

INTERPRETATIONS OF ABRAHAM'S CIRCUMCISION IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND GENESIS RABBAH

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In the first generations following the death of Jesus, during which time early Christians were grappling with how to define themselves in relation and out of relation to Jews, the subject of circumcision was at the fore of dialogue and debate. First- or second-century¹ Christians who had come to terms with a full departure from the law – as opposed to Jewish-Christian communities such as those of the Ebionites and Nazarenes – were not necessarily committed to rejecting the Hebrew Bible or Jesus' place in a dynastic line of Jewish leaders stemming back to Abraham. Some early Christians, such as the early second-century CE apologist Justin Martyr, sought to depict the patriarchs from the book of Genesis as forefathers of the Christians whose religious identities were characterized, not by laying the foundation upon which the nascence of Judaism was built, but by their foreseeing and acknowledging the advent of Christ.² Other early Christian thinkers, such as Tertullian, who lived at the turn of the third century, did not paint the patriarchs in Genesis as proto-Christians or proto-Jews, but as wise observers of a perfect and universal law.³ Both these early Christian thinkers were motivated by a desire to preserve a

1. In the present study I make reference to “early Christians” while acknowledging that the term is somewhat anachronistic; the Christian religion did not emerge as a separate entity from Judaism until the third or fourth century. See J. D. G. Dunn 1991, 238–39.

2. See Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* 11, 23–24 in Roberts et al. 2007, 206–7. See also Irenaeus' *Against the Heresies* in Roberts et al. 2007, 466–67. This reading is based on John 8:56, which reads, “Your ancestor Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad” (NRSV). The tradition of this verse's interpretation is not be explored in this study however, it is generally associated with Gen 15 rather than with circumcision.

3. See Tertullian's *Answer to the Jews* in Menzies 1994, 152–53.

familial and spiritual connection to the biblical patriarchs as pious forefathers of early Christians while still rejecting and separating themselves from what would later be known as **Mosaic Law**. In attempting to do so, the problem arose that one patriarch in particular seemed to be inextricably wedded to the Law. That patriarch, of course, was Abraham, whose faith and devotion to God culminated in the act of self-circumcision and the circumcision of his son Ishmael in Gen 17. Beginning with Paul, early Christian writers endeavored to present the figure of Abraham as a forefather of Christianity while rejecting the view that he circumcised in obedience and devotion to Mosaic Law.⁴

In light of the push among early Christian theologians to depict Abraham as an exclusively Christian forefather during these early centuries, it is perhaps not surprising that midrash *Genesis Rabbah*, a compilation of rabbinic aggadic texts edited and redacted by the fifth century, links Abraham's circumcision to the history of the Israelite people in such a way that one cannot accept the typological importance of one without the other.⁵ These two positions place early Christian and Jewish theologians at opposite ends of the pro-circumcision and anti-circumcision dispute.

The earliest extant sources, which differentiate between the symbolic significance of Abraham's circumcision and the symbolic significance of ongoing Israelite circumcision, are found in the letters of Paul. Remarkably, the concept of such demarcation was adopted by almost every early Christian source engaging with the question of how to understand Abraham's circumcision. Unlike the famous early second-century bishop Marcion of Sinope, whose advocated separation from Jews required an unequivocal rejection of the Jewish Scriptures, many early Christians strove to preserve the status of Abraham as a Christian forefather. Yet these writers, like the Marcionites, aimed to enforce a tangible separation from the Jews that enabled them to forge an altogether different religious entity and at the same time present themselves as more

4. There were other early Christian writers, as Levenson points out, who did not expend energy reclaiming Abraham: "In much of the classical Christian tradition, Abraham and the Jews were only instrumental to the emergence of the gospel and its exportation to all the nations of the world" (Levenson 2012, 35). The sources in this the present study represent only the splice of Christian opinion that sought to reclaim the figure of Abraham.

5. Stemberger and Strack 1992, 160, accept Neusner's suggestion that the core of the material in *Genesis Rabbah* reflects a fourth-century context during which the Christian Church turned into a political power. Although Neusner 1985a, xi, maintains that the core of *Genesis Rabbah* was in place by the year 400, he acknowledges that it is working with material that could have been written at least a century or two earlier.

forward-thinking than their Jewish counterparts. Their challenge was to achieve this identity shift while incorporating the Jewish Scriptures into their Christian holy writ, rather than rejecting these books altogether.

