

Circumcision in the Early Jesus Movement: The Contributions of Simon Claude Mimouni, “Paul within Judaism” and “Lived Ancient Religion”

Thomas R. Blanton IV

University of Erfurt | trbiv@mac.com

JJMJS No. 8 (2021): 131–157

Abstract

Simon Claude Mimouni (1949–), director of the Department of Religious Studies (Section de Sciences Religieuses) at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris from 1995 until 2017¹, is the author of *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine* (*Circumcision in the Judean World in the Greek and Roman Periods*)². Alongside Andreas Blaschke’s *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (*Circumcision: Testimonies of the Bible and Related Texts*)³, *La Circoncision* is one of two most wide-ranging reference volumes on circumcision within biblical studies and cognate fields⁴. Since Mimouni’s work is often overlooked in English-language scholarship,⁵ I have been invited to

* I am most grateful to Barry C. Hopkins, Interim Director and Public Services Librarian at JKM Library, Chicago, for providing research material during the long period of library closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ Simon Mimouni, “École Pratique des Hautes Études, <https://www.ephe.psl.eu/en/ecole/nos-enseignants-chercheurs/simon-mimouni>.

² Simon Claude Mimouni, *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine: Histoire d’un conflit interne au judaïsme* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

³ Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (Tübingen: Francke, 1998).

⁴ All translations are those of the author unless otherwise noted. Translations of biblical texts, however, are those of the NRSV unless otherwise noted

⁵ Exceptions to this trend include Matthew Thiessen, “Conversion, Jewish,” in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 27 July 2017, [https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-](https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-8130?rskey=dyBA3F&result=1)

[8130?rskey=dyBA3F&result=1](https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-8130?rskey=dyBA3F&result=1); Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Thomas R.

introduce and summarize its discussion pertaining to the Jesus movement during the first century CE. In order to enhance the utility of this survey, I relate Mimouni's work to more recent developments in the field, particularly those associated with the "Paul within Judaism" perspective; and introduce two methodological approaches that, I suggest, hold the potential to enhance research in this area; namely the "processing approach" and "lived ancient religion." Lastly, a case study demonstrates the utility of the latter two approaches.

Keywords

Simon Claude Mimouni, Mark D. Nanos, circumcision, ritual, Paul of Tarsus, Second Temple Judaism, lived ancient religion, religious studies methods

1. Simon Claude Mimouni on Circumcision

Mimouni's work surveys material including, but not limited to, the Hebrew Bible, Philo, Josephus, the Dead Sea scrolls, the Mishnah, the Babylonian Talmud, the New Testament, patristic literature, and a selection of Greek and Roman writers. I briefly summarize the chapter of Mimouni's study that is most relevant to the topic of the present special issue; namely, "The Christian Movement of the First Century and the Question of Circumcision."⁶

At the outset, two caveats must be registered. First, Mimouni uses Acts to provide the "historical" and chronological frameworks of his discussion, an approach that has been called into question by Ryan Schellenberg and others who emphasize the role of the author of Luke-Acts as a creative writer who utilized novelistic techniques to serve his own literary and theological agendas.⁷ Second, Mimouni includes Colossians and Ephesians, arguably deutero-Pauline epistles, in his reconstruction of "Paul's" attitude toward circumcision. Both issues lead to a distorted view of the "historical" Paul's perspectives. We proceed with these caveats in mind.

The narrative of the "conversion" of Cornelius in Acts 10:1–11:18, which Mimouni takes to refer to a historical event that occurred around 43 or 44 CE, occupies an important place in his reconstruction. Acts 10:11–13 describes

Blanton IV, "The Expressive Prepuce: Philo's Defense of Judaic Circumcision in Greek and Roman Contexts," *SPhiloA* 31 (2019): 127–162.

⁶ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 159–246.

⁷ Ryan S. Schellenberg, "The First Pauline Chronologist? Paul's Itinerary in the Letters and in Acts," *JBL* 134 (2015): 193–213; Cavan Concannon, "Economic Aspects of Intercity Travel among the Pauline Assemblies," in *Paul and Economics: A Handbook*, ed. Thomas R. Blanton IV and Raymond Pickett (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 333–360.

Cornelius as a centurion of the “Italic” cohort who “feared God” and donated to a group of local Judeans resident in Joppa. Noting that the ritual is prescribed specifically for Judeans in Acts 2:37–42, Mimouni reasons that the baptism of Cornelius and other non-Judeans in Acts 10:48 therefore represents “a rite of adherence to Judaism for non-Judeans.” He takes baptism to represent the established ritual practice by which non-Judeans adhered to Judaism in the diaspora. Thus Cornelius and his baptized household held the status of “proselytes.”⁸ It is this “community of life, and without doubt, of table,” that allowed Peter, a Judean, to lodge with Cornelius (Acts 10:48).⁹ Mimouni takes the episode to establish a precedent for the admission of non-Jews into the Jewish “messianic community” without circumcision.¹⁰

Gal 2 and Acts 15 independently attest to a subsequent stage in the Jesus movement in which the question was raised whether, or to what extent, non-Judeans ought to follow the “law of Moses,” including circumcision.¹¹ Both sources, Mimouni argues, refer to the same set of events: a conflict in Antioch and a subsequent “council” that convened in Jerusalem. Drawing from Paul’s statements in Galatians, Mimouni argues that the Antioch conflict concerned a “doctrinal” issue that is summed up in Acts 15:1: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Mimouni opines that both Paul and Luke agree on the doctrinal issue at stake: “since God granted salvation to the Greeks who do not completely (*totalement*) observe the Law of Moses, it is understood that ‘the grace (*grâce*) of the Lord Jesus’ (Acts 15:11) is enough to be saved.”¹² This position was adopted to resolve the doctrinal dispute.

The resolution of the “doctrinal” issue in turn gave rise to a practical question: which dietary prescriptions should be followed to facilitate “relations” (*rappports*) between “Christians” of Greek and Judean origin?¹³ Acts 15:20 recounts the solution, proposed by James, the brother of Jesus, at the Jerusalem meeting, which took place circa 49 or 50 CE: non-Judean members of early Christian groups should “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication

⁸ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 168–169, 173–174; diaspora practice: 132–157.

⁹ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 166.

¹⁰ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 171, 174.

¹¹ Two independent attestations to the same event: Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 200. On the contrary: Schellenberg (“First Pauline Chronologist”) argues that the author of Acts used a collection of Pauline epistles as a source, in which case the notion of multiple, independent attestation evaporates.

¹² Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 192.

¹³ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 193.

and from whatever has been strangled and from blood.” James’s proposal is related to the “Noachide precepts” outlined in Lev 17–18, which pertain not only to native Judeans but to the “resident aliens” (גרים) living in the land.¹⁴ Mimouni concludes: “The observance of these rules thus makes possible coexistence and relations between Judeans and non-Judeans.”¹⁵

Moving from corporate decisions to individual matters, Mimouni discusses an apparent contradiction in Paul’s relations with Timothy and Titus: Paul insisted that the non-Judean Titus was not compelled to be circumcised during the meeting with James and Peter in Jerusalem (Gal 2:3); conversely, in Acts 16:3 Paul urged the non-Judean Timothy to be circumcised in Lycaonia. While Titus’s non-circumcision coheres with Paul’s general policy regarding non-Judeans, Mimouni notes that Timothy’s circumcision has occasioned embarrassment among some (Christian) interpreters.¹⁶ Assuming the historicity of Acts’s report, Mimouni resolves the apparent contradiction by arguing that although Timothy’s father was “Greek,” his mother was Judean, as Acts 16:1 indicates; therefore his circumcision, although belated, was not improper.

