאֲכִי וּפְנֵה דֶרֶךְ לִפְנֵי, וּפְתָאֵם יְבוֹא אֵל  
הַיְכָלִי הָאֵדוֹן אֲשֶׁר אַתָּם מְבַקְשִׁים וּמַלְאֲךְ הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר  
אַתָּם חֹפְצִים הִנֵּה בָּא אִמְרֵי יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת.

Behold I am sending My messenger to clear the way before Me, and the Lord whom you seek shall come to His Temple suddenly. As for the angel of the covenant that you desire, he is already coming.

It is worth pointing out that the circumcision liturgy emphasizes Torah and the fulfilment of *mitzvot* many times. Twice we hear:

כשם שניכנס עגירת, כן יכנס לתורה ולחופה ולמצוות ואגיד.

We also find:

רביו של עולם, יהי רצון מהפנין שיהא לך חסד  
ומרצה ומקבל כאלו הקרבתיו עפ' כסף כבודך.  
ואגיד ברחמיך יידיים, שמה על ידי מהפנין  
הקדושים נשמה קדושה וטהורה ע' (פג'') הנחום  
צתי עשתי הגדול, ושיהיה לבו פתוח כפתחו  
של אולם בתורתך הקדושה, עמוך ועלמך,  
לשחור ולעמוד.

One more point might be made. We find the phrase

זכר עולם בריתו, דבר צוה עולם דור.

Why would this verse find its way into the liturgy? We suggest that it may have functioned to underscore the eternal nature of God's covenant with Abraham which is now manifest through circumcision. Where Christians claimed that this covenant was obsolete, replaced by a new and superior one, the rabbis asserted that it was designed to last "a

thousand generations." Origen and others claimed that the edict to circumcise ended with Jesus; the Jews maintained that it was as eternal as was their covenant with God.

The liturgy for circumcision can be viewed as a theological statement concerning the role of circumcision as a covenantal act. It underscores the importance of observing *mitzvot* and adhering to the Torah. It promises salvation. Whether it is intended to be an anti-Christian polemic, as Hoenig maintains, however, is difficult to determine conclusively. There are strong claims made, but Christian attitudes are not explicitly denied (even without attributing them to Christians) and no mention is made of alternative beliefs. However, it does appear that Jews were aware of, and sensitive to, Christian claims and that they fashioned the liturgy to express their theological viewpoints clearly.

We began with the question: did Jews and Christians read one another's texts and discuss theological issues with one another? We have found no solid evidence that they did, but much to indicate that they were aware of one another's claims. In chapter four, we noted numerous assertions in the midrash that circumcision is a covenantal act and that observance of the *mitzvah* of circumcision is not only meritorious but rewarded with salvation. Abraham emerged as the model and focal point. In the liturgy, too, Abraham is the model. We find the same themes of covenant, *mitzvot* and salvation expressed. It does, indeed, seem that Jews were aware of Christian claims that their covenant with God had been abrogated, that rabbinic legislation was not authoritative and that faith in Jesus rather than observance of *mitzvot* would win them salvation.

#### 5.4 Looking Forward

This study has touched on many other areas within the realm of early Jewish-Christian relations worthy of investigation. We mention a few of the more intriguing prospects for future study here.

First, the issue of salvation deserves to be studied for itself. It is important to clarify what salvation or redemption meant to different people, both Jews and Christians. How did different individuals and groups believe salvation could be attained? What effect did such beliefs have on Jewish-Christian relations in the first few centuries?

As a specific example of redemption, it might prove interesting to compare the Jewish treatment of פְּדוּת מִצִּיפּוֹן with the Christian view of the Exodus. What theological role did it play? What was its historical role? We saw glimpses of this in our discussion of the Mekhilta. There remain much more material and work to do.

Along similar lines, it is possible to isolate specific figures and themes for comparative investigation. For example, one might examine the midrashic literature concerning Abraham in order to deduce the role(s) he played and what he represents in the first few centuries. This might be compared with the Christian writings on Abraham to determine points of theological (and perhaps social) contact between the two groups.

Blood provides another promising possibility.<sup>165</sup> Goodenough<sup>166</sup> has written extensively on the Jewish meaning, and ceremonial function of blood in the Hellenistic world. It might prove exciting to compare the

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<sup>165</sup>See page 8 above. See also Ephesians 2:11-16.

<sup>166</sup>Goodenough *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*.

significance of blood in Christian thinking with Jewish thinking.

No doubt, study in these areas will reveal further ideas for investigation. The first two centuries were an exciting and formative period, both for Christianity and for rabbinic Judaism. Therefore the relations between the two groups during this time are a fascinating and fruitful area for exploration.

## Appendix A

Acts 15:1-35. Translation from the Revised Standard Version as it appears in Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1340-1341.

<sup>1</sup>But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." <sup>2</sup>And when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. <sup>3</sup>So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, reporting the conversion of the Gentiles, and they gave great joy to all the brethren. <sup>4</sup>When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup>But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up, and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses."

<sup>6</sup>The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup>And after there had been much debate, Peter rose and said to them, "Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup>And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us; <sup>9</sup>and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup>Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup>But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."



<sup>12</sup>And all the assembly kept silence; and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup>After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brethren, listen to me. <sup>14</sup>Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup>And with this the word of the prophets agree, as it is written,

<sup>16</sup>After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;  
I will rebuild its ruins,  
and I will set it up,  
<sup>17</sup>that the rest of men may seek the Lord,  
and all the Gentiles who are called by my name,  
<sup>18</sup>says the Lord, who has made these things known from old.

<sup>19</sup>Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup>but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood. <sup>21</sup>For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues."

<sup>22</sup>Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, <sup>23</sup>with the following letter: "The brethren, both the apostles and the elders, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greeting. <sup>24</sup>Since we have heard that some persons from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, <sup>25</sup>it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, <sup>26</sup>men who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>27</sup>We have therefore

sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. <sup>28</sup>For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things: <sup>29</sup>that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from which is strangled and from unchastity. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell."

<sup>30</sup>So when they were sent off, they went down to Antioch; and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. <sup>31</sup>And when they read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. <sup>32</sup>And Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, exhorted the brethren with many words and strengthened them. <sup>33</sup>And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them.\* <sup>34</sup>But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also. [Acts 15:1-35]

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\*Other texts include a verse 34: "But it seemed good to Silas to remain there."

## Appendix B

Galatians 2. Translation from the Revised Standard Version as it appears in Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1411-1412.

<sup>1</sup>Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. <sup>2</sup>I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. <sup>3</sup>But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. <sup>4</sup>But because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage— <sup>5</sup>to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. <sup>6</sup>And from those who were reputed to be something (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those, I say, who were of repute added nothing to me; <sup>7</sup>but on the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised <sup>8</sup>(for he who worked through Peter for the mission to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles), <sup>9</sup>and when they perceived the grace that was given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the the Gentiles and they to the circumcised; <sup>10</sup>only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do.

<sup>11</sup>But when Cephas came to Antioch I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup>For before certain men came from James,

he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. <sup>13</sup>And with him the rest of the Jews acted insincerely, so that even Barnabas was carried away by their insincerity. <sup>14</sup>But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" <sup>15</sup>We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, <sup>16</sup>yet who know that man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified. <sup>17</sup>But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we ourselves were found to be sinners, is Christ then an agent of sin? Certainly not! <sup>18</sup>But if I build up again those things which I tore down, then I prove myself a transgressor. <sup>19</sup>For I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God. <sup>20</sup>I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. <sup>21</sup>I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose. [Galatians 2]

## Appendix C

Romans 4. Translation from the Revised Standard Version as it appears in Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 1365-1366.

<sup>1</sup>What then shall we say about Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? <sup>2</sup>For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. <sup>3</sup>For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." <sup>4</sup>Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. <sup>5</sup>And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. <sup>6</sup>So also David pronounces a blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: <sup>7</sup>"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; <sup>8</sup>blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not reckon his sin."

<sup>9</sup>Is this blessing pronounced only upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? We say that faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness. <sup>10</sup>How then was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. <sup>11</sup>He received circumcision as a sign or seal of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, <sup>12</sup>and likewise the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but also follow the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

<sup>13</sup>The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. <sup>14</sup>If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. <sup>15</sup>For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.

