

THE GALATIAN AGITATORS' THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE FOR CIRCUMCISION

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According to Paul, the agitators¹ in Galatia were trying to compel Paul's Galatian converts to get circumcised (6:12; cf. 5:2-3).² Since the Galatians were convinced by the agitators' persuasion (5:7), they intended to accept circumcision (5:2-3).³ As a matter of fact, it was

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¹Paul's opponents in Galatia are traditionally called "judaizers," but J. M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: A Study of Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 36, n.1, and J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 10, appropriately criticize this label. The term "agitators" is Paul's own language about his opponents in Galatia, found in Gal 1:7 and 5:10 (cf. 5:12).

²Although many aspects of the agitators' gospel are unclear, there is little doubt that circumcision was an important component. There are two indications. It can be safely inferred from 5:2-3 that the Galatians intended to be circumcised because they were persuaded by the agitators' demand of circumcision. In 6:12-13 it is apparent that the agitators in Galatia were teaching that the Galatians must be circumcised. They were trying to compel the Galatians to be circumcised (6:12). And also they wanted the Galatians to be circumcised so that they may boast about the circumcision of the Galatians (6:13). Cf. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 45-60; H. D. Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 6; F. F. Bruce, "Galatian Problems," *BJRL* 53 (1970-71): 263-266; J. D. G. Dunn, "Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . ." (Gal. 5:2-12; 6:12-16; cf. 1 Cor. 7:17-20)," in *La Foi Agissant par L' amour (Galates 4,12-6,16)*, ed. A. Vanhoye (Rome: Abbaye de S. Paul, 1996), 79; J. L. Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 290-294, 560-561.

³Although the conditional expression (ε αὐτῶν περιτεμνησθε) suggests that the Galatians had not received circumcision yet (E. D. Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 273; Martyn, 469; F. J. Matera, *Galatians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 181), the present participle (περιτεμνομένη) in 5:3 indicates that Paul envisages a situation in which they were accepting circumcision. That the Galatians had already begun the practice of circumcision is suggested by the fact that they were turning (μετατιθέσθε - present) to a different gospel (1:6). In addition, that they were no longer running well (5:7) indicates that they had already followed the

very difficult for the Galatians to decide to undergo circumcision because circumcision was disdained in the Graeco-Roman world and regarded with horror, contempt, scorn, and ridicule (e.g. Josephus, *Apion* 2.137; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.1-2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5).⁴ Some Jews in the Diaspora practiced a surgical removal of circumcision, epispasm (1 Macc 1.15) both to avoid scorn and ridicule and to gain social advantages.⁵ So the Galatians would have been hesitant to get circumcised. How, then, did the agitators succeed in persuading these Gentile Galatians to accept circumcision? There have been a number of attempts to answer the question.

On the basis of the assumption that the agitators were Gnostics,⁶ Schmithals argues that the agitators took over the Jewish circumcision rite and reinterpreted it as a Gnostic rite. He claims that the agitators persuaded the Galatians to undergo circumcision by saying “the act of circumcision portrayed the liberation of the pneuma-self from the prison of this body.”⁷ He supports this argument both by referring to the use of circumcision by the Ebionites, Elchasaites and Cerinthians and by comparing the interpretation of circumcision in Col 2:11-13. Betz argues that in consideration of circumcision as an effort to reintroduce a “code of ethics,” the Galatians were seeking circumcision in order to prevent falling into “problems with the flesh.”⁸ On the basis of Gal 3:3, Jewett claims that the Galatians were accepting circumcision in order to attain perfection through circumcision.⁹ He

agitators’ gospel and thus had started accepting circumcision.

⁴See Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 46, n. 25; L. H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 153-158; R. G. Hall, “Circumcision,” *ABD*, 1:1027; L. L. Grabbe, “Orthodoxy in First Century Judaism: What are the Issues?” *JSJ* 8 (1977): 150; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 455-456.

⁵Cf. R. G. Hall, “Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writings,” *JSP* 2 (1988): 71-86.

⁶W. Schmithals, “The Heretics in Galatia,” in *Paul and the Gnostics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 13-64.

⁷Schmithals, 38.

⁸H. D. Betz, “In Defense of the Spirit: Paul’s Letter to the Galatians as a Document of Early Christian Apologetics,” in *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. E. S. Fiorenza (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1976), 99-114; idem, “Spirit, Freedom, and Law: Paul’s Message to the Galatian Churches,” *SEA* 39 (1974): 145-160.

⁹R. Jewett, “The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation,” *NTS* (1971): 212,

supports his argument by appealing to *Gen. Rab.* 46.4 and *Jub.* 15.25-33. Brinsmead proposes that circumcision was introduced to the Galatians as a “powerful mystery initiation,” interpreting circumcision as a rite of initiation into a mystery-cult.¹⁰ Barclay argues that the Galatians were willing to get circumcised not only because they were convinced by the agitators’ theological argument that circumcision is necessary for them in order to share in the Abrahamic blessing and to secure their identity as members of God’s people and recipients of God’s promise, but also because by accepting circumcision they wanted to “identify themselves with the local synagogues and thus hold at least a more understandable and recognizable place in society.”¹¹ There are of course some elements of truth in these theories. But none of them is entirely satisfactory.

The aim of this paper is to clarify the agitators’ theological rationale for circumcision. The agitators were not arguing in a vacuum. As we attempt to understand the agitators’ rationale adequately, therefore, we need to see the Scripture’s view of circumcision to which they must have appealed.¹² In addition, we should investigate their immediate predecessors’ and their contemporaries’ view of circumcision that might have influenced the agitators’ view. When investigating the agitators’ rationale, we are not so much concerned with their political or social reason (6:12) because it is not directly related to the present study.¹³ Rather our primary focus is on their theological rationale not only because Paul’s letter is concerned with it but also because it caused the problem of circumcision in Galatia.

states, “It was their desire to gain the final level of perfection which led to circumcision when they heard from the agitators that such an act would ensure entrance into the mythical seed of Abraham.”

¹⁰B. H. Brinsmead, *Galatians – Dialogical Response to Opponents*, SBLDS 65 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 144-146.

¹¹Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 52-60.

¹²C. K. Barrett, “The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians,” in *Rechtfertigung*, ed. J. Friedrich et al. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1976), 15, argues, “The adversaries did not act out of mere personal spite or jealousy; they held a serious theological position which they supported by detailed biblical arguments.” See also B. W. Longenecker, *The Triumph of Abraham’s God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 129-130.

¹³For the agitators’ political rationale, see Jewett, “The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation,” 198-212. Jewett argues that the agitators preached circumcision because of the persecution of Zealots who were hostile to any Christian Jews who had fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles.

AGITATORS' THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

Circumcision as the Sign of the Eternal Covenant Defining the Identity of God's People

The first reason for the agitators' demand for the circumcision of the Galatians no doubt was the belief that circumcision is the covenant sign between God and his people, which defines the identity of the covenant people of God. Probably they found support in Gen 17:10-14 for this rationale:¹⁴ "Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you . . . So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (NRSV). In particular, they must have appealed to Gen 17:11. It is clear in the passage that circumcision is "the sign of the covenant" (τὸ σημεῖον τοῦ διαθήκῃς)¹⁵ between God and Abraham and his descendants. Circumcision was both a token that testifies a special covenant relationship between God and Israel and a symbol that reminds the Jews of their consecration and commitment to God.¹⁶ Furthermore, the agitators might have had a view similar to that of the author of *Jubilees*. The significance of Abraham's circumcision (Gen 17) as the sign of covenant is elaborated in *Jub.* 15.25-34. According to *Jub.* 15, circumcision is the covenant sign showing that the circumcised belong to the Lord (*Jub.* 15.26). The author of the book

¹⁴J. D. G. Dunn, "What was the Issue between Paul and 'Those of the Circumcision'?" in *Paulus und das antike Judentum*, ed. M. Hengel and U. Heckel (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 303, regards Gen 17 as "the constitutional document of circumcision." Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 54 and p. 54, n. 53, writes, "The explicit connection in the Genesis text between circumcision, Abraham and covenant ensured the frequent association of these themes in Jewish theology as can be seen in a wide range of Jewish literature, both from Palestine and from the Diaspora." See also S. McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 79. For further bibliography, see p. 79, n. 8. For the close relationship between circumcision and the Abrahamic covenant, see G. W. Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 171-174.