I will review these texts in their chronological compositional order starting with the letters of Paul, which are dated to the middle and late 50s and early 60s. Following Paul, there seem to be six threads of Christian interpretations of Abraham's circumcision and the consequent Israelite circumcision. First, the early second-century Epistle of Barnabas and the Gospel of Philip distinguish between Abraham's circumcision and Israelite circumcision by suggesting that Abraham circumcised himself as a joyful response to foreseeing the coming of Christ. The Gospel of Philip does not offer an explanation for the practice of Israelite circumcision, but the Epistle of Barnabas posits that the Israelites err in maintaining this practice and that it contains no particular significance. The second-century writers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian offer a different approach. While they also distinguish between Abraham's circumcision and the Israelite practice of circumcision, they argue that the former highlights Abraham's complete faith in God whereas Israelite circumcision forecasts the Jews' accursed state and permanent exile from both the present Jerusalem and the kingdom of heaven. Third, the third-century theologian Origen interprets Abraham's circumcision as a sign of his faith in God and argues that, because circumcision should be understood allegorically, the Israelite practice of circumcision is an egregious misinterpretation. Fourth, John Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, presents circumcision as a physical shackling of the Jews as means of reminding them to control their naturally lustful tendencies. Fifth, the Syriac fathers Aphrahat and Theodoret, living in the turn of the fourth century in Persia and early fifth century in Cyrrhus respectively, maintain that circumcision was meant to ensure that Jews would not intermarry with pagans. Finally, the fourth-century Syrian writer Ephrem offers a unique interpretation of circumcision by attributing to it some positive value, but at the same time **marginalizes** its theological significance.

Although Paul discusses the question of whether or not Gentile Christians should practice circumcision in his letters to the Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians, he only considers Abraham's circumcision at length in Rom 4.⁶ Harmonizing the arguments set out in Paul's various

6. Paul begins his discussion of circumcision in Rom 2, but does not discuss Abraham's circumcision until Rom 4: "Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised

letters should be avoided, since they were written at different times throughout his life and reflect varying degrees of embattlement, from Romans, which is perhaps Paul's most systematic letter, to Galatians, which is Paul's most agonized letter.⁷ These epistles, moreover, addressed diverse communities experiencing varying challenges. Rather than determining Paul's attitude towards circumcision by combining all of his statements on the subject, I use Rom 4 as a lens through which to read Paul's other epistles. In it, Paul aims to preserve the figure of Abraham as a Christian forefather who foresaw the coming of Jesus and whose faith in God, and consequent divine reckoning to righteousness, occurred before his circumcision. For Paul, the notion that Abraham had faith in God prior to his circumcision highlights the fact that circumcision has no value on its own, but was simply a sign representing Abraham's faith. Paul writes:

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness... [9b] We say, "Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness." How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:1–5, 9b–13 NRSV)

but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God" (Rom 2:25–29 NRSV). According to Paul, physical circumcision simply does not matter—it is not representative, nor does it take the place of, good works. This argument lays the groundwork for Paul's point that Abraham is the father of all people, both circumcised and uncircumcised, and that salvation is achieved through faith in Christ.

7. As pointed out in Siker 1991, 28–29.

In this passage, the physical sign of circumcision is subjugated to the spiritual significance of Abraham's faith. Paul's central argument is that God's reckoning Abraham's faith to righteousness occurs in Gen 15:6, prior to Abraham's circumcision in Gen 17. The reckoning of Abraham to righteousness while he was still uncircumcised enables him to function as the legitimate forefather of both the circumcised and uncircumcised, that is, Jews and Gentiles. Thus, Paul is effective in arguing that Jews and Gentiles are equal before God. As we see below, Paul's efforts to separate the circumcision of Abraham from consequent Israelite circumcision is a motif that is taken up by a number of Christian theologians throughout the fourth century.

Paul also discusses circumcision in his more polemical letters, namely Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In these (1 Cor 7:18–9; Gal 2:12; 5:6), Paul exhorts the Gentile members of the new churches to ignore those Jewish-Christian apostles who are encouraging them to perform circumcision in order to enter into the covenantal community. On account of the polemical nature of these epistles, Paul's tone is less systematic and more distressed. He engages in what Jeffrey Siker has called "polemical overkill."⁸ Paul does not discuss Abraham's circumcision in these writings, but his claim that Gentile circumcision will not bring one into a state of grace is an indication that Paul saw Israelite circumcision as an altogether different typological entity than Abraham's circumcision.