<sup>16</sup>That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants—not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham, for he is the father of us all, <sup>17</sup>as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations"—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. <sup>18</sup>In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, "So shall your descendants be." <sup>19</sup>He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. <sup>20</sup>No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup>fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup>That is why his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness." <sup>23</sup>But the words, "it was reckoned to him," were written not for his sake alone, <sup>24</sup>but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, <sup>25</sup>who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.



## Appendix D

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Beshallah, chapter IV. Text and translation from Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), 216-23.

ויאמר יי אל משה מה תצעק אלי  
 ונו' רבי יהושע אומר אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה  
 משה אין להם לישראל אלא ליסע בלבד רבי  
 אליעזר אומר אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה משה  
 בני נתונים בצרה הים סוגר ושונא רודף ואתה עומד  
 ומרבה בתפלה מה תצעק אלי שהיה אומר יש  
 שעה לקצר ויש שעה להאריך אל נא רפא נא לה  
 הרי זה לקצר ואתנפל לפני יי כראשונה ונו' הרי  
 זה להאריך רבי מאיר אומר אם לאדם הראשון  
 שהוא יחיד עשיתי לו יבשה שנאמר ויאמר אלהים  
 יקוו הים ונו' לעדת קדושים אלו אני עושה להם  
 את הים יבשה מה תצעק אלי ונו' רבי ישמעאל  
 אומר בזכות ירושלים אני קורע להם את הים  
 שנאמר עורי עורי לבשי עורך ציון לבשי בגדי  
 תפארתך ירושלים עיר הקדש כי לא יוסיף יבא  
 כך עוד ערל וטמא ואומר עורי עורי לבשי עז  
 זרוע יי עורי כימי קדם דורות עולמים הלא את  
 היא המחצבת רהב מחוללת תנין הלא את היא  
 המחרבת ים מי תהום רבה השמה מעמקי ים דרך  
 לעבור נאולים דבר אחר עושה אני הבטחה  
 שהבטחתי אבותיהם שאני קורע להם את הים  
 שנאמר והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ ופרצת ימה וקדמה  
 רמו לו פרוץ את הים רבי יהודה בן בתירה אומר  
 אמר לו הקב"ה כבר עשיתי הבטחה שהבטחתי  
 את אבותיהם שנאמר וישם את הים לחרבה ונו'  
 ובני ישראל הלכו ביבשה בתוך הים רבי שמעון  
 בן יוחאי אומר כבר חסה ולבנה מעידין עליהן  
 שנאמר כה אמר יי נותן שמש לאור יומם חקת ירח  
 ונו' רבי בנאה אומר בזכות מצוה שעשה אברהם  
 אביהם אני קורע להם את הים שנאמר ויבקע עצי

עולה וכתוב ויבקעו המים שמעון התימני אומר  
 בזכות המילה אני קורע להם את הים שנאמר אם  
 לא בריתי יומם ולילה חוקות שמים וארץ לא שמתי  
 אמרת צא וראה איזו היא ברית שהיא נוהגת ביום  
 ובלילה אין אתה מוצא אלא מצות מילה רבי  
 אבשלום הזקן אומר משל למה הדבר דומה לאדם  
 שכעס על בנו וטרדו מביתו נכנס אוהבו לבקש  
 הימנו ולהחזירו לביתו אמר לו כלום אתה מבקש  
 ממני אלא מפני בני כבר נתרצתי לבני כך אמר  
 הקדוש למשה מה תצעק לא מפני בני כבר נתרציתי  
 לבני דבר אל בני ישראל ויסעו רבי אומר אמש  
 היית אומר ומאז באתי אל פרעה וגו' ועכשיו אתה  
 עומד ומרבה בתפלה מה תצעק אלי דבר אחר  
 רבי אומר דבר אל בני ישראל ויסעו יסיעו דברים  
 שהיו דוברים מלבן אמש היו אומרים המבלי אין  
 קברים וגו' ועכשיו אתה עומד ומרבה בתפלה מה  
 תצעק אלי וגו' יסיעו דברים מלבן וחכמים אומרים  
 למען שמו עשה עמהם שנאמר למעני למעני אעשה  
 וגו' וכתוב בוקע מים מפניהם מפני מה לעשות לו  
 שם עולם רבי אומר כדי היא האמנה שהאמינו בי  
 שאקרע להם את הים שנאמר וישובו ויחזו וגו' רבי  
 אלעזר בן עזריה אומר בזכות אברהם אביהם אני  
 קורע להם את הים שנאמר כי זכר את דבר קדשו  
 את אברהם עבדו וכתוב ויוציא עמו בששון רבי  
 אלעזר בן יהודה איש כפר תותא אומר בזכות  
 השבטים אני קורע להם את הים שנאמר נקבת  
 במציו וגו' וכן הוא אומר לנחר ים סוף למורים  
 שמעיה אומר כדי היא האמנה שהאמין בי אברהם  
 אביהם שאקרע להם את הים שנאמר והאמין ביי  
 אבטליון אומר כדי היא האמנה שהאמינו בי שאקרע  
 להם את הים שנאמר ויאמן העם שמעון איש קטרון  
 אומר בזכות עצמות יוסף אני קורע להם את הים

שנאמר ויעזוב בגדו אצלה וינס ואומר הים ראה  
 וינס רבי נתן אומר משום אבא יוסף המכחי והלא  
 כבר הכתבתי בכל ביתי נאמן הוא אתה ברשותי  
 והים ברשותי ואני עשיתיך מבר עליו רבי חנניה בן  
 חלניסי אומר והלא כבר הכתבתי אח לצרה יולד  
 אח אני לישראל בשעת צרתן אחים אלו ישראל  
 שנאמר למען אחי ורעי וגו' רבי שמעון בן יהודה  
 אומר מה תצעק אלי כבר צעקתם קדמה לצעקתך  
 שנאמר ויראו מאד ויצעקו בני ישראל אל יי רבי  
 אחא אומר מה תצעק אלי בשבילך אני עושה אמר  
 הקב"ה אלמלא צעקתך כבר אבדתי אותם מן  
 העולם שנאמר ויאמר להשמידם לולי משה בחירו  
 עמד בפרץ לפניו להשיב חמתו מהשחית לכך  
 נאמר מה תצעק אלי דבר אל בני ישראל ויסעו  
 מפני צעקתך נוסעין רבי אלעזר המודעי אומר  
 מה תצעק אלי על בני אני צריך ציווי שנאמר על בני  
 ועל פועל ידי תצויתי והלא כבר מוכנים הם לפני  
 מששת ימי בראשית שנאמר אם ימוש החקים האלה  
 מלפני נאם יי גם זרע ישראל ישבתו מהיות נוי לפני  
 ה' הימים אחרים אומרים כדי היא האמנה שהאמינו  
 בי שאקרע להם את הים שלא אמרו למשה היאך  
 אנו יוצאים למדבר ואין בידינו מחיה לדרך אלא  
 האמינו והלכו אחרי משה עליהם מפורש בקבלה  
 הלוך וקראת באוני ירושלם וגו' מה שכר נטלו על  
 כך קדש ישראל ליי וגו' רבי יוסי הגלילי אומר  
 כשנכנסו ישראל לים כבר הר המוריה נעקר  
 ממקומו ומזבחו של יצחק הכניי עליו ומערכתו  
 הערוכה עליו ויצחק כאילו עקוד נתן על גבי  
 המזבח ואברהם כאלו פושט ידו ולוקח את המאכלת  
 לשחוט את בנו אמר המקום למשה משה בני נתנים  
 בצרה והים סוגר ושונא רודף ואתה עומד ומאריך  
 בחפלה אמר לפניו משה ומה עלי לעשות אמר לו  
 הרם את מטך וי' אתה תהא מרוסם ומפאר ומשבח  
 ונתן שיר ושבח וגדולה ותפארת והודייה והלל  
 לסי שהמלחמות שלו.

