

Restoring Abraham's Foreskin: The Significance of ἀκροβυστία for Paul's Argument about Circumcision in Romans 4:9–12

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Abstract

In his discussion of Abraham's circumcision (Rom 4:9–12), Paul uses the term ἀκροβυστία, or “foreskin,” six times, as a key part of his argument. Unfortunately, this term is something of a scholarly blind spot and is often taken as referring only to the absence of circumcision, or to a time before circumcision. However, given Paul's usage of this term, as well as the metaphor of foreskin in the Hebrew Bible, ἀκροβυστία should be understood as a negative physical presence that marks those who do not belong to God's people. Paul's argument that Abraham was justified while ἐν ἀκροβυστία therefore specifically concerns gentiles, and does not make a point about πίστις or justification before circumcision. Moreover, awareness of the physical referent of the term shows that Paul describes Abraham's circumcision as a sign that marks the foreskin. A consistent focus on the significance of ἀκροβυστία therefore offers an important correction to the common understanding of this crucial passage.

Keywords

Circumcision, foreskin, gentiles, justification, Romans 4

1. Introduction

Paul's discussion of Abraham's circumcision in Rom 4:9–12 accomplishes a remarkable feat: it unites Pauline scholars in an extremely rare case of near consensus. Exegetes tend to agree that the issue at stake for Paul here is one of timing: was Abraham justified “when he had already been circumcised or while he was still uncircumcised?”¹ This consensus is all the more remarkable given that

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 208.

the Greek text of this passage contains no terms that refer to time or sequence; words such as “still,” “yet,” and “already” are often added in translation (see below), but have no Greek equivalent. Moreover, this dominant interpretation relies on misunderstanding or ignoring Paul’s emphatic use of the term ἀκροβυστία, or “foreskin,” which occurs six times in these four verses, but constitutes something of a scholarly blind spot. The term ἀκροβυστία is often translated as “uncircumcised,” or is reduced, due to the focus on time, to merely “before” or “previously,” in phrases such as “before or after he had been circumcised” and “the righteousness that he had *previously* received through faith” (emphasis in the original).² The invisibility of ἀκροβυστία works to support the prevalent scholarly assumption that the central issue in the passage is the significance of circumcision, and its relationship to faith. Yet Paul starts off the discussion in verse 9 with the question whether God’s blessing also falls on the ἀκροβυστία—that it is for “the circumcision” is taken as a given. The lack of serious engagement by scholars with the emphasis on ἀκροβυστία throughout the passage has further meant that Paul’s remarkable explanation that Abraham’s circumcision is a sign of the foreskin has not been recognized.

This article will challenge the consensus reading of Abraham’s circumcision in Romans, and will offer an interpretation that takes the importance of ἀκροβυστία for Paul’s argument into account. If most scholars consider the gist of the passage to roughly be: *is circumcision necessary? No, look at Abraham, he was justified before he was circumcised, so circumcision is not necessary*, this study will argue that it rather should be understood as: *is “foreskin” a problem? No, look at Abraham, he was justified when he was “in foreskin,” so “foreskin” need not be a problem.*

This might seem like a minor shift, but it is one that has important implications. If the passage is understood as specifically addressing the question of gentile circumcision, it no longer relates to circumcision in general, and does not contrast justification by faith to some other form of justification, as is often supposed. It is not a matter of what came first in the case of Abraham, his justification or his circumcision, but rather what is required of gentiles. If Abraham could be justified while “in foreskin,” then so can others who are “in foreskin,” i.e., other gentiles. The passage is then concerned only with the

² The phrase “before or after he had been circumcised” occurs in John Ziesler’s commentary on Romans. John Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1989), 127; Philip Esler refers to “the righteousness that he had *previously* received through faith,” in *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 189.

inclusion of gentiles, and does not easily relate to aspects of Christian theology such as justification through faith, with which it has been connected.

This alternative reading not only confirms recent insights that Paul was concerned with the status of gentiles and proselyte circumcision, rather than with circumcision as a Jewish rite more generally; it also makes sense of some of the problematic aspects of the passage that plague the conventional reading, especially the second “τοῖς” in verse 12, which is often ignored or written off as a mistake.

2. Faith Before Circumcision: The Near Consensus View

Before turning to the meaning of ἀκροβυστία and its role in Rom 4:9–12, I will briefly discuss the dominant scholarly view on this passage and how it differs from what I propose.³ Of course, given the wealth of publications on these verses, it is