Although Shaye Cohen found no evidence that matrilineal descent was observed in Judaism in the first century CE,¹⁷ Mimouni suggests that since “in the Iranian world the status of the infant is given by the mother and not by the father,” therefore “it is possible to think that matrilinearity was a rule in force in the diaspora while patrilinearity was in Palestine.”¹⁸ Thus he is in basic agreement with a view proposed by Ambrosiaster in the fourth century CE: Paul prevailed upon the properly *Judean* Timothy to perform only belatedly a ritual that should have been carried out during his infancy.¹⁹ It is worth noting that Richard Pervo judges the episode to be “probably without historical basis”; it was rather a literary invention that “admirably serves the Lucan program of ‘Jew first,’ and demonstrates Paul’s loyalty to the traditional faith.”²⁰

Following his historical reconstruction, Mimouni discusses “Pauline” texts (including Colossians and Ephesians) in which circumcision is at issue. In

¹⁴ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 192–193; for the date of the Jerusalem meeting, see 171, 201.

¹⁵ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 193.

¹⁶ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 203.

¹⁷ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 263–307.

¹⁸ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 209 (quotations), 212–213.

¹⁹ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 205.

²⁰ Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 388.

what follows, we examine a few salient passages, following Mimouni's arrangement.

1 Cor 7:18: Paul's advice *μη ἐπισπάσθω*, literally "let him not undergo epispiasm," refers to a surgical procedure by which the skin of the shaft of the penis is drawn over the glans to create an artificial prepuce, as Mimouni rightly notes.²¹ Greeks and Romans interpreted the circumcised phallus as a marker of uncontrolled sexual desire and barbarity; consequently some Judeans underwent epispiasm in an effort to appear more "Greco-Roman"—an issue that could arise in contexts where nudity was customary, especially in the gymnasium and at the baths.²² Paul advises all males to maintain the status of their foreskins—whether intact or ablated—in the state that pertained when they were admitted into the assembly of Jesus-devotees in Corinth.

1 Cor 7:19: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything." Mimouni understands "the commandments" here to refer to "the rules of conduct in the Decalogue, among which circumcision does not appear."²³ He opines that "circumcision and uncircumcision have no bearing on the belief [*la croyance*] in the messiahship of Jesus."²⁴ Paul was no revolutionary who sought to overturn "established social values"; the status of "believers" as either Judeans or "Greeks"—a synecdoche referring to all non-Judeans—is retained. Paul, however, "wanted to reduce the differences in identity in the name of sole observance of the divine commandments: briefly, in the name of this observance, which for him is a belief [*croyance*], circumcised Judeans and uncircumcised Greeks were identical [*identiques*]"²⁵ in the sense of "messianic belief having to be superimposed [*devant se surimposer*] on the condition of origin of each one."²⁶

Gal 5–6: Mimouni understands Galatians to be an attack on the position of "Jacobians"—people associated with James, the brother of Jesus—who advocated that non-Judean devotees of Jesus should submit to the "yoke" of the

²¹ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 119–120. The surgical procedure is described in Celsus, *Med.* 7.25. See also Troy W. Martin, "Paul and Circumcision," in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 113–142 (122); Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 350–353.

²² See Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 47–48.

²³ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 215.

²⁴ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 216.

²⁵ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 216.

²⁶ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 120.

law, including circumcision.²⁷ Commenting on Gal 5:3, he notes that Paul “attests that those who are circumcised have to practice the law in its totality—and consequently risk not being justified in case of transgression.”²⁸ However, the options for removing guilt associated with intentional or inadvertent transgressions were more numerous and varied than Paul’s “either/or” scenario—either follow the law in toto or receive “grace” (χάρις) through Christ—indicates. Both Paul and Mimouni fail to mention the broad palette of mechanisms for removing the guilt incurred through transgressing halakic (legal) precepts during the Second Temple period, including the Day of Atonement, repentance, almsgiving, and offering specified sacrifices at the Jerusalem Temple.²⁹

Mimouni sees in Gal 5:11 “an allusion to a time when Paul would have still recommended circumcision, either as a Pharisaic missionary or as a Christian missionary—so his thought would have varied on that point.”³⁰ Commenting on Gal 6:15 (“For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”), Mimouni indicates that “the apostle to the gentiles lets the person of the believers envision a cosmic perspective: Judeans as well as Greeks, without distinction, are called to renew the world in joining with the faithful of Jesus the Messiah—all ethnic and religious differences here lose their importance.”³¹

Rom 2:25–29: Mimouni explains: “Circumcision is useful in the framework of observance of the law, but, for the transgressor, it gives no guarantee.... There is ... a sort of divorce between being and appearing, which affects not only the behavior of the man but finally his very identity: the true Judean is not the one who appears so.... In short, for Paul, if sinful Israel has an uncircumcised heart, the nations can have circumcised hearts.”³² The motif of “circumcision of the heart” appears also in Deut 10:16 and Jer 9:24–25. Paul indicates that non-Judeans who “keep the requirements of the law” (Rom 2:26) will be “regarded” (λογισθήσεται) by God *as if* they were circumcised. We note that he stops short of saying that non-Judeans could be regarded as Judeans, however.

Rom 3:1–2: “Then what advantage [τὸ πλεονεκτήσιον] has the Judean? Or what is the benefit [ἡ ὠφέλεια] of circumcision?” (NRSV, modified). Immediately after

²⁷ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 216–221.

²⁸ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 217.

²⁹ See, e.g., E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief; 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM; Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994), 103–118, 141–143.

³⁰ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 218.

³¹ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 219–220.

³² Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 226–227.

arguing that non-Judeans were not placed at a disadvantage relative to Judeans on account of their intact foreskins, Paul indicates that Judeans do have an “advantage,” and circumcision provides a “benefit” denied others. Mimouni writes: “Paul seems to respond that circumcision is ‘great in all respects.’ But one can understand also that it is Judean superiority that is ‘great in all respects,’ all the more so as he justifies his point of view by motivating it, specifying that the Judeans are the recipients of divine revelations.”³³ We return to the issue of Paul’s marking of his ethnicity below.

Phil 3:2–11: “Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!” Mimouni understands Paul to be arguing either against “itinerant preachers, Christians of Judean origin of the tendency of James the Just” or against “Judeo-Greek ‘superapostles’” such as Paul had encountered in Corinth (2 Cor 11:22).³⁴ Mimouni opines that the opposing group is maligned as “dogs” because circumcised Judeans supposedly used the term to express their contempt for uncircumcised Greeks.³⁵ Although without referring to Mimouni’s work, Mark Nanos has since contested the position that he espouses, which is widespread in commentaries.³⁶

Paul’s response to this competing group is to claim, “it is we who are the circumcision” (Phil 3:3). This is “not to render circumcision null and void but to consider that it consists not of an incision or mutilation [terms referring to circumcision, in Mimouni’s view] but of a profound change of attitude: a transformation that is not possible but by the Spirit of God. So in this perspective true circumcision represents the Christian community in which incision or mutilation does not represent anything,” a position that he finds also in Rom 2:25–29 and Col 2:11–13. Mimouni understands the first person plural pronoun “we” in Phil 3:3 to refer both to Paul and his “Christian” addressees in Philippi.

Despite flaws in Mimouni’s methods, his discussions are informative, and to my knowledge no other volume save Blaschke’s *Beschneidung* covers a comparably vast range of sources. Mimouni’s conclusion, moreover, is sound and worth repeating: “In the first century [CE], Christians adopted in a relatively clear manner a double attitude with regard to circumcision: (1) for those of Judean

³³ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 223.

³⁴ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 229.

³⁵ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 228–229.

³⁶ Mark D. Nanos, “Paul’s Polemic in Philippians 3 as Jewish-Subgroup Vilification of Local Non-Jewish Cultic and Philosophical Alternatives,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 3, no. 1 (2013): 47–91.

origin, there is no cause to suppress it; (2) for those of Greek origin, there is no cause to impose it.”³⁷

2. “Paul within Judaism”

In order to render this brief survey of Mimouni’s contributions more useful to researchers and students, in what follows I assess some of his views in light of more recent developments, largely those stemming from the “Paul within Judaism” approach.

