

JONATHAN MORGAN

Circumcision of the Spirit in Cyril of Alexandria

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146

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Jonathan S. Morgan

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Mohr Siebeck

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Abbreviations

Series or Major Works

ABD	Freedman, David Noel, ed. <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992
ACO	Schwartz, Eduard, ed. <i>Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum</i> . Berlin: de Gruyter, 1914–1984
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina
CSCO	Chabot, Jean Baptiste, et al., eds. <i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i> . Paris, 1903
FC	Fathers of the Church
GSC	Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9 th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996
LXX	Septuagint
NPNF ¹	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1
NPNF ²	Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2
PG	Migne, Jacques-Paul, ed. <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> [=Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca]. 162 vols. Paris, 1857–1886.
PGL	Lampe, W.H. Geoffrey. <i>Patristic Greek Lexicon</i> . Oxford: Clarendon, 1961
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
TLG	Luci Berkowitz and Karl A. Squitier, eds. 3 rd ed. <i>Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: Canon of Greek Authors and Works</i> . New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Works by Cyril of Alexandria

<i>Chr. Un.</i>	<i>On the Unity of Christ</i>
<i>Com. Amos</i>	<i>Commentary on Amos</i>
<i>Com. Hab.</i>	<i>Commentary on Habakkuk</i>
<i>Com. Hos.</i>	<i>Commentary on Hosea</i>
<i>Com. Is.</i>	<i>Commentary on Isaiah</i>
<i>Com. Joel</i>	<i>Commentary on Joel</i>
<i>Com. Mic.</i>	<i>Commentary on Micah</i>
<i>Com. Mal.</i>	<i>Commentary on Malachi</i>
<i>Com. Na.</i>	<i>Commentary on Nahum</i>
<i>Com. Zech.</i>	<i>Commentary on Zechariah</i>
<i>De ador.</i>	<i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i>
<i>FL</i>	<i>Festal Letters</i>
<i>Glaph.</i>	<i>Glaphyra</i>
<i>In Jo.</i>	<i>Commentary on John</i>

1. Introduction

This book explores the way Cyril of Alexandria uses the biblical concept of circumcision to describe God's saving work through Christ and the Holy Spirit. Salvation is a multifaceted idea in Cyril's writings, and is thus difficult to identify according to modern systematic standards. This is due, in part, to the fact that there was no settled definition or formulae of salvation in the patristic period during which Cyril wrote and ministered.¹ Much like his contemporaries, Cyril never wrote a treatise describing God's work of salvation in a methodical fashion. Such a project would have seemed strange to him anyway. Christian thinkers in antiquity did not engage in the kind of "systematizing" of doctrines akin to modern Western methods. Rather, Cyril's theology tracks and develops alongside the narrative of Scripture. He recognizes the entire story of the Bible as the unfolding revelation of God's gracious action in history to restore human nature by transforming sinful humanity through the person and work of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, and subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit. Guided by this narrative, Cyril draws upon biblical language, conventions, and images to explain the saving activity of the Triune God.

The rite of circumcision (περιτομή) is, for Cyril, one of the most important biblical metaphors that illumines the fullness salvation. The word occurs hundreds of times throughout Cyril's corpus, often in biblical quotes or brief asides with little development. Sometimes he uses "circumcision" as a pejorative stand-in for the Jewish people, often coupled with a derisive tone.² However, there are notable occasions in his commentaries and festal letters where Cyril carefully examines circumcision and puts it forth as a multivalent symbol of salvation. Like nearly all Christians of his era, he maintains that circumcision as a surgical

¹ See David Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), v, who asserts that the lack of soteriological pronouncements from the councils of the early church signify not a lack of interest in salvation, "but to the fact that 'Jesus Christ is Savior' was the one doctrine which served as the irreducible platform for all other doctrines." Surveys on patristic soteriology include H.E.W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: Mowbray, 1952); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition, vol. I* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975); Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009); Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: University Press, 2006).

² Cyril's anti-Judaism is well known. Below I will consider in what ways his negative sentiments of the Jews contributed to his view of circumcision.

procedure required under the Mosaic Law no longer applies under the new covenant. He mocks the Jews who continue the tradition and affirm its ancient function as an identity marker of God's people. Instead, Cyril insists that in light of the Incarnation circumcision has been transformed into an image of God's saving acts through Christ and the Spirit.³ It isn't about the removal of a man's foreskin, but the renewal of his mind. Because circumcision appears throughout Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments, he assumes its important role within the trajectory of salvation history. Cyril therefore treats circumcision as he does other images, institutions, or events in the Law: it serves as a type that points to spiritual realities fulfilled in Christ and actualized by the Holy Spirit. The spiritual realities to which circumcision points, according to Cyril, are soteriological in nature.