³ Some important exceptions to the consensus view should be noted. Nina Livesey highlights the significance of ἀκροβυστία in this passage and suggests that “Paul is driving home the point that, like circumcised Jews, foreskinned Gentiles can become righteous heirs of Abraham.” Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 115. My interpretation here differs from Livesey’s, especially with regard to the interpretation of the two references to ἀκροβυστία in verse 11, as will be explained below. Mark Nanos sees time as a significant factor not in relation to Abraham’s circumcision, but rather for Paul’s larger eschatological frame. He therefore argues that in Rom 3:29–4:25, Paul makes the “chronometrical gospel case that non-Jews must remain non-Jews with the arrival of the awaited age. (...) God thus becomes also the God of the ‘foreskinned,’ so they must remain representatives from the other nations and not become circumcised, that is not become Jews/Israelites.” Mark D. Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul’s Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus’ Advisors to King Izates,” in *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 105–152, at 126. While I see this passage as focused on the conditional inclusion of non-Jews into the children of Abraham, rather than as directly arguing against circumcision of gentiles, the two are closely related issues in Paul’s understanding of circumcision. Like Livesey and Nanos, Matthew Thiessen also sees this passage as focused on the position of gentiles, but he assumes nevertheless that Paul also felt the need to establish the position of Jews. In this sense, he seems closer to the consensus view, since the timing of Abraham’s circumcision is relevant to his interpretation: “Rom 4:11–12 suggests that, for Paul, if Abraham had not undergone circumcision, he would only have become the father of believing gentiles.” According to Thiessen, Paul’s understanding of circumcision “is surprising in that it suggests that Abraham was first the father of believing gentiles and that an additional covenant and sign, circumcision, was necessary for him to become the father of Jews.” Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 83.

impossible to be comprehensive, but the summary given here is intended as a fair representation of current views. The NRSV can be taken as an example of the prevailing focus on time, since it renders the passage as follows:

9 Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” 10 How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, 12 and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:9–12 NRSV)⁴

The words that refer to time in this translation, “before,” “after,” and “still,” do not reflect direct equivalents in Greek. In spite of this, the consensus view on Romans 4 is that the central issue in this passage is one of timing and sequence, and there does not appear to be significant debate about this.⁵ A few examples can

⁴ The NIV has a largely similar translation to the NRSV but adds an exclamation point which highlights the temporal aspect in verse 10: “Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!” In the KJV and NKJV the words “before” and “after” do not occur, but the words “yet” (KJV) and “still” (NKJV) are used instead. Some translations, such as the New American Standard Bible, do not include any temporal references. David Bentley Hart’s recent translation does not include references to time in verses 9–10 and translates ἀκροβυστία in verse 9 as “those of the foreskin” and ἐν ἀκροβυστία in verse 10 as “with a foreskin.” However, in verse 11a the word “time” is added to interpret the reference to ἀκροβυστία: “And he received a sign of circumcision, a seal of the uprightness of his faithfulness during the time when he had had a foreskin.” David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 252. This in spite of the fact that Hart claims to have produced “an almost pitilessly literal translation,” which does not “draw a veil of delicacy over jarring words or images,” of which ἀκροβυστία is mentioned as a specific example (*The New Testament*, 15).

⁵ There is, of course, significant disagreement on the passage in other respects. On this see, e.g., Stephen Chester, who takes Romans 4 as an “exegetical test case” for reconciling Reformation views and those of the New Perspective on Paul. Stephen Chester, *Reading*

illustrate this view. In his study on Abraham's faith in Rom 4, Benjamin Schliesser argues that Paul is focused on the "temporal interval" between Gen 15 and Gen 17, which is "indispensable for his case of the material priority of faith and the ensuing interpretation of circumcision."⁶ Stanley Porter makes a similar point in his commentary on Romans, describing the argument as one formulated around "Biblical chronology." Abraham's faith (in Gen 15) precedes the story of his circumcision (in Gen 17) and is therefore "completely independent of the later command to be circumcised."⁷ For N. T. Wright, the "historical sequence" between these two Genesis chapters is "a key point" in Paul's argument.⁸ According to Robert Jewett, "Paul makes the case that circumcision was not only performed long after Abraham's reckoning as righteous, but also that it was merely the 'seal' of the righteous status that he had already received."⁹ Joshua Jipp even interprets Paul's question in verse 10, which is introduced by $\pi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$, as asking after time: "When then was it reckoned?" ($\pi\acute{\omega}\varsigma$ οὖν ἐλογίσθη).¹⁰

Paul with the Reformers: Reconciling Old and New Perspectives (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 400–422.

⁶ See Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 357.

⁷ Stanley E. Porter, *The Letter to the Romans: A Linguistic and Literary Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), 106.

⁸ N. T. Wright, "Paul and the Patriarch: The Role of Abraham in Romans 4," *JSNT* 35.3 (2013): 207–241, at 210.

⁹ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 318.