The “Paul within Judaism” approach resists a long-entrenched tradition of theological historiography that has roots growing through the Protestant Reformation of the 1500s back to its origins in the second century CE, in which both Jesus and Paul are understood as Jews who “transcended” or “overcame” Judaism to establish a new religion, “Christianity.”³⁸ This new religion is supposed to display characteristics diametrically opposed to those of Judaism: universalism instead of nationalism, “grace” rather than “law,” and “faith” rather than “works” (i.e., “salvation” cannot be “merited” or “earned” by human effort). As William Bousset, a major figure in the early *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* (History of Religion School) of Göttingen in the 1890s, put it, “Jesus freed religion from nationality: Judaism spells fetters, Christianity freedom....” Moreover, “Paul accomplished the external deliverance from nationality,” writing, “There can be neither Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28).³⁹ The “fetters” that Bousset refers to connote “ceremony,” “ritual observance,” and “law”; all of which are opposed to the “freedom” supposed to inhere in Christianity, a religion of “grace” in which God freely bestows “salvation” on sinners by virtue of their “faith” (cp. Mimouni’s

³⁷ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 242.

³⁸ For overviews of the approach, see Mark D. Nanos, introduction to *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context of the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 1–30; Magnus Zetterholm, “Paul within Judaism: The State of the Questions,” in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*, 31–52; William S. Campbell, *The Nations in the Divine Economy: Paul’s Covenantal Hermeneutics and Participation in Christ* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2018), 51–77.

³⁹ Wilhelm Bousset, *Das Wesen der Religion, dargestellt an ihrer Geschichte* (Halle: Gebauer-Schwetschke, 1900); Eng. trans.: *What Is Religion?*, trans. F. B. Low (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1907), 218–219.

croyance: “belief”): the Christian is imagined to be unfettered by the obligation to observe ritual or legal prescriptions.⁴⁰

As Jonathan Z. Smith observed, the same narrative was utilized by Protestants to delegitimize both Catholicism and Judaism, both of which were associated with the negative characteristics of legalism and ceremony.⁴¹ This polemical narrative generates perceptions that are historically inaccurate and that misrepresent both Judaism and Christianity. Magnus Zetterholm writes that as the result of E. P. Sanders’s classic work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, which debunked many of the narrative’s presuppositions, “it now seemed apparent that previous scholarship on Paul was based, not on an adequate description of ancient Judaism, but on a Christian caricature.”⁴²

Mark Nanos points to this entrenched exegetical tradition, which further posits that Paul “opposed the value of Jewish identity as well as Torah-defined behavior when practiced by [Paul himself and] other followers of Jesus.”⁴³ On the contrary, proponents of the “Paul within Judaism” approach assume that “the writing and community building of the apostle Paul took place *within* late Second Temple Judaism, *within* which he remained a representative after his change of conviction about Jesus being the Messiah (Christ).”⁴⁴ The approach thus counters what William Campbell identifies as “the tenacious continuity that emerges in the anti-Jewish reception of his [i.e., Paul’s] thought and actions.”⁴⁵

The “Paul within Judaism” approach is compatible with Mimouni’s assertion that devotees of Jesus, both Judeans and Greco-Romans, were understood to belong to a “party” *within* Judaism and not to a separate entity, “the Church” or “Christianity.”⁴⁶ The integration of Judeans and non-Judeans within particular assemblies, however, raised practical questions about how differences in ethnic identity should be navigated.

⁴⁰ On Bousset and the History of Religion School, see Thomas R. Blanton IV, “The Continuing Influence of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,” in *The Oxford History of Modern German Theology*, ed. Johannes Zschuber, Judith Wolfe, and David Lincicum, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press), forthcoming.

⁴¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

⁴² Zetterholm, “Paul within Judaism,” 6; E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977).

⁴³ Nanos, introduction, 5.

⁴⁴ Nanos, introduction, 9.

⁴⁵ Campbell, *Nations in the Divine Economy*, 51.

⁴⁶ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 195–196.

We have already seen how in Mimouni's interpretation of 1 Cor 7:19, he opines that Paul "wanted to reduce the differences in identity [between Judeans and non-Judeans]"; "messianic belief" was "superimposed on the condition of origin of each one." Similarly, in Gal 5:11, "ethnic and religious differences ... lose their importance." More recently, Campbell has adopted a more nuanced position. Rather than simply trying to reduce differences by superimposing "messianic belief" as a new identity marker, "Paul affirmed the differing but related identities of Jews and *ethnē* [i.e., 'nations' or 'gentiles'] in Christ," entailing a "recognition of ethnic difference," difference that is, however, reconciled (at least in theory) on the basis of "mutual dependence through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ."⁴⁷ Further: "Paul regards Christ as making the *ethnē* who follow him acceptable to God as *ethnē*, yet without becoming part of the covenant of circumcision."⁴⁸

Mutual dependence and reconciliation, however, took place within a social context in which different ethnic groups were ranked hierarchically in terms of political rights, citizenship, and rates of taxation.⁴⁹ Jan Bremmer notes that in first-century CE Alexandria, inhabitants were hierarchically ranked in terms of political rights and access; in descending order: Romans, Greeks, Judeans, and Egyptians.⁵⁰ Greek and Roman artistic and literary depictions of Egyptians, Ethiopians, and Judeans indicate that circumcision was viewed as a salient part of the ethnic ranking system: it was coded as a barbaric practice associated with those deemed ethnically inferior.⁵¹ Philip Harland shows how Paul recalibrates the normally operative ranking system, placing Judeans at the pinnacle of the sociopolitical hierarchy, taking Paul's phrase "to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom 1:16; 2:9–11) to imply not just a temporal but also a hierarchical rank.⁵²

⁴⁷ Campbell, *Nations in the Divine Economy*, 105–152 (quotations: 145–146).

⁴⁸ Campbell, *Nations in the Divine Economy*, 234.

⁴⁹ On taxation, see G. Anthony Keddie, "Roman Provincial Censuses as Sociopolitical Regulation: Implications for Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels and Acts," in *Taxation and Revolt: Case Studies in the Economies of Ancient Rome, Galilee, and Egypt*, ed. Thomas R. Blanton IV, Agnes Choi, and Jinyu Liu (London: Routledge), forthcoming.

⁵⁰ Jan N. Bremmer, "The First Pogrom? Religious Violence in Alexandria in 38 CE?," in *Alexandria: Hub of the Hellenistic World*, ed. Benjamin Schliesser, Jan Rügemeier, Thomas J. Kraus, and Jörg Frey (WUNT 2/460; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 245–260.

⁵¹ See Blanton, "Expressive Prepuce."

⁵² Philip A. Harland, "Climbing the Ethnic Ladder: Ethnic Hierarchies and Judean Responses," *JBL* 138 (2019): 665–686.

Similarly, Jennifer Eyl observes how Paul adduces his ethnic credentials—including the fact of his circumcision—to demonstrate his authority as an exponent of the “good news” concerning Jesus. Particularly in comparisons he makes with other “apostles” or similar groups construed as competitors, Paul utilized “changes in terminology [to] capitalize on reverence for the distant past while simultaneously asserting his innate, hereditary connection to that past.” This was an “active, constructive, and strategic” procedure in which Paul chose not do designate himself using the term *Ioudaios* [“Judean”], “which, according to Josephus, came into usage after the Babylonian exile,” but instead used terms that connoted antiquity and privileged lineage, “Hebrew” and “Israelite.”⁵³ Thus when Paul boasts that he is “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee,” “the catalogue of his ethnic qualifications anchors his authority.”⁵⁴

Eyl’s observations are complemented by the work of Heidi Wendt, who identifies a category of “freelance religious experts” among whom Paul was a salient example. Freelance religious experts representing Persia, Babylonia, Gallia, Egypt, Syria, and Judea proliferated during the Roman imperial period, offering services including healing, exorcism, “dream interpretation, prophecy, revelation, interpretation of oracles, revelations linked with literary prophecies, law instruction,” and other services.⁵⁵ Claimed connections to a “foreign” land bore the potential to enhance the authority and legitimacy of those religious experts. Paul’s appeals to ethnicity, including the ethnically coded practice of circumcision, thus grounded his authority among Greeks and Romans. The work of Harland, Eyl, and Wendt implies that Paul hardly rejected nationalism (we would rather now say “ethnic identity”), ceremony, and ritual observance, as Bousset supposed. Nor, as James Dunn imagines, did he consider “badges of covenant membership” to be “superfluous.”⁵⁶ On the contrary, Paul understood

⁵³ Jennifer Eyl, “‘I Myself Am an Israelite’: Paul, Authenticity and Authority,” *JSNT* 40.2 (2017): 148–168 (quotations: 149; referring to Josephus, *Ant.* 11.173).

