

Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17:1–14¹

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There have always been male Jews who were not circumcised even though from Biblical times onwards circumcision was recognised by Jews and non-Jews alike as a sign of the covenant and marker of Jewish identity.² During the Second Temple Period, when this phenomenon appears to have increased as a result of acculturation to Hellenism, uncircumcised Jews provoked some discussion, but nevertheless remained a rather anomalous minority.³ The extant sources on the topic suggest

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² Gen. 17:10–11 “This is my covenant (בריתי), which you shall keep, between me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you (לאות ברית ביני וביניכם)”. See esp. H. Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism. An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington 1990) 141–76, who convincingly argued that P transformed a fertility rite into a sign of the covenant. This position is also embraced by L. A. Hoffmann, *Covenant of Blood. Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago and London 1996) 27–48. Cf. also H. E. Goldberg, Cambridge in the Land of Canaan: Descent, Alliance, Circumcision and Instruction in the Bible, *JANES* 24 (1996) 9–34, and W. H. Propp, The Origins Of Infant Circumcision In Israel, *HAR* 2 (1987), 355–70, who both stress motifs of alliance in the historical development of circumcision (esp. Gen. chap. 34). Goldberg even suggests in a highly apologetic manner that circumcision implied cultural transmission “viewing the family, including the women in it, as central in perpetuating societal traditions” (p. 27). Even though circumcision was shared by some Near Eastern nations, pagans generally recognised it as a marker of Jewish identity, see esp. P. Schäfer, *Judeophobia. Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge MA 1997) 93–105.

³ P. Schäfer, The Bar Kokhba Revolt and Circumcision: Historical Evidence and Modern Apologetics, in: A. Oppenheimer (ed.), *Jüdische Geschichte in hellenistisch-römischer Zeit. Wege der Forschung: Vom alten zum neuen Schürer* (München 1999) 119–132, has stressed the voluntary nature of the *epispasmos* which many Jews under-

that circumcision was the norm and represent Jews with a foreskin as an isolated group. The *Book of Jubilees* is especially harsh, condemning them as persons who “have made themselves like the gentiles” and are “to be removed and be uprooted from the land” (Jub. 15:34). While Philo is considerably more sympathetic, he also accuses them of negligence and disregard for the Jewish community.⁴ Josephus seems to summarise a majority position when taking circumcision for granted and explaining that Abraham and his descendants were given this commandment in order to be “kept from mixing with others” (A. J. 1:192).

It is thus all the more surprising that *Genesis Rabbah*, one of the formative texts of the consolidating rabbinic movement, raises more fundamental questions about the practice.⁵ It is not only a (foreign) philosopher who challenges R. Hoshaya with regard to the actual value of circumcision, but even Abraham himself is depicted as having doubts. When given the commandment of circumcision, he is said to have asked God: “If circumcision is so precious, why was it not given to Adam?” (G. R. 46:3). The patriarch equally wonders whether circumcision may not be an obstacle deterring potential proselytes from joining the community (ibid). In G. R. 48:9 Abraham is moreover concerned that travellers may no longer visit him as they used to do before he was circumcised. It is striking that there is not even a hint in this rabbinic discourse to sinful Jews who may have entertained such views. *Genesis Rabbah* rather seems to address the intrinsic concerns of its own Jewish audi-

went during the Hellenistic period in order to acculturate to Greco-Roman values. J. J. Collins, *A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century*, in: J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs (eds.), “*To See Ourselves As Others See Us*”. *Christians, Jews, “Others” In Late Antiquity* (Chico 1985) 163–86, has shown that circumcision is a remarkably neglected topic in many writings of the Hellenistic diaspora.

⁴ Migr. 89–93; see also: J. M. Barclay, *Paul And Philo on Circumcision: Romans 2.25–9 In the Social And Cultural Context*, *NTS* 44 (1998) 536–56, who distinguishes Philo’s from Paul’s approach by reference to the former’s commitment to the Jewish community.

⁵ On the gradual emergence of the Rabbinic movement and its loose network of relationships, rather than hierarchical structure, see the excellent study of C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen 1997 = TSAJ 66). S. Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden 1994) 63–7, argued that in rabbinic literature circumcision is not just affirmed as a central aspect of Jewish identity, but actually constitutes it. His argumentation, however, is based almost exclusively on much later sources, while G. R. is hardly ever mentioned. In addition, Stern denies the relevance to rabbinic literature of Barth’s sociological model of identity, which stresses dialogue with Others as a central constituent of identity. As a result, Stern does not investigate whether the rabbis developed their notions in response to positions held outside their own circle. On the problems of this approach, see my review in *Zion* 63 (1998) 221–4.

ence. The ritual no longer seems to have been taken for granted in the same way as it had been done during the Second Temple Period. This indicates a considerable change in Judaism during the span of time between Philo, or the *Book of Jubilees*, and the composition of *Genesis Rabbah*.

It is the purpose of this article to examine the nature of this change and to uncover its historical stages. Special attention will be paid to the question whether and to what extent nascent Christianity played a role. Did the Christianization of the Roman Empire change Jewish perspectives? To what extent did rabbinic exegetes know ecclesiastical positions and respond to them?⁶ Jacob Neusner suggested that we read *Genesis Rabbah* as a well-orchestrated reaction to the challenge of Christianity, yet provided little text analysis in support of this thesis.⁷ I have chosen to study here one particular example with a view to the above-mentioned questions. Philo is the starting point of my analysis, because his interpretation of circumcision is very rich and original as well as influential for the subsequent discourse, particularly in Christian circles. Taking his views seriously into account will allow us to understand the degree and the complexity of interaction which took place between ancient Jews and Christians. It will also enable us to estimate more accurately the changes which characterised Judaism during that crucial period of four hundred years when Christianity emerged and established itself as a state religion.⁸ This study will hopefully contribute to the current debate about the separation between Judaism and early Christianity. Previous research postulated a clear and early parting of the ways. Recent scho-

⁶ On contacts between rabbinic and ecclesiastical exegesis, see the overview of scholarship by J. R. Baskin, *Rabbinic-Patristic Exegetical Contacts in Late Antiquity: A Bibliographical Reappraisal*, in: W. Scott (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* (Atlanta 1985) 5:52–80; and also more recently: I. J. Yuval, “Two Nations In Your Womb”. *Perceptions of Jews And Christians* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv 2000); D. Boyarin, *A Tale of Two Synods: Nicea, Javneh, and Rabbinic Ecclesiology*, *Exemplaria* 12.1 (2000) 21–62; E. Kessler, *The Exegetical Encounter between the Greek Church Fathers and the Palestinian Rabbis*, *SP* 34 (2001) 395–412. G. Stemmerger, *Exegetical Contacts between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire*, in: M. Saebo (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of Its Interpretation* (Göttingen 1996) I/1:569–86, has denied the mutuality of the encounter, arguing that Christian exegetes were challenged by the Jews, but not vice versa.

⁷ J. Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah As Polemic. An Introductory Account*, *HAR* 9 (1985) 253–65.

⁸ Regarding the question to what extent Early Christianity changed in the 4th century or preserved at least some structures of its pre-Constantine era, see esp.: Ch. Marksches, *Zwischen den Welten Wandern. Strukturen des Antiken Christentums* (Frankfurt, 1997 38–52; R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge 1990) 19–135.

larship, on the other hand, has suggested that this parting was a rather more prolonged and gradual process with many points of contact as well as of dispute.⁹ Tracing exegetical trajectories from Philo through the Church Fathers to the rabbis holds the key to a more nuanced understanding of the stages as well as the dynamics of this process.

Philo's Interpretation of Abraham's Circumcision

The extant writings of Philo preserve a richer and more thoughtful discussion of circumcision than can hitherto be found. The topic was evidently important to him, not only because of the internal Jewish disagreement about it, which actually remains marginal to his argument.¹⁰ Philo developed innovative views which departed from both biblical and subsequent Palestinian perspectives. His interpretation seems to have been characteristic of the Hellenistic diaspora in Egypt in the sense that he brought to a sophisticated climax certain allegorical tendencies.¹¹ He also left significant traces among the Church Fathers and even seems to have provided models of interpretation for *Genesis Rabbah*.¹² Philo's

⁹ See the excellent account of scholarly developments by J. M. Lieu, *History and Theology in Christian views of Judaism*, in: eadem et al. (eds.), *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians* (London and New York 1992) 79–96; and also her justified warnings regarding the potentially apologetic, theological implications of the modern scholarly term “parting of the ways”, which has replaced earlier models of supersession, “The Parting Of The Ways”: Theological Construct Or Historical Reality?, *JSNT* 56 (1994) 101–19; see also: P. Alexander, “The Parting of the Ways” from the Perspective of Rabbinic Judaism, in: J. D. G. Dunn (ed.), *Jews and Christians. The Parting of the Ways A. D. 70–135* (Cambridge 1999) 1–25.

¹⁰ Modern scholarship has focused to a disproportionate degree on the internal Jewish controversy with the result that Philo's own arguments have rarely been analysed.

¹¹ One has to be careful not to regard Philo as a stereotypical representative of Jewish Hellenism, which is often supposed to be a rather homogeneous entity. Even when Philo refers to predecessors from whom he inherited certain views, he sets his own accents and shapes his own views. On the whole his writings are highly distinct and cannot simply be reduced to general opinions supposedly held by everyone else. The differences between him and Artapanus, for example, are all too conspicuous; for details, see: M. R. Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* (Tübingen 2001) 9–10, 71–4, 141–4.

¹² Philo's influence on the Church has often become the subject of scholarly inquiry; see the survey of D. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature* (Assen and Minneapolis 1993). The question of Philo's influence on the rabbis, on the other hand, has been treated with considerable scepticism, because his name is never mentioned in rabbinic literature. D. Barthélemy, *Est-Ce Hosya Rabba Qui Censura Le “Commentaire Allégorique”?*, in: *Philon D'Alexandrie. Colloques Nationaux Du Centre National De La Recherche Scientifique* (Paris 1967) 45–78, went furthest in arguing for rabbinic

exegesis thus constitutes the beginning of a long chain of crucial changes.

Initially, however, it is striking that the importance we attribute to Philo's discussion on circumcision is directly contrasted by his own lack of attention to it in his biography of Abraham. Philo does not even mention the ritual here. While discussing in detail Abraham's change of name (Gen. 17:5), Philo ignores the immediately preceding and following verses dealing with God's covenantal promises and His command of circumcision (Abr. 81–4). For Philo, Abraham was primarily the discoverer of monotheism and the founder of the Jewish nation, but not the first Jew performing circumcision.¹³ Why then did Philo nevertheless consider the ritual worthy of justification and firmly recommended its practice?