¹⁰ Joshua W. Jipp, "Rereading the Story of Abraham, Isaac, and 'Us' in Romans 4," *JSNT* 32.2 (2009): 217–242, at 224. A similar focus on time and sequence is found in many scholars, e.g., "Paulus hat dabei im Auge, daß in der Chronologie der Schrift die Beschneidung Abrahams in Gen 17 erst nach seiner Rechtfertigung in Gen 15 folgt" (Ulrich Wilkens, *Der Brief an die Römer (Röm 1-5)* [Zürich: Benziger Verlag 1978], 264); "Paul focusses here upon the timing of Abraham's justification" (Glenn N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1–4* [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990], 164); "Paul asks about the time sequence: which came first, Abraham's justification or his circumcision?" (Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 380); "The priority of Abraham's faith with respect to his circumcision is emphasized in v. 11" (Michael Cranford, "Abraham in Romans 4: The Father of All Who Believe," *NTS* 41.01 [1995]: 71–88, at 84); "Paul has in mind the chronological progression of the Genesis narrative about Abraham" (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 268); "Gen. 15.6 shows that Abraham being reckoned as righteous was sequentially prior to him being circumcised" (Edward Adams, "Abraham's Faith and Gentile Disobedience: Textual Links Between Romans 1 and 4," *JSNT* 65.19 [1997]: 47–66, at 50); "Da in der Schrift Gen. 17,9ff.

As these quotations show, the issue of time is for most interpreters closely bound up with the way Paul is thought to reinterpret the meaning of circumcision in verse 11. Douglas Moo, for example, makes the point that “Abraham was declared righteous while still uncircumcised. His later circumcision added nothing materially to that transaction; it simply signified and confirmed it.”¹¹ For Benjamin Schliesser, Paul’s argument shows that “circumcision is temporally and materially secondary, and it has a relative character.”¹² In a range of ways, scholars thus argue that Paul redefines what circumcision signifies, based on the sequence of events in Gen 15 and 17. What matters for Paul, in this view, is that Abraham’s circumcision came after he was reckoned as righteous, and therefore only confirms his status. For most scholars,

erst auf Gen. 15,6 folgt, lautet die Antwort: Abraham wurde gerechtfertigt als er noch unbeschnitten war” (Peter Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998], 69); “Paulus argumentiert hier mit der zeitlichen Reihenfolge” (Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* [Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999], 103); “he creates leverage by centering his discussion on the exact temporal point when Abraham was circumcised” (Jipp, “Rereading the Story of Abraham, Isaac, and ‘Us,’” 224); “What is certain is that Paul was aware of the general time-frame, and he made a point of it, namely, that the promise to Abraham ... was prior to his circumcision” (Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 183); “a saving faith already anticipated ..., well before circumcision was commanded” (Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012], 138); “After he had been circumcised or when he was still uncircumcised?” (Rafael Rodriguez, *If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014], 91); “Paulus sieht sich ganz offensichtlich genötigt zu erklären, warum Abraham überhaupt noch beschnitten wurde, nachdem Gott ihn schon vorher, noch im Zustand der Unbeschnittenheit, für gerecht erklärt hatte” (Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2014], 289); “the context of the passage makes it clear that God credited righteousness to Abraham before he was circumcised, not when or after he was circumcised” (Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016], 503); “He uses the narrative about Abraham as recorded in the Judean scriptures to argue that Abraham could not have been regarded as righteous by God through circumcision, as Abraham received righteousness before being circumcised” (Andrew Kimseng Tan, *The Rhetoric of Abraham’s Faith in Romans 4* [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2018], 210).

¹¹ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 269.

¹² Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith in Romans 4*, 359.

Paul puts circumcision in its place as not a means to righteousness, but a sign of it, that comes after the fact.¹³

Underlying both the temporal perspective and the assumption that the passage is primarily concerned with reinterpreting circumcision, is a largely unspoken understanding that ἀκροβυστία is quite literally a non-issue. As we have seen, it is not just understood as “uncircumcision,” but as “before circumcision” and “previously”: as a state or time characterized merely by the absence of the thing Paul is thought to be focused on. Because ἀκροβυστία is understood only as an absence, the dominant interpretation can assume that Paul explains something about justification in a general sense. The idea is that for all people justification comes through πίστις and not circumcision. There is no sense that the reference here is only about those who are ἐν ἀκροβυστία.

Of course, some interpreters do show awareness in discussions of Rom 4 that ἀκροβυστία has to do with gentiles, a category that certainly is not neutral or a non-issue for Paul. But the temporal reading and the insistence that Paul is commenting on how circumcision relates to justification generally, seems to push this awareness into the background.¹⁴ If Abraham was justified ἐν ἀκροβυστία, this is not understood as a description of what Abraham was—“in foreskin,” a gentile—but primarily of what he was not: circumcised. Scholars here do not see “uncircumcision” as a specific quality of the religious outsider, but implicitly as a characteristic of all people, in the time before circumcision is introduced.

It is perhaps unsurprising that this type of understanding of ἀκροβυστία as merely an absence, and of circumcision as a mark that creates difference

¹³ See, e.g., Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: T&T Clark, 1975), 236; Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 265; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 209; Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans*, 189; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 381; Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 69; Jewett, *Romans*, 318–319; Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 183; Tan, *The Rhetoric of Abraham's Faith*, 205.