¹⁵For a detailed study of circumcision as the sign of the covenant, see M. V. Fox, "Sign of the Covenant," *RB* 81 (1974): 557-596.

¹⁶Cf. N. M. Sarna, *Genesis* (New York: JPS, 1989), 125, 385-387; G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, WBC 2 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1994), 23-24.

urges Jews of his day to maintain circumcision so that they might not be uprooted from the land (15.28). So, the author finds the reason for circumcision in Gen 17 and urges the Jews of his day to keep the covenant forever because it is the mark of the covenant between the Lord and the sons of Israel.¹⁷

Furthermore, it is to be noted that circumcision is the everlasting covenant (MDlwø tyîrVb – 17:13; cf. 17:7, 19)¹⁸ between God and Abraham. The offspring of Abraham throughout their generations (17:9; cf. 17:12) should keep the covenant not only because it is God's commandment (...wrVmVvI;t rRvSa yItyîrV;b – 17:10) but also because not to keep it would result in being cut off from God's people (17:14). The significance of Abraham's circumcision (Gen 17) as the eternal covenant was again elaborated in *Jub.* 15.25-34. According to the passage, the covenant of circumcision is for all the generations because it is an eternal ordinance (*Jub.* 15.11, 14, 25, 28, 29). The author of *Jubilees* says, "This law is for all the eternal generations and there is no circumcising of days and there is no passing a single day beyond the eight days because it is an eternal ordinance ordained and written in the heavenly tablets" (*Jub.* 15.25). Predicting that the sons of Israel will deny circumcision, moreover, the author warns that there is no forgiveness for those who deny circumcision (*Jub.* 15.33-34).

The significance of circumcision as the eternal covenant commanded by God culminates in the Maccabean revolt. The revolt was caused by the attempt of Israel's Syrian overlords to destroy Israel's national and religious uniqueness by prohibiting the practice of circumcision (1 Macc. 1.15, 48, 60-61; 2 Macc. 6.10; 4 Macc. 4.25). Antiochus stipulated that the Jews were "to leave their sons uncircumcised" (1 Macc. 1.48), and "they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers' necks" (1 Macc. 1.60-61). In spite of the persecution the Maccabeans

¹⁷Dunn, "Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . .," 83, states, "The elaboration of the importance of circumcision in *Jub.* 15.25-34 is only a more extreme expression of the attitude already implicit in Gen. 17."

¹⁸Fox, "Sign of the Covenant," 588, correctly notes, "The circumcision is a permanent, eternal sign, irradicable and irreversible both in the life of the individual and in the course of generations."

circumcised by force the uncircumcised children within the borders of their land (1 Macc. 2.46). In brief, circumcision as the everlasting covenant commanded by God is the reason why Jews during the Maccabean period continued to practice circumcision in spite of persecution.

The agitators presumably derived their rationale for their demand of the circumcision of the Galatians from Gen 17:9-14, possibly also *Jub.* 15.25-34 and the Maccabean tradition. On the basis of the texts and in line with the Maccabean tradition, the agitators could argue that if the Galatians want to become the covenant people of God, they should get circumcised because circumcision is the sign of the covenant between God and his people that must be kept forever by the people of God.¹⁹ Moreover, like the author of *Jubilees*, the agitators might have said that circumcision is the sign of the covenant testifying that the circumcised belong to God, and thus become the members of the people of God.

Furthermore, it seems that the agitators demanded the Galatians to get circumcised because circumcision was an identity marker of God's people. Although there are various significant aspects of Jewish circumcision (cf. Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.1-11),²⁰ its more fundamental role was an identity marker of the Jews within Judaism. The role of circumcision as an identity marker of the covenant people was vividly expressed when the Jews encountered "uncircumcised" nations, especially the Philistines (Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chr 10:4). The Philistines were simply called "the uncircumcised" (MyIlérSoDh – Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 31:4; 1 Chr 10:4; lit. the "foreskin") distinguished from the circumcised Jews. It is striking that the Egyptians were designated as MyIlérSoDh

¹⁹Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 53, likewise maintains, "Armed with such unambiguous texts the agitators could readily demonstrate that, to share in the Abrahamic covenant and the Abrahamic blessing (Gen 12.3; 18.18, etc.), the Galatians needed to be circumcised; indeed, such was the command of God in their Scripture." See also E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 18.

²⁰Hall, "Circumcision," 1026, notes various connotations of circumcision: marriage and fertility, covenant making, deliverance from evil, suitability for participation within God's activity, national identity. For a fine discussion of Philo's understanding of circumcision, see B. R. Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 150-160.

(Eze 32:21; cf. 32:19), despite the fact that they practiced circumcision (Jer 9:25-26). Moreover, foreigners were simply characterized as *Μυττῆρσο* (Eze 28:10; 31:18; 32:24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 32; 44:7, 9). We can infer from these texts that Jews regarded circumcision as the marker of the covenant people and the uncircumcised as aliens from the covenant community. In other words, for Jews circumcision was a distinctive marker of the children of Israel which distinguished them from other peoples designated as “the uncircumcised.”

This significance of circumcision as an identity marker of Jews continued through the Second Temple period. As noted earlier, in the Maccabean period circumcision became a still more distinctive marker of Jews.²¹ Furthermore, we can substantiate the point by comparing Jewish circumcision with the circumcision practice of other nations, such as Egypt and Arabia. While Egyptians, Arabs and other surrounding nations (e.g. Colchians, Ethiopians) also practiced circumcision (Jer 9:25-26; Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.36-47, 104; Philo, *Spec. Leg.* 1.2; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.214; idem, *Ag. Ap.* 2.141),²² circumcision gave the Jews a sense of national identity. It is important to observe in *Jub.* 15.30 that “the Lord did not draw Ishmael and his sons and his brothers and Esau near to himself” despite the fact that they were the circumcised sons of Abraham. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the author of *Jubilees* viewed the real people of God as not the sons of Abraham but the sons of Israel because God chose Israel that they might be a people for himself (15.28-29). The sons of Ishmael and Esau were not called the people of God although they were circumcised and were the physical offspring of Abraham. Rather they were called Arab and Ishmaelites (20.13). While Roman authors knew the practice of circumcision in other countries, moreover, they thought circumcision as a unique characteristic of Jewish males. That circumcision is considered as the most characteristic feature of the Jews is found in Petronius’ remark (“And please circumcise us too, so that we may look like Jews” - Petronius, *Satyricon*, 102.14). Another indication is attested in Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (“They adopted circumcision to

²¹Dunn, “Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . .,” 84; Meyer, “perite/mnw,” *TDNT*, 6:77-79.

²²Cf. Feldman, 154-155; Sarna, 385-386; J. M. Sasson, “Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” *JBL* 85 (1966): 473-476.

distinguish themselves from other people by this difference”). In short, circumcision was the unique identity marker of the Jews (the true people of God), which distinguished them from other nations (Josephus, *Ant.* 1.192).²³

The point also can be vindicated by Paul’s use of *peritomh/*. It is important for our argument to note that *peritomh/* denotes the community of the circumcised, i.e. the Jews. Paul identifies the Jewish people simply as *peritomh/* (Rom 3:30; 4:9, 12; 15:8; Gal 2:7, 8, 9; Col 3:11). *Peritomh/* is used as a distinctive feature standing (by metonymy) for the Jews that distinguishes from *aókrōbustī÷a* (Rom 2:26-27; 4:9; Gal 2:7; Col 3:11; cf. Eph 2:11).²⁴ It is probable that Paul takes over the Old Testament use of *MyIlérSoDh* (Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 31:4; 1 Chr 10:4; Eze 28:10; 31:18; 32:24, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 32; 44:7, 9) and designates the Gentiles simply as *aókrōbustī÷a*; from Paul’s perspective, the Jews could be categorized simply as *peritomh/*, and the other people as *aókrōbustī÷a*. Moreover, Paul’s use of the phrases *oiJ ejk peritomh/* (Gal 2:12; Rom 4:12; cf. Acts 10:45; 11:2; Tit 1:10) and *oi o;ntes e k peritomhvß* (Col 4:11) makes the point all the more forceful. While scholars have disputed whether *oiJ ejk peritomh/* refer to either Jewish Christians²⁵ or non-Christian

²³P. Fredriksen, “Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope,” *JTS* 42 (1991): 536, notes, “Circumcision is likewise singled out in Hellenistic Jewish, pagan, and Christian literature as the premier mark of the Jew, and specifically of the convert to Judaism.” See also Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 56; idem, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan* (323 BCE-117 CE) (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 411-412; B. R. Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 133-141; E. J. Christiansen, *The Covenant in Judaism and Paul: A Study of Ritual Boundaries as Identity Markers*, AGAJU 27 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 97-101; J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul and the Law* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 192; Feldman, 158; McKnight, 79 and other scholars he cites in n. 8; E. P. Sanders, *Judaism* (London: SCM, 1992), 213-214; L. H. Schiffman, “The Rabbinic Understanding of Covenant,” *RevExp* 84 (1987): 297; N. T.-L. Yee, “‘You Who Were Called the Uncircumcision by the Circumcision’,” (Ph. D. thesis, University of Durham, 1999), 99-102.