⁵⁴ Eyl, “I Myself,” 151.

⁵⁵ Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74–113 (quotation: 94).

⁵⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 28 n.107; 109, 111, 115, 117, 472; “Faith in Jesus as Christ becomes the primary identity marker which renders the others superfluous” (Dunn, *New Perspective*, 113). For a critique of Dunn’s position, see Kathy Ehrensperger, “The New Perspective and Beyond,” in *Modern Interpretations of Romans: Tracking Their Hermeneutical/Theological Trajectory*, ed. Daniel Patte and Cristina Grenholm (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 189–220.

them as points worth boasting about, strategically, when his “apostolic” credentials needed to be reasserted.

Katell Berthelot points to a number of Jewish practices that non-Jews attracted to Judaism adopted in antiquity, including studying and observing the laws of Moses, and, conversely, failing to uphold the laws of Rome; fasting; keeping the Sabbath; lighting lamps for the Sabbath; abstaining from pork; ritual immersion; and circumcision.⁵⁷ Thus we would expect non-Jews attracted to the Jesus movement to adopt some Judean practices, but which ones? As we have seen, based on 1 Cor 7:19, Mimouni infers that Paul advocated that non-Jewish devotees of Jesus should follow the Decalogue (Exod 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21). Similarly, Paula Fredriksen proposes that Paul advocated that non-Jews adopt the Ten Commandments, albeit sans Sabbath observance.⁵⁸

What then of circumcision, which, as Berthelot notes, “was a decisive step equivalent to joining the Judean *ethnos*”?⁵⁹ As Michael Bachmann and others have pointed out, in Paul’s view, non-Jews joined as “full members” of God’s people, but not by becoming “Israelites” or “Jews/Judeans.”⁶⁰ Paul developed various narratives to justify this incorporation: non-Jews were “adopted” as children of God (e.g., Rom 8:15), or incorporated into Abraham’s lineage as the pneumatic “seed” of Christ (Gal 3:16, 29), as Caroline Johnson Hodge, Gitte Buch-Hansen, and Matthew Thiessen have demonstrated.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Katell Berthelot, “To Convert or Not to Convert: The Appropriation of Jewish Rituals, Customs and Beliefs by Non-Jews,” in *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean World: Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics*, ed. Valentino Gasparini et al. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 493–515.

⁵⁸ Paula Fredriksen, “Paul’s Letter to the Romans, the Ten Commandments, and Pagan ‘Justification by Faith,’” *JBL* 133 (2014): 801–808.

⁵⁹ Bertelot, “To Convert,” 497.

⁶⁰ Michael Bachmann, “Paul, Israel, and the Gentiles: Hermeneutical and Exegetical Notes,” in *Paul and Judaism: Crosscurrents in Pauline Exegesis and the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Reimund Bieringer and Didier Pollefeyt (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 72–105; Campbell, *Nations in the Divine Economy*, 234; Mark D. Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’s Advisors to King Izates,” in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*, 105–152.

⁶¹ Carolyn Johnson Hodge, “The Question of Identity: Gentiles as Gentiles—but also Not—in Pauline Communities,” in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*, 153–174; Gitte Buch-Hansen, “Paulus i Aristoteles’ hønsegård Dåb og genealogi i Galaterbrevet,” *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 77 (2014): 9–26; Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105–170.

Thiessen makes a related argument that Paul thought it was impossible for non-Jews to become members of God's people by circumcision because proselytes could only perform the ritual as adults, and not on the eighth day after birth as prescribed in Gen 17 and Jub. 15.⁶² Shaye Cohen, however, points out that "not a single ancient Jewish text says that a gentile cannot convert to Judaism because of missing eighth-day circumcision. All passages (including those in Jubilees) that highlight eighth-day circumcision are talking about Israelites (Jews)."⁶³ Thiessen reads Gen 17 and Jub. 15, texts in which the issue of gentile conversion to Judaism are *not* addressed, as if they were meant to *exclude the possibility* of such conversion. But the legal status of an issue cannot be decided by texts in which that issue is never once mentioned. The reasons why Paul did not advocate circumcision for non-Judean devotees of Jesus must be sought elsewhere.

Karin Neutel offers a more compelling solution. She points out that Paul frequently argued against competitors who advocated for the circumcision of non-Judean devotees of Christ to incorporate them into the lineage of Abraham as Jews. But in Paul's view, non-Jewish devotees of Jesus were *already* "insiders" in the Abrahamic lineage, for "if gentiles are in Christ, they are Abraham's seed and heirs to God's promise to him (Gal 3:27–29)... Paul then proposes an alternative form of kinship with Abraham for gentiles, through Christ." Thus attempting to join Abraham's lineage by another means—circumcision as a rite of passage into Judaism—amounted to a rejection of the "free gift" (χάρις; or, "grace") of incorporation as Christ's pneumatic "seed." If they should opt to be circumcised, Paul reasons, his addressees would have "fallen away from grace [τῆς χάριτος]" and nullified the gift (Gal 5:4).⁶⁴ As these recent studies demonstrate, the discussion has become considerably more nuanced since *La Circoncision* was published.

3. The "Processing" Approach and "Lived Ancient Religion"

Although Mimouni and the subsequent "Paul within Judaism" perspective have made significant progress in overcoming the entrenched tradition of

⁶² Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 14, 73–104.

⁶³ Shaye J. D. Cohen, review of *Contesting Conversion* (by Thiessen), *CBQ* 75 (2013): 379–381 (quotation: 380).

⁶⁴ Karin B. Neutel, "Circumcision Gone Wrong: Paul's Message as a Case of Ritual Disruption," *Neot* 50.2 (2016): 373–396 (quotation: 383).

supersessionist and anti-Jewish readings of Paul's letters, I submit that discussions of circumcision in the early Jesus movement would benefit from interacting with two additional methodological perspectives: the "processing approach" and "lived ancient religion." After brief introductions, I present a case study to illustrate ways in which these approaches might usefully be employed by researchers in this area.

The processing approach was introduced in a volume edited by Staf Hellemans and Gerard Rouwhorst in 2020, *The Making of Christianities in History: A Processing Approach*.⁶⁵ Hellemans developed the approach in an effort to clarify the ways in which the Western Catholic Church adapted to "modernity" as expressed in nineteenth-century European societies.⁶⁶ The approach was inspired by sociological theories that attend to the relationship between *structures*; that is, social, political, religious, and economic systems understood to provide patterns by which societies are shaped; and *agents*, that is, individual actors and groups who actively select, arrange, revise, or reject structural elements of a given society in efforts to serve perceived individual or group interests. Structures themselves are not seen to be singular or monolithic, but composed of diverse elements that are continually evolving and changing.