¹⁴ Edward Adams evaluates the relative significance of temporal and ethnic aspects: “Three times over in vv. 11–12, it is emphasized that Abraham was in a state of uncircumcision—ἐν ἀκροβυστία—when he was accepted by God. While this means that Abraham was justified before he had submitted to the rite of circumcision, ἀκροβυστία is probably also intended to signify Abraham's ethnic status at the time (...). In other words, Paul emphasizes that Abraham was still a Gentile when he was declared righteous through faith.” Unfortunately, Adams concludes from this that “Paul uses Abraham to make the Gentile route to God the standard and rule” (“Abraham's Faith and Gentile Disobedience,” 63), a view that will be disputed here. See also Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans*, 164–165; Jewett, *Romans*, 318–319; Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4*, 363; Jipp, “Rereading the Story of Abraham, Isaac, and ‘Us’,” 224.

between otherwise undifferentiated people, has long made sense in the field of Pauline studies, given the extent to which it has relied on a Christian perspective. The temporal interpretation is informed by and in turn has informed the idea that Paul here conveys a general message about the key issues of justification, faith, and circumcision, and their relative importance for “believers”—a category without ethnic distinction.

Yet it is doubtful that such an interpretation of ἀκροβυστία can claim to represent a credible first-century Jewish perspective, much less that of Paul, who stands out for insistently differentiating between Jew and non-Jew, between Ἰουδαῖοι and ἔθνη, between περιτομή and ἀκροβυστία.¹⁵ It is this division that Paul discursively creates in order to confront the notion that the non-Jews are necessarily the outsiders. His message in Romans emphasizes and at the same time challenges this division in the phrase “Jew first and also Greek” (Rom 1:16; 2:9–10; 3:9; 10:12) and in the questions posed in 3:29 and 4:9, whether it is only the Jews who belong to God and receive his blessing, or also the other group, referred to as ἔθνη and ἀκροβυστία. The term ἀκροβυστία consistently functions as a significant component within this division and to assume that it would be a way to refer to an undivided, pre-circumcised condition suggests a considerable lack of engagement with Paul’s frame of reference. In what follows, I hope to show in more detail why the consensus view constitutes a highly problematic interpretation of ἀκροβυστία and consequently of Paul’s argument about Abraham’s circumcision.

3. In Foreskin, Not in Circumcision: The Significance of ἀκροβυστία

The meaning of the term ἀκροβυστία is not usually the subject of much reflection in scholarship on Romans.¹⁶ As we have seen, it is understood in the temporal

¹⁵ On this, see Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Adi Ophir, who argue that Paul is unlike other Jewish authors in creating an undifferentiated category of the non-Jew, understood both collectively and individually, rather than recognize different non-Jewish nations (“Paul and the Invention of the Gentiles,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 105.1 [2015]: 1–41, esp. 21–41). On the problem with assumptions about Christian “universalism,” see Anders Runesson, “Particularistic Judaism and Universalistic Christianity?: Some Critical Remarks on Terminology and Theology,” *Studia Theologica* 54.1 (2000): 55–75.

¹⁶ Nina Livesey is one of the few scholars to reflect on ἀκροβυστία. She describes Paul’s usage of both περιτομή and ἀκροβυστία as a combination of “literal, metonymic and metaphoric,” specifically in connection with Rom 2:25–29 (Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 108; see also Nanos, “The Question of Conceptualization,” quoted above n.3). Joel Marcus’s article “The Circumcision and the Uncircumcision in Rome” discusses the unusual character of Paul’s language and recognizes its derogatory sense. Marcus argues that

sense as “previously” and “before (circumcision),” or translated as “uncircumcision” and occasionally as “gentiles.” In his monograph on Rom 4, Andrew Kimseng Tan attempts to locate Paul’s use of the term in a wider context, by suggesting that ἀκροβυστία was a term “Judeans use to refer to gentiles.” While he points to 1 Macc 1:15 as a proof-text for this interpretation, Tan concedes that ἀκροβυστία is in fact used there “to refer to Judeans who become uncircumcised and abandon the ‘holy covenant’ and join the gentiles.”¹⁷ This passage chastises Jews who “made foreskins for themselves” (ἐποίησαν ἑαυτοῖς ἀκροβυστίας). Clearly, the claim that ἀκροβυστία is used by Judeans to refer to gentiles is not supported by a Jewish text that uses the term in connection with other Jews. Tan’s insertion of “e.g.” before the 1 Maccabees reference is misleading, since it suggests that other instances of this usage exist. Yet it is no coincidence that such an unconvincing example is given, since there simply are no other extant cases where ἀκροβυστία is used in the sense of “gentiles.” As will be discussed below, all occurrences of the term outside of Paul’s letters refer to physical, rather than metaphorical foreskin, primarily as the part that is cut in circumcision. Most dictionaries therefore list “foreskin” as the primary meaning of ἀκροβυστία, although they sometimes suggest “uncircumcision” or “gentiles,” for Paul’s use of the term.¹⁸

περιτομή and ἀκροβυστία should in many cases be translated as “circumcised penis” and “foreskin” rather than with “the stative abstractions ‘state of being circumcised/uncircumcised.’” See Joel Marcus, “The Circumcision and the Uncircumcision in Rome,” *NTS* 35.01 (1989): 67–81, at 75. Unfortunately, Marcus makes an exception for those cases where the terms occur with the prepositions ἐν and διὰ, such as in Rom 4:10–11, where he believes the abstract translation is appropriate (“The Circumcision and the Uncircumcision in Rome,” 75). Robert Jewett builds on Marcus’s insights and translates ἀκροβυστία as “(uncircumcised) foreskin” (*Romans*, particularly 234). Francis Watson improbably suggests that ἀκροβυστία refers to “the Pauline Gentile Christian congregations;” Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 267. See also Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 171–173.