*And the Lord Said unto Moses: 'Wherefore Cries Thou unto Me? Speak unto the Children of Israel that They Go Forward.'* R. Joshua says: The Holy One, blessed be He, said unto Moses: "Moses, all that Israel has to do is to go forward." R. Eliezer says: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: "Moses, My children are in distress, the sea forming a bar and the enemy pursuing, and you stand there reciting long prayers; wherefore criest thou unto Me?" For R. Eliezer used to say: There is a time to be brief in prayer and a time to be lengthy. "Heal her now, O God, I beseech Thee" (Num. 12.13). This is an instance of being brief. "And I fell down before the Lord as at the first time," etc. (Deut. 9.18). This is an instance of being lengthy. R. Meir says: "If for Adam the first man, who was but one individual, I made dry land,—as it is said: 'And God said: "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered,"' etc. (Gen. 1.9)—will I not for this assembly of holy men turn the sea into dry land? Wherefore criest thou unto Me," etc. R. Ishmael says: "For the sake of Jerusalem, I will divide the sea for them." For it is said: "Awake, awake, put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean" (Isa. 52.1). And it also says: "Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the days of old, the generations of the ancient times. Art thou not it that hewed Rahab in pieces, that pierced the dragon? Art thou not it that dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep; that made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?" (ibid., 51.9-10).

Another Interpretation: "I will fulfill the promise to divide the sea for them, which I have made to their fathers." For when it was said: "And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east" (Gen. 28.14), it hinted to him: "Break through the sea." R. Judah the son of Bathyra says: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, I have already fulfilled the promise that I made to their fathers. For it is said: "And made the sea dry land" (Ex. 16.18); "But the children of Israel walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea" (ibid., 14.29). R. Simon the son of Yoḥai says: For a long time already the sun and the moon have been their witnesses. For it says:

"Thus saith the Lord, who giveth the sun for a light by day, who stirreth up the sea, that the waves thereof roar, The Lord of hosts is His name: If these ordinances depart from before Me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever" (Jer. 31.35-36). R. Banaah says: "Because of the merit of the deed which Abraham their father did, I will divide the sea for them." For it is said: "And he cleaved the wood for the burnt-offering" (Gen. 22.3). And here it is written: "And the waters were cleft." Simon of Teman says: "Because of the merit of observing the commandment of circumcision, I will divide the sea for them." For it is said: "Thus saith the Lord: 'If not for My covenant of day and night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth'" (Jer. 33.25). Go and see which covenant obtains by day and by night. You can find none but the commandment of circumcision. R. Absalom, the elder, giving a parable, says: To what is this like? To a man who got angry with his son and drove him out of his house. His friend then came to him, requesting that he allow the son to come back to the house. He said to his friend: You are only asking me on behalf of my own son. I am already reconciled to my son. So also did the Holy One say to Moses: Wherefore criest thou? Is it not on behalf of My own sons? I am already reconciled to My sons. Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward. Rabbi says: "Yesterday you were saying 'For since I came to Pharaoh,' etc. (Ex. 5.23). And now you are standing there reciting long prayers. Wherefore criest thou unto Me?" Another Version: Rabbi says: "Speak unto the children of Israel that they move." Let them remove from their hearts the words which they have been saying. Yesterday they were saying: "Because there are no graves in Egypt," etc. (v. 11), and now you stand here reciting long prayers. "Wherefore criest thou unto Me?" Let them remove the evil words from their hearts. The sages say: For the sake of His name He acted thus towards them, as it is said: "For Mine own sake, for Mine own sake will I do it" (Isa. 48.11). And it is written: "That divided the water before them" (ibid., 63.12). What for? "To make Thyself a glorious name" (ibid., v. 14). Rabbi says: "That faith with which they believed in Me is deserving that I should

divide the sea for them." For it is said: "That they turn back and encamp," etc. (Ex. 14.2). R. Eleazar the son of Azariah says: "For the sake of their father Abraham I will divide the sea for them," as it is said: "For He remembered His holy word unto Abraham His servant" (Ps. 105.42). And it is written: "And He brought forth His people with joy" (ibid., v. 43). R. Eleazar the son of Judah, a man of Kefar Tota, says: "For the sake of the tribes I will divide the sea for them." For it is said: "Thou hast pierced through because of his tribes," etc. (Hab. 3.14-15). And it says: "To Him who divided the Red Sea into parts" (Ps. 136.13). Shema'yah says: "The faith with which their father Abraham believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the sea for them." For it is said: "And he believed in the Lord" (Gen. 15.6). Abtalyon says: "The faith with which they believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the sea for them." For it is said: "And the people believed" (Ex. 4.31). Simon of Kitron says: "For the sake of the bones of Joseph I will divide the sea for them." For it is said: "And he left his garment in her hand and fled" (Gen. 39.12). And it also says: "The sea saw it and fled" (Ps. 114.3). R. Nathan in the name of Abba Joseph of Mahoz says: "Have I not long ago caused to be written: 'He is trusted in all My house' (Num. 12.7)? You are under My authority and the sea also is under My authority, and I have made you a commander over it." R. Hananiah the son of Halmisi says: "Have I not long ago caused to be written: 'And a brother is born for adversity' (Prov. 17.17)? I am like a brother to Israel when they are in trouble." "Brothers" is a designation for Israel, as it is said: "For my brethren and companions' sakes," etc. (Ps. 122.8). R. Simon son of Judah says: "Wherefore criest thou unto Me? Their own crying has already preceded your crying," as it is said: "And the children of Israel cried out unto the Lord." R. Aha says: "Wherefore criest thou unto me? For your sake I will do it." The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: If not for your crying I would already have destroyed them from the world. For it is said: "Therefore He



said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn back His wrath lest He should destroy them" (Ps. 106.23). In this sense it is said here: "Wherefore criest thou unto Me, speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward"—it is because of your crying that they can go forward. R. Eleazar of Modi'in says: "Wherefore criest thou unto Me?" Do I need any urging concerning My sons? For it is said: "Concerning My sons, and concerning the work of My hands, command ye Me?" (Isa. 45.11). Have they not already from the time of the six days of creation been designated to be before Me? For it is said: "If these ordinances depart from before Me, saith the Lord, then the seed of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me for ever" (Jer. 31.35). Others say: "The faith with which they believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the sea for them." For they did not say to Moses: How can we go out into the desert without having provisions for the journey? But they believed in Moses and followed him. Of them it is stated in the traditional sacred writings: "Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying," etc. (Jer. 2.2). What reward did they receive for this? "Israel was the Lord's hallowed portion" (ibid., 2.3). R. Jose the Galilean says: At the moment when the children of Israel went into the sea, mount Moriah began to move from its place with the altar for Isaac that had been built upon it and the whole scene that had been arranged upon it—Isaac as if he were bound and placed upon the altar, Abraham as if he were stretching forth his hand and taking the knife to slay his son. God then said to Moses: Moses, My children are in distress, the sea forming a bar and the enemy pursuing, and you stand so long praying? Moses said before Him: What then should I be doing? Then He said to him: "Lift thou up thy rod," etc.—you should be exalting, glorifying and praising, uttering songs of laudation, adoration and glorification, of thanksgiving and praise to Him in whose hands are the fortunes of war.

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## Appendix E

Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Beshallah, chapter VII. Text and translation from Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), 243-55.

וַיֹּאמֶר יי אל משה נטה את ירך על  
הים אין הים עומד כנגדך.

וישובו המים על מצרים על רכבו  
ועל פרשיו יחזור עליהם הגלגל ויחזיר עליהם  
ודונם שבמחשבה שחשבו מצרים לאבד את ישראל  
בה אני דנן הם חשבו לאבד את בניי במים אני אני  
לא אפרע מהם אלא במים שנאמר בור כרה  
ויחפרהו ויפול בשחת יפעל חופר נומץ בו יפול  
ופורץ נדר ישכנו נחש מסיע אבנים יעצב בהם  
ובוקע עצים יסכן במ ואומר ישוב עמלו בראשו  
ונו' ואומר כורה שחת בה יפול ונו' וכן שלמה המלך  
עליו השלום אומר מפרי פי איש ישבע טוב ונמול  
ידי אדם ישיב לו וכן ישעיה הנביא עליו השלום  
אומר כעל נמולות כעל ישלם ונו' ואומר ומדותי  
פעולתם ונו' וכן ירמיה הנביא אומר גדול העצה  
ורב העליליה אשר עניך פקוחות על כל דרכי  
בני אדם לתת לאיש כדרכיו וכפרי מעלליו ואומר  
שלמו לה כפעלה ככל אשר עשתה ונו' וכן יתרו  
אומר למשה עתה ידעתי כי גדול יי ונו' מכירו הייתי  
לשעבר ועכשיו ביותר שנתגדל שמו בעולם שבדבר  
שחשבו מצרים לאבד את ישראל בו בדבר נפרע  
מהם שנאמר כי בדבר אשר ודו עליהם.