Where Cyril extensively treats circumcision in his writings, it functions as a unifying concept bringing together diverse soteriological themes such as justification by faith, purification, and deification. Cyril's doctrine of salvation is rich and many-sided. His references are so frequent and his descriptions so varied that providing a thorough, systematic account of his soteriology is extraordinary challenging. My aim, then, is to demonstrate that for Cyril circumcision serves as a theologically broad concept describing salvation's multiple effects as revealed in Scripture. Robert Wilken observes that "all biblical commentators invest certain texts, certain terms, and certain images with an interpretive power that transcends their specific setting."⁴ I suggest that circumcision is one such term and image in which Cyril invests "interpretive power" to explain the effects salvation has on humanity.

However, Cyril never states *why* circumcision is such an important *theologoumenon* for him. What motivated him to draw on this image and use it the way he does? I offer three suggestions. First, the metamorphosis of circumcision from a physical rite to a spiritual reality is already realized in Scripture. As a master of the sacred page,⁵ Cyril is especially interested in Paul's epistles where the apostle develops the relationship between the physical act of circumcision performed by hands and the one that is inward and performed by the Spirit.⁶ Cyril is also aware of Old Testament passages such as Jeremiah 4:4 that indicate a spiritual intent for circumcision beyond the physical.

³ Given Cyril's interest, whenever I speak of "circumcision" (unless otherwise noted) I mean the dynamic and symbolic relationship between physical circumcision prescribed in Judaism and spiritual circumcision, or circumcision of the Spirit, in Christianity.

⁴ Robert Wilken, "Cyril of Alexandria, Biblical Exegete," in *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2006), 856.

⁵ It is worth noting that of the ten volumes in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* that contain Cyril's literary corpus, seven contain exegetical works.

⁶ Cf. Rom 2:28–29. As I will demonstrate throughout this study, this is an important passage for Cyril.

Second, the type-reality relationship between circumcision and salvation was already well-established by the fifth century. Many of Cyril's predecessors gave considerable attention to circumcision and utilized it as a way to expound upon the mysteries of the faith. As I will show in chapter two, a range of patristic figures pre-dating Cyril who took an interest in circumcision directly or indirectly influenced him. Given Cyril's reverence for the Church's tradition, he continued to develop this biblical theme as others had before him.

Third, much of Cyril's exegesis was driven by his relationship to Judaism. Though many scholars have recognized Cyril's ire toward his Jewish neighbors, Wilken has persuasively demonstrated Cyril's ongoing consternation over the continuation of Jewish belief and practice.⁷ Like many exegetes in the early church, Cyril interpreted the Old Testament typologically. The stories, characters, institutions and events in its pages revealed God's truth in types and shadows, always pointing ahead to the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. In light of this, Cyril seems bewildered and agitated that a large Jewish community with a strong religious identity and persistent exegetical traditions continued to flourish even after Christ appeared and turned all their "types" into realities.⁸ For this reason, Cyril's exegesis is often motivated by a desire to cast Jewish exegesis and theology in a negative light by accentuating the distinction between the "bare letter" (or, literal sense) of the Old Testament with the spiritual sense of the New Testament.⁹ Cyril believed that only enemies of the truth would cling to the shadows while turning away from the light. Now that Christ has appeared as the second Adam, Cyril believed it only natural for traditional Judaism to give way to that which it had always pointed as its fulfillment.¹⁰ To persist under the Mosaic law was akin to a denial of God's revelation.

But it was not only Jewish exegesis and theology that caused Cyril disquiet. Social relations between the Jewish and Christian communities co-habiting Alexandria had become almost irreparably frayed by Cyril's episcopacy. The bishop of Alexandria displayed little charity toward anyone he considered a religious or political rival, and he had especially little patience with his Jewish neighbors. The early church historian Socrates records the infamous clash between Christians and Jews in Alexandria stemming from the public beating of a Christian

⁷ This is a major thesis of Robert Wilken in his *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004).

⁸ Athanasius, Cyril's predecessor who presided over the Alexandrian see from 328 until his death in 373, expressed a similar sentiment toward the Jews in his *De incarnatione* 33–40.