¹⁷ Tan, *The Rhetoric of Abraham’s Faith*, 204.

¹⁸ See, e.g., LSJ, “foreskin,” “state of having the foreskin,” “uncircumcision”; “collect. the uncircumcised”; *TDNT* gives “foreskin” or *praeputium*; Bauer’s *Wörterbuch* lists “Vorhaut” as the first meaning but then for Paul’s uses of the word gives “Unbeschnittenheit,” “Heidenschaft,” and “Unbeschnittenen”; L&N do not mention “foreskin” but give “a collective for those who are uncircumcised”—“uncircumcised, Gentiles, the Gentile world”; Gingrich’s *Shorter Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* translates “foreskin, uncircumcision,” as well as “Heathendom, the Gentiles”; the *Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* gives “prepuce”; and for the New Testament “fig. non-circumcision” and “the uncircumcised.”

3.1. ἀκροβυστία: A Negative Presence Rather Than a Neutral Absence

The meaning of the term ἀκροβυστία in Paul is thus far from straightforward. His usage of the term (16 times, in Rom 2:25–27; 3:30; 4:9–12; 1 Cor 7:18–19; Gal 2:7; 5:6; 6:15) stands out in its ancient context. Apart from Paul’s letters, ἀκροβυστία occurs only in the Septuagint (Gen 17:11, 14, 24, 25; 34:14; Exod 4:25; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:3; 1 Sam 18:25, 27; 2 Sam 3:14; Jer 9:24, and, in some sources, in Jer 4:4) and once in Philo (*QE* 2.2). In Philo and in most of the Septuagint cases, ἀκροβυστία is used in the phrase “the flesh of your/his/their foreskin” which occurs as the object of the verb “to circumcise,” περιτέμνω (Gen 17:11, 14, 24, 25; 34:14; Lev 12:3). Other occurrences of ἀκροβυστία in the Septuagint, such as in the story of the rape of Dinah (Gen 34:14) and in Zipporah’s act of circumcision (Exod 4:25), also all refer to physical foreskin. In the case of Jer 4:4, where the Hebrew speaks of the “foreskin of the heart,” the Codex Vaticanus, the Codex Sinaiticus, and the Codex Alexandrinus all read σκληροκαρδία, but some other witnesses here read ἀκροβυστία. This is the only instance of a metaphorical reference to foreskin in Greek that possibly predates Paul, but may also be dependent on him.¹⁹ Given the close association of ἀκροβυστία with circumcision, it is not surprising that the word does not appear in non-Jewish sources, which use terms such as ἀκροποσθία, ἀκροπόσθιον, πόσθη or ποσθία to describe penile anatomy.²⁰

While ἀκροβυστία is thus nearly always used in a literal, anatomical sense, the Hebrew noun הַלְרֵפָה, “foreskin,” and the (nominal) adjective לְרֵפָה, “foreskinned” frequently have a metaphorical sense in the Hebrew Bible. This metaphorical foreskin has a negative connotation: “foreskinned” is used as a description for people who are estranged from God and “foreskin” is something that needs to be

¹⁹ These two translations have led to different reconstructions of the text in the critical Göttingen edition (Joseph Ziegler ed., *Jeremias. Baruch. Threni. Epistula Jeremiae* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht], 1976, 166) and Rahlfs edition of the Septuagint (Alfred Rahlfs ed., *Septuaginta: Id est Vetus Testamentum graece iuxta LXX interpretes* [Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979], 662). Rahlfs reads σκληροκαρδία, based on the main witnesses, while Ziegler reads ἀκροβυστία based on the recensions of Origen and Lucian, on a number of minuscule manuscripts, some of which Ziegler considers to belong to the same group as these recensions (e.g., 233, 62, 26, 46, 106), as well as on commentaries by Church Fathers (e.g., Origen, Justin Martyr, Methodius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nissa), and translations (*Vetus Latina*, Bohairic and Armenian translations).