The *processing* of structures by agents consists of six components: (1) agents *select* particular elements and options presented by their environments, while neglecting or overlooking others; (2) the objects and opportunities thus selected are *modified* to meet the situation-specific needs of the individual or group: "affordances, opportunities, resources (personnel, goods, other things), and ideas that an agent finds interesting for processing are tailored for re-use in his or her lifeworld";⁶⁷ (3) the modification of objects and opportunities selected from the structuring environment require *assembly* into a "new, often fragile unity." Thus: "the twin processes of modification and assembling ... are a complex and iterative affair."⁶⁸ (4) Cultural elements thus selected, modified, and reassembled into new unities are subsequently expressed in cultural *performances*, which may either succeed or fail, be accepted or rejected by other constituencies, both individual and corporate, within the cultural milieu in which the performance takes place. (5) Performances may subsequently be *integrated* into the agent's repertoire of action, which may in turn lead to (6) modifications of the

⁶⁵ Staf Hellemans and Gerard Rouwhorst, eds., *The Making of Christianities in History: A Processing Approach* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

⁶⁶ Staf Hellemans, "Turning 'Society' into Religion: A Processing Approach," in Hellemans and Rouwhorst, *Making of Christianities*, 23–58.

⁶⁷ Hellemans, "Turning 'Society' into Religion," 42.

⁶⁸ Hellemans, "Turning 'Society' into Religion," 44.

structuring environment, referred to as *resonances*. “Resonances, in their turn, can be the start of another round of processing.”⁶⁹

Thus the agency of individuals and groups is linked to structural elements of society in a circular, mutually generative process. As Hellemans and Rouwhorst point out, “innovation stands at the heart of every case of processing, since all the material involved in the processing, both old and new, is continually modified and re-assembled in the process.”⁷⁰ History, from this perspective, has an “anarchic” character; it is not governed by abstract principles, laws, or controlling institutions, but instead results from the myriad decisions, selections, omissions, and transformations of innumerable agents within overlapping fields of cultural (re)production.⁷¹

Complementing the processing approach of Hellemans and Rouwhorst is the *lived ancient religion* (LAR) approach elaborated in a project involving Jörg Rüpke, Rubina Raja, Katharina Rieger, Richard Gordon, and Emiliano Urciuoli, among many others, at the University of Erfurt from 2012 to 2017.⁷² Succinctly: “The main thrust of the LAR initiative was to resist the easy reification of ‘religion’ (as though we all know what is involved) in order to emphasize its ceaseless construction through individual action within the loose parameters provided by traditions, ideals and institutions (‘religion in the making’).”⁷³

LAR rejects approaches in which “the balance between structure and individual agents is shifted to the one pole of an overwhelming and engaging structure.”⁷⁴ Further: “Rather than stressing the ‘reproduction’ of culture, *appropriation* focusses on the partiality, the occasional character, the deficits, the incoherency, but above all on the strategic selectivity of the individual agent’s

⁶⁹ Hellemans, “Turning ‘Society’ into Religion,” 46.

⁷⁰ Staf Hellemans and Gerard Rouwhorst, “Introduction: On the Processing of Society and Religion by Religious Agents,” in Hellemans and Rouwhorst, *Making of Christianities*, 7–22 (quotation: 16); see also Rouwhorst, “The Making of Early Christianity: A Processing Perspective on the History of Its Rituals,” in Hellemans and Rouwhorst, *Making of Christianities*, 83–118.

⁷¹ On the language of “fields,” see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁷² Jörg Rüpke, “Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘Cults’ and ‘Polis Religion,’” *Mythos*, n.s., 5 (2011): 191–204 (191).

⁷³ Janico Albrecht et al., “Religion in the Making: The Lived Ancient Religion Approach,” *Religion* 48 (2018): 1–26 (quotation: 2).

⁷⁴ Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke, “Appropriating Religion: Methodological Issues in Testing the ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ Approach,” *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1 (2015): 11–19 (quotation: 12).

making prefabricated meanings one's own. Accordingly, the cumulated effect of these appropriations is the precarious and ever-changing character of what claims to be normative tradition."⁷⁵

The lived ancient religion approach identifies four key terms "intended to sharpen the accounts of the dynamics of ancient religious experiences, practices and beliefs." These include *appropriation*, denoting "the situational adaptation and deployment of existing practices and techniques, institutions, norms and media to suit contingent individual or group aims and needs"; *competence*, which highlights "the priority of personal engagement, knowledge and skill in the provision of services of all kinds, ... including public and private performance, authorship, teaching and networking"; the *situational construction of meaning*; that is, religious meanings were assumed to be generated not "by world-views but by the complex interplay of interests, beliefs and satisfactions in specific situations"; and *mediality*,⁷⁶ referring to the ways in which agents communicate religious meanings materially; for example, through utterances, prayers, gestures, texts, objects (statuary, altars, votives, etc.), and the manipulation of objects (e.g., depositing votives in a space marked as "sacred").

Both the processing approach and LAR object to the reification of structure, privilege the agency of individuals and groups as they actively select and modify elements of their environments to suit their own needs, and posit a reciprocally formative relationship between structure and agency: structure is understood to amount to the "cumulated effect of ... [its] appropriations" by agents. Structure is thus understood to be subject to historical change in keeping with the shifting priorities and demands of innumerable agents.

4. Case Study: Mimouni and Nanos Regarding Izates and Paul

In an attempt to demonstrate how the processing approach and LAR might usefully be applied, I consider the comments of Mimouni and Nanos regarding circumcision in the cases of Izates II, king of Adiabene in the early- to mid-first century CE, and Paul of Tarsus.⁷⁷ I pay special attention to the ways in which structure—a potent conceptual tool in both the processing approach and LAR—plays an important, though unacknowledged, role in shaping the arguments of both Mimouni and Nanos. Two divergent views of structure are, moreover, implied. Other issues of potential interest, including strategic selectivity, modification, and the assembly of elements by agents, cannot be pursued here.

⁷⁵ Raja and Rüpke, "Appropriating Religion," 13 (emphasis mine).

⁷⁶ Albrecht, "Religion in the Making," 3.

⁷⁷ Adiabene was a Parthian client kingdom in Western Asia, in present-day Iraq.

The story of Izates's circumcision, related in Josephus, *Ant.* 20.2.1–4 (§§17–48), is embedded within a larger literary unit that stretches from *Ant.* 20.2.1 to 20.4.3 (§§17–96). Josephus relates the circumcision of Izates as follows: Izates's mother, Helene of Adiabene, was a sympathizer of Judaism, “very pleased with the customs of Judeans” (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§38]), and acted as a benefactress to the people of Jerusalem during a time of famine (ca. 44 CE; *Ant.* 20.2.5 [§§49–53]).⁷⁸ Taking the cue from his mother, Izates, too, “hastened to adopt” Jewish customs (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§38]). Izates is counseled successively by two Jewish males: first, by one whom Josephus describes as a travelling merchant, Ananias; and second, by a Galilean Jew, Eleazar, described as “extremely strict [ἀκριβής] concerning the ancestral decrees” (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§44]). Anxious that he might not be “with certainty a Judean” (βεβαίως Ἰουδαῖος) unless he was circumcised (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§38]), Izates seeks the advice of Ananias, who indicates that the king's circumcision would generate “great enmity” towards him among his subjects, since they would “not tolerate a Judean ruling over them” (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§39]).⁷⁹ Ananias adds that Izates would be able to “revere the divinity without being circumcised” and that God would “pardon” him for omitting the rite since he was constrained by the twin forces of “necessity” and “fear of his subjects” (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§41–42]). After being inhibited for a time by this advice, Izates met with Eleazar, who said that by failing to observe the ritual of circumcision, Izates was violating the greatest laws, thereby “wronging” God (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§45]). Thereupon, Josephus informs us, Izates “did not postpone the act; but, departing to another room and summoning the physician, he accomplished what was commanded” (*Ant.* 20.2.4 [§46]).

In Mimouni's view, the narrative expresses a distinction between diaspora Judaism, understood to be “rather lax” (*plutôt laxistes*) in terms of adherence to Mosaic law, and Palestinian Pharisaism, understood to be characterized by strict observance of the laws. Mimouni notes that Eleazar is described as “extremely strict concerning the ancestral decrees,” similar to Josephus's descriptions of Pharisees elsewhere (e.g., *B.J.* 2.8.14 [§162]). Josephus endorses Eleazar's position: “For Flavius Josephus, the opinion adopted by the king is the right one; it is the one that must be followed because it conforms to the law and to God”—even though he had espoused a different opinion on the subject

⁷⁸ For the date, see Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 140.