The Epistle of Barnabas, which most scholars regard as having been composed in Egypt towards the end of the first or beginning of the second century, offers a novel approach to Abraham's circumcision and the ongoing circumcision of his Israelite descendents. Like Paul, the author of the Epistle distinguishes between the significance of Abraham's circumcision and that of Israelite circumcision. The author writes that Abraham foresaw the coming of Jesus, and, in order to acknowledge and celebrate his coming, Abraham circumcised himself and his 318 servants. The "proof" for this interpretation is that 300 is numerically equivalent to the *tau*, which symbolizes Jesus' cross, and 18 is numerically equivalent to the *iota* and *eta*, the first two letters of Jesus' name in *koiné* Greek. The Epistle of Barnabas reads:

Thus learn about the whole matter fully, children of love. For Abraham, the first to perform circumcision, was looking ahead in the Spirit to Jesus when he circumcised. For he received the firm teachings of the three letters. For it says, "Abraham circumcised eighteen and three hundred men from his household." What knowledge, then, was given to him? Notice that first he

8. Ibid., 49.

mentions the eighteen and then, after a pause, the three hundred. The number eighteen [in Greek] consists of an Iota [J], 10, and an Eta [E], 8. There you have Jesus. And because the cross was about to have grace in the letter Tau [T], he next gives the three hundred, Tau. And so he shows the name Jesus by the first two letters, and the cross by the other. For the one who has placed the implanted gift of his covenant in us knew these things. No one has learned a more reliable lesson from me. But I know that you are worthy. (Ep. Barn. 9:7–9)⁹

The Epistle of Barnabas somewhat dismissively explains the Jews' insistence on the circumcision of their sons by positing that an "evil angel" taught the Jews a false divine precept in order to deceive them (9:4). The Epistle's interpretation of Abraham's circumcision employs the exegetical method of *gematria*. This methodological strategy, which is commonly used in rabbinic exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures, but appears in only a handful of early Christian Greek texts, has led some scholars to suggest that the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, who probably wrote his letter in Egypt, may have been a converted Rabbi.¹⁰

Placing the writing of the Epistle of Barnabas in Egypt has added significance when considering the fact that the Gospel of Philip, which is generally dated to the end of the second century and also attributed to a writer living in Egypt, advances a similar view regarding the association of Abraham's circumcision with the foreseeing of Christ.¹¹ According to this text, Abraham circumcised upon receiving the vision of Jesus' advent: "When Abraham...that he was to see what he was to see, [he circumcised] the flesh of the foreskin, teaching us that it is proper to destroy the flesh" (Gos. Phil. 82).¹² In the Gospel of Philip, Abraham's circumcision was a response to a vision about the coming of Jesus. The difference between the Epistle of Barnabas and the Gospel of Philip, on the one hand, and Paul's epistles on the other, is that Paul does not equate Abraham's faith with a foreseeing of Jesus' coming.

Like the author of the Epistle of Barnabas, the second-century theologians Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Justin Martyr also adopt a typological approach for understanding the significance of Abraham's circumcision

9. Ehrman 2003, 44–47.

10. Barnard 1966, 47; G. D. Dunn 1998, 131. For more on the Christian use of *gematria*, see Varner 1997.

11. Turner 1996, 1–8; Lundhaug 2010, 364; Twigg 2015, 74. Another possibility is that the Gospel of Philip was composed in Syria; see Segelburg 1966–67, 207. More recent scholarship, however, leans towards Egypt as a likely place of origin for this text.

12. Isenberg 1990.

versus Israelite circumcision. According to Justin Martyr, Abraham circumcised himself as a sign of faith in Jesus. Justin writes in his *Dialogue with Trypho*:

For if there was no need of circumcision before Abraham, or of the observance of Sabbaths, of feasts and sacrifices, before Moses; no more need is there of them now, after that, according to the will of God, Jesus Christ the Son of God has been born without sin, of a virgin sprung from the stock of Abraham. For when Abraham himself was in un-circumcision, he was justified and blessed by reason of the faith which he reposed in God, as the Scripture tells. Moreover, the Scriptures and the facts themselves compel us to admit that He received circumcision for a sign, and not for righteousness. So that it was justly recorded concerning the people, that the soul which shall not be circumcised on the eighth day shall be cut off from his family. And, furthermore, the inability of the female sex to receive fleshly circumcision, proves that this circumcision has been given for a sign, and not for a work of righteousness. (*Dial.* XXIII)¹³

Justin's argument regarding the purpose of Abraham's circumcision is similar to the interpretations offered in both the Epistle of Barnabas and Gospel of Philip. It picks up on the Pauline perspective that Abraham's circumcision was a sign of faith – although, as mentioned above, Paul does not indicate that Abraham had a vision of Jesus' coming. Justin's understanding of the Israelite practice of circumcision is also different than both Paul's letters and the Epistle of Barnabas in that for Justin, Israelite circumcision is a sign of God's curse upon the Jews, who are responsible for Christ's death. Circumcision, therefore, designates those who are destined for punishment:

For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem." For you are not recognised among the rest of men by any other mark than your fleshly circumcision. (*Dial.* XVI)¹⁴

Presumably, Justin is referring to both an ultimate eschatological punishment and events of recent history. Justin was likely born in the wake of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, and may have

13. Roberts et al. 2007.

14. Ibid.

been witness to the catastrophic events following the rebellion of Simon bar Kosiba against the Romans in 132–135. Over the course of this rebellion, as many as a 100,000 Jews were killed, and thousands more exiled from Jerusalem. Rather than being a mark of divine favor as the Jews had claimed, Justin turns circumcision on its head by portraying it as a mark of divine exclusion.