⁹ For a classic study of Cyril's interpretation of the Old Testament see Alexander Kerrigan, *Cyril of Alexandria, Interpreter of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952). For more recent account of Cyril's typology see Nathan Porter, "Letter as Spirit in Cyril of Alexandria: Typology and the Christological Defense of Literal Exegesis," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 31, no. 2 (2023): 223–251.

¹⁰ See especially chapters 4–7 in Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*.

named Hierax, a teacher of literature and one of Cyril's enthusiastic supporters.¹¹ Enraged, Cyril threatened the Jews who then responded with further retaliation. Late one night, instigators from the Jewish community sounded an alarm among the Christian populace, falsely warning that their church was on fire. When the startled, half-awake Christians emerged from their homes to save their church from destruction, a Jewish mob attacked resulting in several fatalities. Cyril's retaliation was severe. At his instigation and on account of his powerful political position, the Jews were deprived of their synagogue and banished from the city. Cyril's retribution ended the lawlessness, but his sentiments toward Jews remained deeply embittered throughout his life.

The persistent threat of Judaism in Cyril's mind may help explain why circumcision is a regular theme in many of his writings. Jews and Christians had debated the issue since the inception of the Church.¹² Given Cyril's typological exegesis of Scripture, he likely saw circumcision as one more biblical institution under the Mosaic law prefiguring its fulfillment in Christ. He often makes the same exegetical move with other Jewish observances such as the Sabbath and the sacrificial system. His intention is not only to demonstrate the continuity of salvation history between the Old and New Testaments, but specifically the superiority of Christianity over Judaism.¹³ For Cyril, the physical mark of Jewish identity provided him a way to exploit a crucial difference between Jews and Christians. Both recognized circumcision as a divine prerogative. Jews maintained the physical operation as an exercise in covenant obedience and national identity, but for Christians it referred to God's saving work that takes place in a person's heart by the activity of the Spirit. Christians held that God's command to circumcise, even when given under the Law, always prefigured an interior salvific reality. Like most Christians of his day, Cyril assumes that *physical* circumcision no longer had any soteriological relevance. The reality to which it had always pointed has now come through Christ by the Spirit.

¹¹ See Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.13, ed. Philip Schaff, *NPNF*², vol. 2 (Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1890; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 159. Various accounts of this unfortunate series of events are found in other ancient sources such as Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5905; Cassiodorus, *Historia Ecclesiastica Tripartita* 11.11; John of Nikiu, *Chronicle* 84.89–99. Of course, tension between the two groups preceded these events. For helpful analyses of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in fourth and fifth century Alexandria, see Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 9–68 and Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 121–127, 299–304.

¹² The Council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, debated whether circumcision was a necessary component to one's salvation. Though the Church came to the formal decision that circumcision was spiritually ineffective since salvation is accomplished through the grace of Christ, the debate over circumcision between Jews and Christians did not go away. In chapter two I discuss the tension that continued after the era of the apostles.

¹³ Cf. Daniel Keating, "Supercessionism in Cyril of Alexandria," *Studia Patristica* 68 (2013): 543–549.

Cyril's soteriological interpretation of circumcision has never been the subject of any serious investigation.¹⁴ Therefore, the present study will help fill this lacuna in Cyrilline scholarship by demonstrating that circumcision provided Cyril with a useful image to articulate his comprehensive soteriology. In other words, Cyril sees circumcision as a unifying concept to illustrate the many-sidedness of salvation. In order to accomplish this, I will analyze pertinent texts where he explores circumcision according to its spiritual sense. The majority of these passages are found in his commentaries and festal letters written prior to his involvement with Nestorius in 428. Therefore, my focus will be limited to circumcision texts prior to this important date. The year 428 marks a dramatic shift in the focus of his literary activities.¹⁵ The majority of works written prior to this date are largely exegetical and pastoral¹⁶ with the exception of his apologetic work *Contra Julien*.¹⁷ Those completed after 428 are dogmatic and polemical in nature with a sharp focus on Christology. Many are directed against Nestorius and his allies. Were it not for his role in the Nestorian controversy, Cyril would most likely be remembered as a powerful bishop and prolific commentator on Scripture.¹⁸ Though some have downplayed Cyril's contribution as a biblical exegete,¹⁹ recent studies have drawn attention to his interpretive eclecticism,²⁰ his

¹⁴ Everett Ferguson mentions Cyril once in his article "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41, no. 4 (1988): 485–497. Another survey on early Christian interpretations of circumcision, though without mention of Cyril, is Hervé Savon, "Le prêtre Eutrope et la 'vrai circoncision,'" *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 199 (1982): 273–302.