ויט משה את ידו על הים וישב הים  
לפנות בקר לאיתנו אין איתנו אלא תקפו  
שנאמר איתן מושבך רבי נתן אומר אין איתן אלא  
ישן וקשה שנאמר גוי איתן הוא גוי מעולם הוא.  
ומצרים נסים לקראתו מלמד שלכל  
צד שהיה מצרי גם היה הים רץ כנגדו משל למה  
הדבר דומה ליונה שברחה מפני בן הנץ וכנסה  
לטרקלין של מלך פתח לה המלך חלון מורחית  
יצאת והלכה לה נכנס בן הנץ אחריה נעל המלך  
בפניו כל החלונות והתחיל מורה בו את החצים

כך כשעלה האחרון שבישראל מן הים ירד האחרון  
שבמצרים לתוכו והתחילו מלאכי השרת זורקין  
בהם חצים ואבני אלנביש אש ונפריית כענין שנאמר  
ונשפטתי אתו בדבר ובדם וגו'.

וינער יי את מצרים כאדם שמנער את  
הקדרה התחתון עולה למעלה והעליון יורד למטה  
דבר אחר וינער וגו' נתן בהם כח נערות כדי לקבל  
את הפורענות דבר אחר וינער מסרם כאילו בירי  
מלאכים נערים כאילו בירי מלאכים אכזרים  
שנאמר ומלאך אכזרי ישולח בו ואומר תמות בנער  
נפשם וגו'.

וישובו המים ויכסו את הרכב וגו'  
אפילו פרעה דברי רבי יהודה שנאמר מרכבות  
פרעה וחילו וגו' רבי נחמיה אומר חוץ מפרעה  
ועליו הוא אומר ואולם בעבור זאת העמדתיך ויש  
אומרים באחרתה ירד פרעה וטבע שנאמר כי בא  
סוס פרעה וגו'.

ובני ישראל הלכו ביבשה בתוך  
הים והיו מלאכי השרת חמהים לומר בני אדם  
עובדי עבודה זרה מהלכין ביבשה בתוך הים ומנין  
שאף הים נתמלא עליהם חמה שנאמר והמים להם  
חמה אל תקרי חומה אלא חיסה ומי גרם להם  
להציל מימנם ומשמאלם מימנם בזכות התורה  
שהן עתידין לקבל שנאמר מימינו אש דת לנו  
ומשמאלם זו תפלה דבר אחר מימנם זו מזוזה  
ומשמאלם אלו תפילין דרש רבי פפייס לססתי  
ברכבי פרעה רכב פרעה על סוס זכר כביכול  
נלה עליו הקב"ה על סוס זכר שנאמר דרכת בים  
סוסך וגו' רכב פרעה על סוס נקבה כביכול נלה  
עליו הקב"ה על סוס נקבה שנאמר לסוסתי וגו'  
אמר לו רבי עקיבא דייך פפייס אמר לו ומה אתה  
מקיים לסוסתי ברכבי פרעה אמר לו לססתי כתיב  
אמר הקב"ה כשם שששתי על המצרים לאבדם כך  
כמעט ששתי על ישראל לאבדם ומי גרם להם  
להציל מימנם ומשמאלם דרש רבי פפייס והוא







מצוה אחת באמנה כראי הוא שתשרה עליו רוח  
הקדש שכן מצינו באבותינו שבשכר האמנה שהאמינו  
זכו ושרתה עליהם רוח הקדש ואמרו שירה שנאמר  
ויאמינו ביי ונו' או ישיר משה ובני ישראל וכן אתה  
מוצא שלא ירש אברהם אבינו את העולם הזה  
והעולם הבא אלא בשכר אמנה שהאמין שנאמר  
והאמין ביי ונו' וכן אתה מוצא שלא נאלו ישראל  
ממצרים אלא בשכר אמנה שהאמינו שנאמר ויאמן  
העם וכן הוא אומר אמתים נוצר יי מזכיר אמתות  
אבות ואומר ואהרן וחור תמכו ונו' זה השער ליי  
צדיקים יבאו בו בבעלי אמנה מהו אומר פתחו  
שערים ויבא גוי צדיק שומר אמתים השער הזה כל  
בעלי אמנה נכנסין בו וכן הוא אומר טוב להודות  
ליי ולזמר לשמך עליון להגיד בבקר חסדך  
ואמתתך בלילות ונו' כי שמחתי ונו' מי גרם לנו  
לבא לידי שמחה זו אלא בשכר אמנה שהאמינו  
אבותינו בעולם הזה שכולו לילות לכך נאמר להגיד  
בבקר חסדך ואמתתך בלילות וכן יהושפט אומר  
לעם האמינו ביי אלהיכם ותאמנו האמינו בנביאיו  
והצליחו וכתוב יי עיניך הלא לאמנה ונו' וכתוב  
וצדיק באמתתו יחיה וכתוב חרשים לבקרים רבה  
אמתתך וכן אתה מוצא שאין הנליות עתידות  
מתכנסות אלא בשכר אמנה שנאמר אתי מלבנון  
כלה אתי מלבנון תבואי תשורי מראש אמנה וכתוב  
וארשתוך לי לעולם ונו' וארשתוך לי באמנה הא  
גדולה האמנה לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם שבשכר  
אמנה שהאמינו שרתה עליהם רוח הקדש ואמרו  
שירה שנאמר ויאמינו ביי ובמשה עבדו או ישיר  
משה ובני ישראל את השירה הזאת ליי וכן הוא  
אומר ויאמינו בדבריו ישירו תהלתו.

*And the Lord Said unto Moses: 'Stretch Out Thy Hand over the Sea.'* The sea will not withstand you.

*That the Waters May Come Back upon the Egyptians, upon Their Chariots, and upon Their Horsemen.* Let the wheel turn against them and bring back upon them their own violence. For with the same device with which they planned to destroy Israel I am going to punish them. They planned to destroy My children by water, so I will likewise punish them only by water. For it is said: "He hath digged a pit, and hollowed it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made" (Ps. 7.16). "He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh through a fence, a serpent shall bite him. Whoso quarrieth stones shall be hurt therewith; and he that cleaveth wood is endangered thereby" (Eccl. 10.8-9). And it also says: "His mischief shall return upon his own head" (Ps. 7.17). And it says: "Whoso that diggeth a pit shall fall therein" (Prov. 26.27). And so did King Solomon, peace be upon him, say: "A man shall be satisfied with good by the fruit of his mouth, and the doings of a man's hands shall be rendered unto him" (ibid., 12.14). Likewise, the prophet Isaiah, peace be upon him, said: "According to their deeds, accordingly will He repay" (Isa. 59.18). And he also says: "Therefore will I first measure their wage," etc. (ibid., 65.7). Likewise, the prophet Jeremiah said: "Great in counsel, and mighty in work; whose eyes are open upon all the ways of the sons of men, to give every one according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings" (Jer. 32.19). And he also says: "Recompense her according to her work, according to all that she hath done, do unto her" (ibid., 50.29). And so also did Jethro say unto Moses: "Now I know that the Lord is greater," etc. (Ex. 18.11). I have acknowledged Him in the past, and now even more, for His name has become great in the world. For with the very thing with which the Egyptians planned to destroy Israel, He punished them, as it is said: "Yea, for with the very thing with which they acted presumptuously against them" (ibid.).

*And Moses Stretched Forth His Hand over the Sea, and the Sea Returned to Its Strength, When the Morning Appeared.* The expression *Etano* simply means "its strength," as in the passage: "Though strong (*etan*) be thy dwelling place" (Num. 24.21). R. Nathan says: The word *etan* means old and strong, as in the passage: "It is a strong (*etan*) nation, it is an ancient nation" (Jer. 5.15).

*And the Egyptians Fled against It.* This teaches that in whatever direction an Egyptian fled, the sea would be rushing against him. To give a parable, to what can this be compared? To a dove that flees from a hawk and enters the palace of the king. The king opens the eastern window for her and she goes out and flies away. When the hawk, pursuing her, enters the palace, the king shuts all the windows and begins shooting arrows at him. So also when the last of the Israelites came out from the sea, the last of the pursuing Egyptians entered into the bed of the sea. The ministering angels then began hurling at them arrows, great hailstones, fire and brimstone, just as it is said: "And I will plead against him with pestilence and with blood . . . and great hailstones, fire and brimstone" (Ezek. 38.22).