⁷⁹ I prefer to translate Ἰουδαῖος as “Judean” rather than “Jew” here: in Josephus's Roman imperial context, the issue of indigenous rule by an Adiabenean (rather than a Judean) is implied.

at an earlier date (*Life* 23 [§112–113]).⁸⁰ Mimouni understands the positions advocated by Ananias and Eleazar to parallel those defended at the Jerusalem meeting held around 48–50 CE.⁸¹ Mimouni finds in the Izates narrative “undeniable” evidence for the existence of a “tendency in favor of the absence of the obligation of circumcision for proselytes” in the mid-first century CE.⁸²

In Mimouni’s view, prior to its destruction in 70 CE, the Jerusalem Temple, with its priestly hierarchy under the authority of the High Priest, had “held and maintained the ‘national ancestral laws.’” The loss of the Jerusalem Temple precipitated a “destructuring [*déstructuration*] and the absence of a recognized and sovereign authority [*une autorité reconnue et souveraine*] capable of defining Judean identity with a single voice”; scribes and sages subsequently filled the void left by an absent priesthood.⁸³ In Mimouni’s view, structure is unitary: a centralized authority, the High Priest, based in the temple in Jerusalem, Judea’s cultural and religious hub, maintains laws that implicitly structure the practices and define the identities of Judeans at home and abroad.⁸⁴ Actions are evaluated almost solely in terms of their correspondence to the norms proposed by this centralized authority. Thus the binary scheme: behavior is either “strict” or “lax”; there is no question of selection, modification, innovation, or the like. Only when the temple is destroyed, and its priests rendered powerless, can there be a “destructuring” of society; other actors rush to fill the structural void.

One cannot fail to note a certain correspondence of this top-down structural view with a long tradition of Christian historiography, stretching back to the patristic era, that defined the church in analogous terms; it is, however, the Pope rather than the High Priest who speaks with a “single voice” of “sovereign authority”; Rome rather than Jerusalem that is defined as the center in relation to which all actions are judged; and “orthodoxy” and “heresy” that are encountered rather than “rigorism” and “laxism.” Despite all their significant differences, the two approaches share a common outlook: structure is determined by a single figure of authority presiding in a temple or basilica situated at a geographic hub, and actions are evaluated in terms of their correspondence with the pronouncements emanating from the cultural-religious center.

⁸⁰ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 139.

⁸¹ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 139.

⁸² Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 140.

⁸³ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 209–210.

⁸⁴ Mimouni does, however, occasionally concede dual practices, such as the principle of matrilineality that he proposes was dominant in the diaspora, in contrast to the patrilineality practiced in Judea.

LAR seeks to problematize the type of view that Mimouni espouses; that is, views of ancient religions as constituted by “an ahistorical set of ‘symbols’ of fixed meaning”⁸⁵ or “as a belief system on the blueprint of Christian dogmatics.”⁸⁶ “Instead of starting from religious organisations, elaborated belief systems and their always insufficient reproduction by individual members and believers, ‘lived religion’ focusses on the individual’s ‘usage’ of religion.”⁸⁷ One sees little room for individual agency in Mimouni’s paradigm, where decisions are implicitly cast in binary terms: one chooses either to follow the voice of sovereign authority or to reject it. The multiform procedures by which agents appropriate, rearrange, and communicate elements of a variegated structure envisioned by the processing approach and LAR do not appear in Mimouni’s account; indeed, his monolithic view of structure precludes them.

In contrast with Mimouni, Nanos sees a more complex cultural dynamic at work. When comparing Paul’s position to that of other Jewish writers (such as Josephus), Nanos suggests that the elements of “*time*, *location*, and *situation*” must be taken into account, implying a more dynamic view of structure and agency.⁸⁸

In terms of *time*, Nanos notes that Paul promoted the “claim that the end of the ages has begun within the midst of the present age”; that is, he espoused an apocalyptic perspective in which non-Jews were learning to revere Israel’s God.⁸⁹ Nanos notes that Josephus’s narrative about Izates contains no hint that considerations of apocalyptic temporality played any role as they did in Paul’s arguments.

In terms of *location*, Nanos posits that Paul’s addressees convened in “subgroup gatherings (*ekklēsia*) of Israelites and non-Israelites [who] live and worship together without discrimination even though retaining ethnic, gender, and other significant differences.”⁹⁰ Izates, in contrast, appears to be detached from any corporate setting of devotion to the God of Israel (i.e., such as an association or synagogue of Judeans); he is drawn to “Judaize” by a series of institutionally unrelated individuals: his mother and two Judean teachers, one a traveling merchant and the other an itinerant teacher from Galilee. The location

⁸⁵ Albrecht, “Religion in the Making,” 4.

⁸⁶ Jörg Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 2.

⁸⁷ Raja and Rüpke, “Appropriating Religion,” 12.

⁸⁸ Nanos, “Question,” 108. Emphasis is Nanos’s.

⁸⁹ Nanos, “Question,” 108.

⁹⁰ Nanos, “Question,” 109.

of the Pauline groups as “subgroup gatherings” of Jews and non-Jews decisively inflects Paul’s positions regarding circumcision in a way that is not paralleled in Josephus’s Izates account.

Lastly, the *situation* must be assessed when comparing Paul’s position to the Izates narrative. The central dynamic in the Josephus narrative concerns the way in which Izates, as heir to the throne and subsequently king of Adiabene, was subject to significant political risk due to his circumcision. For Paul’s addressees, the central dynamic was different: how should Jews and non-Jews best be incorporated into a single associative body while retaining the specific ethnic identities of each one? The proposed solution: “Paul opposed Christ-following non-Jews becoming Jews (i.e., “converting” to Jewish ethnic identity [through circumcision]), but he did not oppose, and instead promoted, them practicing Judaism, (i.e., “converting” into a Jewish way of living), alongside of Jews who did so, such as himself.”

Nanos concludes his study by pointing to the centrality of *pistis*, understood to denote “fidelity” or “loyalty” to Israel’s God, in the narratives under consideration. Just as Paul makes *pistis* a cornerstone of his arguments in Romans and Galatians, Nanos argues that “although Izates’s advisors do not use the word *pistis* in direct contrast to *ergon* ... both make their case based upon whether the action or rite best represents faithfulness for him.”⁹¹ Nanos’s attempt to connect Josephus’s account with the virtue of *pistis*, however, is based on slim evidence, a single use of the verbal form *pisteuō* in Ant. 20.2.4 (§48). There Josephus narrates, “the fruit of reverence [τῆς εὐσεβείας] is not lost to those who pay attention to him [τοῖς εἰς αὐτὸν ἀποβλέπουσιν] and trust in him alone [καὶ μόνῳ πεπιστευκόσιν].” Nanos’s attempt to see in the passage a reference to “faith(fulness)/trust alone [*monō pepisteukosin*]” misconstrues the term μόνῳ, an adjective referring to the object of trust (i.e., God alone; in the dative case), not an adverb modifying πεπιστευκόσιν (in which case we would expect μόνως or μόνον).⁹²

In contrast with Paul, I suggest, the virtue of special interest in Josephus’s narrative is not “faithfulness” (*pistis*) but “reverence” (*eusebeia*): reverence bears fruit for “those who pay attention” to and place their trust in God (Ant. 20.2.4). Similar formulations appear elsewhere in the narrative: Ananias taught women in the king’s court to “revere God” (τὸν θεὸν σέβειν; Ant. 20.2.3 [§34]) and counseled Izates to “revere God without being circumcised” (χωρὶς τῆς περιτομῆς τὸ θεῖον σέβειν; Ant. 20.2.4 [§41]); Izates displayed “reverence toward God” (τὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν εὐσέβειαν; Ant. 20.4.1 [§75]; τὸν θεὸν δὲν σέβει; Ant. 20.4.2 [§88]). *Pietas* (*eusebeia*),

⁹¹ Nanos, “Question,” 123.