¹⁵ Jouassard asserts that the year 428 demarcates "deux périodes de caractère assez différent, la seconde de controverse, la première au contraire où il ne fait guère de théologie que pour sa propre satisfaction et celle de ses lecteurs, de la théologie et de l'exégèse." See Georges Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire de S. Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428," in *Mélanges E. Podechard* (Lyons: Facultés Catholiques, 1945), 172.

¹⁶ This is not to suggest that Cyril was not concerned with Christology before the Nestorian controversy. However, his battle with Nestorius forced him to articulate his Christology in a way that reveals a new level of theological nuance and grammatical sophistication. McGuckin asserts that the early writings before 428 "are largely exegetical, and his Christological ideas are more abstractly presented there than in the specific and apologetical context of the Nestorian debate." See his *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 176. On Cyril's Christology before 428 see Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique de saint Cyrille D'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne* (Lille: Facultés Catholiques, 1951), 11–16.

¹⁷ Though traditionally this work has been considered a late one in Cyril's career (cf. Jouassard), more recent scholarship has suggested a much earlier date.

¹⁸ McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria*, 4–5, maintains that during Cyril's own lifetime "he probably thought that it would be his great biblical commentaries that would earn him his immortality as a Christian thinker."

¹⁹ J. Quasten dryly observes that "[Cyril's] exegetical works form the greater but not the better part of his literary output." See his *Patrology*, vol. 3, *The Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicaea to the Council of Chalcedon* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1960), 119.

²⁰ De Margerie muses, "One is tempted to suggest that his (Cyril's) method represents a synthesis of the better elements of the two schools of Antioch and Alexandria." See Bertrand de

theologically rich hermeneutic,²¹ and what he contributes to our understanding of early Christian interpretation of Scripture.²²

Before engaging Cyril's comments on circumcision, I will provide some historical context that will illumine the *status quaestionis* for this study. In chapter one, I will provide a survey of early Christian views of circumcision that created an interpretive tradition that influenced Cyril's own perspective in significant ways. Chapters two through four constitute the core of this study. In these chapters I will explore pertinent passages written prior to the Nestorian controversy where Cyril unpacks the meaning of circumcision and its relation to salvation in the *Festal Letters*, Old Testament commentaries, and his *Commentary on John*. In the fifth and final chapter, I will compare the soteriology of the circumcision passages with one of Cyril's most mature works, *On the Unity of Christ*. This comparison will demonstrate the continuity of Cyril's soteriology between his early and later writings. The conclusion will summarize the main points of each chapter and bring them into cohesion.

Margerie, "St. Cyril of Alexandria Develops a Christological Exegesis," in *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis*, vol. 1 (Petersham: St. Bede's, 1993), 248. For a similar sentiment see John McGuckin, "Cyril of Alexandria: Bishop and Pastor," in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria*, eds. Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 209.

²¹ See especially Matthew Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford: University Press, 2014).

²² In addition to Wilken's and Kerrigan's work, other studies include Hauna Ondrey, *The Minor Prophets as Christian Scripture in the Commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2018); Lois Farag, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, A New Testament Exegete* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007); Steven McKinion, *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ* (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, trans. John Hughes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

2. Circumcision in Early Christianity

Circumcision is a prominent and complex feature in salvation history. In spite of its prominence in the biblical narrative, scholarly inquiries into its precise meaning have yielded little consensus. Shaye Cohen's judgment is apt: "Circumcision has been understood to mean almost anything – and its opposite."¹ Many scholars have investigated its theological, socio-political, and cultural dimensions in the Ancient Near East and beyond. While an exhaustive monograph on circumcision in early Christian literature remains to be written,² this chapter is a brief survey that outlines early Christian interpretations of the Jewish rite up to the end of the fourth century. Such a survey helps set the theological and hermeneutical context within which Cyril contributed his own views of circumcision. As we will see, he drew upon and developed ideas from his predecessors.