The key to answering this question lies in Philo's understanding of two central notions: covenant and law. For him, διαθήκη meant something quite incompatible with a physical operation such as circumcision. Philo therefore severed the ritual, as much as he could, from Abraham and the covenantal context, defining it instead as a paramount example of Mosaic law. This transfer from covenant to law is especially conspicuous in Philo's *Questiones* where his exegesis proceeds verse by verse.¹⁴ Even here he ignores the covenantal significance of circumcision by simply skipping the second half of Gen. 17:11 which introduces it precisely as **אֹת בְּרִית** or σημεῖον διαθήκης. This avoidance of covenantal notions in the context of circumcision is remarkable. On other occasions Philo liked to speak about the subject. He subsequently even devoted two separate, yet lost treatises to it.¹⁵ His extant discussions indicate

familiarity with Philonic writings. He suggested that some rabbinic scholars, such as R. Hoshaya, were actually involved in editing Philo's *Allegorical Commentary* for Origen's library holdings in Caesaria.

¹³ Abraham as the discoverer of monotheism: Abr. 68–80; Abraham as the founder of the Jewish nation: Abr. 276, 77). See also: M. Mach, Abraham, the eternal student according to Philo (Hebrew), in: M. Hallamish et al. (ed.), *The Faith of Abraham. In the Light of Interpretation throughout the Ages* (Ramat Gan 2002) 59–70.

¹⁴ See also: G. Sterling, Philo's *Quaestiones*: Prolegomean or Afterthought?, in: D. M. Hay, *Both Literal and Allegorical. Studies in Philo of Alexandria's Questions and Answers on Genesis and Exodus* (Atlanta 1991) 102–23, who has shown that the *Quaestiones* were written as a running commentary, which was later supplemented and occasionally completed by the *Legum Allegoriae*.

¹⁵ Philo mentions these treatises in Mut. 53 where he says τὸν δὲ περὶ διαθηκῶν σύμπαντα λόγον ἐν δυσὶν ἀναγράφα συντάξεσι. A. Terian, The Priority Of The *Quaestiones*, in: Hay, *Both Literal and Allegorical* 33–4, suggests that these treatises were an exposition of Gen. 6:13–9:19 and argues against Marcus that they were written after the *Quaestiones*. Philo's vague reference in Q. E. 2:34 to a prior discussion of the covenant, which Marcus took as a reference to the lost treatises (Marcus, ad.loc.), is

that he understood covenant in distinctly ethereal terms. In contrast to the author of the *Book of Jubilees* he completely dissociated it from the concrete Land of Israel mentioned in Gen 17:8.¹⁶ Philo instead read God's covenant with Abraham in the context of the opening of the chapter where God, according to the LXX, commands Abraham to "be well pleasing before me and become blameless".¹⁷ The concrete Hebrew terms **הַתְּהִלָּךְ** and **תָּמִים**, the latter of which is often used in sacrificial contexts, have thus been replaced by more spiritual notions.¹⁸ Philo follows the Septuagintal approach and suggests that God's covenant with Abraham crowns a spiritual process which began with his moral perfection. The covenant thus becomes a Divine "grace" granted to those who "reject evil", have risen from mortal "weakness to health", are "far from all blame" and have become a "truly noble and virtuous man".¹⁹ It emerges that Abraham's moral perfection is a precondition for being pleasing to God and receiving the covenant. Becoming irreprouchable, he also experiences God's grace and proximity.²⁰ It is in this context that Philo stresses another element of the biblical account, namely Abraham's change of name (Q. G. 3:43). This is natural for him because, according to his theory of language, names express the essence of the thing named.²¹ After Abraham has perfected himself

certainly better interpreted as a reference to Philo's discussion in Q. G. 3:40–60. Terian may also well be right that the absence of any reference in Q. G. 3:46–60 to the lost treatises indicates the chronological priority of the *Quaestiones* even though it is always difficult to argue *ex silencio*. In his extant Greek writings Philo mentions the covenant 23 times, see: P. Borgen et al., *The Philo Index. A Complete Greek Word Index to the Writings of Philo of Alexandria* (Leiden 2000) 86.

¹⁶ In the two cases where Philo quotes verses linking the covenant with the Land of Israel (Gen. 15:18 and Gen. 17:8) he allegorises the land and dwells on moral as well as spiritual issues (Heir 313; Q. G. 3:45).

¹⁷ Gen. 17:1 "εὐαρέσκει ἐναντίον ἐμοῦ καὶ γίνου ἄμεμπτος".

¹⁸ This Septuagintal rendering is remarkable also in view of the fact that a similar description of Noah in Gen. 6:9, namely **אִישׁ צַדִּיק תָּמִים**, is translated as ἄνθρωπος δίκαιος τέλειος. See also: Hoffmann, *Covenant of Blood* 36–7, who stresses the ritual connotation of **תָּמִים**, which reflects the priestly ideal of man's physical perfection parallel to that of the sacrificial animals. This is indeed the rabbinic interpretation of Gen. 17:2, on which see below. The Masoretic text itself, however, also suggests parallels to Gen. 6:9–9:17 where Noah is associated with the same web of characteristics as Abraham in Gen. 17:1–14, namely walking before God, blamelessness, fertility and covenant. The LXX highlights the spiritual dimension especially in the case of Abraham, who is firmly removed from sacrificial connotations of blamelessness.

¹⁹ Q. G. 3:40; see also: Mut. 52–3; Sac. 57; Somn. 2:223–4, 237.

²⁰ Q. G. 3:42; Mut. 47–53.

²¹ For details on Philo's theory of language, see: M. Niehoff, *What is in a Name? Philo's Mystical Philosophy of Language*, *JSQ* 2 (1995) 220–52, updated version in: Niehoff, *Philo On Jewish Identity* 187–209. Note that Philo criticises in Q. G. 3:43 those who take the change of Abraham's name lightly. These are "deceived by the

and experienced God, he is obviously a different person and requires an appropriate new name reflecting that spiritual dimension. The addition of an Alpha to his name signifies that he is now guided by God to insights of true wisdom. God Himself is the “teacher and leader” of his soul (Q. G. 3:43). There is no need for a physical operation which could hardly express a spiritual essence of the order implied here. Covenant and circumcision were thus rather incompatible notions for Philo. This does not mean, however, that circumcision became altogether insignificant for him.²² Philo rather invested it with another meaning in the context of Mosaic law.

The new context of circumcision is conspicuous in Philo’s *Quaestiones*, where he explains his views in detail and with direct reference to Gen. 17:10–2. Initially, Philo’s attention is caught by the two different references to circumcision in Gen. 17:10–11. The fact that Scripture speaks of a circumcision of “every male” as well as of a circumcision of “the flesh of the foreskin” in his opinion cannot be superfluous, but necessarily carries special meaning. Philo interprets these two expressions as indicating two kinds of circumcision, one literal or fleshly, the other a metaphorical circumcision of the mind (Q. G. 3:46). Philo may have found a further clue for his reading in the Septuagintal rendering of זכר as ἀρσενικός, which also implies virility and male gender as opposed to θηλυκῶς. He stresses that (Q. G. 3:46):

which [is] naturally male in us is the mind, whose superfluous growths it is necessary to cut off and throw away in order that it may become pure and naked of every evil and passion, and be a priest of God. Now this is what He indicated by the second circumcision, stating in the law (LXX Deut. 10:16) that “you shall circumcise your hardness of heart”,²³ which means your hard and rebellious and refractory thoughts, and by cutting off and removing arrogance, you shall make the sovereign part free and unbound.

Philo relies in this passage on ancient medical opinion and cultural stereotypes in order to construct the male as mind.²⁴ Circumcision then involves an excision of superfluous and by implication feminine

superficial aspects of names”, he says, “whereas it would be proper to thrust their minds into the depths in search of the inner facts for the sake of greatly possessing the truth”.

²² As has been assumed by J. Z. Smith, *Fences and Neighbours. Some Contours of Early Judaism*, in: W. S. Green (ed.), *Approaches to Ancient Judaism* (Chico 1980) 2:15.

²³ LXX Deut. 10:16 renders the Masoretic *את ערלת לבבכם* as *περιτεμεῖσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν*.

²⁴ For details on Philo’s medical notions and gender constructs, see the discussion and bibliography by Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture* 18–9, 102–5. Note that in Q. G. 3:48 Philo himself refers to “the ancients”, who were “disposed to regard

accretions to the intellect. The mind is thus restored to its original virility and purity. Circumcision may in fact be said to reverse the creation of Eve, allegorised by Philo as passion, while restoring Adam, the virile mind, to his original freedom and hegemony.²⁵ As much as Eve was a harmful addition to Adam, who until then had enjoyed perfect rationality and harmony with God, the passions are a harmful addition to the mind and therefore need to be cut off. In this way circumcision emerges as a necessary perfection of creation or rather as a return to man's original creation in the image of God.

Philo reports in Q. G. 3:48 that "they", an unspecified group, "say that the circumcision of the skin is a symbol, as if [to show that] it is proper to cut off superfluous and excessive desires by exercising continence and endurance in matters of the Law". The expression ἐγκράτειαν ὑπομονῆς τοῦ νόμου clearly indicates that Philo must have heard of this symbolical interpretation of circumcision from Jews. Only they would be concerned with matters of the law. His quotation suggests that these Jews arrived at their interpretation by analogy to the widely accepted medical benefit of physical circumcision, arguing that "just as the skin of the foreskin is superfluous in procreation ..., so the excess of desire is superfluous ...".²⁶ Philo clearly embraces this Jewish allegorical tradition which is nowhere else attested. His own contribution appears to have been two-fold: he grounded this Jewish position in a close reading of Scripture and added a substantial cultural dimension with significant implications about man's original creation. In the above-quoted passage in Q. G. 3:46, where no predecessors are mentioned, Philo both interprets the double reference to circumcision in Gen. 17:10–11 and quotes the only Pentateuchal reference to circumcision as a metaphor.²⁷ This allows Philo both to introduce a strong gender bias and to highlight the parallelism of the two Scriptural categories of circumcision, one of the foreskin, the other of the heart. Philo moreover applies

the bodily organ of generation as resembling thought, which is the most generative (force) of the heart".

²⁵ Philo's famous treatment of Eve's creation after Adam can be found in *Opif.* 151–2, now excellently commented by D. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria. On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses. Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Leiden 2001) 354–61.

²⁶ Regarding Philo's medical justification of circumcision, see below.

²⁷ Relying almost exclusively on the Torah, while treating the Prophets and the Writings as interesting, but uncanonical, traditions, Philo would not resort to metaphors of circumcision in these later parts of the Bible. These however, were to become paramount in Origen's exegesis and subsequently also in *Genesis Rabbah*, on both of which see below. For details on Philo's conception of the Torah as canonical text, see: Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, 187–209.

the notion of nature and suggests that circumcision restores man's original virility of mind, as exemplified by Adam.