²⁴Dunn, “Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . .,” 82-83.

²⁵H. Lietzmann, *An die Galater*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1971), 14-15; V. M. Smiles, *The Gospel and the Law in Galatia* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 89-92.

Jews,²⁶ there is little doubt that οἱ ἑκ περιτομῆς is used to express those whose identity was derived from their circumcision.²⁷

To sum up, in light of the observations above, we can conclude that the agitators demanded the circumcision of the Galatians because circumcision is the sign of the eternal covenant which defines the identity of God's people. So the agitators could argue that no Gentile believers become part of the covenant people of God without first being circumcised.

Circumcision as an Entrance Requirement into the Covenant Community

A second likely reason for the agitators' demand for circumcision of the Galatians is that for the Gentiles circumcision is a prerequisite for becoming the people of God. The idea had been present before the third century BCE. We find several indications supporting this.²⁸

First of all, an indication of the entrance of ἑβραῖοι (Gen 17:12) into the household of Abraham by means of circumcision is already found in Gen 17:12-13:²⁹ "Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be

²⁶F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 131.

²⁷Dunn, "Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . .," 82. Dunn writes elsewhere ("What was the Issue between Paul and 'Those of the Circumcision'?" 312), "οἱ ἑκ περιτομῆς, like its synonym, οἱ τῶν νομῶν, defines a social identity marked out and bounded by law and circumcision in particular. These are phrases denoting ethnic identity; the group's self identity arises out of (ἐκ) their practice of the law and fact of circumcision (covenantal nomism)." See also E. E. Ellis, "The Circumcision Party and the Early Christian Mission," in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, ed. E. E. Ellis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 116-117.

²⁸It should be noted that we shall focus on the issue of the inclusion of "uncircumcised man" in the covenant community. For the issue of the relationship between circumcision and women and the inclusion of women proselytes, see J. M. Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation," *NTS* 40 (1994): 358-370.

²⁹Sarna, 236, rightly states, "Genesis 17.9-14 makes circumcision the indispensable precondition for admittance into the community of Israel."

circumcised” (NRSV). It is important to note that the alien slaves who were not Abraham’s physical offspring also should be circumcised in order to be included into the household of Abraham. According to God’s command, Abraham circumcised the slaves born in Abraham’s house and bought with money from any foreigner who was not of his offspring so that they might not be cut off from God’s people: “all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him” (Gen 17:27 - NRSV). So it is clear in Gen 17 that circumcision was also required of those not descended from Abraham.

Gen 34:14-24 is another passage that seems to refer to circumcision as a condition of entry into the covenant community for other than Abraham’s direct descendants. According to the story in the passage, Shechem cannot marry Dinah because the sons of Jacob refused to give their sister to one who is uncircumcised. They said to Shechem and Hamor, “We cannot do this thing, to give our sister to one who is uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace to us” (34:14 - NRSV). So they suggested one condition. “Only on this condition will we consent to you: that you will become as we are and every male among you be circumcised, . . . and we will live among you and become one people” (34:15-16 - NRSV). Hamor and Hamor’s son Shechem were pleased with their suggestion and spoke to the men of their city that “Only on this condition will they agree to live among us, to become one people: that every male among us be circumcised as they are circumcised” (34:22 - NRSV). So every male who went out of the city gate heeded Hamor and his son Shechem was circumcised (34:24). In this story, although the immediate issue was intermarriage, it is striking that circumcision determines whether the Shechemites can become one people (דד ךרא מאוױל ...װני םיִדח – 34:16, 22) with the descendants of Abraham. Here again circumcision is required for the Shechemites as a condition for their becoming part of the covenant people.

The same lesson is pressed home in Ex 12:48. Here circumcision is again the condition on which an uncircumcised resident alien (רֵעֵךְ) can celebrate the Passover to the Lord: “If an alien who resides with you wants to celebrate the Passover to the Lord, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it” (NRSV). Note that the one who is circumcised can be regarded as a

native of the land (X@rDaDh jâr zRaV;k hÎyDh w). In other words, for the aliens circumcision is the means by which they may be regarded as the members of the covenant community (i.e. Jewish festival community). This indicates that circumcision was already a prerequisite for the Gentiles to be considered as the members of Israel.

This point can be validated by examining the Septuagint's interpretation of a formal conversion of many of the Babylonians to Judaism in Esther 8:17. The LXX interpreted circumcision as a prerequisite for the Gentiles to become members of God's people. The translators of the Septuagint did not follow the Hebrew text. They translated MyîdShÅyVtIm as periete÷monto kai« ijoudaizon. The difference between the Hebrew text and LXX is important for understanding the significance of circumcision for the translator of the Septuagint. The addition of the word

periete÷monto clearly indicates that the translator regarded circumcision as a prerequisite for conversion to Judaism. The same point is found in Jdt 14.10 – “When Achior saw all that the God of Israel had done, he believed firmly in God. So he was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel’ (periete÷meto th\n saÿrka thvß aókrobusti÷aß aujtouv kai« prosete÷qh ei ß to\n oi•kon Israhel); and in Josephus, *Ant.*13.319 – Aristobulus compelled the Ituraeans to be circumcised and joined them to the Jews “by the bond of circumcision.” Moreover, the much-quoted story of Izates, king of Adiabene, clearly illustrates the point that circumcision was a requirement. Influenced by a Jewish merchant, Ananias, Izates wanted to adopt the Jewish way of life, including circumcision, in order to become an authentic Jew (*Ant.* 20.38). Ananias persuaded Izates that he could worship God without being circumcised. But Eleazar, a Jew from Galilee who was extremely strict in observance of the ancestral laws, urged him to get himself circumcised (*Ant.* 20.43). He compelled Izates to get circumcised because it is commanded in the law (*Ant.* 20.44-45). Moreover, the Gentile nations captured by the Jews were required to circumcise themselves to remain in their country. For example, *Ant.* 13.257-258 – Having captured the Idumaeans, Hyrcanus “permitted them to live in their country so long as they had themselves circumcised.” The literature above clearly indicates that for Gentiles (proselytes) circumcision was the indispensable precondition for admittance into the community of Israel because only circumcision

could guarantee membership of the covenant community.³⁰ There is little doubt, therefore, that circumcision was normally required for the Gentiles as a prerequisite for becoming members of the covenant people within the later Second Temple period.³¹

It is entirely likely, therefore, that the importance of circumcision

³⁰Fredriksen, 546, concludes, “All the material we have reviewed – biblical and extra-biblical Jewish writings, Josephus, the rabbis, and outsiders whether pagan or Christian – emphasise circumcision as the *sine qua non* of becoming Jew.”