As a fifth century bishop and theologian, Cyril was a beneficiary of several hundred years of Christian (and Jewish) reflection on circumcision, particularly in light of Christ's fulfillment of the Law. Informed by his deep knowledge of Scripture and the traditions preceding him, Cyril identifies circumcision within the narrative of Scripture as a type-fulfillment motif showing that God's promises of salvation have been fulfilled in Christ. That is, physical circumcision

¹ Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7. Cohen quotes James Boon's assessment in his essay "Circumscribing Circumcision/Uncircumcision: An Essay amidst the History of Difficult Description," in *Implicit Understandings: Observing ... the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 562: "An unwieldy array of functions, features, causes, and effects has been attributed to circumcision and associated rites: age-grade bonding and generation dividing; social exchange and rivalry; spilling blood, inflicting ordeals, remaindering prepuces, occasioning stoicism ...; making boys into men, ordinary men into prophets, a people into chosen or condemned, men into women ("symbolic wounds"), phalluses into vaginas, human penises into marsupial-like ones (Australia) or rhinoceros-like ones (Borneo); to enhance or diminish virility, fertility, sacrality, holiness, or other kind of potency, either to augment or to limit population growth, and thereby curing or causing disease." See also important works by Alan Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Nina Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 88 (2000): 3–18; Jack Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85, no. 4 (1966): 473–476; Rodolph Yanney, "Feast of Circumcision of our Lord: A Biblical Patristic Study," *Coptic Church Review* 3, no. 4 (Winter: 1982): 135–141.

² Cohen, 244, n. 38. Though not a monograph, the article by Hervé Savon, "Le Prêtre Eutrope et la 'vraie circoncision,'" *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 199, no. 4 (1982): 273–302 outlines the evolution of circumcision in Christian thought.

points beyond itself to a spiritual work; the removal of foreskin foreshadows the removal of sin. Circumcision eventually became in Christian tradition a multi-valent symbol to describe the many dimensions of salvation. However, I will argue in the subsequent chapters that Cyril's view of circumcision is more expansive and includes more aspects of salvation than what we find in his predecessors. Because space does not permit an all-inclusive survey, I will consider select passages from authors who most likely had an influence on Cyril's theology and exegesis. Instead of presenting these writers chronologically, I group them into two categories. The first consists of exegetes and theologians from Alexandria spanning the first to the fourth century. I will examine this group first because, insofar as they make up Cyril's more proximate theological heritage, they have more immediate impact on his thought. The second category of writers I will explore is Christian thinkers outside Alexandria ranging from the second to the fifth century whose writings on circumcision helped form the theological backdrop to Cyril as he hammered out his own interpretation. But before surveying these two groups, I will provide a brief outline of circumcision as it appears in the Old and New Testaments. It is beyond the scope of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of circumcision in Scripture, but reviewing the biblical texts describing circumcision is important since the early Christians used them to form their interpretations of this important biblical rite.

2.1 Circumcision in Scripture

Circumcision first appears in the Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis 17 where Yahweh establishes his covenant with Abram to make him the father of many nations and guaranteeing his descendants the land of Canaan.³ According to the Bible, the commandment to circumcise eight-day-old males that was first given to Abraham was passed on to succeeding generations and so became a tradition embedded in Israelite religion and culture.⁴ Circumcision was to serve as the tangible expression of God's covenant and the identifying mark of God's chosen people. It was a sign reminding the people that they belonged to God and

³ Most modern biblical scholars view this passage as a composite that received its extant form after years of transmission and edition. See Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, eds. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 22. However, Christians in antiquity, along with their Jewish counterparts, believed the passage to be the product of one author, Moses, and read it as a seamless whole. Cohen, 9, provides a brief but helpful discussion on the scholarly debates surrounding Genesis 17. While scholarship such as Cohen's is speaking of the Hebrew text, my principal concern will be, as Cyril's was, the LXX. Cyril did not know Hebrew, so the LXX was, as it was for most Greek-speaking Christians of the time, his Old Testament text.

⁴ Gen 21:3; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:2–7; John 7:22; Acts 7:8; and Rom 4:11 convey the tradition of circumcision in biblical history.

that he was working on their behalf.⁵ However, other Hebrew texts suggest circumcision could have other meanings. In some cases, the practice indicates an inward, spiritual response rather than a literal cutting away of foreskin. This is usually described as circumcision of the heart.⁶ Deuteronomy 30:6 is a case in point. Foretelling a future time when covenant relationship would be lived out between God and his people, the Lord announces circumcision of a non-physical nature that will generate a new spiritual condition: “The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.”⁷ In this case, the heart was to replace the male genitalia as the locus of God’s mark of promise.