*And the Lord Overthrew the Egyptians.* Like a man who stirs a pot; what is at the bottom comes up to the top and what is at the top goes down to the bottom.

Another Interpretation: *And the Lord Rejuvenated (vayena'er) the Egyptians.* He put into them the strength of youth so that they could receive the punishment.

Another Interpretation: *And the Lord Overthrew the Egyptians.* He delivered them into the hands of youthful angels, so to speak; into the hands of cruel angels, so to speak; as it is said: "Therefore a cruel angel shall be sent against him" (Prov. 17.11). And it also says: "Their soul perisheth by youth" (Job 36.14).

*And the Waters Returned and Covered the Chariots . . . There Remained Not So Much as One of Them.* Not even Pharaoh himself, according to the words of R. Judah, for it is said: "The chariots of Pharaoh and of his host hath He cast into the sea" (Ex. 15.4). R. Nehemiah says: Except Pharaoh himself. Of him it says: "But in very deed for this cause have I made thee to stand" (ibid., 9.16). And some say that later on Pharaoh also went down and was drowned, as it is said: "For the horse of Pharaoh went in," etc. (ibid., 15.19).

*But the Children of Israel Walked upon Dry Land in the Midst of the Sea.* And the ministering angels were wondering at them, saying: "Sons of men, worshipers of idols, walk upon dry land in the midst of the sea!" And whence do we know that the sea also was filled with anger at them? It is said: "And the waters were *Hmah* against them." Do not read *Hmah*, "wall," but *Hmah*,

"anger." And what helped them to escape? "On their right hand, and on their left." "On their right hand," suggests the merit of the Torah which they were destined to receive, as it is said: "At His right hand was a fiery law unto them" (Deut. 33.2). "And on their left," suggests prayer. Another Interpretation: "On their right hand," suggests the *Mezuzah*, "and on their left," suggest the phylacteries.

R. Pappias expounded: "To a steed in Pharaoh's chariot" (Cant. 1.9). When Pharaoh rode on a stallion, God, as it were, also appeared to him on a stallion, as it is said: "Thou hast trodden the sea with Thy horses" (Hab. 3.15). When Pharaoh rode on a mare, God, as it were, also appeared to him on a mare, as it is said: "To a steed in Pharaoh's chariot," etc. Said R. Akiba to him: "That is enough, Pappias." He, then, said to him: "And how do you interpret 'To a steed in Pharaoh's chariot?'" Said R. Akiba to him: The word, as written, reads *lesassti*, which I interpret thus: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: "Just as I destroyed the Egyptians and was glad of it (*lesassti*), so I came near destroying the Israelites and being glad of it." But what helped them to escape destruction? "On their right hand, and on their left."

R. Pappias also expounded: "But He is at one with Himself, and who can turn Him" (Job 23.13). He judges all that come into the world by Himself and there is no one to argue against His words. Said R. Akiba to him: "That is enough, Pappias." He, then, said to him: "How do you interpret: 'But He is at one with Himself, and who can turn Him?'" Akiba said to him: There is no possible argument against the words of Him who spoke and the world came into being, for every word is in accordance with truth and every decision in accordance with justice. R. Pappias also expounded: "Behold, the man is become as one of us" (Gen. 3.22), like one of the ministering angels. Said R. Akiba to him: "That is enough, Pappias." He then said to him: "And how do you interpret: 'Behold, the man is become as one of us (*mimmenu*)?'" Said R. Akiba: *Mimmenu* does not mean like one of the ministering angels. It only means that God put before him two ways, the way of life and the way of death, and he chose for himself the way of death. R. Pappias also

expounded: "Thus they exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox that eateth grass" (Ps. 106.20). I might understand this to refer to the ox above, but it says; "that eateth grass." Said to him R. Akiba: "That is enough, Pappias." He, then, said to him: "And how do you interpret: 'Thus they exchanged their glory for the likeness of an ox that eateth grass?'" Simply thus: One might understand this to refer to an ox as he is all year around; therefore it says, "that eateth grass." Nothing is more disgusting and repulsive than an ox when he is grazing.

*Thus the Lord Saved Israel that Day.* Like a bird that is in the hand of a man who by a slight pressing of his hand could immediately choke it. For it is said: "Our soul is escaped as a bird," etc. (Ps. 124.7). "Our help is in the name of the Lord," etc. (ibid., v. 8). "Blessed be the Lord who hath not given us as a prey," etc. (ibid., v. 6). And like a man who draws out the young calf from the cow's womb. For it is said: "Or hath God essayed to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation" (Deut. 4.34). There is no purpose in saying, "from the midst of another nation," except to suggest that it was like a man who draws out the young calf from the cow's womb. And it also says: "But you hath the Lord taken and brought out of the iron furnace" (ibid., 4.20).

*And Israel Saw the Egyptians Dying upon the Sea-Shore.* There were four reasons why the Egyptians had to be dying upon the sea-shore in the sight of Israel: That the Israelites should not say: As we came out of the sea on this side, so the Egyptians may have come out of the sea on another side. That the Egyptians should not say: Just as we are lost in the sea, so the Israelites also are lost in the sea. That the Israelites might be enabled to take the spoil, for the Egyptians were laden with silver and gold, precious stones and pearls. That the Israelites, setting their eyes upon them, should recognize them and reprove them, as it is said: "I will reprove thee, and set the cause before thine eyes" (Ps. 50.21). And it also says: "Then mine enemy shall see it, and shame shall cover her" (Micah 7.10). It is not written here: "And Israel saw the Egyptians who were dead," but "dying upon the sea-shore," meaning, they were dying but not yet dead. It

is the same as: "And it came to pass as her soul was in departing, when she died" (Gen. 35.18). Now, was she at that moment already dead? Is it not said: "That she called his name Ben-oni" (ibid.)? It can only mean, she was dying but not yet dead.

*And Israel Saw the Great Hand, etc.* All sorts of cruel and strange deaths. R. Jose the Galilean says: Whence can you prove that the Egyptians were smitten in Egypt with ten plagues and at the sea they were smitten with fifty plagues? What does it say about them when in Egypt? "Then the magicians said unto Pharaoh: 'This is the finger of God' " (Ex. 8.15). And what does it say about them when at the sea? "And Israel saw the great hand," etc. Now, with how many plagues were they smitten by "the finger?" With ten plagues. Hence you must conclude that in Egypt they were smitten with ten plagues and at the sea they were smitten with fifty plagues. R. Eliezer says: Whence can you prove that every plague which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt really consisted of four different plagues? etc. R. Akiba says: Whence can you prove that every plague which the Holy One, blessed be He, brought upon the Egyptians in Egypt really consisted of five different plagues? etc. —

*And the People Feared the Lord.* Formerly, when in Egypt, they did not fear the Lord, but here, "And the people feared the Lord."

*And They Believed in the Lord and in His Servant Moses.* If you say they believed in Moses, is it not implied by *Kal vahomer* that they believed in God? But this is to teach you that having faith in the shepherd of Israel is the same as having faith in Him who spoke and the world came into being. In like manner you must interpret: "And the people spoke against God, and against Moses" (Num. 21.5). If you say they spoke against God, is it not implied by *Kal vahomer* that they spoke against Moses? But this comes to teach you that speaking against the shepherd of Israel is like speaking against Him who spoke and the world came into being.



Great indeed is faith before Him who spoke and the world came into being. For as a reward for the faith with which Israel believed in God, the Holy Spirit rested upon them and they uttered the song; as it is said: "And they believed in the Lord . . . Then sang Moses and the children of Israel" (Ex. 14.3; 15.1). R. Nehemiah says: Whence can you prove that whosoever accepts even one single commandment with true faith is deserving of having the Holy Spirit rest upon him? We find this to have been the case with our fathers. For as a reward for the faith with which they believed, they were considered worthy of having the Holy Spirit rest upon them, so that they could utter the song, as it is said: "And they believed in the Lord . . . Then sang Moses and the children of Israel." And so also you find that our father Abraham inherited both this world and the world beyond only as a reward for the faith with which he believed, as it is said: "And he believed in the Lord," etc. (Gen. 15.6). And so also you find that Israel was redeemed from Egypt only as a reward for the faith with which they believed, as it is said: "And the people believed" (Ex. 4.31). And thus it says: "The Lord preserveth the faithful" (Ps. 31.24)—He keeps in remembrance the faith of the fathers. And it also says: "And Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands," etc. (Ex. 17.12).