Philo continues to be concerned with the fact that circumcision pertains to males. In Q. G. 3:47 he explicitly raises the question "why does He command that only the males be circumcised?". He justifies the Mosaic legislation by pointing to men's stronger sexual impulses as well as their inclination towards arrogance resulting from their dominant role in procreation.²⁸ Given their potential for sin, men require pruning, whereas women do not. Philo highlights these "biological facts" in order to distinguish Jewish customs from Egyptian ones. He is keenly aware of the Egyptian practice of "circumcising" girls of marriable age. The Mosaic restriction to males, he insists, is much more plausible since it is grounded in the unchanging reality of nature. The superiority of Jewish circumcision over its Egyptian counterpart emerges also with respect to its timing. It is "very much better and more far-sighted", Philo prides himself, "to prescribe circumcision for infants", who cannot yet object to the painful procedure.²⁹

Philo takes for granted the medical reasons for circumcision. Not only the Jews, but also the Egyptians, Arabs and Ethiopians know

²⁸ Following Aristotelian biology, Philo believed that the father provides the active cause, while the mother supplies nothing but the plasma of the embryo. Her role is therefore entirely passive, nothing to be proud of, as Philo warns women. For details, see: Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, 18–9; see also: J. M. Lieu, *Circumcision, Women and Salvation*, *NTS* 40 (1994) 362; and S. D. J. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, *Gender and History* 9 (1997) 565–6, who stresses the importance of Philo as the first witness to the growing importance of the question why Jews circumcise only the males and furthermore argues that Philo may thus have responded to Jewish critics who rejected the practice on the grounds of women's equal spirituality. The latter point, however, is highly speculative since Philo applies himself to the biblical text, happy to stress some gender biases. Nowhere in the *Questiones et Solutiones* is he concerned with alternative Jewish opinions. On the contrary, he seems to write for an audience who practices circumcision, but wishes to know more about its deeper meaning. Characteristically, the subject of male-only circumcision is never addressed in the other contexts where Philo responds to internal Jewish queries about the practice.

²⁹ Q. G. 3:48. R. D. Hecht, *The Exegetical Contexts of Philo's Interpretation of Circumcision*, in: F. E. Greenspahn et al. (eds.), *Nourished With Peace. Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel* (Chico 1984) 70, 77–8, points to the difference in this respect between Philo's discussion in *Spec.* 1:7 and Q. G. 3:48. While in the former he stresses the similarities between Jewish and Egyptian justification of circumcision, he insists in the latter on Jewish distinction and superiority. Hecht makes the interesting suggestion that "Philo's interpretation in *Spec Leg* 1.7 seems more in line with the earlier tradition within Hellenistic Jewish texts which argues that Moses taught the Egyptians circumcision". This is all the more remarkable, because Philo usually distances himself from all traditions appearing in Artapanus, the archetypical representative of the pre-Roman Egyptian-Jewish symbiosis (for details, see: Niehoff, *Philo on Jewish Identity and Culture*, 45–74).

them: cutting off the foreskin will prevent diseases, especially in the hot climate of the southern regions, and will also enhance fertility by easing the sperm's way into the female womb (Q. G. 3:48). Health is better preserved and fertility more easily achieved without a foreskin. These well-known explanations lead Philo to some further thoughts, which seem to have been his own and became crucial in later discussions on circumcision. These thoughts ultimately pertain to man's place vis-a-vis God. Philo raises the important question whether man has been created with other organs which may prove superfluous and thus removable. Could circumcision, in other words, be applied to other areas of the human body? Philo's question is particularly forceful since he is aware of the similarity between circumcision and the pruning of trees, which is suggested by the Biblical expression *כל-עץ מאכל וערלתם ערלתו את-פריו* (Lev. 19:23). Even though the LXX translates this terminology into notions of impurity (*ἀκαθαρσία*), Philo explicitly speaks of circumcision as a process of being "purified and trimmed like plants".³⁰ If cutting off superfluous parts from trees is a standard procedure helpful to their growth and fertility, perhaps the same is also true of the human body in general? Is man perhaps called to cultivate his body in a more comprehensive way? Philo's answer is clear. The physical human body, he insists, must be circumcised only at the foreskin. No other member can be pruned in this way. As he put it in Q. G. 3:48:

Now if there were some way of avoiding other afflictions and diseases as well by cutting off some member or some part of the body, by the removal of which there would be no obstacle to the functioning of its parts, man would not be known as mortal but would be changed into immortality.

Philo raises here an important issue which will concern virtually all subsequent exegetes, namely the question to what extent physical operations, such as circumcision, interfere with God's authority and plan of creation. Philo's answer stresses the unique status of circumcising the foreskin. While this operation is beneficial and commanded by God, others of this kind would upset the order of things. As Philo put it, if man could heal all his afflictions by simply cutting off the respective parts of his body, he would no longer be mortal, but would have achieved Divine immortality. Circumcision of the foreskin is thus highly exceptional. It is the only kind of circumcision which can literally be performed without interfering with God's designs. As we saw above, instead it perfects creation or rather restores man's original virility.

³⁰ Q. G. 3:50; for similar Philonic statements, see: Agr. 39; Spec. 1:304–6; Plant. 94; for a discussion of the biblical evidence, see: Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage* 149–55.

Other kinds of excision, by contrast, pertain only to the metaphorical realm. It is striking that in this realm Philo not only approves of an excision of the heart, mentioned in Deut. 10:16, but also speaks freely of an excision of the eyes (Q. G. 3:47). In the context of metaphor Philo thus assumes a multiplicity of circumcisions and even adds to the one Pentateuchal example. In this important respect his *Peshat* and allegory significantly differ. While their basic meaning is the same, namely excision of superfluous parts, literal circumcision pertains only to one specific member of the human body, while metaphorical circumcision can be applied to a variety of organs.

The general applicability of metaphorical circumcision leads Philo to postulate a broader role for the rite. He in fact raises it to the status of a paradigmatic example of Mosaic legislation. In Q. G. 3:48 he makes the following somewhat tentative statements:

For just as the skin of the foreskin is superfluous in procreation because of the burning affliction which comes upon it, so the excess of desire is superfluous and at the same time harmful. It is superfluous because it is not necessary, and it is harmful because it is the cause of diseases of body and soul. But through this great desire (Scripture) alludes also to the fact that one ought to cut off other desires as well. And the greatest desire is that of intercourse between man and woman ... And it indicates the cutting off not only of the excessive desires but also of arrogance and great evil and such habits. And arrogance, as the saying of the ancients goes, is the excision and impeding of progress, for one who thinks (well of himself) does not admit of betterment, thinking that he is the cause that is involved.

Philo suggests in this passage that circumcision demands the excision of everything detrimental to human betterment. Put positively, circumcision is central to man's sublimation of his drives and emotions. "Cutting off other desires as well" helps him to make progress and achieve *enkrateia*, an ideal which in Philo's view informs all of Mosaic legislation.³¹ Thinking of Mosaic law in terms of Natural Law, Philo generally insisted that it leads to self-restraint and health (Praem. 119). The Jews were in this respect the spearhead of Western civilisation, who curbed the influence of cultures based merely on conventional law, on passing fashions or even on plain vice. Especially dangerous in this respect were the Egyptians, a permanently sick and perverted nation, which infected with their madness even such Romans as Gaius and Flaccus.³² Moses instead inculcated *enkrateia* and commanded the Jews to lead a life in

³¹ For more details on Philo's view of *enkrateia* as the central idea of Mosaic law, see: Niehoff, Philo on Jewish Identity 94–110.

³² Her. 79; Spec. 23–4; Leg. 14, 22, 76–114; Flacc. 10–8.

accordance with Nature. Control over everything that may upset rational life is the ultimate goal of the individual Jew's brave struggle with himself. Circumcision is a paradigm of Mosaic law, because it curbs the strongest impediments to *enkrateia*, the sexual impulse and self-conceit.

Philo formulated this line of thought also in his later work *De Specialibus Legibus*, where he gives a summary of his position, now taking credit for the metaphorical interpretation.³³ To the well-known medical reasons for circumcision, he wishes "to add that I consider circumcision to be a symbol of two things most necessary to our well-being" (Spec. 1:8), namely excision of pleasure and conceit. As we have just seen, these motifs played already a prominent role in his *Questiones*. In the present context Philo further suggests their general applicability and, ultimately, their special role in relation to the Decalogue and the special laws (Spec. 1:9):

For since among the love-lures of pleasure the palm is held by the mating of man and woman, the legislator thought good to dock the organ which ministers to such intercourse, thus making circumcision the figure (*ἀνιτρομένοϛ*) of the excision of excessive and superfluous pleasure, not only of one pleasure but of all the other pleasures signified by one, and that the most imperious.

Circumcision is similarly said to reduce human arrogance which might arise from the parents' sense of having created a new human being (Spec. 1:10). Philo reminds such parents of their humble position vis-a-vis God, who is the real originator of human life. Circumcision thus prevents man from assuming that he is invested with Divine powers. More importantly, the excision of pleasure and self-conceit plays a special role in Philo's transition from the Decalogue to the special laws. He has placed his discussion of circumcision at the very beginning of his treatment of special laws, leaving it unclear whether he regards it to be part of the former or the latter. At first sight, there is no room for doubt.

³³ It is interesting that Philo still refers to his predecessors when discussing the literal, medical explanation of circumcision. It is nevertheless clear here that in comparison with his discussion in the *Questiones* he has reduced the number of references to other exegetes. This result conforms to a broader pattern, which has been shown by D. M. Hay, *References To Other Exegetes*, in: idem, *Both Literal and Allegorical* 81–97. Hay stresses that the *Questiones* nevertheless refer to the same type of exegetes and suggests that all of these references indicate the dialogical environment of Philo's work. It seems to me that the distinctly greater frequency of such references in the *Questiones* also indicates a development in Philo's self-confidence: as he grew in years and experience, probably gaining increasing prestige and standing in the community, he claims more credit for ideas which, at the beginning of his career, he still attributed to others.

The law of circumcision is certainly not one of the Ten Commandments. Philo acknowledges this at the opening of his treatise when promising to proceed to the explanation of the particular ordinances after concluding his discussion of the main headings of the law (Spec. 1:1). At the end of his exposition of circumcision, however, he repeats that he will now move on to the particular ordinances, implying that the subject of circumcision still belonged to the general categories of Mosaic law (Spec. 1:12). Though somewhat hesitantly, Philo has thus assimilated the status and nature of circumcision to those of the Decalogue. Extracted from its original covenantal context, the ritual now attains paradigmatic legal significance even though it is not one of the Ten Commandments. Philo saw fit to do so, because circumcision symbolises the most central aspects of *enkrateia*.³⁴

Philo's interpretation of circumcision also indicates how he saw its function in defining the boundaries of Jewish identity. In contrast to the *Book of Jubilees* and other Palestinian sources the ritual did not delineate for him exclusive boundaries associated with the map of the Land of Israel. Spiritual, not physical circumcision was required of the proselyte (Q. E. 2:2). Yet upon entering the community Jews were expected to perform the ritual.³⁵ Philo fervently criticises those ridiculing circumcision and calls upon them to approach the subject from a "wiser and more serious" perspective (Spec. 1:3). While Philo in *De Specialibus Legibus* does not give us any clues regarding the background of these critics, he provides some information in *De Migratione Abrahami*. It clearly emerges here that he has Jews in mind. He accuses them of overly indulging in the allegorical meaning of Mosaic law and thus becoming oblivious to its actual performance (Migr. 89). His main charge, however, is social: such Jews ignore the community and behave "as though they were living alone by themselves in a wilderness, or as though they had become disembodied souls".³⁶ Philo significantly mentions circumcision together with two other laws which distinguished the Jewish community, namely the Sabbath and the holidays. He reminds his readers that these, too, have a spiritual meaning, while their actual performance is at the same time crucial (Migr. 91–2). Philo insisted on law observance because of its educational value. Jews achieve *enkrateia* by implementing

³⁴ See also: Hecht, *Philo's Interpretation of Circumcision* 67, 74–5, who explains the unusual place of Philo's discussion of circumcision in *De Specialibus Legibus* by reference to the overall importance of modesty for the observance of Mosaic law.