²⁰ For a discussion of these terms and their usage, see Frederick M. Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and their Relation to Lipodermos, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the Kynodesme,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (2001): 375–405.

cut away in order to enable proper functioning or a good relationship to God.²¹ In cases where the Hebrew Bible uses “the foreskinned” (עֲרֵבָה) as a metonym for people (e.g., Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Chron 10:4; 1 Sam 14:6), the Septuagint chooses forms of the word ἀπερίτμητος, “uncircumcised,” as a term for non-Jews and to denote the absence of circumcision. Thus, e.g., Isaiah’s prophecy that the “foreskinned and defiled” (אֲרֵבָה לְעַרְבָּיִם) will not enter Jerusalem again, is rendered in Greek as ἀπερίτμητος καὶ ἀκάθαρτος (Isa 52:1). For other metaphorical references to foreskin, associated with hearts, ears, lips, and fruit (Exod 6:12, 30; Lev 19:23; Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; 6:10; Ezek 44:7, 9; Hab 2:16), the Septuagint translators either used ἀπερίτμητος, “uncircumcised,” or choose a freer translation, allowing the association with circumcision to be lost entirely.²² Given the discomfort that is suggested by the shift away from metaphorical foreskin in the Septuagint, it is possible to suppose that ἀπερίτμητος offered a way to sanitize a metaphor that was otherwise too fleshy and graphic. Scholars sometimes appear to read ἀκροβυστία in Paul as if it were ἀπερίτμητος, however the two terms have quite different usage and ἀπερίτμητος does not occur in Paul’s letters.

3.2. Paul’s Use of ἀκροβυστία as Marked Language

It is of course possible, and perhaps even likely, that ἀκροβυστία was indeed used in a metaphorical sense among Greek-speaking Jews, especially in the vernacular, since we have only very partial access to this.²³ Yet as far as we can tell from extant

²¹ Jason S. Derouchie observes that “foreskin’ bore a negative and even abominable connotation within Israel” and translates עֲרֵבָה as “those estranged from God.” His analysis shows that the Targum translators preserved some metaphorical references to foreskin, but transformed most of them. Jason S. Derouchie, “Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 14.2 (2004): 175–203, at 194.

²² The metaphor did continue to be used in Hebrew, as is evident in the Dead Sea Scrolls, see, e.g., 1QS V:5, 26; 4Q434 I i 4; 4Q177 II:16. See Sandra Jacobs, “Expendable Signs: The Covenant of the Rainbow and Circumcision at Qumran,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Context: Integrating the Dead Sea Scrolls in the Study of Ancient Texts, Languages, and Cultures* Volume Two, ed. Armin Lange, Emanuel Tov and Matthias Weigold (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 543–575, 571–572, as well as in Jubilees, e.g. 1:23; see Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 71.

²³ Joel Marcus assumes that this was indeed the case and takes Eph 2:11 as evidence of this usage. While he acknowledges that Ephesians was most likely written “a considerable time after Paul’s death,” Marcus still maintains that this passage “sheds light on the sociological situation out of which the use of ἀκροβυστία and περιτομή as designations for groups of

literature, which is what we have to base our assessment on, Paul uses *ἀκροβυστία* in a novel way. No other source divides people into *περιτομή* and *ἀκροβυστία*, no other ancient Greek author takes male genital anatomy as *the* signifier of ethnic or religious difference. Moreover, Paul's own usage of the term is far from uniform. He not only uses *περιτομή* and *ἀκροβυστία* as apparent references to groups of people (Rom 3:30; 4:9; Gal 2:7), he also uses the construction δι' *ἀκροβυστίας* (Rom 4:11), to which we will return below, and talks of being ἐν *ἀκροβυστία*, both in connection with Abraham (Rom 4:10–12) and for the circumstances of someone's calling (1 Cor 7:18). In this latter case, the reference seems to be quite directly to male anatomy, since for those who are called ἐν *ἀκροβυστία*, he advises against circumcision, and for those who are called *περιτετμημένος* he advises against epispasm (foreskin restoration). In Rom 2:25, as we will examine in a moment, the term is used in a similarly physical sense, since Paul states there that in a particular situation, circumcision can become foreskin (ἡ *περιτομή* σου *ἀκροβυστία* γέγονεν). A final variation in Paul's flexible use of the term occurs in the next verses, where he personifies *ἀκροβυστία* and imagines that it keeps the law and judges others (Rom 2:26–27).

Paul's language stands out, therefore, and particularly in the case of Romans, where his audience may not have been familiar with his personal idioms—or even with the term at all, outside of a Septuagint context—this is a factor to consider. In light of this varied and marked use, it is not plausible to interpret *ἀκροβυστία* as merely the absence of circumcision, or as “before circumcision.” Rather, given the fact that in the Septuagint and in Philo consistently, and in several cases in Paul as well, *ἀκροβυστία* refers directly to the part of the body that is cut in circumcision, “foreskin” seems the primary meaning and the most appropriate translation. As David Bentley Hart notes in the introduction to his recent translation of the New Testament, the “traditional and demure” rendering of *ἀκροβυστία* as “uncircumcision,” “singularly fails to capture the physiological bluntness of the word.”²⁴

The term thus refers primarily to a physical reality, and beyond that to an ethnic and religious group marked by this physical reality.²⁵ Moreover, since

people arose in Paul's time” (“The Circumcision and the Uncircumcision in Rome,” 77). Taking a source that post-dates Paul and depends on him as evidence that this language actually pre-dates Paul seems highly speculative.