³¹It is disputable whether baptism and sacrifice were normally understood as requirements for conversion to Judaism, for the two requirements are not attested in first-century stories of conversions such as *Joseph and Aseneth* and the story of Izates of Adiabene (Cf. J. J. Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness,” in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, edited by J. Neusner and E. S. Frerichs, 163-186 (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), 171; McKnight, 82-87). But there can be little doubt that circumcision was a normal requirement. However, P. Borgen, *Paul Preaches Circumcision and Pleases Men* (Trondheim: Tapir, 1983), 67, argues, “bodily circumcision was not the requirements for entering the Jewish community, but was one of the commandments which they had to obey after having received the status of Jews.” This is followed by T. Laato, *Paul and Judaism* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 173-174. N. J. McEleney, “Conversion, Circumcision, and the Law,” *NTS* 20 (1973-74): 319-341, also suggests that it is not always necessary for proselytes to be circumcised. However, both have not been widely accepted by scholars. For the criticism, see J. Nolland, “Uncircumcised Proselytes?” *JSJ* 12 (1981): 173-194. Nolland, 194, concludes, “We must conclude therefore that none of the texts brought forward stand scrutiny as firm evidence for a first-century Jewish openness to the possibility of accepting as a Jewish brother a convert to Judaism who felt unable to undergo circumcision.” See also M. Hengel and A. M. Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 72. But McEleney, 332, agrees that circumcision was normally the approved way of a man’s becoming a Jew in first-century Israel.

I think Barclay’s argument is balanced and convincing. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 56-57, argues, “Although it is possible that in exceptional cases Gentiles could be regarded by Jews as proselytes without circumcision, it appears to have been generally recognized that circumcision was a necessary and decisive requirement for adopting Jewish identity.” S. J. D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82 (1989): 27, also concludes, “as far as is known no (non-Christian) Jewish community in antiquity accepted male proselytes who were not circumcised.” See also T. L. Donaldson, *Paul and the Gentile: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 58-60; Feldman, 299; McKnight, 79-82; H. B. P. Mijoga, “The Pauline Notion of ‘Deeds of the Law’” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 1995), 157-162; E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, Vol. III, Part 1, revised and edited by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 173; E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews Under Roman Rule* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 205, 383; P. J. Tompson, *Paul and the Jewish Law* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 88-89.

as a prerequisite for becoming a Jew and as the mark of the convert to Judaism was the theological rationale of the agitators. They would have insisted that the Galatians must enter Israel through circumcision in order to become the people of God;³² for them salvation is within Israel exclusively.³³ Since the concept of Abraham as the prototypical proselyte was present in Judaism (*Jub.* 11.15-17; *Apoc. Abr.* 1-8; Josephus, *Ant.* 1.154ff.; Philo, *Virt.* 212ff.; *Gen. Rab.* 46.2),³⁴ they may well have argued that the Galatians should be circumcised in order to be proselytes as Abraham was. At any rate they no doubt argued that the only way for the Galatians who were not Abraham's physical offspring ("aliens") to become the members of Abraham's family who can inherit the Abrahamic blessings was by accepting circumcision, an entrance requirement into the people of God.

Salvific Efficacy of Circumcision

A third likely reason for the agitators' imposition of circumcision on the Galatians is the salvific efficacy of circumcision. For them circumcision most likely had power to achieve salvation and righteousness before God. We will attempt to validate the claim by reflecting on the significance of circumcision as a redemptive and apotropaic rite within Judaism. Furthermore, the claim can be substantiated by several Jewish writings in which salvific efficacy is ascribed to circumcision. And also the salvific efficacy of circumcision is reflected in Romans and Acts. Most importantly the thought is clearly implied in Galatians.

³²Jewett, "The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation," 207, argues likewise, "circumcision was presented as a prerequisite for entering fully into Abraham's promise, into the chosen people whom God would spare in the parousia." See also T. L. Donaldson, "'The Gospel That I Proclaim among the Gentiles' (Gal 2.2): Universalistic or Israel-Centered?," in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans*, Festschrift R. N. Longenecker, JSNTSup 108, ed. L. A. Jervis and P. Richardson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 180.

³³In the Jewish tradition, the description of "being cut off from Israel" as being removed from within the boundary of salvation indicates that salvation is within Israel (Gen 17:14; Ex 12:15, 19; 30:33, 38; 31:14; Lev 7:20, 21, 25, 27; 17:4, 9, 10; 18:29; 19:8; 20:3, 5, 6, 17-18; 23:29; Num 9:13; 15:30; 19:13, 20; Eze 14:8).

³⁴Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 54, argues, "But of particular relevance to the Galatian situation was his [Abraham] position as the first proselyte."

The Salvific Efficacy of Circumcision within Judaism

First of all, the salvific efficacy of circumcision is indicated by the Jewish understanding of circumcision as a redemptive rite within Judaism. Circumcision as a redemptive and apotropaic rite is hinted in the story of Zipporah's circumcision of Moses' son (Ex 4:24-26).³⁵ There are several issues in the passage, such as the meaning of the phrase *MyIm ;d NAtS j*, the identity of the potential victim, and the differences between the Hebrew text and LXX.³⁶ For the purpose of the present inquiry, we will focus on the significance of Zipporah's circumcision of her son. Zipporah cut off her son's foreskin (*;hÎnV;b tAl rDo_tRa tOrVkI;tÅw*) because the Lord sought to kill him (Moses or her son). After she performed her son's circumcision, he (the Lord) left him alone. It is clear that she performed circumcision to save Moses or her son from death. It is important to note that the blood shed at the rite of circumcision redeemed him from mortal danger. So we can infer from the story of Zipporah's circumcision of her son that the blood shed at the rite of circumcision had a vicarious redemptive effect.³⁷ Moreover, it is likely that the blood of circumcision had the same significance as that of the Passover lamb which was of effect for the redemption of Israel (Ex 12:13, 22-23).³⁸ As we shall see below, on the basis of the text, such a redemptive significance for circumcision was developed and became prevalent within Second Temple Judaism.

The interpretation of Zipporah's circumcision of her son in the Septuagint (Ex 4:24-26) makes it probable that circumcision was regarded as a redemptive rite in the later Second Temple period. The translator(s) of the Septuagint did not follow the Hebrew text. Probably the translator(s) had Moses in mind as the potential victim and clearly regarded the angel of the Lord (*a ;ggeloß kuri/ou*) not the Lord

³⁵See Braxton, 131-132.

³⁶See B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 95-96; J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 56-59.

³⁷H. P. Smith, "Ethnological Parallels to Exodus IV. 24-26," *JBL* 25 (1906): 15, also notes the redemptive efficacy of the blood of circumcision.

³⁸There are similarities between the two. 1) Redemption from death through blood; 2) touching with blood (Both used the same verb *ogn* – Ex 4.25 and 12.22). Cf. Sarna, *Genesis*, 125.

(חַיְיָ), as the attacker, refusing to follow the clear indication of the Hebrew text regarding the identity of the attacker. According to LXX, Zipporah circumcised the foreskin of her son and said to the angel that εἴσθη τοῦ αἵματος τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου (4:25). Then the angel departed from Moses because (διό/τι) she so spoke. The translators' departure from the Hebrew text, translating γίλλ ἡδ; τὰα ΜυἸμ ; δ_ΝΑτSj ("you are a bridegroom of blood to me") into εἴσθη τοῦ αἵματος τῆς περιτομῆς τοῦ παιδίου μου ("the blood of my son's circumcision is staunched"),³⁹ indicates that the redemptive blood of circumcision was significant for the translator(s). It is also to be noted that the translator(s) put the causal conjunctive διό/τι between the words of Zipporah and the departure of the angel. This indicates that Zipporah's circumcision of her son caused the departure of the angel from her husband and thus saved him from death.⁴⁰ Thus we can conclude that the Septuagint interpreted Zipporah's circumcision of her son as a redemptive rite for the guilt of Moses.

The belief in the redemptive efficacy of circumcision was also developed in later Judaism. The Targums interpreted Zipporah's circumcision of her son as a redemptive rite.⁴¹ Thus, in *Tg. Onq. Ex* 4:25-26, Zipporah circumcised her son and said "May my husband be given to us by the blood of this circumcision" and "But for the blood of this circumcision, my husband had merited death." Here it is not difficult to think that the blood of circumcision had vicarious redemptive efficacy. The point is explicit in *Frg. Tg. Ex* 4:25 ("Now may the blood of this circumcision atone for the guilt of my husband") and 4:26 ("How beloved is the blood of this circumcision which has

³⁹G. Vermes, "Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-25," in *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 180, writes, "Although the sense of εἴσθη is not at first sight obvious, a similar use of ἰϕσθημι in Luke viii. 44 shows that it should be translated 'staunched'."