The Carthaginian apologist Tertullian takes an almost identical view to Justin's. He writes that Abraham was not commanded to have his sons circumcised for all time, but only as a one-time sign of faith. God *did* command the Jews to circumcise their sons; but this was done as a designatory sign so that others would know whom to prohibit from entering Jerusalem at a later time. For Tertullian, the temporary and carnal circumcision of the Jews contrasts with the permanent and spiritual circumcision of the heart:

But Abraham, (you say,) was circumcised. Yes, but he pleased God before his circumcision; nor yet did he observe the Sabbath. For he had "accepted" circumcision; but such as was to be for "a sign" of that time, not for a prerogative title to salvation. In fact, subsequent patriarchs were uncircumcised, like Melchizedek, who, uncircumcised, offered to Abraham himself, already circumcised, on his return from battle, bread and wine... For circumcision had to be given; but as "a sign," whence Israel in the last time would have to be distinguished, when, in accordance with their deserts, they should be prohibited from entering the holy city. (*Answer to the Jews* 3)¹⁵

Like the Christian exegetes before him, Tertullian differentiates between Abraham's circumcision and Israelite circumcision by arguing that Abraham's circumcision functioned as a sign of his faith, whereas Israelite circumcision functions as a sign of exclusion.

Irenaeus also adopts this method of differentiating between Abraham's circumcision as a sign of faith and Israelite circumcision as a sign of accursedness. In *Against the Heresies*, Irenaeus writes that,

We learn from the Scripture itself that God gave circumcision, not as the complete of righteousness, but as a sign, that the race of Abraham might continue recognizable... And that man was not justified by these things, but that they were given as a sign to the people, this fact shows, – that Abraham himself, without circumcision and without observance of Sabbaths, "believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God." (*Haer.* IV.16.1–2)¹⁶

15. Menzies 1994.

16. Roberts et al. 2007.

Apparently, the position that Israelite circumcision reflected accursedness and that Abraham's circumcision signified his faith was popularly circulating in the second half of the third century among western church fathers. But other interpretations were circulating during this time as well. For example, Origen of Alexandria expends a great deal of effort towards explaining the meaning of circumcision and, like those before him, distinguishes between Abraham's circumcision and Israelite circumcision. According to Origen, Abraham circumcised as a sign of faith, but the Israelites erred in interpreting this commandment as an instruction to be taken literally for perpetuity. He writes, "Then at once [Abraham] both received the covenant of God and accepted circumcision as a sign of faith which he could not accept while he was still in his father's house and in the relationship of flesh and while he was still called Abram" (*Hom. Gen. 3:3*).¹⁷ Origen notes that one of his objectives is to discourage the act of Christian circumcision, which was a widespread practice during his lifetime (*Hom. Gen. 3:5, Heine*).¹⁸ Unlike some of his contemporaries, Origen does not incorporate Israelite accursedness into his interpretation. Likewise, John Chrysostom suggests that while Abraham's circumcision was a sign of faith, Israelite circumcision does not act as a sign of exclusion. Rather, it acts as a means of controlling the natural carnal tendencies of the Jews. Chrysostom claims that:

God gave them circumcision, curbing their unrestrained urges. He was aware of their lustful tendencies in not practicing restraint...he gave them a perpetual reminder with this sign of circumcision, as though fastening them with a chain. He set limits and rules to prevent them overstepping the mark... like shackles on their feet as a reminder that they have no further need of instruction from others... Our circumcision on the other hand, the grace of baptism, involves a painless medicine and is the means of countless good things for us, filling us with the grace of the spirit. (*Hom. Gen. 39:14; 40:16*)¹⁹

Chrysostom's argument claims that circumcision, rather than symbolizing election, symbolizes shackles. This argument functions as both a return to the second-century CE position that circumcision represents accursedness, as found in Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho*, and as the culmination of a series of ruminations by a string of Christian theologians

17. Heine 1982.

18. Origen's statement is further examined in the final section of this paper. See Niehoff 2003, 108.

19. Hill 1990.

working to depict circumcision as either a worthless misinterpretation or as a sign of divine rejection.