In the Gospels, Luke records that Jesus was circumcised according to Jewish law, though Jesus would never mention circumcision during his teaching ministry.⁸ However, after his ascension circumcision became a matter of significant controversy in the early church. The council of Jerusalem, recorded in Acts 15, debated the place of circumcision and adherence to the Mosaic law in matters of salvation. Through their deliberation, the apostles agreed not to impose circumcision (and the bulk of the Mosaic regulations) on new Gentile believers, insisting that salvation comes through the grace of Jesus Christ.⁹ Paul’s view of circumcision maintains the early church consensus while expanding its spiritual interpretation. He recognizes its importance for Jewish identity, but also interprets it along the hermeneutical trajectory of Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4. A case in point is his claim that Abraham’s own circumcision was a seal (σφραγιδα) of the righteousness that comes by faith.¹⁰ Paul elaborates in his epistles that circumcision has been reinterpreted as an inward work that deals with the sinful “flesh” of the heart rather than the flesh of the body.¹¹ Further, this interior circumcision is not carried out by human hands (ἀχειροποιήτος), but by the Spirit.¹² Literal circumcision is no longer necessary for the people of God since Christ has graciously established a new covenant of salvation by his own death and resurrection. As the Church accepted this new understanding, it

⁵ “Circumcision” in David Freeman, ed. *ABD*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1027.

⁶ The Old Testament also acknowledges a circumcision of the ears (Jer 6:10) and the lips (Exod 6:12), which, of course, were not commandments to be taken literally and most likely served to underscore the connection of the physical rite with circumcision of the heart.

⁷ Other Old Testament passages with a similar re-interpretation of circumcision include Lev 26:40–41; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4, 9:25–26; Ezek 44:9.

⁸ Cf. Luke 2:21

⁹ Cf. Acts 15:5–11, particularly verse 11: ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς χάριτος τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ πιστεύομεν σωθῆναι καθ’ ὃν τρόπον κάκεῖνοι.

¹⁰ Rom 4:11.

¹¹ Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 26–27, who compares Philo’s allegorizing of circumcision with Paul’s reinterpretation. For Philo the excision of the foreskin symbolizes the quelling of the passions. For Paul, it signals the removal of the desires of the flesh made possible by the death of Christ. See also *ABD*, 1029–1031.

¹² Cf. Rom 2:28–29 and Col 2:11.

is not surprising that Paul and other early Christian leaders engaged in polemics against those maintaining obeisance to the Mosaic law's prescription for circumcision.¹³ In any case, the New Testament texts treating circumcision deny any soteriological efficacy to the cutting away of foreskin. The physical act came to be understood as an excessive practice within an outdated covenant offering no spiritual advantage.¹⁴ Early Christians understood circumcision in new ways. Jacobs' observation of the New Testament attitude toward circumcision is especially pertinent: "Whether Christ's circumcision is baptism or crucifixion or both, it is no longer a sign of the covenant of Abraham or the legible symbols of Roman imperial subjection. It is Christianized, and totally open to multiple new meanings."¹⁵

Thus, according to the overarching narrative of Scripture, two primary viewpoints of circumcision come to the fore. The first is under the Mosaic covenant that involves cutting away the foreskin of an eight-day-old male as a physical sign of God's covenant. The second appears in the wake of Christ's ascension and subsequent gift of the Spirit where circumcision refers to an inward, spiritual work analogous to salvation. The precise nature of this inward work, however, is not clear. While both viewpoints are represented in the Old Testament, the New Testament interpretation creates a tension between them, rejecting the first while embracing the second.¹⁶

2.2 Circumcision in Jewish Perspectives in the Early Common Era

As Christianity became increasingly untethered from Judaism in the early centuries of the common era, circumcision continued to be a central fixture of Jewish life and self-understanding.¹⁷ It served as an unmistakable mark of

¹³ See especially Gal 5:2–6 where Paul posits a dichotomy between circumcision and Christ, and goes so far to say that those wishing to maintain circumcision have fallen away from the grace of God. Though a detailed description of the Pauline interpretation of circumcision goes beyond the aims of this study, it is worth noting Andrew Jacobs' assertion that Paul's resistance to physical circumcision went beyond the soteriological argument to a means of resisting Roman power. See Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 23–24.

¹⁴ Other passages in the New Testament that either downplay the significance of the physical circumcision according to the law or interpret circumcision as an inward, subjective work of God in the heart include Rom 3:30; I Cor 7:19; and Gal 5:2–3.

¹⁵ Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 28, makes this observation after an exegetical exploration of Col 2:9–13.

¹⁶ The "circumcision of the heart" motif continued in Jewish usage, for example, at Qumran (IQpHab. xi. 13; cf. IQS v. 4f) "for cutting off evil inclinations and disobedience." See Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (1988): 486.

¹⁷ Cf. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 20.2–4 and *Contra Apionem* 2.13 in Benedictus

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