*This is the Gate of the Lord the Righteous Shall Enter into It.* (Ps. 118.20). What does it say about the people of faith? "Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation that keepeth faithfulness may enter in" (Isa. 26.2). In this gate, then, all people of faith shall enter. And thus it says: "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto Thy name, O Most High; to declare Thy lovingkindness in the morning, and Thy faithfulness in the night seasons" (Ps. 92.2-3), "For Thou, Lord, hast made me glad through Thy work," etc. (ibid., v. 5)—What was the cause of our attaining this joy? It was but a reward for the faith with which our fathers, in this world which is altogether night, believed. It is in this sense that it is said:

"To declare Thy lovingkindness in the morning, because of the faith in Thee in the night seasons" (ibid., v. 3). And so also Jehoshaphat says to the people: "Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe His prophets, so shall ye prosper" (II Chron. 20.20). And it is written: "O Lord, are not Thine eyes upon faith," etc. (Jer. 5.3). And it is written: "But the righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2.4). And it is written: "They are new every morning; great is Thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3.23). And you also find that the people of the diaspora will be assembled again in the future only as a reward of faith. For it says: "Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, with me from Lebanon; look from the top of Amana" (Cant. 4.8). And it is also written: "And I will betroth thee unto Me forever . . . and I will betroth thee unto Me because of faithfulness" (Hos. 2.21-22). Verily, great indeed is faith before Him who spoke and the world came into being. For as a reward for the faith with which they believed, the Holy Spirit rested upon them and they uttered the song; as it is said: "And they believed in the Lord, and in His servant Moses. Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord" (Ex. 14.31; 15.1). And so also it says: "Then believed they His words; they sang His praises" (Ps. 106.12).

## Appendix F

Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 91:5. Text from J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, Vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 1118-21. Translation from H. Freedman and M. Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Soncino Press, 1977), 838-9.

דא וירש יעקב כי יש שבר וגו' ו' הוא שני טוח קדיש על ידי שלמה בן דוד מונע בר יקבוהו לאום וברכה לראש משביר (סלי יט טו) בנדר מי אמי שלמה סקרא זה כנדר פרעה ויוסף. מונע בר זה פרעה שגנא את התבואה בשני רענן ולא ביקש לספור והיו הכל מקללין אותו. וברכה לראש משביר זה יוסף הצדיק שון את העולם ברעה. עליו אמר דוד רוסה ישראל האוינה נהוג בצאן יוסף וט' (תהלים 88). מר נהג כצאן יוסף כשבא רעב כימי דוד היה מבקש רחמים סן הקב"ה. רטן כל העולם טוג את צאנך ביוסף שנהג את העולם חן אותו בשני רענן. שכין שהוק הרעב כפצרים בא מצרים אצלו אמר חן לו לחם. אמר להם אי לו שאני ון את הערלים לבט וטולו עצמכם. הלכו אל פרעה והיו צועקן לשון. אמר להם לבט אל יוסף. אמר לו הלכט אצלו וא לו פולו עצמכם. לא כך אמרת לך מתחילה עברי הוא ואין דרך עברי לטונן מלכות עלי. אמר ירה שמים לא כדו קרא מלאכי כל איתן שני השוכע רעב בא רעב בא. ספני מה לא שפרתם לכם שלבי שנים או שלאחת. אותה שעה התחיל לבכות אמר אף תבואה שגבית שטורה לו ורקבה. אמר להם לא נשחיר קסח מתחיל שלשום. אמר לו אף חם שיהיה לו כסל הרקוב. אמר להם שישם אמר על התבואה נור ושרקת שסא יגוד עלי ונסתה. אלא לבט אצלו אמר יאמר לכם חתכו מכשירם שסעז לו כל אישר יאמר לכם תעשו. ורעב היה על הארץ היה לכתוב. למה נכתב על פני כל הארץ (בראשית 88 טו). אלא אמר ששאל בר נחמני לא התחיל הרעב תחילה אלא כעשרים בוסן שארם עשיר יש לו פנים שסחים לראות את חבירו. ובוסן שארם עני אין לו פנים לראות ספני שדא מתבייש מתכיר לך נאמ מונע בר יקבוהו לאום:

Another interpretation of NOW JACOB SAW THAT THERE WAS CORN, etc. This illustrates what was said by Solomon son of David, under Divine inspiration: *He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him; but blessing shall be upon the head of him that selleth it* (Prov. xi, 26). To whom did Solomon allude in this verse? To Pharaoh and Joseph. 'He that withholdeth corn' alludes to Pharaoh, who stored the corn in the years of famine and refused to sell, so that everyone cursed him. 'But blessing shall be upon the head of him that selleth it' alludes to the righteous Joseph, who fed the world like a shepherd. Concerning him said David: *Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, lead thy flock like Joseph*, etc. (Ps. lxxx, 2).<sup>3</sup> What means, 'Lead thy flock like Joseph'? When famine came in the days of David he thus beseeched the Holy One, blessed be He, for compassion: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Lead Thy flock like Joseph who led [provided for] the world and sustained it in the years of famine.' For when the famine in Egypt became severe, the Egyptians went to him, crying, 'Give us bread.' 'Woe to me that I must feed the uncircumcised,' he exclaimed; 'go and circumcise yourselves.' So they went to Pharaoh and cried out before him. 'Go unto Joseph,' he bade them. 'We have gone to him,' they answered, 'and he bids us circumcise ourselves. Did we

not tell thee originally that he is a Hebrew and it is not fitting for a Hebrew to wield authority over us?' 'Fools,' he retorted, 'did not a herald continually proclaim before him during the seven years of plenty, "A famine is coming, a famine is coming!" Why then did ye not keep in reserve the produce of a year or two?' Bursting into tears they replied, 'Even the corn which we have left at home has rotted.' 'Has no flour been left from yesterday and the day before?' he asked. 'Even the bread in our baskets has gone mouldy,' they told him. 'Ye fools,' he answered: 'if the corn rots at his decree, what if he decrees against us and we die! Go rather to him, and even if he tells you to cut off something of your flesh, obey him and do all that he bids you.'

Now Scripture should write, and the famine was over the earth; why state, *And the famine was over all the face of the earth* (Gen. xli, 56)? Said R. Samuel b. Nahmani: The famine commenced first with the wealthy. When one is wealthy he has a smiling face to show his friends. But when one is poor he has not the face to see him, being ashamed before him.<sup>1</sup> For that reason it says, '*He that withholdeth corn, the people shall curse him.*'<sup>2</sup>

## Appendix G

Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 46:5. Text from J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 462-3. Translation from H. Freedman and M. Simon, *The Midrash Rabbah*, Vol. 1 (New York: The Soncino Press, 1977), 392.

ר' ישמעאל ור' עקיבא ר' ישמעאל א' אברהם כהן גדול היה שני נשבע יי ולא  
ינחם אחת כהן לעולם על דברתי מלכי צדק (ההוא ק' ו) ונאם לחלץ ונמלחם את כשר  
ערלכם (בראשית י"א). אם ימול מן האוזן אינו כשר להקריב. מן הזה אינו כשר להקריב. מן  
הלב אינו כשר להקריב. מאיכן [ימול ויהא] כשר להקריב. הרי אומר זו ערלת הגוף. ר' עקיבא אומר  
ארכע ערלות הן נאם ערלה באוזן שנאם הנה ערלה אונם (ויסח ו' ו) ונאם ערלה בזה הן אמי  
ערל שפתים (שם ו' ו) ונאם ערלה בלב וכל בית ישראל ערלי לב (ויסח ו' ו) ונאם לו  
תתהלך לפני דתיה חמים [אם ימול מן האוזן אינו חמים. מן הזה אינו חמים. מן הלב אינו  
חמים. מאיכן ימול ויהא חמים] הרי אומר זו ערלת הגוף. [נקרה אחר] וכן שפנת ימים ימול  
לכם כל זכר (בראשית י"ז) אם ימול מן האוזן אינו שומע. מן הזה אינו מרבי. מן הלב אינו  
חושב. מאיכן ימול ויהא יכול לחשוב. זו ערלת הגוף. אומר ר' חנניאל סתברא דרמ דנקרה. וצ"ל  
זכר (שם ו' ו) וכי יש ערל נקבה. אלא סתקום שהוא ניכר אם זכר הוא אם נקבה הוא שם  
סודלים אחר:

R. Ishmael and R. Akiba [reasoned as follows].  
R. Ishmael said: Abraham was a High Priest, as it says,  
*The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent: Thou art a priest  
for ever after the manner of Melchizedek* (Ps. cx, 4).<sup>1</sup> Again,  
it is said, *And ye shall be circumcised in the flesh of your  
'orlah* (Gen. xvii, 11). If he circumcised himself at the  
ear, he would be unfit to offer sacrifices; if at the mouth,  
he would be unfit to offer; at the heart, he would be unfit  
to offer.<sup>2</sup> Hence, where could he perform circumcision and  
yet be fit to offer? Nowhere else than at the 'orlah of the  
body [the foreskin]. R. Akiba said: There are four kinds  
of 'orlah. Thus, 'orlah is used in connection with the ear,  
viz. *Behold, their ear is 'orlah*—E.V. 'dull' (Jer. vi, 10);  
the mouth, *Behold, I am 'aral* [E.V. 'uncircumcised']<sup>3</sup> of  
lips (Ex. vi, 30); the heart: *For all the house of Israel are  
'arle* [E.V. 'uncircumcised'] in the heart (Jer. ix, 25). Now,  
he was ordered, *WALK BEFORE ME, AND BE THOU  
WHOLE*. If he circumcised himself at the ear, he would  
not be *WHOLE*; at the mouth, he would not be  
*WHOLE*; at the heart, he would not be *WHOLE*.  
Where could he circumcise himself and yet be *WHOLE*?  
Nowhere else than at the 'orlah of the body.

Naḥdah said: It is written, *And he that is eight days old  
shall be circumcised among you, every male* (Gen. xvii, 12).  
Now if he is circumcised at the ear, he cannot hear; at  
the mouth, he cannot speak; at the heart, he cannot think.<sup>4</sup>  
Where then could he be circumcised and yet be able to  
think? Only at the 'orlah of the body. R. Tanḥuma  
observed: This argument of Naḥdah is logical.

AND THE UNCIRCUMCISED MALE (xvii, 14). Is there  
then an uncircumcised female? The meaning, however, is  
that we must perform circumcision on the member which  
marks the distinction between male and female.

## Appendix H

From the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Tractate Amalek, chapter III. Text and translation from Jacob Z. Lauterbach, ed., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), 168-70.

ואת שני בניה ונו' נכריה רבי יהושע  
אומר ארץ נכריה היתה לו ודאי רבי אלעזר  
המודעי אומר בארץ נכריה נכר יה אמר משה  
הואיל וכל העולם כולו עובדי עבודה זרה למי אני  
אעבוד למי שאמר והיה העולם שבשעה שאמר  
משה ליתרו תנה לי את צפורה בתך לאשה  
אמר לו יתרו קבל עליך דבר אחד שאני אומר לך  
ואני נותנה לך לאשה אמר לו מהו אמר לו בן שיהיה  
לך תחלה יהיה לעבודה זרה ומכאן ואילך לשם  
שמים וקבל עליו אמר לו השבע לי וישבע  
שנאמר ויואל משה ואין אלה אלא לשון שבועה  
שנאמר ויואל שאול את העם ונו' וכן הואל וקח  
ככרים ונו' לפיכך הקדים המלאך להרוג את משה  
מיד ותקח צפורה צר ותכרות את ערלת בנה ונו'  
וירף ממנו. רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר מאוסה  
ערלה שנתנו בה רשעים שנאמר כי כל הגוים  
ערלים רבי ישמעאל אומר גדולה מילה ששלש  
עשרה בריתות נכרתו עליה רבי יוסי הגלילי  
אומר גדולה מילה שדוחה את השבת חמורה  
שחייבין עליה כרת רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר  
גדולה מילה שלא נחלה זכות למשה עליה מלא  
שעה רבי נחמיה אומר גדולה מילה שדוחה את  
הנגעים רבי אומר גדולה מילה שכל זכויותיו של  
משה לא עמדו לו בשעת דחקו הלך להוציא את  
ישראל מסצרים ועל שנתעצל במילה שעה אחת  
בקש המלאך להרגו שנאמר ויהי בדרך במלון  
ונו' רבי יוסי אומר חס ושלום לאותו צדיק שנתעצל  
במילה שעה אחת אלא ימול ויצא הרי סכנת נפשות  
ישהה ימול המקום אמר לו לך והוציא את ישראל



ממצרים אלא על שנתרשל בלינה קודם למילה לכך  
בקש המלאך להרע שנאמר ויהי בדרך במלון וע'  
רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר לא ביקש המלאך  
להרוג למשה אלא לחינוק שנאמר כי חתן דמים  
אתה לי אמרת צא וראה מי קרוי חתן משה או  
החינוק הוי אומר החינוק.

*And Her Two Sons . . . in a Strange Land.*  
R. Joshua says: It certainly was a land strange  
to him. R. Eleazar of Modi'im says: "In a strange  
land"—where God was like a stranger.' Moses  
said: Since the whole world is worshiping idols,  
whom shall I worship? Him by whose word the  
world came into being. For at the time when  
Moses said to Jethro: "Give me your daughter  
Zipporah to wife," Jethro said to him: "Accept  
one condition which I will state to you and I will  
give her to you for a wife." "What is it?" asked  
Moses. He then said to him: "The first son that  
you will have shall belong to the idol and the  
following may belong to God." Moses accepted.  
Jethro then said: "Swear unto me," and Moses  
swore, as it is said: "And he adjured (*vayoe*)  
Moses" (Ex. 2.21). For *Alah* is but an expression  
for swearing, as it is said: "But Saul adjured  
(*vayoe*) the people" (I Sam. 14.24). So also:  
"Be adjured" (*Hoel*) to take two talents" (II  
Kings 5.23). It was for this that the angel at  
first wished to kill Moses. Immediately: "Zip-  
porah took a flint and cut off the foreskin of her  
son . . . So he let him alone" (Ex. 4.25-26).  
R. Eleazar b. Azariah says: Uncircumcision is  
detestable, for the wicked are reproached with  
it, as it is said: "For all the nations are uncir-  
cumcised" (Jer. 9.25). R. Ishmael says: Great  
is circumcision, for thirteen covenants" were  
made over it. R. Jose the Galilean says: Great  
is circumcision, for it sets aside the Sabbath,  
which is very important and the profanation of  
which is punishable by extinction. R. Joshua b.  
Karḥa says: Great is circumcision, for no merit  
of Moses could suspend the punishment for its  
neglect even for one hour. R. Nehemiah says:  
Great is circumcision, for it sets aside the laws  
concerning plagues. Rabbi says: Great is circum-  
cision, for all the merits of Moses availed him

not in the time of his trouble about it. He was going to bring out Israel from Egypt and yet because for one hour he was negligent about the performance of circumcision, the angel sought to kill him, as it is said: "And it came to pass on the way at the lodging place," etc. (Ex. 4.24). R. Jose says: God forbid! to think that this righteous man neglected the duty of circumcision even for one hour! But, should he perform the circumcision and immediately go on his journey—there is risk of life. Should he perform the circumcision and tarry a while—God had told him: "Go and bring out Israel from Egypt."<sup>u</sup> It was merely because he relaxed and thought of lodging before performing the circumcision, that the angel sought to kill him. For it is said: "And it came to pass on the way, at the lodging place," etc. R. Simon b. Gamaliel says: The angel sought to kill not Moses but the child. For it is said: "Surely a bridegroom of blood art thou to me" (ibid. v. 25). You must reason: Go and see who could have been designated bridegroom? Moses or the child? You must say: the child.<sup>v</sup>

## Appendix I

Liturgy of the circumcision ceremony. Text and translation from Hyman E. Goldin, *Hamadrikh: the Rabbi's Guide*, 1939; rpt. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1956), 33-37.

## ORDER OF CIRCUMCISION

Candles are lit in the room where the circumcision is to be performed.

A chair is set aside in honor of the prophet Elijah, and the following is said:

This chair is devoted to Elijah the prophet, may his remembrance be for the good.

When the infant is brought in to be circumcised, all present rise and say aloud:

May he who cometh be blessed.

All present must remain standing to the end of the ceremony.

The circumciser takes the infant from the one who brought him in, and joyfully says:

The Holy One, praised be He, said to our father Abraham: "Walk thou before Me and be thou perfect."