⁴⁰Vermes, "Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-25," 181, notes, "Moses was delivered from death by the expiatory virtue of the blood of the circumcision?" Hall, "Circumcision," 1028, writes, "The blood of circumcision atones for the guilt of Moses, thus warding off the angel of destruction who seeks to kill him."

⁴¹The following pages dealing with the Targumim interpretation of Ex 4:24-26 are indebted to the provocative study of Vermes, "Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-25." I use his translation of the texts.

saved my husband from the hand of the Angel of Death”). The same thought is indicated in *Tg. Ps.-J. Ex 4:25* – “May now the blood of this circumcision atone for my husband” and 4:26b – “How beloved is the blood of this circumcision which has saved my husband from the hand of the Destroying Angel.” Here again it is clear that the sacrificial blood of circumcision was understood to have salvific force. The same point can be found in *Tg. Neof. Ex 4:25-26* which is almost identical with the *Frg. Tg. Ex 4:25-26* and *Tg. Ps.-J. Ex 4:25-26*. Thus we can safely infer that the targumic exegesis of Ex 4:24-26 reveals that the salvific efficacy was ascribed to circumcision as a redemptive rite for sin.⁴² If the targumic tradition originated in the third century BCE,⁴³ it is likely that the tradition was widespread in the later Second Temple period.

The salvific power and merit of Zipporah’s circumcision of her son is also found in *Exod. Rab. 5.8*:⁴⁴

And Zipporah took a flint. . . How did she know that Moses was in trouble because of circumcision? Because the Angel came and swallowed Moses from his head to the place of circumcision. When she saw that the Angel had swallowed him to that place, she understood that he was in trouble because of the commandment of circumcision. She knew how great was **the power of circumcision** because he could not swallow him further.

So immediately, she cut off. . . She said: You will give my husband back to me by the merit of this blood. Behold, I have fulfilled the commandment. Immediately, the Angel departed from him. Then she said: Bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision. She said: How great is **the merit of circumcision**! For my husband deserved to be punished with death because he neglected to observe the commandment of circumcision. **Without it he would not have been saved**

There are several other indications that seem to refer to the salvific efficacy of circumcision. The significance is hinted in *Jub. 15.28-32*: God sanctified Israel by means of circumcision so that they might be with him and with his holy angels (15.27, 31). These texts imply that circumcision is a mark that testifies Israelites as the sanctified people of God who can draw near to the presence of God. Moreover, in the passage circumcision signifies God’s rule and protection of the Jews

⁴²McEleney, “Conversion, Circumcision and the Law,” 334-345. T. R. Schreiner, “Circumcision” (Ph. D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1983), 104-105; Vermes, “Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-25,” 183.

⁴³Vermes, “Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-25,” 184, argues, “The date of its origin may, therefore, safely be placed approximately in the third century BC.”

⁴⁴The similar thought is reflected in *Mek. 2.169-170*.

from evil spirits (15.32). In short, as Hall rightly notes, circumcision is of salvific effect in the sense that “Circumcision removes Israelites from the dominion of evil, places them under God’s reign, and sanctifies them to experience God’s presence with the holy angels who were created circumcised.”⁴⁵

Another indication that refers to the salvific efficacy of circumcision is to be found in the traditional Jewish *mohel*’s blessing recited at the time of circumcision. The blessing is as follows:

Blessed art Thou, Lord our God, King of the universe, who sanctified the beloved in the womb, and set a statute in his flesh, and stamped his descendants with the sign of the holy covenant, Therefore, as a reward for this, O Living God, our Portion and our Rock, command [or the living God . . . commanded] that **the beloved of our flesh shall be delivered from the pit, for the sake of His covenant which He set in our flesh**. Blessed art Thou, Lord, who makes a covenant.⁴⁶

According to Flusser and Safrai, the blessing “expresses the idea that circumcision saves the circumcised infant from destruction . . . that circumcision saves one from mortal danger.”⁴⁷ It is striking that circumcision is closely bound up with God’s sanctification, seal, and salvation. The blessing therefore suggests that the salvific efficacy of circumcision was prevalent in the later Second Temple period because the blessing was probably customary in the period.⁴⁸

The apotropaic nature of circumcision can also be found in the *Damascus Document* (CD 16.4-6: “And on the day when a man accepts on himself to return to the Torah of Moses, the angel Mastema leaves him if he fulfills his word; for this reason Abraham was circumcised on the day of his knowledge”). It seems that the author relates entrance into the Qumran community with Abraham’s circumcision, which frees

⁴⁵Hall, “Circumcision,” 1028.

⁴⁶*Tosefta Ber.* 6, 13; *Pal. Tal.* 9.4; *Bab. Tal. Sabb.* 137 b. These are cited from L. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996), 112. Cf. D. Flusser and S. Safrai, “Who Sanctified the Beloved in the Womb?,” *Immanuel* 11 (1980): 50.

⁴⁷Flusser and Safrai, 52.

⁴⁸Flusser and Safrai, 51, argues that the blessing recited at the time of circumcision was popular in the Second Temple period not only because the poetic language of the blessing points to the fact but also because the expression “sealed” in the blessing is already found in the Aramaic “Testament of Levi” in the story of Schechem which dates from the second century BCE and occurs in Paul’s epistle to the Romans (Rom 4:11).

the circumcised person from the dominion of Prince Mastema.⁴⁹ For the author circumcision has a salvific power requiring Prince Mastema to leave the circumcised man.

Furthermore, the relationship between perfection and circumcision is found in *Tg. Ps.-J.* The author translated Gen 17:1 as follows. “Worship before me and be perfect in the flesh.” It seems clear that *Tg. Ps.-J.* connects circumcision of the flesh with perfection. The same interpretation is also found in *m. Ned.* 3.11 (cf. *Sabb.* 19.23; *Gen. Rab.* 11.4; 46.1, 4). Rabbi Judah says, “Great is circumcision for despite all the religious duties which Abraham our father fulfilled, he was not called ‘perfect’ until he was circumcised, as it is written, Walk before me and be thou perfect.”⁵⁰ Here again circumcision is closely related to perfection.⁵¹ Probably Rabbi Judah understood Abraham’s circumcision as the climactic act of his devotion to God. If the targumic tradition originated in the first century BCE, it is fair to say that perfection was regarded as a benefit of circumcision in first century Judaism.⁵²

To sum up, all the texts examined above strongly suggest that the redemptive and apotropaic significance of circumcision was one strong line of tradition within Judaism. The Septuagint and all the Targums understood Zipporah’s circumcision of her son as a redemptive and apotropaic rite that saves one from death. We have also seen that several other Jewish sources imply the salvific efficacy of circumcision.⁵³ It is thus fair to say that the idea of salvific (redemptive)

⁴⁹Hall, “Circumcision,” 1028, likewise maintains, “Circumcision removes one from the wicked sphere and places one in the sphere of God; entering the community resembles Abraham’s circumcision in that it frees one from the Angel of Enmity (CD 16.4-6).” See also Flusser and Safrai, 49.

⁵⁰The translation is from J. Neusner, *The Tosefta*, vols. 2-6 (New York: Ktav, 1977-1981).

⁵¹Cf. O. Betz, “Beschneidung,” *TRE* 5.718 [716-722]; Christiansen, 41-42, 282; Hansen, 172, 195; Martyn, 292-294.

⁵²Pace Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 49, who claims, “we never find this ‘perfection’ motif in the context of Hellenistic Jewish apologetic.”