²⁴ Hart, *The New Testament*, 15.

²⁵ For reasons of space, I leave aside here the obvious gender implications and the androcentrism evident in this term. However, these aspects do constitute an important aspect of Paul's language, as well as of his concern with circumcision more generally.

the occurrence of metaphorical foreskin in the Hebrew Bible appears to be the closest parallel to Paul's usage, it is likely that the term would be assumed to have a negative connotation. The key characteristic of foreskin in this understanding is that it is something that is and should be removed through circumcision. It is a mark of those who do not belong to God, in contrast to "the circumcision." A possible explanation for the fact that Paul, unlike the Septuagint translators, does not shy away from this fleshy metaphor, is that he does not intend to confirm the outsider status it reflects, but rather to subvert it, for those gentiles who turn to Christ. Using this unusual image serves to draw attention to his positive message for gentiles, his "good news for the foreskin" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς ἀκροβυστίας, Gal 2:7). Paul thus sets up the division into "circumcision" and "foreskin," but then challenges the negative understanding of ἀκροβυστία through his innovative language and imagery.

3.3. Romans 2–3: Challenging the Negative Connotation of ἀκροβυστία

There is no space here to examine all occurrences of the term in detail, so I will limit myself to a brief look at how ἀκροβυστία is used in the chapters preceding Paul's discussion of Abraham's circumcision, in Rom 2 and 3. In Rom 2, Paul confirms the negative connotation of ἀκροβυστία, since he connects foreskin here to the violation of the law, but also subverts it:

Rom 2:25 Περιτομὴ μὲν γὰρ ὠφελεῖ ἐὰν νόμον πράσσης· ἐὰν δὲ παραβάτης νόμου ᾖς, ἡ περιτομὴ σου ἀκροβυστία γέγονεν. 26 ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ἀκροβυστία τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλάσσει, οὐχ ἡ ἀκροβυστία αὐτοῦ εἰς περιτομὴν λογισθήσεται; 27 καὶ κρινεῖ ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία τὸν νόμον τελοῦσα σὲ τὸν διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς παραβάτην νόμου.

25 Circumcision is of value if you obey the law, but if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become foreskin. 26 So, if the foreskin keeps the requirements of the law, will not his foreskin be regarded as circumcision? 27 And the foreskin by nature that keeps the law will condemn you who through the letter and circumcision are a violator of the law.

As just noted, Paul personifies foreskin in this passage, thus conjuring up a non-Jew, and imagines that it keeps the law. The first instance of the word here, however, is a more direct reference to genitals, since after confirming that circumcision is of value if you obey the law, Paul suggests that breaking the law

causes a man's circumcision to turn into foreskin.²⁶ From this he then proposes that the reverse may also occur and asks whether, if "the foreskin" keeps the law, this would not mean that "his foreskin" is regarded as circumcision. The personification shifts here, from "the foreskin" (ἡ ἀκροβυστία) to "his foreskin" (ἡ ἀκροβυστία αὐτοῦ). Another variation occurs in the final reference, to the foreskin "by nature" (ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία) who/which keeps the law and judges others. The addition "by nature" (ἐκ φύσεως) here serves to distinguish this natural foreskin from the metaphorical one that resulted from lawbreaking in 25b.²⁷

The passage thus shows the varied and almost playful handling of ἀκροβυστία and confirms that Paul understands "foreskin" to be inherently problematic, since he connects it to violation of the law, and circumcision to law observance, even if he suggests that it is possible for those associated with either to do the opposite. The positive connotation of circumcision is Paul's starting point, and the fact that circumcision is physically compromised by lawbreaking allows him to raise the question whether if "the foreskin" keeps the law, this might not be equated to circumcision.

In Rom 3:30, ἀκροβυστία is more clearly used as a term for non-Jews. Paul answers the question whether God is only the God of Jews, or also the God of the

²⁶ This is recognized also, e.g., by John Barclay, "Paul and Philo on Circumcision: Romans 2.25-9 in Social and Cultural Context," *NTS* 44.4 (1998): 536–556, at 544, and Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 108.

²⁷ While I agree with Matthew Thiessen that Paul does not redefine Jewishness in Rom 2, nor challenge the significance of physical circumcision for Jews, and is generally focused on arguing against proselyte circumcision, I find his argument that these verses refer critically to a circumcised gentile to be unconvincing (*Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 43–71; also "Paul's Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17–29," *Novum Testamentum* 56 [2014]: 373–391). According to Thiessen, "This gentile believes himself to be a Jew, but Paul denies him this identity, showing the interlocutor the way in which his circumcision is in reality uncircumcision" (70). Yet Paul starts off by saying that circumcision is of value if you obey the law, which, in Thiessen's logic, must be a reference to circumcision as practiced by Jews on the eighth day, since gentile circumcision itself already constitutes a violation of the law (68). In this view then, the focus shifts between 25a and 25b, from eighth-day to proselyte circumcision, and not from keeping the law while circumcised, to violating the law while circumcised, as seems indicated. It is furthermore unclear why the fact that physical circumcision does not work for gentiles and actually does not remove foreskin, would lead Paul to infer (ἐὰν οὖν) that law-observing foreskin can be regarded as circumcision. Rather, the association of circumcision with law-observance and of foreskin with law-breaking supports Thiessen's overall interpretation of Paul's message to both circumcised Jews and uncircumcised gentiles, that what pleases God is a circumcised heart (70).