I am ready and willing to perform the precept which the Creator, praised be He, commanded us concerning circumcision.

If the father himself performs the circumcision, he says:

"I am ready... which the Creator, praised be He, commanded me to circumcise my son."

The circumciser places the infant upon the chair set aside for the prophet Elijah, and recites:

This chair is devoted to Elijah, may his remembrance be for the good.

For Thy salvation I have waited, O Lord.

I have hoped for Thy salvation, O Lord, and Thy commandments have I fulfilled.

Elijah, thou angel of the covenant, lo, thine is before thee. Do thou stand at my right and sustain me.

I have hoped for Thy salvation, O Lord.

I rejoice at Thy word, as one that findeth great spoil.

Great peace have they who love Thy law; and there is no stumbling for them.

Happy is he whom Thou chooseth and bringest nigh that he may dwell in Thy courts.

## סדר ברית מילה

מדליקים נרות בבית המילה.

מכניס כסא לכבוד אליהו הנביא, ואומרים:

זה הכסא של אליהו הנביא נכור לטוב.

כשמביאים את הרך הנימול לבית המילה, קמים הנאספים על רגליהם ואומרים:

ברוך הקא

ועומדים הנאספים על רגליהם עד סוף סדר המילה.

המזהל לוקח את התיטק מיד המביא אותו, ואומר בשמחה:

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא לאברהם אבינו, התהלך לפניו והיה תמים.

הנני מוכן ומזומן לקיים מצוות עשה שצונו הבורא יתברך למול.

וכשהאב כעצמו מל את בנו, יאמר:

הנני מוכן... שצונו הבורא יתברך למול את-בני.

וישים את התיטק על הכסא שהוכן לאליהו הנביא ויאמר:

זה הכסא של אליהו נכור לטוב.

לישועתך קויתי יי.

שברתי לישועתך יי, ובריתך עשיתי.

אליהו מלאך הברית, הנה שלך לפניך, צמוד

על ימיני וסמכני.

שברתי לישועתך יי.

שש אנכי על אמרתך כמוצא שלל רב.

שלום רב לאהבי תורתך ואין למו מכשול.

אשרי תבחר ותקרב ישכון חצרך.

## Those present respond:

May we be satisfied with the goodness of Thy house,  
the holy place of Thy temple.

The performer of the circumcision places the infant upon the  
lap of the godfather, and before performing the circumcision says  
the following benediction:

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the uni-  
verse, who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments,  
and enjoined us the rite of circumcision.

The circumcision is performed.

And immediately after the circumcision, before the uncovering  
is performed, the father, or the godfather, if there is no father, says:

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the uni-  
verse, who hast sanctified us by Thy commandments,  
and hast bidden us to make him enter into the covenant  
of Abraham our father.

## Those present respond:

As he has been entered into the covenant, so may  
he be introduced to the study of the Law, to the nuptial  
canopy, and to good deeds.

After the performance of the circumcision, the circumciser  
takes a goblet of wine, and continues:

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the uni-  
verse, who hast created the fruit of the vine.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the uni-  
verse, who hast sanctified the well-beloved (Isaac) from  
the womb and hast set Thy statute in his flesh, and hast  
sealed his offspring with the sign of the holy covenant.  
Therefore, because of this, O living God, our Portion  
and our Rock, deliver from destruction the dearly be-  
loved of our flesh, for the sake of the covenant Thou  
hast set in our bodies. Praised be Thou, O Lord our  
God, who hast made the covenant.

Our God and God of our fathers, preserve this child  
to his father and to his mother, and let his name be  
called in Israel . . . son of . . . Let the father (!) rejoice  
in his offspring, and let the mother be glad with her  
children; as it is written: "Let thy father and thy  
mother rejoice, and let her that bore thee be glad."  
And it is said: "And I passed by thee, and I saw thee  
weltering in thy blood, and I said unto thee: 'In thy  
blood thou shalt live.' " Yea, I said: "In thy blood thou  
shalt live." (A little wine is put in the mouth of the infant  
when the last two sentences are repeated). And it is said:  
"He hath remembered His covenant for ever, the word  
which He commanded to a thousand generations; (the  
covenant) which he made with Abraham, and His oath

## הנאספים עונים:

ושבעה בטוב ביתך קדש היכלך.

המהל לוקח את החיטק ומניח אותו בחיק הסנדק, ולפי  
המילה מברך:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהיט מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו  
במצותיו, וצונו על המילה.

אחר כך יחתוך את הערלה.  
ומייד קודם הפריעה מברך האב, ואם אין לחיטק אב, מברך  
הסנדק:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהיט מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו  
במצותיו, וצונו להכניסו בביתו של אברהם אבינו.

## הנאספים עונים:

בשם שנכנס לבית, כן יכנס לתורה ולחקה  
ולמעשים טובים.

אחר הפריעה והמציצה לוקח המהל כוס ומברך:

ברוך אתה יי, אלהיט מלך העולם, בורא פרי  
הגפן.

ברוך אתה יי, אלהיט מלך העולם, אשר קדש  
דיד מבטן וחק בשארו שם, וצאצאיו חתם באות  
ברית קדש. על כן בשכר זאת, אל חי, תלקט, צורתי,  
צנה (יא צנה) להציל ידירות שארתי משחת, למען  
בריתי אשר שם בבשרי. ברוך אתה יי, בורח הברית.  
אלהיט ואלהי אבותיט. קים את הילד הנה לאביו  
ולאמו ויקרא שמו בישאל אל (פליי בר פליי). ישמח האבי  
ביצא חלציו, ותגל אמו בקרי בטנה. בכתוב, ישמח  
אביו ואמו, ותגל יולדתו. ונאמר, נאעבור עליך  
ונאראך מתבוססת בדמך, נאמר לך בדמך חיי,  
נאמר לך בדמך חיי (עון באצבע מדיון בפי החיטק). ונאמר,  
זכר לעולם בריתי, דבר צנה לאלף דור. אשר ברת  
את אברהם, ושבועתו לישחק. ונעמדה ליצקב לחק.

unto Isaac, and confirmed the same unto Jacob for a statute, to Israel for everlasting covenant." And it is said: "And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God commanded him." O give thanks unto the Lord; for He is good; for His loving kindness endureth for ever. The little child . . . , may he become great. As he has been entered into the covenant, so may he be introduced to the study of the Law, to the nuptial canopy, and to good deeds.

The circumciser then recites the following prayer while standing:

Creator of the universe! May it be Thy gracious will to regard and accept this (performance of circumcision), as if I had brought this infant before Thy glorious throne. And Thou, in Thy abundant mercy, through Thy holy angels, give a pure and holy heart to . . . , the son of . . . , who was just now circumcised in honor of Thy great name. May his heart be wide open to comprehend Thy holy Law, that he may learn and teach, keep and fulfill Thy laws.

Special prayer for the circumcised infant:

May He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless this tender infant who was circumcised, and may He grant him a perfect cure. May his parents (or: relatives) deserve to raise him up to the study of the Law, to the nuptial canopy and good deeds. Let us say, AMEN.

לישראל ברית עולם. ונאמר, נמל אברהם את יצחק  
במין שמונת ימים, באשר צוה אותו אלהים. הורו  
למי כי טוב, כי לעולם חסדו. (פסלתי) נה הקטן גדול  
יהיה. בשם שנקנס לברית, בן יגנס לתורה ולחפה  
ולמעשים טובים. אמן.

אחר כך יעמוד המוהל ויתפלל תפלה זו:

רבוט של עולם, יהי רצון מלפניך שיהא זה חשוב  
ומרצה ומקבל כאלו הקרבתיהו לפני כסא כבודך.  
ואתה ברחמיך הרבים, שלח על ידי מלאכיה  
הקדושים נשמה קדושה וטהורה ל (פ"ב) הנמול עתה  
לשמך הגדול, ושיהיה לבו פתוח בפתחו של אולם  
בתורתך הקדושה, ללמוד וללמד, לשמור ולעשות.

מי שברך לילד אחר המילה:

מי שברך אבותי, אברהם, יצחק ויעקב, הוא  
יברך את הילד הרך הנמול וירפא אותו רפואה  
שלמה, ויזכו אבותיו (קרוביו) לגדלו לתורה ולחפה  
ולמעשים טובים. ונאמר אמן.



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