³⁵ See also: Collins, *A Symbol of Otherness*, 172–4.

³⁶ Migr. 90; see also: Migr. 91–3; in Spec. 1:3, 8 Philo similarly stresses the traditional value of circumcision without, however, discussing contemporary social issues.

Mosaic law. Living thus, however, they are also painfully set apart, as Philo remarked in a famous passage (Spec. 4:179). The boundaries drawn by circumcision and other central laws are distinct, yet to some extent also inclusive and permeable. Philo expected any rational person to accept and carry out Mosaic laws. He registered with satisfaction that many pagans had already done so (Mos. 2:25–33). In the case of circumcision, the Egyptians had come rather close to the perfect Jewish form of it. The ultimate purpose of circumcision, however, is explained only in the *Questiones* to an audience which seems to have entertained deeper interests in the biblical text. To Jews who did not merely require an apology for the law Philo suggested that circumcision ultimately restores man's original virility and his Adamic likeness to the image of God. While everybody was invited to strive for this ideal, in Philo's view the Jews had particular access to it. Their education and law observance prepared them better and thus brought them closer to God than any other civilised nation.

Christian Interpretations of Abraham's Circumcision

Circumcision was one of the first markers of Jewish identity by which the emerging Christian movement defined its own boundaries. This ritual played a particularly important role in the two religions' gradual parting of the ways. To be sure, Jesus himself took circumcision for granted (John 7:22–3). Already for Paul, however, it became a significant symbol of Otherness. Much has been written on Paul's interpretation of circumcision and a detailed analysis of his statements is clearly beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it therefore to note that Paul's insistence on the outdated nature of circumcision helped him to attract large numbers of Gentiles and thus dramatically change the composition of the nascent Christian movement.³⁷ While Paul initially only seems to have denied the covenantal significance of circumcision, he increasingly attacked it as a paradigmatic example of Jewish law observance. He thus moved from criticizing Palestinian notions to mocking Philonic views.³⁸

³⁷ F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and The Gentiles. A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge 1986) 23–48, argues that Paul turned to the Gentiles and no longer insisted on law observance as a condition for joining the community, because he had failed in his mission to the Jews and thus hoped to achieve success as a preacher of the Gospel to a new audience (see esp. 1 Cor. 9:21, 10:32–33).

³⁸ See also: F. W. Horn, *Der Verzicht Auf Die Beschneidung Im Frühen Christentum*, *NTS* 42 (1996) 484–6, who distinguishes between an earlier Antiochian and a later, distinctly Pauline stage with regard to circumcision. While the former was in-

Occasionally, the ritual is thus only denied its special value and said to be a matter of complete indifference (1 Cor. 7:19). Circumcision gives the Jews neither the right to claim distinction nor the right to expect the fulfilment of Divine promises. In other and probably later contexts, however, Paul attacks the ritual more actively by denigrating it as a sign of the “slavery” from which Christ had precisely come to free man. Christians who nevertheless perform circumcision are threatened that Christ “will not be of any use” to them (Gal. 5:2). In a particularly heated argument Paul even associates “the mutilation of the flesh” with “dogs” and “evil-doers” (Phil. 3:2). While Christians should avoid the practice of circumcision and indeed of Jewish ritual as a whole, they would still inherit the covenantal promise by performing a circumcision of the heart. The literal and the allegorical dimension of circumcision, which had firmly belonged together for Philo, are now separated and even contrasted to each other.³⁹ As Paul put it in his famous formulation in Rom. 2:28–9,

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something external in the flesh. Rather a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual, not literal.

Paul’s statement indicates that circumcision, or rather the lack of it, became already in the first century a clear marker distinguishing Israel from those aspiring to become “*Verus Israel*”. This does not mean, however, that circumcision was immediately accepted by everybody as a stringent boundary which created insurmountable walls between the communities. On the contrary, Christian leaders continued to be deeply concerned with Christians performing circumcision and observing other aspects of Mosaic law.⁴⁰ This suggests a rather prolonged blurring of differences. At the same time an increasing number of writers had re-

formed by more practical considerations, Paul subsequently linked the ritual to his “Tauftheologie”; cf. J. D. G. Dunn, What was the Issue between Paul and “Those of the Circumcision”? in: M. Hengel and U. Heckel (eds.), *Paulus und das Antike Judentum* (Tübingen 1991) 295–313, who suggests that circumcision throughout ancient Judaism carried the same two connotations, namely a covenantal and a paradigmatic legal dimension. Accepting Sander’s notion of “covenantal nomism”, Dunn treats these two aspects always as two sides of the same coin found in all forms of Judaism, including supposedly even Philo (p. 301). As P. Schäfer (ibid 316) rightly observed, Ancient Judaism on the contrary was extremely diverse and developed a plurality of positions on central issues, such as circumcision.

³⁹ Cf. D. Boyarin, *A Radical Jew. Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley 1994) 26–7, who regards Paul’s interpretation as a radical continuation of Philo’s position. This interpretation has been criticised by Barclay, Paul and Philo on Circumcision.

⁴⁰ See R. L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews. Rhetoric and Reality In The Late 4th Century* (Berkeley 1983) 68–79, for an overview of the phenomenon.

course to circumcision in order to construct boundaries for their imagined communities.⁴¹ Ignatius of Antioch, one of the earliest post-New Testament writers, for example, used the ritual to distinguish Ἰουδαισμός for the first time from what he called χριστιανισμός. In this context the Jews simply appear as “the circumcised”, while the Christians are “the uncircumcised”.⁴²

Given the formative role of circumcision in defining boundaries, one might expect that each group constructed the Other from an exclusively internal perspective, while ignoring the Other’s own voice. The opposite, however, seems to have been the case or, rather, Ancient reality was far more complex. The discussion about circumcision in fact surmounted the very fences established by it. This means that the boundaries constructed by the rhetoric of outstanding figures remained rather partial and permeable. The communities remained in contact, often intermingling to an extent which appeared alarming to their respective establishments. Even those writers who insisted on firm boundaries were themselves surprisingly involved in the discourse of “the other side”. Perhaps it was precisely because circumcision was recognized by all parties as a central marker of Jewish life that it became not only a bone of contention, but also a locus of lively intellectual exchange. It is therefore appropriate to ask with Judith Lieu “not so much how clear are the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism, but more particularly who is drawing them and for whom”.⁴³ Justin Martyr and especially Origen are conspicuous in this context. Circumcision was for them a central subject which they discussed thoroughly and with originality. They did so by considering contemporary and ancient Jews, responding to their respective views and claims, while hoping to reduce their attractiveness to members of the Christian community. Justin’s and Origen’s interpretations also gained public authority far beyond the confines of their immediate communities. The rabbis got to know them and responded for the benefit of their own communities. Justin and Origen thus became important bridges in the trajectory of ancient exegetical traditions.

⁴¹ I am consciously using B. Anderson’s felicitous expression, which he coined in his seminal book *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London 1991, 2nd rev. ed.). Anderson stressed the constructed nature of collective identities which become distinct by creating rather unique ways of sensing togetherness within the group as well as difference to other groups. Anderson moreover assigned to written texts a crucial role in the emergence of imagined communities.

⁴² Ignatius, Ep. Phil. 6:1; quoted by Lieu, *History and Theology* 92–3. On the Judaizers as one group of Ignatius’ opponents, see: W. Bauer, H. Paulsen, *Die Briefe des Ignatius von Antiochia und der Brief des Polykarp von Smyrna* (Tübingen 1985 = *Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 18, Die Apostolischen Väter II*) 64–5.

⁴³ Lieu, *History and Theology* 92.

In *Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho* both Christians and Jews refer to circumcision as a clear marker of identity. The dialogue opens by Trypho introducing himself to his Christian interlocutor as a Ἑβραῖος ἐκ περιτομῆς.⁴⁴ Justin furthermore says of Trypho that he accuses Christians of “not circumcising the flesh as did your forefathers” (Dial. 10:1). Justin inversely denies Jewish claims regarding the salvific role of circumcision. The Christian insists that Trypho seek salvation only through faith in Christ and a moral lifestyle (Dial. 8:2). To this proposition Trypho and his friends are said to have responded by bursting into loud laughter. Trypho furthermore explains in a more serious tone that while a philosophical lifestyle is certainly a worthy goal, salvation can only be attained by initially performing circumcision (πρῶτον μὲν περιτομοῦ) and then also observing the Sabbaths, Feasts and New Moons (Dial. 8:4). Trypho concludes: “Do in general everything written down in the law” (Dial. 8:4). The reader of this passage in the *Dialogue* is initially struck by the intensity of the clash over circumcision. This is evidently not just a random issue of discussion, but one that evokes the strongest expressions of emotion. It is a serious bone of contention and competition. The conflict revolves around the salvific role of circumcision, which is altogether denied by the Christian, yet affirmed by the Jews. Justin's presentation of the Jewish side is interesting not only because of the liveliness of the picture, which may suggest reminiscences of real encounters.⁴⁵ Trypho's argumentation is moreover remarkable, because he speaks of circumcision as a paramount example of law observance. As we saw above, this was precisely Philo's view, which had also resurfaced in Paul's writings. It is at the same time conspicuous that Philo's thoughtful explanations are not given here. Justin rather restricts himself to an abbreviated version which is probably meant to look somewhat odd in light of the “spiritual” alternative of Christianity.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Dial. 1:3 (text quoted according to the new critical edition by M. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris Dialogus Cum Tryphone* (Berlin and New York 1997).

⁴⁵ J. M. Lieu, *Image and Reality. The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh 1996) 109–113, has strongly argued that Trypho is not a mere strawman who enables Justin to project his own Christian ideology. His refusal to consider Christianity and his specific views rather suggest that Justin constructed this figure from reminiscences of real encounters with Jews. E. R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr* (Amsterdam 1968) 90, argued, by contrast, that Trypho was “in many respects a strawman who says the right thing in the right place ... and never seriously embarrasses Justin by his replies.”