⁵³We can also find the salvific significance of circumcision in later rabbinic teaching. Later Judaism claimed that “no person who is circumcised will go down to Gehenna” (e.g. *Gen. Rab.* 48.18; *Exod. Rab.* 5.19 (81c)). According to later rabbinic teaching, circumcision is a guarantee of a share in the world to come and of salvation from the fires of Ge-Hinnom (cf. H. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testamen aus Talmud und Midrash*, 6 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1926-1963), 1.119). Hoffman, 96-110, observes the close relationship between the blood of circumcision

efficacy of circumcision was prevalent in later Second Temple Judaism.⁵⁴ In which case, it is likely that Jews in Paul's days believed in the salvific efficacy of circumcision on the basis of the redemptive nature of circumcision.⁵⁵

The Salvific Efficacy of Circumcision in Romans and Acts

Paul's letter to the Romans likewise hints at the salvific significance of circumcision. Paul's statement concerning the benefit of circumcision in Rom 2:25 (peritomh\ me«n ga»r wófelei e a»n no/mon praçsshøß) and 3:1 (h· ti÷ß hJ wófe÷leia thvß peritomhvß) suggests that the Jews of Paul's day believed that circumcision removes Israelites from the eschatological wrath of God (1:18) and from God's judgment (2:3).⁵⁶ In 2:25-29, Paul contests the salvific value of circumcision that protects circumcised Jews from the wrath and judgment of God.⁵⁷ The Jewish interlocutor would have argued that Jews have the salvific advantage of circumcision.⁵⁸ He could have argued that circumcision is of benefit for rescuing the Jews from the power of sin (3:9) and the judgment of God (2:1-11; 3:19) because it is a mark of God's covenant people. So it may be fairly claimed that many Jews probably believed that circumcision gives the circumcised salvific benefit. They may well have assumed, as the author of *Jubilees* did, that circumcision sanctifies the circumcised and enables them to draw near to the presence of God without any

and salvation in later Rabbinic Judaism, in particular in *Pirque Rabbi Eliezer*. He concludes, "The Rabbis replaced the fertility symbolism of the Bible with blood as a symbol of salvation" (p. 109). Vermes, "Circumcision and Exodus IV 24-25," 190-191, also notes that the interpretation of the redemptive virtue of the blood of circumcision is closely bound up with the redemptive blood of the Passover lamb in later Judaism (*Mek.* 1.33-34; *Exod. Rab.* 19.7). Thus it seems clear that later Judaism ascribed salvific efficacy to circumcision. For the salvific merit of circumcision in Rabbinic Judaism, see Hoffman, 111-135.

⁵⁴Cf. McEleney, 334.

⁵⁵Hall, "Circumcision," 1028, likewise maintains that many of the Jews would have believed that "Circumcision atones for guilt as a sacrifice, transfers one from the realm of the deceiving, destroying angels to the realm of blessing, and sanctifies one for participation in heavenly worship in God's presence."

⁵⁶Most commentators of Paul's letter to the Romans have not paid sufficient attention to the theme of the benefit of circumcision.

⁵⁷D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 167.

⁵⁸J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38a (Dallas, TX: Word, 1998), 121.

hindrance. Paul argues against the salvific effect of circumcision by means of the antithesis between circumcision of the flesh and that of heart and between circumcision *ejn pneu/mati* and that (*ejn gra/mmat.i*).⁵⁹ He seems to contend that physical circumcision is irrelevant to salvation from the wrath of God (1:18) and justification,⁶⁰ and has become valueless because the true circumcision is the circumcision of the heart in the Spirit (Rom 2:29).⁶¹ In other words, circumcision does not guarantee protection from the wrath and judgment of God because Jews and Gentiles are equally “under the power of sin” (3:9) and subject to God’s wrath (1:18).⁶² Moreover, Paul argues that circumcision is irrelevant for the blessing of the forgiveness of sin (4:1-12). On the contrary, the blessing is given to those who believe. We can infer from Paul’s critique of the salvific benefit of circumcision that the Jews (as represented by the Jewish interlocutor) of Paul’s day believed in the salvific efficacy of circumcision.

What then is the benefit of circumcision that Paul has in mind in Rom 3:1-2? Although he could list more,⁶³ he actually lists only one item, that is the oracles of God.⁶⁴ What are the other benefits of circumcision that Paul had in mind? Since Paul links the benefit of circumcision with the advantage of the Jew (3:1), probably he had in mind the prerogatives of Jews as the benefits of circumcision. He seems to have returned to the subject in Rom 9:4-5 where he lists the seven prerogatives of Jews.⁶⁵ The seven prerogatives are adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises,

⁵⁹For a detailed exposition of the antitheses, see J. M. G. Barclay, “Paul and Philo on Circumcision,” *NTS* 44 (1998): 551-555.

⁶⁰E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 71-77.

⁶¹Barclay, “Paul and Philo on Circumcision,” 546, argues that for Paul circumcision “is simply not worth counting as a circumcision; it has become an entirely superfluous phenomenon.”

⁶²Dunn, “What was the Issue between Paul and ‘Those of the Circumcision’?,” 311, writes, “Before the power of sin and the judgement of God . . . circumcision provides no guarantee.”

⁶³This is suggested by “much,” “in every way,” and “first of all” (3.1-2).

⁶⁴The oracles of God probably refer to the promises uttered by God. For bibliography, see Moo, *Romans*, 182.

⁶⁵Several commentators have observed it. E.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 1.326; Moo, 181.

and the patriarchs. So it is likely that Paul had in mind the seven prerogatives of Jews as the benefits of circumcision.

Acts 15:1 and 5 also hint at the salvific efficacy of circumcision within first century Judaism. Acts 15:1 tells us, $\tau\iota\sigma\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ $\kappa\alpha\tau\epsilon\lambda\gamma\omicron/\nu\tau\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ $\alpha\acute{\omicron}\rho\omicron\ \backslash$ $\theta\upsilon\upsilon\varsigma$ $\text{Ioudai}\div\alpha\varsigma$ ϵ $\text{di}\div\text{daskon}$ $\text{tou}\backslash\varsigma$ $\alpha\acute{\omicron}\delta\epsilon\lambda\phi\omicron\ \backslash\varsigma$ $\omicron\tau\tau\iota$, ϵ $\alpha\gg\text{n}$ $\text{mh}\backslash$ $\text{peritmhqh}\upsilon\tau\epsilon$ tw^{\wedge} $\epsilon\ \text{¶}\text{qei}$ tw^{\wedge} $\text{Mwu}^{\prime\prime}\text{se}\div\text{w}\varsigma$, $\omicron\upsilon\text{j}$ du/nasqe $\text{swqh}\upsilon\text{nai}$. Acts 15:5 clearly tells us that some believers who belonged to the group of the Pharisees insisted that it is necessary for the Gentile believers to undergo circumcision (deiv $\text{perite}/\text{mnein}$ $\text{auj}\text{tou}/\varsigma$) in order to receive in full the salvific benefits provided by God for his people.⁶⁶ Why did they require circumcision of the Gentile believers as a basis or condition of salvation? Probably because they believed in the salvific efficacy of circumcision (i.e. salvation through circumcision) on the basis of the Judaic tradition of the salvific efficacy of circumcision. Some believers who belonged to the group of the Pharisees had a position similar to the authors of *Frg. Tg. Ex 4:26*, *Tg. Ps.-J. Ex 4:26*, and *Exod. Rab. 5.8* on the point that they regarded circumcision as the basis of salvation.

The Salvific Efficacy of Circumcision in Galatians

It is very important to note that the salvific efficacy of circumcision is indicated in Galatians. First of all, it is striking that there is a similarity between *Tg. Ps.-J.* (cf. *m. Ned. 3.11*; *Sabb. 19.23*; *Gen. Rab. 11.4*; *46.1, 4*) and Gal 3:3. In Gal 3:3 Paul says, ϵ $\text{narxa}\zeta\text{menoi}$ pneu/mati nuvn $\text{sarki}\ll$ ϵ pitelei sqe (“Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected (ϵ pitelei sqe) by means of flesh?”).⁶⁷ Probably the word sa/rx refers to the

⁶⁶C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostle*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 2.699.