⁹² On the dative object, see BDAG, s.v. πιστεύω, 1b.

like *fides* (*pistis*), was a virtue that Romans and Judeans held in common. We will return to this issue shortly.

In contrast with Mimouni's assumption an engaging structure, Nanos's discussion is far more nuanced. Although the latter offers no theoretical reflection on the role that structure plays in his argument, I suggest that at least four components may be detected in it, each of which contributes to the structuring of the religiopolitical environment. These include (1) virtues, (2) legal norms and ethnic customs, (3) "scriptural" narratives and apocalyptic traditions, and (4) guidelines for behavior within assemblies (i.e., the "body of Christ"). We take a closer look at each in turn.

1. By *virtue*, I refer to abstract concepts designating loose constellations of behaviors judged to be beneficial to society. Discourses of virtue played a key role in Roman narratives in which exemplary figures and actions are adduced to guide subsequent behavior, in what Matthew Roller dubs a "loop of social reproduction."⁹³ Similar processes are at work in Jewish texts.⁹⁴ Both *pistis* (Lat. *fides*) and *eusebeia* (Lat. *pietas*) were important social/political/religious virtues in antiquity.

Despite my caveat about *eusebeia* rather than *pistis* being the operative category in the Izates narrative, Nanos's discussion points to the ways in which virtues function as conceptual tools that bear the potential to shape (or, structure) environments: behaviors judged to embody virtues such as loyalty and respect for one's superiors are likely to be socially encouraged and rewarded, while those judged to embody the opposite characteristics are likely to be punished or to elicit social disapproval. The structuring environment makes available a range of virtues from which agents must choose to label particular actions or courses of action. In the Izates account, the choice of which virtue best applied was at issue, as was the question of whether or not a particular virtue was properly embodied in a given course of action. Did the actions of Izates or Paul embody or fail to embody the crucial virtues of *pistis* and *eusebeia*? Answers to these questions could vary. The act of associating a particular course of action with a particular virtue thus sends a sociopolitical message as to whether or not that action is suitable for repetition and thus (in "processing" terms) incorporation into a behavioral repertoire. Virtue-labeling is therefore a strategic act accomplished by

⁹³ Matthew B. Roller, "Exemplarity in Roman Culture: The Cases of Horatius Cocles and Cloelia," *Classical Philology* 99 (2004): 1–56.

⁹⁴ E.g., Howard Clark Kee, "Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs," in *OTP* 1:775–828 (779): "universal virtues are presented in a manner strongly reminiscent of Stoicism."

agents interested in promoting specific types of social formation and discouraging others.

2. Legal norms and ethnic customs are sometimes viewed, as with Mimouni, to provide rules that are either followed “strictly” or imperfectly (i.e., by “laxists”).⁹⁵ As a practice that, for Judeans, is legally mandated yet subject to local autonomy, the issue of circumcision provides an interesting vantage point from which to view issues of structure.

Although there was widespread agreement among Judeans that circumcision ought to be performed by members of that group as a “sign of the covenant” with Yahweh, the god of Israel (e.g., Gen 17), nevertheless there is evidence to suggest that some either neglected the rite altogether or performed it but removed only a portion of the prepuce, leaving part of the glans covered (Jub. 15:33; 1 Macc 1:48; perhaps Philo, *Migr.* 89–93).⁹⁶ During the Second Temple period, there does not appear to have been any “standard” practice promulgated, either by the Jerusalem priesthood or any other group, pertaining to the circumcision of non-Judeans who wished to “revere” Israel’s God. Instead we encounter a sliding scale of practices ranging from lighting candles on the Sabbath to immersion in water and circumcision.⁹⁷ Thus it comes as no surprise that differences of agreement arose as the Jesus movement began to incorporate greater numbers of non-Jews into its ranks.

Moreover, since circumcision was practiced locally, its implementation was never subject to direct administrative oversight from the Jerusalem Temple or its priesthood. The author of the Gospel of Luke imagines that John and Jesus were circumcised in a local context (Luke 1:57–66; 2:15–21), evidently in the home. In Luke 1:58, “they,” that is, “neighbors and relatives,” “came” (ἤλθον), apparently to the home in which the child had been born, to witness John’s circumcision (Luke 1:59). Although from a later period, the Mishnah’s statement about the transport from one courtyard to another of a bandage to help staunch the bleeding of the circumcised phallus similarly implies a domestic setting (m. Šabb. 19.2).

Circumcisions may have been performed by local ritual experts or surgeons (roles that were not mutually exclusive in antiquity). Recall that in Josephus’s account, Izates is circumcised in his royal residence by someone

⁹⁵ On ethnicity and customs in relation to deities, see Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 26 (2010): 232–252.

⁹⁶ For Jubilees, see James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees*, 2 vols. (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 1:524–525.

⁹⁷ Berthelot, “To Convert.”

designated only “the physician” (ὁ ἰατρός), presumably a non-Judean who may have been familiar with a version of the procedure known to Greek medicine as a treatment for phimosis, or inflammation of the penis.⁹⁸ Only in a later period (ca. fifth–eighth centuries CE)⁹⁹ does the Babylonian Talmud offer evidence for ritual experts who specialized in circumcision: b. Šabb. 130b (§6) mentions one Rabbi Yehuda “the Cutter” (הגזר) in the context of a discussion about circumcision on the Sabbath, while the better-known designation *mohel* (Aram. מהולא: “circumciser”) appears in b. Šabb. 156a (§11).

Rather than involving ritual or medical experts specifically trained for the task, Jubilees imagines that the patriarch Abraham himself performed circumcisions at his estate (Jub. 15:23).¹⁰⁰ Exod 4:25 has Moses’s wife Zipporah circumcise her infant son.¹⁰¹ The text of 1 Macc 1:60–61 indicates that mothers “who had circumcised [τὰς περιτετευχίας] their sons” were put to death during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, circa 168 or 167 BCE. This could imply that mothers themselves acted as the ritual agents, but the text is not explicit.¹⁰² Women are similarly the subjects of the active, transitive verb *περιτέμνω* (“to circumcise”) in 2 Macc 6:10 and 4 Macc 4:25, just as men are subjects of the verb in LXX Gen 17:23–24; 21:4; Josh 5:2–3, 7; and 1 Macc 1:61. Although more could be said, on balance this evidence suggests that both fathers and mothers were

⁹⁸ Nanos (“Question,” 118, n. 22) also presumes the surgeon to be non-Judean. On the procedure, see Celsus, *Med.* 7.25 (also 6.18; 25.2); Frederick Mansfield Hodges, “Phimosis in Antiquity,” *World Journal of Urology* 17, no. 3 (1999): 133–136.

⁹⁹ For the complicated issues of dating the Babylonian Talmud and its sources, see Hermann L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 211–225.

¹⁰⁰ See VanderKam, *Jubilees*, 1:518.

¹⁰¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke*, rev. ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 369.

¹⁰² Jonathan A. Goldstein (*1 Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1976]), 139, writes “the circumcision of babies appears to have been the responsibility of the mother, even though she did not perform the operation herself.” The authority he cites for this position, however, states, “While in Biblical times the mother (perhaps generally) performed the operation, it was in later times performed by a surgeon,” citing Josephus’ Izates narrative and the Talmudic passages already noted above as evidence; see online: Emil G. Hirsch et al., “Circumcision,” *Jewish Encyclopedia.com*, <https://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3074-berit-milah>. This evidence does not rule out the possibility that mothers performed the operation. For mothers as circumcisers, see Abraham C. Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York: Ktav, 1980), 9.

understood to perform circumcisions in antiquity. The fact that “in-house” expertise is called upon in carrying out the rite suggests a degree of pluriformity and local adaptation.