⁴⁶ Connections between Justin and Philo have often been suggested, yet not universally accepted in modern scholarship; for an overview, see: Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature* 97–105; and more recently D. Rokeah, *Justin Martyr and the Jews* (He-

Justin moreover interprets circumcision in the context of creation and nature. He wishes to show that circumcision is superfluous, because it was not part of God's original plan of creation. A late-comer on the scene of history this rite may easily be consigned to oblivion. His examples are Adam, biblical heroes before Abraham, the stars and female biology. All of these prove in his opinion the secondary and thus unnatural character of circumcision. "If it was indeed necessary, as you think," Justin argues, "then God would not have created Adam uncircumcised" (Dial. 19:3). This statement raises the same issue which Philo had introduced, yet reverses his views on the matter. As we saw above, Philo suggested that circumcision restores man's original virility and thus perfects creation. He developed this idea against the background of the two creation accounts in Genesis, which indicate in his opinion two kinds of creation, one ideal, the other an imperfect addition which calls for amendment. The superfluous growth symbolized by Eve requires pruning in the form of circumcision as well as manly self-cultivation. Creation thus has for Philo a strong teleological dimension: man is permanently called to retrieve a lost ideal and maintain a fragile victory over adverse, superfluous elements. Circumcision symbolises that need for man's effort. Addressing the same issues, Justin develops the opposite perspective. Adam no longer represents a lost, but regainable ideal, but the given reality of male biology. Adam, as every other male, was created uncircumcised. God can therefore not have intended this operation which changes the way God designed the human body. Justin thus emphatically recommends to follow nature and "stay as you were created".⁴⁷ In this way he abolishes the exceptional status of circumcision on which Philo had so fervently insisted. As we saw above, he, too, warned not to cut off random members of the body and thus challenge man's status vis-a-vis God. Circumcision, however, was in Philo's view a crucial exception to this rule. Justin now denies this special status of circumcision and assimilates it to all the other members of the human body which need to be preserved intact as they have been created.

Justin strengthens his argument by referring to additional examples. All biblical heroes before Abraham, he insists, enjoyed a perfect relationship with God. They did not need circumcision in order to encounter Him and be saved. Abel, for example, earned God's favour without having cut his foreskin. Enoch is equally said to have been pleasing to

brew, Jerusalem 1998) 23–28; M. Hirshman, Polemic Literary Units in the Classical Midrashim and Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho*, *JQR* 83 (1993) 369–84.

⁴⁷ μείνατε ὡς γεγέννησθε (Dial. 23:3).

God. Lot was saved and Noah entered the ark (Dial. 19:3–4). These examples show that circumcision was not only unintended in God’s original creation, but continued to be superfluous in the primal and foundational stage of history. Christians, Justin implies, should identify with these origins and circumvent later Jewish accretions. The nature of the stars and female biology provide further evidence. The stars do not follow any of the particular laws of Judaism – a fact which again proves the secondary and temporary nature of the latter (Dial. 19:4). Girls moreover cannot be circumcised (Dial. 19:5). Since they cannot have been *a priori* excluded from salvation, their inability to perform the ritual necessarily proves its superfluity. Justin’s strategy of inscribing Christian values into nature is fascinating especially in view of the competition in this respect with Philo. He, too, had claimed authenticity for Jewish customs, arguing that only they conform to the laws of nature, while pagan customs all depart from Nature and amount to nothing but passing accretions.⁴⁸ Justin embraces this line of argument, now turning it against Jewish customs and uprooting circumcision from the record of creation as well as primal history.

Justin, however, was not satisfied with refuting Jewish-Hellenistic interpretations of circumcision. He also knew Palestinian positions on the subject and wished to provide a Christian answer to them as well. Relating to the biblical account of Abraham’s circumcision as a sign of the covenant, Justin proposed a rather malicious caricature. Weaving together Deut. 10:16 and Lev. 26:40, he associates the uncircumcised and rebellious hearts of the Israelites with their annihilation in the lands of their enemies (Dial. 26:1). For Justin this suggests that circumcision was given to the Jews not as a sign of election, but rather as a sign of curse:⁴⁹

For the circumcision according to the flesh, that was from Abraham, was given as a sign (σημεῖον), so that you may be separated from the other nations and us, so that only you suffer the things which you now rightly suffer, so that ‘your land may be desolate, the cities be burnt down, and that foreigners should eat up the fruits before your face’ (Is. 1:7), and none of you enter Jerusalem.

In this passage Justin continues to claim history for the Christian side. After he has shown that creation and primal history support Christian claims concerning the superfluity of circumcision he now points to the destruction of the Temple as a sign of God’s final rejection of Israel qua

⁴⁸ For details, see: Niehoff, Philo on Jewish Identity 247–66.

⁴⁹ Dial. 16:2; Engl. transl. by A. L. Williams, *Justin Martyr. The Dialogue With Trypho* (London 1930) with modifications.

Jews. Circumcision now marks those who have stayed behind and failed to recognise the progress of history which was ushered in by Jesus. God can thus easily distinguish and punish those who did not accept His saviour. Ironically, it is uncircumcision which has thus become a sign of election and special Divine favour.

While Justin puts up the appearance of a triumphant victor who engages in dialogue with the losing Jewish side, Origen betrays a deep awareness of the continued strength and attraction of Judaism. Circumcision is a prime example. Origen recognised it from early on as a marker of Jewish identity. In his book *On First Principles* he simply identified the Jews as “those who advocate circumcision” (4.2:1). Later he speaks of the rite as the Jews’ “indigenous mark”.⁵⁰ Many Christians found the custom so appealing or theologically so compelling that Origen felt obliged to clarify the issue and redraw blurred boundaries. He thus devoted a special sermon to Abraham’s circumcision, admitting that he hopes in this way “to refute not only the Jews in the flesh concerning the circumcision of the flesh, but also some of those who appear to have taken up the name of Christ and nevertheless think circumcision of the flesh is to be received”.⁵¹ In the same vein Origen added a special excursus on circumcision to his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. He again acknowledges that he does so in response to those who “have been persuaded to be circumcised even after the coming of Jesus, even though they were Gentiles”.⁵² In addition, he addresses in the commentary Marcionite criticisms of circumcision which go unmentioned in the sermon.⁵³ Origen thus conveys the sense that circumcision must be a clear marker of boundaries. Even though the social reality around him was rather more perplexing, he wished to establish the rite as a defini-

⁵⁰ C.Rom. 2: 9.12–3 “insigne vernaculum”; ed. C. P. Hammond Bammel, *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origenes. Kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins* (Freiburg 1990–98) I 152; Engl. transl. Th. P. Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 103 (Washington 2001) with modifications.

⁵¹ H. Gen. 3:5; ed. W. A. Baehrens, *Origenes Werke*, Vol. 6 = *Homilien zum Hexateuch in Rufins Übersetzung* (Leipzig 1920), Engl. transl. by R. E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church* vol. 71 (Washington 1982) with modifications. See also H. Lev. 5:8, where Origen’s polemicalises against those who “bring that which you have learned from the Jews into the Church today”.

⁵² C.Rom. 2:9.12–3; Hammond-Bammel I, 15; Scheck 148.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Origen must have considered his discussion of Marcionite views as too academic and beyond the scope of a sermon, which by nature addresses a more popular audience; see also: E. Klostermann, *Formen der exegetischen Arbeiten des Origenes*, *ThZ* 4 (1947) 203–8, on the different forms and audiences of these two exegetical genres.

tive criterion distinguishing true Christians from both Jews and Gnostics.⁵⁴

Origen's sermon on Abraham's circumcision is of particular interest to us, because the arguments are formulated here with utmost sharpness and directly addressed to Jews in the audience. As a preacher Origen hammers home his point, claiming Divine inspiration for his interpretation and confronting the Jews with a Christian position which admits of no Jewish heritage.⁵⁵ In comparison to Justin, Origen's approach is distinctly more exegetical. He focuses on key-texts regarding circumcision and argues for an exclusively allegorical reading, while dismissing the literal sense as a rather absurd Jewish mistake.⁵⁶

Origen prepares his audience for this conclusion by placing the issue of circumcision into a broader context of religiosity. There are different ways of approaching God, he explains. The Jews, for example, think of Him in a most material manner, supposing that He "should be understood as a man ... adorned with human members and human appearance". The philosophers, on the other hand, suggest a rational, in fact a too rational attitude, which rejects the Jewish stories as "fabulous", but also denies God's involvement in human history. A better alternative is offered by Christianity, which professes God to be "incorporeal and omnipotent", yet caring about human affairs (H. Gen. 3:1). Prior to his circumcision Abraham partook of that kind of spiritual experience. After leaving his country and kindred, thus cleansing himself of his materialistic and idolatrous background, Abraham was awarded with the covenant and circumcision. Origen's interpretation of Abraham resembles to a striking degree Philo's views of him. The Alexandrian had already allegorised Abraham's migration as the soul's journey from ma-

⁵⁴ On Marcion's highly marginal position within Gnosticism and his exegetical activities, see: Ch. Marksches, *Die Gnosis* (München 2001) 86–9.

⁵⁵ Regarding the intentions and methods of Origen's sermons, see: Ch. Marksches, "... für die Gemeinde im Grossen und Ganzen nicht geeignet ..."? Erwägungen zu Absicht und Wirkung der Predigten des Origenes, *ZThK* 94 (1997) 39–68. Regarding his claims of Divine inspiration, see esp. H. Gen. 3: 1, 4, 5. While Origen admits in C.Rom. 2.13:9–16, 27, that Jesus took circumcision for granted and speaks rather sympathetically of Jewish circumcision prior to the advent of Christianity, he omits all such complexity in the sermons. He equally claims in H.Gen. 3:4 that Paul, a Christian, introduced the allegorical interpretation of circumcision, while he admits in C.Rom. 2.13: 19, 22 to have relied in this respect on many others, probably also on Philo.

⁵⁶ See also: H. Crouzel, Origène et le sens Littéral dans ses "Homélies sur l'Hexa-teuque", *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 70 (1969) 241–63, who showed that it was Origen's general tendency in his homilies to identify the literal sense with Judaism and stress the superiority of the Christian allegory.

terialism and idolatry to spirituality and faith in the superior creator God (Abr. 68–88). Philo had also severed the covenant from land and people, interpreting it instead as God’s reward for the individual’s struggle to become blameless. In one important respect, however, Origen’s explanations differ from Philo’s: he subsumes circumcision under the same spiritual categories, while Philo had given it new significance as a paramount example of Mosaic law. Origen thus insists that Abraham received circumcision as a “sign of faith”.⁵⁷ This leads him to his main point, namely that only a spiritual circumcision is worthy of the ethereal God (H.Gen. 3:4):

We therefore, familiar with the Apostle Paul, say that just as many other things were made in the figure and image of future truth, so also that circumcision of flesh was bearing the form of spiritual circumcision about which it was worthy and fitting that “the God of majesty” give precepts to mortals.

While Origen acknowledges here the historicity of Jewish circumcision, he portrays it as a bygone stage, which is now superseded by a truly worthy circumcision. In this preliminary statement Origen still proceeds cautiously, only suggesting by implication that literal circumcision has become superfluous in the new Christian era. The two historical stages mentioned here will soon be disclosed as two mutually exclusive alternatives. Yet Origen has to prepare his argumentative move carefully. He is highly aware of the fact that Ez. 44:9 speaks of two circumcisions, one of the flesh, the other of the heart (H.Gen. 3:4). This verse strongly supports Jewish claims of the kind made by Philo, namely that literal and allegorical interpretations of circumcision complement each other. This tradition had apparently played a significant role in preceding Jewish-Christian controversies. Origen even quotes the otherwise unattested words of a “Ioudaios” who (H.Gen. 3:5):

constrains me with this testimony of the prophet and says “Behold, the prophet designates both a circumcision of the flesh and heart; no place remains for allegory (“allegoriae non superses locus”) where both kinds of circumcision are demanded”.