⁶⁷The verb $\epsilon\text{jp}\text{iteleiv}\text{sqe}$ can be taken as passive or middle. Most commentators have rendered it as middle. In the middle voice the sense is “are you now ending with the flesh” (NRSV; Burton, *Galatians*, 148; R. Mahoney, $\epsilon\text{jp}\text{itelei}/\text{w}$, *EDNT* 2.42). In the passive voice the sense is “are you now being perfected by the flesh” (NEB; Betz, *Galatians*, 136; Martyn, 284; Matera, 112-113) or “will you be completed with the flesh” (J. D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993], 155, Witherington, *Grace in Galatia*, 197). However, the passive

circumcised flesh signifying Jewish privileged ethnic identity as God's people (cf. Gal 6:12-13; Rom 2:28; Phil 3:3-5; Col 2:11, 13; Eph 2:11-12).⁶⁸ So, it is possible that the agitators had a position similar to the author of *Tg. Ps.-J.* and R. Judah.⁶⁹ It is also noteworthy that James might have thought of circumcision as the basis of Abraham's perfection (εἰς τὴν ἐργασίαν ἡ περὶ τὴν ἐπιτελείωσιν—Jas 2:22), if “works” include circumcision. Provided that the agitators in Galatia were one with τῆς ἀποστολῆς ἰακώβου (Gal 2:12),⁷⁰ they may well have shared the view of James.⁷¹ It is possible that Jewish-Christian circles inherited the Jewish tradition that connects Abraham's circumcision and perfection and taught the Galatians to achieve perfection through circumcision as Abraham (the paradigmatic proselyte) did. We may justly infer, therefore, that the agitators argued for the necessity of circumcision for perfection.⁷²

is more probable because Paul is thinking of the flesh as the means of perfection as *sarki* / (“instrumental dative”) indicates (Cf. BAGD, s.v. Martyn, 284). Another issue is the meaning of the verb ἐπιτελείωσθε. Does it mean “are you being ended or completed” or “are you being perfected”? The second translation is more probable because the Jewish tradition regarding perfection as a benefit of circumcision suggests that the Galatians desired to be perfected by circumcision. Cf. Martyn, 289-294.

⁶⁸ The point is clearly indicated both in Gen 17:13, Sir 44.20 (“the covenant in the flesh”) and in the traditional Jewish *mohel*'s blessing, in which circumcision is equivalent to “His covenant which He set in our flesh.” Cf. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 180, n. 4; Burton, 148; Dunn, “Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but...,” 89-92; R. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), 99-100; Martyn, 290-292, 294; Witherington, 214. Thus “flesh” does not mean “human effort” (*pace* NIV; Longenecker, 103) or “human nature in its fallenness” (*pace* Fung, 134).

⁶⁹Cf. Brinsmead, 79-81; Jewett, “The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation,” 207; Martyn, 285; Oepke, 101.

⁷⁰Although the both groups might not be identical, at least both are in common in maintaining circumcision; τῆς ἀποστολῆς ἰακώβου are possibly τοῦ ἐκ περιτομῆς (2.12).

⁷¹Cf. Betz, 134; Martyn, 293; Witherington, 214.

⁷²Martyn, 294, writes, “We can be confident that they spoke about the need for perfection in the form of victory over the Impulsive Desire of the Flesh, and about circumcision of the *flesh* as the initial point in the line leading to that perfection.” Jewett, “The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation,” 207, argues, “At first glance it may seem strange that a Hellenistic congregation would consider undergoing circumcision simply to enter the promised people of Israel. It may be, however, that the contact with their own Hellenistic aspirations was at the point of the promise of perfection which the Judaic tradition attached to circumcision.” *Contra* Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 49-50; Donaldson, “The Gospel That I Proclaim among the

Secondly, another indication that refers to the salvific efficacy of circumcision is to be found in Gal 5:6. Paul says, *e n ga»r Cristw^ Ihsouv ou;te peritomh/ ti i scuei ou;te aōkrobusti÷a aōlla» pi÷stiß di aōga;phß e nergoume÷nh*. He claims that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision but *pi÷stiß di aōga;phß e nergoume÷nh* is of effect or force (*ijscu/ei*).⁷³ Paul argues that circumcision is not effective for justification.⁷⁴ Since here Paul argues against the agitators' argument for circumcision, one can infer that the agitators argued that circumcision is powerful or effective (*peritomh/ ijscu/ei*) for justification. It is also quite important to note that there is a close relationship between Gal 5:6 and *Exod. Rab. 5.8* in terms of the salvific power of circumcision. This strengthens the suggestion that the agitators believed in the salvific efficacy of circumcision effecting salvation and righteousness to the circumcised.⁷⁵

Thirdly, the salvific efficacy of circumcision is also hinted in 6:15 (cf. 1 Cor 7:19). Paul says, *ou;te ga»r peritomh/ ti÷ e stin ou;te aōkrobusti÷a aōlla» kainh\ kti÷siß*. Paul argues against the agitators' boasting in the flesh, i.e. pride in Jewish ethnic identity and prerogative as God's people⁷⁶ by saying that circumcision is nothing (*ou;te peritomh/ ti÷ e stin*). We can infer from this that the agitators argued that circumcision is something (*ti÷ e stin*). What does Paul mean by *ti÷ e stin*? The expression occurs in several places in Paul's letters (1 Cor 3:7; 10:19; cf. 7:19). What Paul was trying to say in 1 Cor 3:7 is that the one who gives the growth of the Corinthian church is not Apollos and Paul but God Himself. In 1 Cor 10:19 Paul means that food sacrificed to idols and an idol itself are not effective. So the expression in 6:15 describes something effective. Moreover, the verb *e stin* in 1 Cor 7:19 seems to mean "to be effective." We can justly infer, therefore,

Gentiles' (Gal 2.2)," 179-180.

⁷³ The verb *ijscu/w* can refer to "have power" (Mark 5:4; Acts 19:20; John 21:6), "to be able" (Phil 4:13), and "to be of effect or force" (Gal 5:6; Heb 9:17; James 5:16). The best translation of the verb *ἰσχύει* in Gal 5:6 is "is of effect or force." Cf. Betz, *Galatians*, 263 n. 94; Dunn, *Galatians*, 270. Most commentators fail to see the "power" character of the verb.

⁷⁴Cf. Fung, 228.

⁷⁵Christiansen, 283.

⁷⁶Dunn, "Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . .," 90-92.

that Paul argues against the salvific efficacy of circumcision. Since Paul argues against the agitators' view on circumcision in 6:15, it follows that the agitators argued the salvific effectiveness of circumcision.

In light of the discussion above, it is reasonable to claim that the Jewish belief in the salvific efficacy of circumcision was the theological rationale of the agitators. Since, as most scholars agree,⁷⁷ the agitators were Jewish Christians, they presumably knew the tradition. If so, they probably argued that circumcision was necessary for salvation because it is a means of redemption. It is also likely that the agitators preached, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1),⁷⁸ as "men came down from Judea" did, for the agitators are similar to them.⁷⁹ It is therefore hardly to be doubted that they required the Galatians of circumcision as a condition of salvation because they believed that one could not be saved except by means of circumcision.⁸⁰ The agitators might have taught that the Galatians could be protected from the

⁷⁷E.g. Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*, 86-87; J. Bligh, *Galatians* (London: St. Paul, 1969), 35; Bruce, *Galatians*, 25-27; Dunn, *Galatians*, 11; I.-G. Hong, *The Law in Galatian*, JSNTSup 81 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 120; G. Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia. A Study in Early Christian Theology*, SNTSMS 35 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 1-19; W. G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975), 298-301; Longenecker, *Galatians*, xcv; G. Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 99-103; Martyn, 120-126; Matera, 10; H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 16-18; Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 18. Interestingly, J. B. Tyson, "Paul's Opponents in Galatia," *NovT* 10 (1968): 241-254, argues that Paul's opponents in Galatia are Jewish Christians native to Galatia. F. R. Crownfield, "The Singular Problem of the Dual Galatians," *JBL* 64 (1945): 491-500, claims that Paul's opponents in Galatia are Jewish Christian syncretists.

⁷⁸T. R. Schreiner, "Circumcision," in *DPL*, 138.

⁷⁹Probably the agitators in Galatia, "certain individuals came from Judea" (Acts 15:1; cf. 15:5), and "the false brothers" (Gal 2:4) were from the same group οἱ ἰουδαῖοι περιτομῆς (Gal 2:12; cf. Acts 11:2; Tit 1:10). Cf. Martyn, 195.

⁸⁰J. McHugh, "Galatians 2.11-14: Was Peter Right?," in *Paulus und das anitke Judentum*, WUNT58, ed. M. Hengel and U. Heckel (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1991), 324, rightly observes, "There is no doubt that Paul's opponents are Jewish Christians who preached both the necessity of circumcision and the need to observe the Law as conditions of salvation, and they were striving to convince the Gentiles of these doctrines." See also Schreiner, 138.

eschatological wrath of God and delivered from the present evil age (cf. Gal 1:4) by means of circumcision which saves God's people from destruction and mortal danger and marks God's rule. Since the significance of circumcision as a redemptive rite was prevalent in the Second Temple period, the agitators probably believed that one could be redeemed by means of circumcision. They also might have taught that circumcision secures and guarantees salvation not only because it signifies God's rule and protection and admits the circumcised to the presence of God but also because it is a guarantee of a share in the world to come. For them one achieves righteousness by virtue of circumcision. In short, they wanted the Galatians to get circumcised on the basis of the saving efficacy of circumcision and preached the Galatians that one could not be saved without circumcision.