According to Shaye Cohen, the practice of *periah*, stipulating that the entire *glans penis* be uncovered by circumcision, was not mandated until the second century CE.¹⁰³ Already in the second century BCE, however, the author of Jubilees complained of procedures that left behind “some of the flesh” covering the glans (Jub. 15:33). Thus it appears that in the second century BCE, circumcision could be construed not only in binary terms (circumcised/uncircumcised), but also in quantitative terms; that is, concerning not whether but *how much* foreskin was removed.

If the surgical procedure was implemented by local ritual agents or family members, what can be said about the surgical-ritual *implement* with which the procedure was carried out? In Exod 4:25, Zipporah excises her son’s foreskin with a stone blade, perhaps flint. In Josh 5:2–3, Yahweh himself commands Joshua to make “stone blades” (חרבות צרים) with which to circumcise Israelite males “a second time,” suggesting that only a portion of the foreskin had been removed previously. Compiled circa 200 CE and later, the Mishnah mentions the use of an “iron instrument” (כלי ברזל) for the procedure (m. Šabb. 19:1).¹⁰⁴ During the Middle Ages, Maimonides would opine that almost any cutting instrument suffices, including glass and stone; noting, however, that an iron implement—scissors or a knife—was preferred in his own day (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Milah* 2.1).¹⁰⁵ Although biblical texts suggest that a stone knife, perhaps specifically flint, was the preferred implement for performing circumcisions, the halaka never came around to mandating that a specific instrument be used. One may only speculate that agents performed the ritual using whatever objects were the most readily available, stone or metal blades being the most likely candidates.

There was general agreement that male infants born in Jewish communities should be circumcised on the eighth day after birth (Gen 17:9–12; Jub. 15:11–14). This, however, could be overridden: an infant who is ill should not

¹⁰³ Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, 225, writes that *periah* “is of uncertain origin but seems to have been instituted after the Hadrianic persecutions” of the 130s CE.

¹⁰⁴ Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction*, 149–155.

¹⁰⁵ Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon (“Maimonides”), “Milah: Chapter Two,” Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center, Chabad.org, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/932327/jewish/Milah-Chapter-Two.htm. See further J. David Bleich, “Survey of Recent Halakhic Periodical Literature: Laser Circumcision,” *Tradition* 43, no. 3 (2010): 89–109.

be circumcised until he recovers, according to a Mishnaic view (m. Šabb. 19:5). The birth of an infant at twilight could occasion ambiguity (m. Šabb. 19:5): had the new day yet begun at the precise moment the child was delivered? Cases involving sick infants and twilight births must have occurred long before Mishnaic rulings addressed them. Very few voices were raised, however, to indicate that boys whose circumcisions were delayed due to uncontrollable circumstances were deemed to be any less Jewish or any less within the bounds of the ancient covenant—the author of Jubilees being the notable exception (Jub. 15:25–26). But the author of Jubilees, too, exercised his own form of halakic agency, first by interpreting Gen 17 to limit and exclude cases in which circumcision was delayed slightly, a situation not envisioned in the earlier text; and second by alleging that some “Israelites” were “false to the ordinance” because they failed to remove the *entire* foreskin (Jub. 15:33), adding a stipulation not present in Gen 17.¹⁰⁶

The eighth-day rule was taken to supersede the obligation to avoid work on the Sabbath (m. Šabb. 18:3–19:2); although in Maimonides’s view, the necessary instruments had to be made ready in advance (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Milah* 2.6). In the absence of any known “ruling” on the matter in the Second Temple period, agents were perhaps left to exercise their own discretion. Eventually the possibility that constituent elements of the legal “structure”—eighth-day circumcision and Sabbath rest—could come into conflict necessitated further specification, in a potentially endless loop of halakic elaboration.

3. The contribution of scriptural narratives and apocalyptic traditions also contribute to the ongoing production and reproduction of structure. As we have seen, Paul’s advice to seek neither circumcision nor epispasm in 1 Cor 7:18 occurs in the context of instructions predicated on an apocalyptic timetable (1 Cor 7:29). Nanos argues cogently that Paul’s apocalyptic outlook entails “the nations” revering the God of Israel alongside Judeans (e.g., Isa 11:6; 66:25). This view implies the non-circumcision of the representatives of “the nations,” for in order to fulfill the envisioned apocalyptic narrative, “the nations” must remain just that; if circumcised, they would effectively lose that status and become “Judeans.”¹⁰⁷ Halaka and apocalyptic perspectives thus interacted as mutually informing elements of the structure of Judean practice, again rendering “structure” a flexible construct.

¹⁰⁶ On the halakic issue addressed in Jub. 15:25, see VanderKam, *Jubilees*, 1:520. The translations of Jubilees are VanderKam’s (slightly modified).

¹⁰⁷ Nanos, “Question,” 126–127.

4. Nanos points to yet another structural element, rules to be followed by members of the associative body. Paul actively sought to craft policies to facilitate equality of membership between Jewish and non-Jewish persons; the latter are to be received within the *ekklēsiai* as “full members of the family of Abraham, as more than guests and yet not candidates for becoming Jews.” This entails arranging seating and food portions in a way that does not perpetuate “ethno-religious hierarchical distinctions” within the space of the *ekklēsia*.¹⁰⁸

Nanos’s point can be augmented: other associative groups in antiquity issued rules to promote the integration of various constituencies, such as slave, freed, and free, holding communal meals, giving members opportunities to serve in rotating offices, and banning fighting with or insulting other members at group meetings. Recent work comparing the social organization of early groups of Jesus-devotees with other ancient Mediterranean assemblies, for example by John Kloppenborg, Philip Harland, Richard Last, and Richard Ascough (to name a few) bears the potential to shed additional light on the processes Nanos describes.¹⁰⁹ Paul did not craft regulations for associative life *ex nihilo*, but worked with pre-existing patterns. That said, the interplay between pre-existing associative regulations and innovative procedures tailored specifically for Pauline groups is a topic that deserves further attention.

In sum, discourses about virtue, legal norms and ethnic customs, scriptural and apocalyptic traditions, and norms of associative organization constituted structural elements with which Paul and similar agents worked. Each of the elements was integrated with the others, albeit in unstable and sometimes conflicting ways. There was no blueprint as to how the integration of the various structural elements was to be achieved. Moreover, each of the constituent elements identified consisted not of a monolithic whole but rather an internally diverse assemblage of ideas and practices. Thus actors do not only “inherit” structures; they actively negotiate and process them, selecting elements to integrate into a behavioral repertoire, attempting (with greater or lesser degrees of success) to integrate select elements into a coherent whole, and to embody that

¹⁰⁸ Nanos, “Question,” 150.

¹⁰⁹ John S. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations: Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019); Richard Last and Philip Harland, *Group Survival in the Ancient Mediterranean: Rethinking Material Conditions in the Landscape of Jews and Christians* (London: T&T Clark, 2020); Richard S. Ascough, “The Thessalonian Christian Community as a Professional Voluntary Association,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 311–328; and Anders Runesson, “The Question of Terminology: The Architecture of Contemporary Discussions of Paul,” in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*, 53–77.

negotiated structure in communicative action, all processes leading to the continual modification of the structuring environment.

5. Conclusion

Far from being an element of the structuring environment whose implementation was standardized in first-century Judaism, closer scrutiny reveals that circumcision entailed a considerable degree of flexibility and local discretion by ritual agents, whether surgeons, parents, or Judaic evangelists such as Paul. The ostensibly structuring authorities of Scripture, tradition, and so on proved inadequate to resolve many of the issues involved. This study suggests therefore that researchers would do well to attend to the vicissitudes and contingencies experienced by actors who continually faced the task of “processing” “lived religion,” and to move beyond historical reconstructions that unrealistically privilege structure to the exclusion of the agency of the groups and individuals of interest; most notably, for present purposes, those affiliated with the Jesus movement in its various Jewish settings.