While Origen also discusses Ez. 44:9 in his *Commentary on Romans*, where he attempts some exegetical explanations in support of his position,⁵⁸ as a

⁵⁷ “signaculum fidei accepit circumcisionem” (H.Gen. 3:3).

⁵⁸ In C.Rom. 2.13:22–3, Scheck, 155f.; Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–3; I, 164–5. Origen explains that Ez. 44:9 applies to two allegorical circumcisions, one of faith and one of works. Yet he himself was aware that such an interpretation may not be very convincing and admits that “it may still be possible to reproach us for our explanations of the matters we have discussed above”. Pushed into a corner, Origen even speaks of a person bringing up this issue as someone who “persists in annoying us” (C. Rom. 2.13:20, Scheck 155f.; Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–13, I 164–5; see also: C.Rom. 2.13:22).

preacher he is mostly interested in the contemporary Jewish use of it, which he does not even mention in his commentary. In the sermon Origen tries to solve the difficulty by appealing to Divine inspiration and turning the attention of his audience to verses better suited to his agenda. A place of priority in this respects assumed some verses from the book of Exodus.⁵⁹ Directly addressing the Jews, Origen emphatically argues as follows (H.Gen. 3:5):

In Exodus where we have written in the codices of the Church (“in codicibus ecclesiae”) Moses responding to the Lord and saying: “Provide, Lord another whom you will send” (Ex. 4:13), “for I am feeble in voice and slow in tongue”,⁶⁰ you have in the Hebrew copies (“in Hebraeis exemplaribus”) “but I am uncircumcised in lips”.⁶¹ Behold, you have a circumcision of the lips according to your copies, which you say are more accurate. If, therefore, according to you Moses still says that he is unworthy because he has not yet been circumcised in his lips, he certainly indicates, that he would be worthier and holier who is circumcised in his lips. Therefore, apply the pruning-hook also to your lips and cut off the covering of your mouth since indeed such an understanding pleases you in the Divine letters. But if you refer circumcision of lips to allegory and say no less that circumcision of ears is allegorical and figurative, why do you not also inquire after allegory in circumcision of the foreskin?

Origen is obviously proud to be able to confront his Jewish interlocutors on their own turf. It was mainly for this purpose, he explains in his famous letter to Africanus, that he had undertaken a detailed comparison of the Hebrew text and its different Greek translations.⁶² The Jews,

⁵⁹ Ex. 6:12 and 30, which are also discussed in C.Rom. 2.13:25, Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–3, I, 167, yet with considerably less attention. The translator, ad loc. (p. 158, n. 400), remarked already that Origen treats these as though they were one verse.

⁶⁰ LXX Ex. 4:10 ἰσχνόφωνός καὶ βραδύγλωσσος renders quite literally the Masoretic expression כבד־פה וכבד לשון אנוי. See also Origen’s interpretation of this verse in H. Ex. 3:1–2, where he explains that Moses became aware of his speech defect when he “perceived the true word which “was in the beginning”. Christian interpretation of Scripture, Origen furthermore insists, is spiritual and removed from those who “stand in the lowly place of the letter and connect the text of the story with Jewish narratives (“historia textum iudaicis narrationibus nectus”).

⁶¹ Ex. 6:12, 30 ערל שפתים, which LXX renders respectively as ἐγὼ δὲ ἄλογος (EX. 6:12) and ἐγὼ ἰσχνόφωνός εἰμι (Ex. 6:30). It is possible that Origen gained his clues concerning the Hebrew text from Theodotion’s and Aquila’s more literal Greek renditions, on which see: A. Salvesen, *Symmachus in the Pentateuch* (Manchester 1991) 77–8.

⁶² Ep. Af. 9; Eus., H. E. 6.16:1, appreciates Origen’s work on the Hebrew Scriptures; see also: S. P. Brock, Origen’s aims as a textual Critic of the Old Testament, *SP* 10 (1970) 215–8; Marksches, *Predigten des Origenes* 53–9; idem, *Ambrosius und Origenes. Bemerkungen zur exegetischen Hermeneutik zweier Kirchenväter, Origeniana Septima* (Leuven 1999) 545–570; P. Blowers, Origen, The Rabbis, and The Bible: Toward A Picture Of Judaism And Christianity In Third Century Caesarea, in: C. Kannengiesser and W. L. Petersen (eds.), *Origen of Alexandria: his World and his Legacy* (Notre Dame 1988) 96–116.

he felt, should no longer be able to mock Christians engaging them in religious dispute without having access to the original text of Scripture. In the case of Ex. 6:12, 30 Origen is particularly happy to appeal to the Hebrew version, because it contains a significant reference to metaphorical circumcision. Moses could obviously not apply “the pruning-hook” to his lips, but could hope to become more fluent in his speech as befitting a leader about to guide his people out of Egypt. Taking these references to circumcision literally would be rather absurd. Yet it is precisely this kind of absurd position which Origen wishes to attribute to the Jews. He charges them with reading absolutely everything literally. This charge is plainly wrong, yet rhetorically effective. Origen relies on it when challenging the Jews to “apply the pruning-hook also to your lips and cut off the covering of your mouth since indeed such an understanding pleases you in the Divine letters”. If they indeed wish to remain faithful to their Jewish tradition, he insists, they may not take selective recourse to “our” Pauline metaphors. The only alternatives are either a Christian reading of all kinds of circumcision as allegories or a Jewish reading of all of them as literal commands to cut off the respective members of the body. Origen thus follows Justin in denying the exceptional status of the foreskin, yet argues in a distinctly more exegetical mode, contrasting the literal and the allegorical dimension of circumcision.

Origen does not tire of making this point. It becomes in a way the dominant refrain of his sermon. One particularly lively example may be quoted for further illustration (H.Gen. 3:5):

It is written in the prophet Jeremias: “Behold, this people is uncircumcised in their ears” (Jer. 9:26). Hear, Israel, the voice of the prophet. A great reproach is spoken to you. A great fault is thrust on you. Your accusation is brought forward: you are uncircumcised in your ears. And why, when you heard this, did you not apply the blade to your ears and cut them? ... For I do not permit you to take refuge in our allegories which Paul taught (“*allegorias nostras, quas Paulus docuit*”).

Why are you remiss to circumcise? Cut away the ears, cut off the members which God created for the use of the senses (“*utilitatem sensuum*”) and for the adornment of the human state, for thus you understand the Divine words ...

But if you refer circumcision of the lips to allegory and say no less that circumcision of ears is allegorical and figurative, why do you not also inquire after allegory in circumcision of the foreskin?

In this passage Origen again confronts the Jews very sharply. He once more reduces their literal approach to an absurdity and suggests that Christians have a monopoly to allegory, which must exclusively be ap-

plied to all Biblical references to circumcision. In the fervour of the sermon Origen seems to be carried away by his own rhetorics. In the calmer atmosphere of his *Commentary on Romans* he betrays a more nuanced understanding of the issue. It is initially striking that here he introduces his call for an allegorical reading far more tentatively. He mainly wishes to argue for its legitimacy⁶³. More importantly, his discussion in the commentary still assumes a meaningful correlation between the literal and the allegorical circumcision of the foreskin. Philo almost seems to speak out of his mouth when he explains the following (ibid):

... that if some uncleanness cleaves to the soul by association with the flesh, if someone has covered his soul with a mind that is set on seductive desire, these things ought to be cut off from it. The reason why the cutting is inflicted upon the genital organs and not upon other bodily parts is to clarify that the vices of this sort do not come to the soul from its own essence (“non ex propria substantia”), but rather derive from a natural passion and the incentive of the flesh.

Origen almost speaks here as though he approves of circumcision and assumes its practice. He explains why the “cutting is inflicted upon the genital organs and not upon other bodily parts”, thus suggesting a deep correlation between the literal and the allegorical level of the commandment. These two dimensions in fact complement in each other here in exactly the same way as they had done for Philo. Only the latter’s conclusion, namely that one ought both to perform the ritual and understand its deeper meaning, is obviously lacking in Origen’s commentary. He instead moves rather abruptly to insisting that only the allegorical meaning is acceptable for Christians. This rather inconsistent, yet more nuanced explanation of Origen in the commentary shows how anxious he was in his sermon to set overly clear boundaries for an audience, which he suspected of being attracted to Jewish ways or even consisting partly of Jews. His overtly polemical tone as a preacher expresses his topical concern for the community and his determination to win the competition over Scripture. It is in this heated spirit that he challenges the Jews and their sympathisers once more (H.Gen. 3:6):

Compare... this our account with your Jewish fables and disgusting stories and see whether in those stories of yours or in these which are preached in the Church of Christ circumcision is observed according to God’s command.

⁶³ C. Rom. 2.13:25; Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–3, I, 167.

Origen's challenge indeed reached Jewish ears, whether directly at the delivery of his sermon or indirectly can no longer be determined. It was so provocative that it could hardly go without reaction. The rabbis contributing to *Genesis Rabbah* clearly took up the challenge and responded by providing pertinent interpretations of Gen. 17:1–14.

It is highly interesting that *Genesis Rabbah* responded also to some other material preserved only in Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, namely Marcion's views on circumcision. Marcion, says Origen, opposed circumcision for theological and missionary reasons. He initially criticised the rite questioning whether "he [is] a good God who has ordered new-born human beings to be wounded immediately after they first look upon the light of a new day?"⁶⁴ Marcion furthermore considered circumcision as a most severe obstacle to the Christian missionary effort. The ritual prevents potential candidates from joining, he complained, because "everybody turns away from pain and flees from the derisive mockery which results from shameful ugliness".⁶⁵ Origen rejected Marcion's ultimate conclusion that the God of Mosaic law and Scripture is malicious. He tried to show that circumcision does not interfere with the Christian mission, because many pagans in any case perform the ritual.⁶⁶ Origen more generally defends Israelite ritual vis-a-vis Marcion as a prototype of Christian beliefs which has now become obsolete. This line of defense was evidently not acceptable for rabbinic exegetes and they responded to the challenge by providing answers in support of their particular perspective.

Genesis Rabbah on Abraham's Circumcision

Genesis Rabbah is a more complicated source than the ones so far investigated. We deal here not with one author whose time and circumstances are relatively well known, but with a collection of sayings by many rabbis. *Genesis Rabbah* presents quotations and interpretations from several centuries of exegetical activity. In the past scholars often relied on these ascriptions to earlier rabbinic authorities and assumed long oral chains of tradition preceding the written form of the Midrash. Jacob Neusner, however, challenged the historicity of these ascriptions

⁶⁴ C. Rom. 2.13:27. Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–3, I, 170.

⁶⁵ C. Rom. 2.13:27. "inrisionem turpitudinis refugit". Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–3, I, 170.