In contrast to those interpretations, Aphrahat and Theodoret, Syriac writers who were perhaps inheritors of a separate exegetical tradition, regard circumcision more positively. Each suggests that circumcision was a logical means to prevent the Israelites from interacting and integrating with other nations, an interpretation that may reflect an attempt to preserve the pure Israelite lineage of Jesus. Like many of his predecessors, Aphrahat believed that Abraham's circumcision was a temporary symbol or mark which represents both his covenant with God and God's promise that he would have a son. Aphrahat makes a supreme effort when discussing circumcision. He employs Justin's argument that Melchizedek receiving Abraham's tithe is proof that circumcision is inferior to uncircumcision. He also redeploys Barnabas' argument, which claims that since other nations, such as the Egyptians, practice circumcision, it proves that circumcision has no value. Finally, he repeats Tertullian's claim that divine covenants are temporary and can be terminated in order to suggest that the Mosaic covenant and all law associated with it is no longer in effect.²⁰ For Aphrahat, circumcision stands at the core of Jewish identity and, therefore, uncircumcision must stand at the core of Christian identity. Aphrahat follows Paul's argument in Rom 4 that Abraham's circumcision was a mark that reflected God's covenant and promise that he would bear a child. God chose and found favor in Abraham when he was not in his state of circumcision in order to establish Abraham as the father of all of humankind. Yet Aphrahat departs from Paul, as well as from his predecessors Justin Martyr and Tertullian, when discussing the ongoing practice of Jewish circumcision. Instead of arguing that circumcision is a mark of rejection and exclusion, Aphrahat maintains that the purpose of Israelite circumcision is to distinguish the Israelites from other nations and to prevent the Israelites from incorporating pagan practices into their own tradition: "[God] commanded [Abraham] to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin as a sign and signification of the covenant, so that when his seed would multiply, they might be distinguished from all the peoples among whom they would go, so that they might not be mingled with their [the pagans'] unclean deeds" (Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 11.3).²¹

Similarly, the early fifth-century Antiochan exegete Theodoret also argues that Israelite circumcision is a means to prevent intermingling with other nations, but he does not expend as much exegetical energy on

20. Aphrahat, *Demonstration* 11, in Neusner 1999, 19–30.

21. Neusner 1999.

invalidating circumcision as Aphrahat. Theodoret adopts Paul's position regarding Abraham's own circumcision, which he posits was given as a sign of Abraham's faith. According to Theodoret:

When [God] foretold the exile, he devised a protection for their religion so that, when mingling with pagans, they would not contaminate their noble descent, but rather, looking to the sign, keep an undying memory of the one who had conferred it. The account of their wanderings confirms this. They spent forty years in the wilderness and thought circumcision pointless, since they were cut off from the nations and living a life apart. But when they later entered the promised land, the God of the universe ordered Joshua son of Nun to circumcise all the men before handing over ownership of the land. They were destined to come into close proximity with the gentiles and hence were in need of a seal that would distinguish them from peoples of foreign lineage. (*Questions on the Octateuch* 49.1–14)²²

Theodoret provides a meaningful reason for Israelite circumcision, but he also clarifies that circumcision in and of itself has no inherent value:

Now, if Jews make so much of their circumcision, they should learn that it was not only the patriarch who was circumcised but also Ishmael, a half-slave, as well as the homeborn slaves, the purchased slaves, and the Idumeans, and the offspring of Keturah. Even the Egyptians learned circumcision from the Israelites. And circumcision did not have the effect of making them righteous, since holy Scripture condemns all these peoples as godless. Therefore, it was not circumcision that justified Abraham; faith made him righteous, and virtue rendered him still more illustrious. Circumcision was given as a sign of faith. (*Questions on the Octateuch* 49.15–24)²³

The similar positions held by Aphrahat and Theodoret regarding Abraham's circumcision and the circumcision of the Israelites suggests that their interpretation may have been derived from a common tradition circulating in Syriac Christian communities. This tradition may have had deep roots going back to a first-century CE Palestinian milieu, and it is noteworthy that Josephus also posits that circumcision is a means to prevent "mixing with others" (*Ant.* 1.192).²⁴ As opposed to **western** Christian writers, the Antiochan tradition was less typologically focused and more closely

22. Hill 2007.

23. Ibid.

24. Niehoff 2003, 90.

devoted to literal scriptural reading. As a result, they may have been more attracted to this interpretation than their western contemporaries.²⁵

Scholars have also shown that **Eastern** Christians were more aware of rabbinic exegetical traditions.²⁶ The writings of Ephrem the Syrian, for instance, indicate not only awareness of rabbinic traditions that are extant in midrash *Genesis Rabbah*, but also awareness of at least one Aramaic Targum, as well as a version of the Peshitta that was closer to the Masoretic Text than the Septuagint. Ephrem's homilies contain some interpretations that are attested only in Jewish texts.²⁷ Therefore, it is not surprising that Ephrem, like Aphrahat and Theodoret, does not adopt the attitude that circumcision functions to mark out the accursedness of the Jews. Instead, he accepts the Pauline view that the mark of circumcision holds no significance in and of itself and that true circumcision is the circumcision of the heart. Yet Ephrem goes even further by implying that circumcision must have served a spiritual purpose in ancient times because God became angry when Moses neglected to circumcise his son in Exod 4. Ephrem elaborates by noting that the Hebrews are both commendable and not condemnable, because they insisted on circumcising their sons in Egypt despite their persecution under the Egyptians:²⁸