CONCLUSION AND COROLLARY

To recap what we have said so far, the agitators' theological rationale for circumcision was probably in accordance with the Jewish Scripture and the circumcision tradition of Paul's days. According to the agitators, circumcision is the sign of God's eternal covenant playing a role as the identity marker of the people of God (§1.) and an entrance requirement into the community of Israel (§2.). Most importantly, they believed that circumcision is effective and profitable for salvation (§3.). For them circumcision defines the members of the covenant community and ensures the benefit of salvation. This is why the agitators hold together circumcision and Christ and thus would have argued that Christ was not by itself sufficient for salvation but that circumcision was also necessary; salvation is based on both circumcision and Christ. Furthermore, this is why the agitators wanted to make a good showing in the circumcised flesh (6:12) and why they boast in the circumcised flesh of the Galatians (6:13). It is also probable that the agitators, like the Jewish interlocutor in Romans (Rom 2:25; 3:1; cf. 9:4-5), argued the salvific benefits of circumcision (peritomh/ wōfeleiv). Although we cannot know for sure what kind of benefits the agitators taught the Galatians because Galatians itself does not tell us what they are precisely, we can infer it from the salvific benefits reflected in LXX, *Jubilees*, targums, Acts, Romans, and Galatians. The benefits could be redemption, sonship of Abraham, participation in Abraham's blessing and his inheritance, adoption,

perfection, and righteousness. Since it is probable that the agitators taught these benefits to the Galatians, it is likely that Paul deals with most of these themes because the agitators introduced them to the Galatians.⁸¹ In light of the observations above, we can justly conclude that the agitators tried to persuade the Galatians to get circumcised through pointing out the salvific benefits of circumcision and thus succeeded in persuading many of the Galatians to consider seriously accepting circumcision.

The soteriological function and salvific benefits of circumcision are significant for understanding Paul's reason for his opposition to the circumcision of the Galatians. It is to be said that the issue is not concerned with the figurative significance of circumcision.⁸² It is clear that all of Paul's references to the rite or act of circumcision in Galatians are literal (2:3; 5:2, 3, 11; 6:12, 13), not figurative (cf. Rom 2:25-29; Phil 3:3; Col 2:11).⁸³ This indicates that literal circumcision was the issue between Paul and the agitators. What was at stake was the idea that physical circumcision is necessary for the Gentiles for their salvation. In particular, what was sensitive for Paul was the agitators' claim that circumcision is effective for salvation. In short, the issue was whether circumcision is valid and effective for becoming God's people.

It is important to remember that Paul's objection to circumcision is not so much concerned with the significance of circumcision as the mark of the covenant people. It is clear that Paul did not deny the practice of circumcision itself (1 Cor 9:20) and according to Acts he

⁸¹Unless we have very good reasons to the contrary, it is reasonable to think that Paul brought out the themes (e.g. redemption, sonship, perfection, inheritance, righteousness) because they were raised by the opponents. Most scholars think that the agitators first introduced the issues of Gentiles sharing in Abraham's inheritance and becoming descendants of Abraham in the Galatian context (e.g. Barrett, "The Allegory of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar in the Argument of Galatians," 118-131; Brinsmead, 107-114; J. J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and Their Background* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 82; Others take Paul's mention of perfection (3:3) as an indication of the agitators' theological rationale for circumcision (e.g. Brinsmead, 79-81; Jewett, "The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation," 206-207; D. J. Lull, *The Spirit in Galatia: Paul's Interpretation of Pneuma as Divine Power*, SBLDS 49 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980), 31; Martyn, 285; Oepke, 101).

⁸²Circumcision of lips (Ex 6:12, 30); uncircumcised ears (Jer 6:10); uncircumcised in flesh and heart (Eze 44:7, 9); uncircumcised heart (Lev 26:41); circumcision of heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25-26; cf. Philo *Spec. Leg.* 1.8)

⁸³Martyn, 194.

had Timothy circumcised when Paul needed him for ministry among the Jews (Acts 16:3). As Dunn rightly notes, “It was presumably not so much that he [Paul] objected to circumcision as the mark of the covenant people: ‘the circumcision’ in [Gal] 2.7, 9 is a fairly neutral characterisation; and later on Paul was happy to affirm the ‘sign or seal’ [Rom 4.11] significance of Abraham’s circumcision.”⁸⁴ The point is reflected in 1 Cor 7:18 (“Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision” – NRSV). However, he vigorously opposed circumcision when it was regarded as an essential means to salvation. For to accept the soteriological validity and salvific effectiveness of circumcision meant for Paul a rejection of the ultimate efficacy and sufficiency of the saving work of Christ as well as the salvific benefits of Christ. Paul’s opponents urged the Galatians to accept circumcision because they regarded circumcision as essential for their salvation.⁸⁵ In complete contrast Paul regarded the Galatian’s acceptance of circumcision as apostasy from God (1:6) and disobedience to the truth of the gospel (5:7); it meant to deny God’s grace through Christ and the Spirit, which is wholly sufficient for their salvation. Therefore, Paul rejected circumcision not for social⁸⁶ or ecclesiological⁸⁷ reasons, but because of the salvific efficacy and benefits attributed to circumcision (§2.1.3.).

The soteriological function and salvific benefits of circumcision as an important reason for Paul’s opposition to circumcision is significant

⁸⁴Dunn, “Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but . . .,” 84.

⁸⁵Augustine, in his commentary on Galatians, thinks that circumcision is indifferent unless one relies on it for salvation. See M. F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 71. Most commentators also note the point. E.g. Betz, *Galatians*, 259; Bruce, *Galatians*, 229; Ridderbos, 188; Z. A. Ziesler, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Epworth, 1992), 74.

⁸⁶Pace Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in Ancient World*, 155, who thinks that Paul decided not to require circumcision of Christian proselytes because of the general hostility of the Graeco-Roman world to circumcision.

⁸⁷It is too simplistic to suggest that Paul rejects or abandons circumcision to make it easier for Gentiles to join the church. Pace F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 28. T. R. Schreiner, “‘Works of the Law’ in Paul,” *NovT* 33 (1991): 237-238, has rightly criticized Watson’s argument that social factors alone were the decisive reasons for Paul’s viewpoint on the law and the Jew-Gentile issue.

for further inquiry into Paul's opposition to circumcision in other of his letters (particularly Romans and Philippians). There are several places (Rom 2:25-3:2, 4:1-12; Phil 3:1-9)⁸⁸ where Paul speaks of the salvific benefits of circumcision as he tackles the issue of circumcision. It seems that Paul argues against his opponents' view on the salvific benefit of circumcision. Furthermore, one of the critical issues in Paul's mission to the Gentiles was the salvific efficacy of circumcision, which is evident from Acts 15:1, 5. This indicates that the salvific efficacy and benefit of circumcision is both a crucial concern for Paul and the main target of his attack on circumcision. While most commentators have pointed out that the focus of Paul's opposition to circumcision is on the Jewish notion of circumcision as an identity marker of God's people and an entrance requirement into the covenant community,⁸⁹ they have not paid sufficient attention to the salvific efficacy of circumcision.⁹⁰ Therefore, I would suggest that if we are fully to appreciate how it is that circumcision could become such a crucial concern for Paul and why he vehemently opposed to circumcision, then we need to consider the salvific efficacy and benefit of circumcision as the most important reason for Paul's opposition to circumcision.

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⁸⁸In Phil 3:2-10 Paul implies the antithesis between the profit of the flesh (circumcision) and the profit of Christ. The surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus makes the profit of the flesh (i.e. circumcision) valueless and rubbish (3:8).

⁸⁹Notably Dunn, "'Neither Circumcision nor Uncircumcision, but ...'" 85.

⁹⁰While Christiansen, 283, notes, "Paul only rejects circumcision in its function of conveying perfection," she overlooks other salvific effects of circumcision.

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