⁶⁶ C. Rom. 2.13:28; Hammond-Bammel 2.9:12–3, I, 171–2. Origen seems to have mainly the Egyptians in mind. They, in any case, fit his descriptions.

and warned that Midrashic sources cannot be used naively as store-houses of earlier traditions. They rather need to be appreciated at the level of their redaction, namely as relatively late constructs which creatively reshape past traditions with a view to topical concerns of identity and religiosity. Neusner thus suggested that individual compilations must be studied in their own right before they can be compared to other rabbinic works. He attributed special importance to *Genesis Rabbah*, because he regarded it as central witness to the ways in which formative Judaism responded to the Christianisation of the Roman Empire.⁶⁷ Neusner himself, however, remained at the level of rather general insights and did not provide a detailed text analysis in support of his thesis. Hopefully this lacuna will now be partially filled by studying the interpretations of Abraham's circumcision in *Genesis Rabbah* with a view to their possible interaction with the views of earlier exegetes, especially Philo, Justin and Origen.

Of Palestinian provenance *Genesis Rabbah* can be expected to return at least to some positions earlier expressed by Scripture and the *Book of Jubilees*. As we saw above, the latter paid special attention to the biblical association of circumcision with both an exclusive covenant and the Land of Israel. These were precisely the aspects which Philo completely ignored, while he highlighted the spiritual nature of Abraham's blamelessness and insisted on the paradigmatic legal significance of circumcision. Where does *Genesis Rabbah* stand with regard to this basic divide? Already at first sight it is conspicuous that Gen. 17:8 is given careful attention in this Midrash and not just glanced over as in Philo's discussion.⁶⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* in fact takes for granted the connection between circumcision and the Land of Israel. As R. Judan put it: "God said: ... If they accept my circumcision, they will enter the Promised Land"

⁶⁷ See esp. J. Neusner, *Comparative Midrash. The Plan and Program of Genesis Rabbah and Leviticus Rabbah* (Atlanta 1986 = Brown Judaic Studies 111); see also: P. Schäfer, Research into Rabbinic Literature: An Attempt to Define the Status Quaestionis, *JJS* 37 (1986) 146–9, who criticises Neusner's approach as too simplistic since it ignores the complicated textual history of each Midrashic corpus. See also the exchange between Schäfer and Ch. Milikowsky in *JJS* 39 (1988) 201–211; *JJS* 40 (1989) 89–94. H.-J. Becker, *Die großen rabbinischen Sammelwerke Palästinas* (Tübingen 1999 = TSAJ 70), has recently attempted to deconstruct the redactional identity of *G. R.* arguing that no certainty can be gained with regard to its final redaction, especially in view of its unclear boundaries vis-a-vis jT.

⁶⁸ While *G. R.* is a running commentary, whole verses are sometimes skipped. Such omissions may be significant and point to exegetical problems that the rabbis had with the respective verse; for details and examples, see: M. R. Niehoff, Associative Thinking in the Midrash, Exemplified by the Rabbinic Interpretation of the Journey of Abraham and Sarah to Egypt, *Tarbiz* 62 (1993) 339–60.

(G. R. 46:9). Joshua is moreover said to have upbraided the Israelites, saying; “What do you think that you will enter the Land uncircumcised?” (ibid). While lacking the polemical invective of the *Book of Jubilees*, *Genesis Rabbah* clearly shares the same assumption that circumcision is a precondition for the possession of the Land and, once performed, guarantees Israelite settlement there. The covenant, on the other hand, is not a prominent topic of discussion. Most verses mentioning the term are interpreted in totally different directions, such as fertility, exegesis by *notarikon* and the circumcision by the *Mohel* (G. R. 46:4, 7, 9). In the London *Mss* used by Theodor-Albeck circumcision is once said to express Israel’s acceptance of God’s Divinity, on another occasion its salvific effect is mentioned.⁶⁹ It is striking that there is nothing comparable to the praises heaped on circumcision in mNed. 310, where the covenantal dimension is highlighted for example by R. Ishmael who says: “Great is circumcision whereby the covenant was made thirteen times”.

This neglect of the covenant in the discussion of circumcision in *Genesis Rabbah* is striking and needs to be interpreted. Does the difference in this respect between this Midrash and the Mishnah indicate some deeper change of attitudes? After analysing the overall image of Abraham’s circumcision in *Genesis Rabbah* we may be able to provide at least some tentative answers. At this stage, however, it is important to stress that neglect of the covenantal dimension does not automatically imply an overall acceptance of Philo’s alternative notions. There is in fact no indication in *Genesis Rabbah* that circumcision was understood as a paradigmatic example of Mosaic law. Moreover, Abraham’s blamelessness is interpreted not in spiritual, but concretely physical terms. Parallel to mNed. 3:10 and tNed. 2:5, *Genesis Rabbah* stresses that the Biblical expression תמים (Gen. 17:1) refers to the removal of Abraham’s physical defect, namely his foreskin. It is striking that G. R. highlights this point much more than its Palestinian predecessors. While Mishnah and Tosefta briefly mention this interpretation once, *Genesis Rabbah* provides several illustrations. At the opening of the Parasha R. Judan is quoted as saying (G. R. 46:1):

Just as a fig tree contains nothing inedible save its peduncle, and with its removal even this defect (פסולת) ceases, so did God say to Abraham: ‘There is no defect (פסולת) in you save this foreskin, remove it and the defect ceases’ [hence it is written] “Walk before Me and be blameless” (Gen. 17:1).

⁶⁹ G. R. 46:9 אַם מַקְבִּלִין אֶת הַמִּילָה הֵן מַקְבִּלִין אֱלֹהוֹתַי; G. R. 46:10 tells the story of Moabaz and Izates, who converted to Judaism and were requited by God for their circumcision.

Gen. 17:1 is subsequently quoted again, this time R. Levi providing a Mashal (G. R. 46:4):

This may be compared to a Matrona whom the king commanded: 'walk before me'. She went before him and her face went pale, for, she said, who knows but some defect (פסולת) may have been found in me. Said the king to her: 'You have no defect, only the nail of your little finger is slightly too long, remove it and the defect will be gone'.

Similarly, God said to Abraham: 'You have no defect except this foreskin, remove it and the defect will be gone' [hence it is written] "Walk before Me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1).

The Biblical expression תמים is interpreted on yet another occasion in *Genesis Rabbah*. Once more emphasis is given to the physical dimension of circumcision, yet this time the interpretation is embedded in a larger discussion which departs from the biblical *Vorlage*. The interpreters are clearly concerned here with a broader issue, the discussion of which only culminated in Gen. 17:1 or may in fact even have been attached to this *Lemma* only at a secondary stage.⁷⁰ An analysis of this exegetical vignette will provide important clues to the overall motivation of *Genesis Rabbah* in highlighting the physical dimension of Abraham's blamelessness. In G. R. 46:5 the following discussion is reconstructed:

R. Ishmael and R. Akiva [engaged in a discussion].

R. Ishmael said: Abraham was a high Priest, as it is written "the Lord has sworn and will not repent: you are a priest for ever after the manner of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4); and it is also written "and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin" (Gen. 17:11).

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. Nowhere else than at the foreskin of the body.

R. Akiva said: There are four kinds of foreskin. 'Foreskin' is used in connection with the ear, as it is written "behold, their ear is uncircumcised" (Jer. 6:10); the mouth, as it is written "behold, I am uncircumcised of lips" (Ex. 6:30); the heart, as it is written "for all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart" (Jer. 9:25). Now, he was ordered "Walk before me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1). If he circumcised himself at the ear, he would not be blameless; at the mouth, he would not be blameless; at the heart, he would not be blameless. Where could he circumcise himself and yet be blameless? Nowhere else than at the foreskin of the body.

In this passage Abraham's blamelessness is connected to the question whether circumcision could have been performed on other members of

⁷⁰ This is suggested by the fact that a very similar interpretation by R. Nakdah immediately follows (G. R. 46:5), this time, however, without any reference to Gen. 17:1.

the human body. The main exegetical effort is directed at showing that a circumcision of the ear, heart or mouth would have rendered Abraham unfit in a priestly or sacrificial sense.⁷¹ Only a circumcision of the foreskin could render him blameless as demanded by Gen. 17:1. While Ishmael and Akiva offer basically the same argument, Akiva's views are grounded in numerous other prooftexts. His approach is distinctly more exegetical. It is striking that he in fact refers to exactly the same verses as Origen had done in his sermon arguing for an exclusively metaphorical reading of circumcision. As we saw above, Origen insisted that all biblical references to circumcision must be interpreted in the same way: either they are all nothing but allegories or they must all be literally performed by actually cutting off the respective member of the body. This led him to the rather absurd charge that the Jews believe that they had been commanded by God to prune the ears, mouth and heart. In the heat of the sermon Origen furthermore provoked Jews among his audience to "compare... this our account with your Jewish fables and disgusting stories and see whether in those stories of yours or in these which are preached in the Church of Christ, circumcision is observed according to God's command" (H.Gen. 3:6). It seems that this provocative challenge actually reached rabbinic ears and was given a reply in the above-quoted passage in *Genesis Rabbah*. The interpreters here respond to Origen's challenge by insisting on both the physical dimension of Abraham's blamelessness and the exceptional status of his circumcision of the foreskin. Applying priestly notions of blamelessness they could thus rebut the connection Origen had drawn between Abraham's spiritual blamelessness and his supposedly exclusively metaphorical circumcision.

If indeed *Genesis Rabbah* responds here to Origen's charges, it becomes clear why the issue of Abraham's physical blamelessness figures so prominently in this Midrash. It required emphasis precisely because it had been challenged. Initially, this challenge had come from outside. At the level of *Genesis Rabbah*, however, the issue is treated in the context

⁷¹ R. Ishmael stresses that Abraham is a priest according to Ps. 110:4 and thus needs to fulfill certain physical requirements in order to be able to officiate. It is specified in Lev. 21:17–20 that "no one who has a blemish may draw near [to the altar], a man blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, or a man who has an injured foot or hand or a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man with a defect in his sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles". Cutting off any member other than the foreskin would thus disfigure the priest's body and disqualify him. R. Akiva suggests in the same vein that Abraham's being אִמְתִּים must be understood in analogy to the sacrificial victim which is found without a blemish and thus fit to be offered (e. g., Ex. 12:5, 29:1; Lev. 1:3).

of rabbinic exegesis and for a distinctly Jewish audience. R. Ishmael's and R. Akiva's responses are thus not addressed to the Christian community. They instead appeal to an internal Jewish constituency, which is assured that already the foundational rabbinic authorities of the past defined an exegetical position impermeable to "later" criticism.⁷² This position indeed seems to have become something of a common coin in the rabbinic discourse. G. R. 46:5 indicates that it was discussed and accepted by other sages as well:

Nakdah said: It is written "And he who is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male" (Gen. 17: 12). Now if he is circumcised at the ear, he cannot hear, at the mouth, he cannot speak; at the heart, he cannot think. Where then could he be circumcised and yet be able to think? Only at the foreskin of the body.