At the place where they were spending the night, the Lord came upon Moses, and wanted to kill him, because he had discontinued circumcision in Midian for one of his sons who had not been circumcised. [The angel] appeared to Moses in anger so that his departure [from Midian] would not be ridiculed because he had discontinued circumcision without necessity, while the Hebrew had not interrupted it in spite of the death of their children. (Ephrem, *Homily on Genesis 4.4*)²⁹

25. Matthews and Amar 1994, 48.

26. See Kiperwasser and Ruzer 2012, 197–98 n. 2, who trace the common theme of proselytism in Persian and Babylonian Talmud sources. They cite the most recent scholarship on this subject.

27. Matthews and Amar 1994, 62.

28. For an excellent analysis of Ephrem's commentary on this passage, see Winslow 2009.

29. Matthews and Amar 1994. See also Ephrem's comment on Gen 24:2–3: "that Abraham made [his servant] swear by the covenant of circumcision...[God] set the sign of the covenant on it so that that member which was the most despised of all the limbs would now be the most honored of all the limbs. The sign of the covenant that was set on it bestowed on it such great honor that those who take oaths now swear by it and all those who administer oaths make them swear by it" (*Homily on Genesis 21*, Matthews and Amar 1994).

Although Ephrem's commentary on this passage implies that he acknowledges the intrinsic positive value of the command to circumcise Israelite infant boys, Ephrem does not spend nearly the same amount of time delegitimizing the practice and practitioners of circumcision as Aphrahat and Justin. In fact, circumcision is not a focal point for Ephrem. This may be due to his intention to minimize the exclusivity of the Abrahamic covenant and its promises.³⁰ For this reason, Ephrem also does not discuss at length the story of Abraham's election or the Abrahamic covenant and its promises.

We now turn to midrash Gen. Rab. 46, an extensive commentary on Gen 17 that focuses on the theological significance of circumcision. Compiled and edited as early as the fifth century, Genesis Rabbah shows an awareness of some of the Christian arguments against circumcision that have been cited above.³¹ As is typical of rabbinic literature, the commentary does not directly engage in polemical arguments, but weaves together the symbolism of Abraham's circumcision with Israelite circumcision in order to make one inextricably joined to the other. The opening of Gen. Rab. 46 cites Gen 17:1, which begins with the story of Abraham's circumcision and then immediately cites Hos 9:10, which compares Israel's fathers with the first fruits of a fig tree. Genesis Rabbah then records the following:

R. Yudan said: "In the case of a fig-tree, to begin with the fruit is gathered one by one, then two by two, then three by three, until in the end people are able to gather whole basketsful and shovelsful. So too at the beginning there was only Abraham, then there were Abraham and Isaac, and then there were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, until: [Exodus 1:7: 'The children of Israel were fruitful and increased abundantly and multiplied']" (Gen. Rab. 46.1)³²

This statement ties Abraham's circumcision to those of the Israelites and implies that Abraham's circumcision was not a sign of his faith, as early Christians claimed, but a sign of election, as consequent Israelite circumcision was.

Five lines later, the midrash anticipates possible arguments from its readers regarding the reason why Abraham did not circumcise himself earlier:

30. Frishman 2009, 171.

31. Neusner 1985b, suggests that Genesis Rabbah should be read polemically.

32. Neusner 1985a, 157.

Why did he not circumcise at 48 years, when he recognized his creator? So as not to close the door on proselytes. And if you should say that [Abraham] should have circumcised himself at the age of 85, at the hour that God spoke to him at the Covenant of the Pieces, it was [delayed] so that Isaac should be born of a holy seed [that is, of a circumcised penis, in contrast to Ishma'el, who was born between these two events]. (Gen. Rab. 46.1)³³

This passage comes full circle polemically because it presents Abraham, the Jewish patriarch, as one who is open to proselytes – proselytes who presumably circumcise, doing so as a sign of election and acceptance of **Mosaic law**, not as a sign of faith. This argument answers those Christian interlocutors who presented Judaism as a closed religion that was unwelcoming of Gentiles. In addition, the midrash responds directly to the Pauline argument that since Abraham was reckoned to righteousness based on faith in Gen 15 and only committed righteousness of works, that is, circumcision, in Gen 17, circumcision was only a one-time sign of Abraham's faith without long-term worth. Instead, the midrash offers an alternative explanation regarding why Abraham circumcised well after the story of Gen 15, which took place 51 years earlier. God did not want Ishmael to descend from an individual who was circumcised, but he did desire that for Isaac, which would provide Isaac with automatic entry into the covenantal relationship. Therefore, the midrash binds Abraham's circumcision in Gen 17 with the covenantal election and the ongoing circumcision of Abraham's descendants.

Another significant midrashic statement appears later in Genesis Rabbah:

“Then Abraham fell on his face”: R. Phineas [said] in the name of R. Levi: “Two times did Abraham fall on his face, on account of the merit of which circumcision was taken away from his sons twice, once in the wilderness and once in Egypt. In Egypt Moses came along and circumcised them, and in the wilderness, Joshua came along and circumcised them.” (Gen. Rab. 46:6)³⁴

As with the earlier passage, this statement achieves more than one polemical objective. The fact that Abraham falls on his face twice is taken as a sign of unfaithfulness by Genesis Rabbah, and the two times in biblical history in which the Israelites were negligent in circumcision are taken as punishment for Abraham falling on his face. Abraham's lack of faith is also highlighted in Genesis Rabbah's interpretation of Gen 15:6, in which Abraham asks God for a sign to prove that he will fulfill his promises to

33. Ibid., 158.

34. Ibid.

Abraham. Genesis Rabbah's emphasis on Abraham's doubt contrasts with the pedestal that Abraham is placed upon in early Christian scriptural exegesis. In early Christian texts, Abraham's unquestioning faithfulness lies at the core of understanding what circumcision is and what it is not. By discounting Abraham's faith, the midrash is discounting the early Christian interpretation that circumcision was a sign of that faith: how could that be, when Abraham did not *have* any? In addition, by referring to the Israelites' stay in Egypt as a period of negligence regarding circumcision, the midrash implies that Israelite history began sometime *before* their enslavement in Egypt. Thus, the midrash pushes Jewish history all the way back to the patriarchal narratives and Abrahamic history becomes Israelite history. Once again, the midrash links Abraham's behavior with the destiny of the Israelite people.

Another important passage is Genesis Rabbah's commentary on Gen 18:8. Here the midrash links Abraham with the circumcision of all Jews living throughout history. Abraham is depicted as sitting by the gates of hell and uncircumcising Jewish souls who have acted sinfully while in their bodies. The passage reads:

Rabbi Levi said: In the days to come Abraham will sit by the opening of *Gehenom*, and he will not allow any circumcised member of Israel to descend into it. But those [among Israel] who have sinned too much, what does he do to them? He places the foreskins from the babies who died before they were circumcised and places [the foreskins] upon them and brings them down to *Gehenom*. (Gen. Rab. 48:8)³⁵

This astonishing image, like the midrashic passages mentioned above, links Abraham with the circumcision of the entire Jewish people.³⁶ The inextricable association between Abraham's circumcision and Jewish circumcision culminates in the liturgical prayer recited at the circumcision ceremony: "Blessed are you, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, Who has made us holy us with His commandments, and has commanded us to bring him into the covenant of Abraham our forefather" (b. Šabb. 137b).³⁷

35. Ibid.

36. The association between Abraham's circumcision and Israelite circumcision is enforced in Genesis Rabbah, but not invented by it; see m. Ned. 3:11, which reads, "Rebbe says: 'How great is circumcision, that all the [other] commandments which Abraham our father did were not called perfect, until he circumcised, as it says, [Gen 17:1] 'Walk before Me and be Perfect'" (my translation).

37. My translation.

Overall, many early Christians took Paul's lead in separating the event of Abraham's circumcision from the ongoing practice of Israelite circumcision in order to claim Abraham as a proto-Christian forefather and dismiss Israelite circumcision as either an unfortunate misunderstanding of **Mosaic law** or as an intentional divine ordinance intended to single out a people who were rejected by God. A few centuries after Christians began to write down these arguments, the editors of midrash Genesis Rabbah recorded a series of rabbinic arguments linking the typological significance of Abraham's circumcision to Israelite circumcision. Yet at the same time that the rabbinic arguments justifying Jewish circumcision were calcifying, Augustine was constructing a wholly new approach to Jewish circumcision and law, one which would change the trajectory of Christian attitude towards circumcision. In his Sermon on Ps 59 in **Enarrat. Ps.**, Augustine suggests that Jewish observance of Mosaic Law – including, he specifies, circumcision – was part of God's divine plan for Jews to remain Jews, act as Jews, and function as witnesses to God's grace (**Sermon on Psalm 59**).³⁸ This ground-breaking theme would be picked up eleven hundred years later by Martin Luther in his *On the Jews and Their Lies*, when he paraphrases Paul, writing:

The other boast and nobility over which the Jews gloat and because of which they haughtily and vainly despise all mankind is their circumcision, which they received from Abraham... But you may ask: Of what use then is circumcision? Or why did God command it so strictly? We answer: Let the Jews fret about that! It was not imposed on us, as you have heard. We do not stand in need of it. We can be God's people without it... St. Paul teaches us in Romans 3 that when circumcision is performed as a kind of work it cannot make holy or save. It was not meant to do so, nor does it damn the uncircumcised Gentiles, as the Jews falsely and blasphemously say. Rather, he says, "circumcision is of great value in this way – that they were entrusted with the word of God." That is the point! There it is said! There it is found! Circumcision was given and instituted to enfold and to preserve God's word and his promise. This means that circumcision should not be useful or sufficient as a work in itself. Those who possess circumcision should be bound by this sign, covenant or sacrament to obey and to believe God in his words and to transmit all this to their descendants.³⁹

38. Boulding 2000. See also Fredriksen 2008, 324–31, reviewing Augustine's citation of Ps 59, which she believes references the function of Law as the "mark" of the Jews, in his other works as well.

39. Martin Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, as translated by Lull and Russell 2012, 499.

According to Martin Luther, circumcision contains no inherent value, but its observance signifies that God once made a covenant with the Israelites, and that this covenant was ultimately severed and replaced by the covenant of Christ. This position, which echoes the arguments of Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Chrysostom, regards circumcision as a symbol of accursedness.

The fact that circumcision galvanized so much exegetical and theological material reflects the historical reality that some early Christians were circumcising their sons until perhaps as late as the fifth century.⁴⁰ Early Christian and Rabbinic exegetes tended to focus on Jewish issues that threatened the stability of their religious communities. While boundary lines were drawn by this time at the level of religious leadership, they were not drawn within the realm of societal practice.⁴¹ Shepardson has argued that in the fourth century CE, many early Christians still clung to Jewish practices. **Passover.** This would explain why Ephrem, Aphrahat, and Chrysostom, all exegetes who wrote in the fourth century, devoted themselves to discouraging Judaizing behavior.⁴² Origen, for instance, devotes an entire homily to Abraham's circumcision and to the notion of circumcision of the heart in response to Judaizing Christians in his community, whom he addresses explicitly.⁴³ Likewise, in his *Letter to the Magnesians*, the early second-century theologian Ignatius writes: "If we still live according to the Jewish Law, and the circumcision of the flesh, we deny that we have received grace" (Ignatius, *Magn.* 8.1).⁴⁴ And again, in his second and third discourses against Judaizing Christians, John Chrysostom cites Gal 5:2 three times, in which Paul declares: "Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you." Chrysostom also makes it clear that he believes

40. Jacobs 2012, 41–71, looks at early Christian sources on circumcision such as the writings of Justin and Origen, and also late fourth- to early fifth-century texts such as *The Altercation of Simon the Jew and Theophilus the Christian*, which indicate that even during this period circumcision was a topic of contention and reflects the fuzzy boundaries between Christians and Jews. See also Cohen's review of early Christian and rabbinic sources on circumcision (Cohen 2005, 21–54, 68–108).

41. Kimelman 1999.

42. Shepardson 2008.

43. Origen states, "We must refute not only the Jews in the flesh concerning circumcision of the flesh, but also some of these who appear to have taken up the name of Christ and nevertheless think circumcision of the flesh is to be received, as the Ebionites and any others who err with them in similar poverty of understanding" (*Hom. Gen.* 3:5, Heine 1982).

44. Roberts et al. 2007.

that there are members of his audience advocating for circumcision: “But someone might say: ‘Is there so much harm in circumcision that it makes Christ’s whole plan of redemption useless?’ Yes, the harm of circumcision is as great as that, not because of its own nature but because of your obstinacy” (*Discourse 2.6*).⁴⁵

The fact that the practice of circumcision remained at the foreground of debate indicates that early Christians continued to be attracted to performing the practice.⁴⁶ Even if circumcision was not widespread, as a concept it remained a focal point for leaders trying to draw religious demarcation lines. Boundaries between early Jews and Christians were not yet fixed in the fourth century CE and circumcision signified the controversy of scriptural ownership and divine chosenness that was at stake.⁴⁷ By separating Abraham’s circumcision and Israelite circumcision, Christian leaders were able to advocate for a definitive separation from the Jews and their traditions, while staking a claim to their biblical heritage.

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45. Harkins 1979.

46. Niehoff 2003, 108; Sandmel 2005, 254. Indeed, there is no question that there were Judaizing Christians in the fourth century; the only question is whether circumcision was a popular expression of this Judaizing. The Council of Laodicea in 363 also warns against Judaizing, although it does not specify circumcision: “Christians must not Judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord’s Day... But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ” (*Council of Laodicea Canon 29*, translated in Schaff 1994, 148; see also Visotzky 2009, 46–47).

47. Lieu 2002; Cameron 1991, 1–14.

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