R. Tanhuma observed: This argument of Nakdah is convincing.

Looking at the exegetical trajectory of Gen. 17:1, one realises a fascinating dynamics of interaction. Following LXX, Philo had stressed the spiritual dimension of Abraham's blamelessness which he, however, severed from his circumcision. The latter, he insisted, needs to be appreciated as a crucial aspect of Mosaic law which exemplifies the Jews' overall aspiration to virile *enkrateia*. Origen in turn followed Philo's approach, but also went significantly beyond him when subsuming circumcision under the same categories of spirituality as Abraham's blamelessness. As a result he denied the concrete physical dimension of circumcision. Responding to the distinctly Christian polemics accompanying Origen's exegesis, *Genesis Rabbah* makes special efforts to restore the physical dimension of both circumcision and Abraham's blamelessness. Since the two had been firmly connected on an allegorical level by Origen, they are now both placed in the most concrete context. Philo's double-track exegesis is no longer a viable option, perhaps precisely because it had been turned against the Jews in Christian circles.⁷³

The inverse dynamics can be observed in G. R. 11:6, where some arguments resurface which had been avoided by the Church Fathers, yet used by Philo:

⁷² It is striking that many of the sayings usually attributed to R. Hoshaya are in some MSS of G. R. and in some later Midrashim assigned to R. Akiva; for examples, see: Theodor-Albeck 94.

⁷³ D. Boyarin recently observed a similar dynamics with regard to the Logos-Memra tradition in ancient Judaism and early Christianity; see: The Gospel of the *Memra*: Jewish Binitarianism and the Prologue to John, *HTR* 94 (2001) 243–84. The article is compromised by the assumption of an early, pre-Christian date of the Palestinian Targums, which remains highly speculative.

A philosopher asked R. Hoshaya: “If circumcision is so precious (חביבה), why was it not given to Adam (מפני מה לא נתנה לאדם הרשון)?” He replied: “If so, why do you shave the corners of your head and leave your beard?” “Because it grew with me in folly (שגדל עמי בשטות)” was the answer. He replied: “If so, you should blind your eye and cut off your hands”. [The philosopher replied:] “To such an argument have we come!” He [R. Hoshaya] said: “I cannot send you away empty-handed. The real reason is this: whatever was created in the first six days requires further cultivation (צריכין עשייה); e. g. mustard needs sweetening, vetches need sweetening, wheat needs grinding, and man, too, needs cultivation (אפילו אדם צריך תיקון)”.⁷⁴

It is initially striking that the philosopher quoted here expresses exactly the same view on circumcision as Justin Martyr had done.⁷⁵ The structure of their sentences is indeed so similar that one can almost speak of a direct quotation. Justin had said to Trypho: “If circumcision was indeed necessary (ἀναγκαία), as you think, God would not have created Adam uncircumcised” (Dial. 19:4). As we saw above, Justin made this reference to Adam in the context of showing the secondary and thus superfluous nature of circumcision. God intended man to be uncircumcised and providentially guided all the Biblical heroes before Abraham. The anonymous philosopher in *Genesis Rabbah* poses his question in exactly the same spirit: “If circumcision is so precious, why was it not given to Adam?”. The slight differences in style – “precious” instead of “necessary”, Adam has not been “given circumcision” rather than having been created “uncircumcised” – reflect the distinct perspective of each speaker. In Justin’s *Dialogue* the issue is presented from a Christian point of view, while in *Genesis Rabbah* this view is reported by rabbinic sages for

⁷⁴ The term תיקון has rich connotations, referring primarily to the preparation of the fruits by separating tithes etc., but also implying amendment in a broader religious sense. I have stressed here the primary meaning by translating “cultivation” in analogy to the previously mentioned mustard and wheat.

⁷⁵ The similarity between the positions of Justin and the philosopher in *G. R.* 11:6 has often been noticed; see esp.: M. Friedländer, *Patristische und Talmudische Studien* (Wien 1878) 96–9; K. Hruby, *Exégèse Rabbinique et Exégèse Patristique*, *Rev.Sc.Rel.* 47 (1973) 348–50; N. R. M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third Century Palestine* (Cambridge 1976) 92, who all argued that the philosopher in *G. R.* 11:6 represents Justin Martyr’s view of circumcision. Lieu, *Circumcision*, Women 363, suggested that the philosopher expresses earlier views which were also brought up by Justin, but were not exclusive to Christian polemic. Hirshman, *Polemical Literary Units* 382–3, is even more cautious, suggesting that the philosopher’s challenge in *G. R.* 11:6 has nothing particularly Christian about it and may equally represent pagan or indeed internal Jewish queries; cf. W. Bacher, *The Church Fathers, Origen and Rabbi Hoshaya*, *JQR* 3 (1890) 357–60, who argued that the philosopher in *G. R.* 11:6 represents Origen. As we saw above, however, Origen gave no attention to the argument from creation, which precisely characterised Justin’s approach.

a Jewish audience. Each side thus uses the language reflecting its own tradition and values.

At first sight the conversation which follows upon the philosopher's initial question is somewhat puzzling. What does the growth of the hair and the beard have to do with circumcision? How does the notion of folly fit in? M. A. Mirkin is certainly right when interpreting the conversation as follows: Hoshaya asks the philosopher about cutting his hair, while leaving the beard, because this actually contradicts the latter's own thesis, according to which man should respect the body as originally created by God. It would instead be consistent to let the hair grow, but cut the beard, which grew much later.⁷⁶ The philosopher now replies that his hair has "grown in folly", which Mirkin rightly interprets to mean that this hair grew in his early childhood and is thus far less important than the beard which symbolises maturity (*ibid.*). R. Hoshaya now renders the philosopher's approach absurd, suggesting that if hair that grew early can be cut off, then other members of the human body, such as eyes and hands, could or even should be cut off. The irony of this twist becomes especially apparent, if we remember that Origen had confronted the Jews with exactly the same charge: their literalism should lead them to cut off ears, heart and mouth. Now the (Christian) philosopher is challenged to cut off his eyes and hands. In this way Hoshaya not only shows the absurdity of his interlocutor's position, but also discloses his departure from his own claim about Adam's uncircumcision.

At the end of the conversation Hoshaya explains in a more serious tone that circumcision is a necessary cultivation of the male body which parallels the preparation of mustard, wheat and vetches. Like Philo, he thus argues for the necessity to perfect nature. He indeed relies on the same teleological notion of creation, which implies that man is called to complete and fulfil the process. Sublimation is the Jew's duty towards God. While Hoshaya and Philo rely on similar notions and explain circumcision in a remarkably similar way, it is at the same time conspicuous that they use very different language. While Justin's voice can still be heard in the philosopher's mouth, no trace of Philo's language can be detected in Hoshaya's reply. This could suggest that Hoshaya did not directly rely on Philo, but independently reached similar conclusions. This possibility is indeed rather likely in view of the fact that several interpretations in *Genesis Rabbah* explore the Biblical association of

⁷⁶ A. M. Mirkin, *Genesis Rabbah commented* (Hebrew, Tel Aviv 1992) ad. loc. p. 78–9; for a different interpretation of שְׂטוּת see: H. W. Basser, The Meaning of "Shtuth", *Genesis Rabbah* 11 in Reference to Matthew 5.29–30 and 18.8–9, *NTS* 31 (1985) 148–50.

circumcision and pruning (*G. R.* 46:2,4). The rabbinic sages thus developed an intrinsically biblical approach and did not require Philo in order to formulate the above-quoted views on circumcision. Phenomenologically, however, it remains remarkable that Hoshaya, when responding to Christian challenges, takes up exactly the same line of explanation as Philo had done. Equally remarkable is the fact that this was an approach to circumcision which had been entirely neglected by the Church Fathers.

Justin's argument about Adam's uncircumcision resurfaces once more in *G. R.* 46:3. This time it is, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, put into the mouth of Abraham himself. When given the commandment of circumcision, he has serious doubts about its value:

[Abraham] asked [God]: If circumcision is so precious, why was it not given to Adam?

Said the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He: Let it suffice you that I and you are in the world. If you will not undergo circumcision, it is enough for my world to have existed until now and it is enough for circumcision to have been forelorn until now.

Said he: Before I circumcised myself, men came and joined me. Will they come and join me when I am circumcised?

Abraham, said God to him, let it suffice you that I am your God, let it suffice you that I am your Patron and not only for you alone, but it is sufficient for my world that I am its God and its Patron.

In this passage it is God Himself who replies to Justin's challenge, which has now been internalised by both Abraham and the audience of *Genesis Rabbah*. God stresses that even though He created Adam uncircumcised, He meant circumcision so seriously that He would destroy His world now, if it was not accepted by Abraham. Circumcision and creation are thus deeply linked, even if this becomes clear only somewhat late in history. *MNed.* 3:10 had already drawn a connection between the two, praising the greatness of circumcision for the sake of which God had created the world. The difference between the Mishnaic and the Midrashic saying is evident. *MNed.* 3:10 positively appreciates circumcision as one of the reasons for which the world had been created.⁷⁷ *Genesis Rabbah*, on the other hand, is painfully aware of the belated historical appearance of the commandment. The interpreter here feels compelled to close this gap, which had become such a sensitive issue in Jewish-Christian polemics.

In the above-quoted passage another originally Christian challenge is treated, namely Marcion's criticism of circumcision. As we saw above,

⁷⁷ Rabbinic literature knows of other such items, e. g. the Torah.

Marcion rejected the rite, because it presented in his eyes an obstacle to the Christian missionary effort. Once again, this argument from an unsympathetic outsider seems to have become integrated into the rabbinic discourse to such an extent that it could be placed into Abraham's mouth. God is again appealed to for an answer. He reassures Abraham, and the audience of *Genesis Rabbah*, that proselytising is in fact superfluous. God rather insists that "it is sufficient for my world that I am its God and its Patron". The numerical success of Christianity and its increasing assumption of worldly power must thus not be misunderstood as a real challenge to God's power. As the rabbinic exegete affirms in the face of the rise of Christianity, the Jewish Creator God continues to be the highest authority.

Conclusion

Our analysis of Abraham's circumcision in the eyes of ancient exegetes has uncovered significant historical developments and shown a fascinating complexity of interaction between the different exegetes. Philo gave an important new impetus to the discussion on circumcision, some aspects of which were taken up by the Church Fathers, yet turned against the Jews and their halachic practices. *Genesis Rabbah* responds rather directly to Justin's and Origen's polemics. Strikingly, this is done in the context of an internal Jewish discussion and for an overtly Jewish audience, which indicates that the originally Christian arguments had been integrated into the rabbinic discourse and aroused intrinsic interest on the part of Jewish society. In the process of dealing with these challenges some aspects of Philo's approach resurface phenomenologically and some ancient Palestinian views are confirmed. At the same time, however, *Genesis Rabbah* raises completely new questions concerning the value of circumcision which are found nowhere in the earlier, pre-Christian sources. It emerges that the Christianization of the Roman Empire has prompted significant changes in Judaism. Even when Christian views were rebutted, the parameters of the discussion are inevitably absorbed.