nations (ἡ Ἰουδαίων ὁ θεὸς μόνον οὐχὶ καὶ ἐθνῶν, Rom 3:29) by using synonyms for each group: “yes, also of the nations, since there is one God who will justify circumcision from faith and foreskin through the faith” (ναὶ καὶ ἐθνῶν, εἶπερ εἷς ὁ θεὸς ὃς δικαιώσει περιτομὴν ἐκ πίστεως καὶ ἀκροβυστίαν διὰ τῆς πίστεως, Rom 3:29–30). The term ἀκροβυστία occurs here as a synonym for ἔθνη. This group ἔθνη/ἀκροβυστία are the religious outsiders, in contrast to the Ἰουδαῖοι/περιτομή, whose status as God’s people is taken as evident. That Ἰουδαῖος and περιτομή are positive categories for Paul was already confirmed at the beginning of chapter 3, where both are said to have much value (Τί οὖν τὸ περισσὸν τοῦ Ἰουδαίου ἢ τίς ἡ ὠφέλεια τῆς περιτομῆς; πολὺ κατὰ πάντα τρόπον, Rom 3:1-2). Both in positing that God will justify “foreskin” along with “circumcision” in Rom 3:30, and in assuming the association with lawbreaking yet at the same time subverting it, in Rom 2:25-17, Paul thus challenges the notion that ἀκροβυστία is a negative category, marked by distance from God.

3.4. Romans 4: Faith in ἀκροβυστία

The question that opens our central passage in Rom 4 makes sense in light of the way ἀκροβυστία is used in Rom 2 and 3, and of Paul’s insistence that his message relates to “Jews first and also Greeks” (Ἰουδαίω τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἕλληνι, Rom 1:16, also 2:9–10; 3:9; 10:12). In asking whether the blessing from Pss 32 (LXX 31:1–2), quoted just before, is for “the circumcision,” or for “the foreskin also,” Paul rhetorically questions whether ἀκροβυστία indeed has the negative connotation that it is assumed to have. He then goes on to counter the assumption that ἀκροβυστία necessarily signifies the outsider, through the case of Abraham.

A translation that consistently—if inelegantly—translates ἀκροβυστία as foreskin shows that there is no reference here to time or sequence, but instead a strong emphasis on the fact that Abraham and his πίστις were “in (the) foreskin.”

9 Ὁ μακαρισμὸς οὖν οὗτος ἐπὶ τὴν περιτομὴν ἢ καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν; λέγομεν γάρ· ἐλογίσθη τῷ Ἀβραάμ ἡ πίστις εἰς δικαιοσύνην. 10 πῶς οὖν ἐλογίσθη; ἐν περιτομῇ ὄντι ἢ ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ; οὐκ ἐν περιτομῇ ἀλλ’ ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ. 11 καὶ σημεῖον ἔλαβεν περιτομῆς σφραγίδα τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πατέρα πάντων τῶν πιστευόντων δι’ ἀκροβυστίας, εἰς τὸ λογισθῆναι [καὶ] αὐτοῖς [τὴν] δικαιοσύνην, 12 καὶ πατέρα περιτομῆς τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς ἴχνεσιν τῆς ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ (Rom 4:9–12)

9 So is this blessing for the circumcision, or for the foreskin also? We have said that the faithfulness was credited to Abraham as righteousness. 10 How was it credited? Was he in circumcision, or in foreskin? Not in circumcision, but in foreskin. 11 And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faithfulness that was in the foreskin. So that he would be the father of all who are faithful, through foreskin, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. 12 And father of circumcision for those not from circumcision only, but also for those who follow in the footsteps of the in-foreskin-faithfulness of our father Abraham. (Rom 4:9–12)

If we approach the passage with the idea that it is “foreskin” rather than “circumcision” that constitutes the problematic category for Paul, as the opening question—as well as a contextual reading of the terms—suggests, the reference to the Genesis story takes on a different meaning. It does not illustrate something about the timing of circumcision, but about the remarkable circumstances of Abraham’s faithfulness. The point of the double question in verse 10 and of the answer in both the negative and the affirmative is then to emphasize that Abraham was reckoned as righteous not while being “in circumcision,” as might be expected, but rather while being “in foreskin.” That Abraham was reckoned as righteous while “in foreskin” is presented as a surprising fact, which disrupts not what circumcision stands for, but rather what being “in foreskin” is thought to entail. The surprising possibility of being justified through πίστις while having the negative characteristic of being ἐν ἀκροβυστία is relevant to the larger question of who the possible recipients of God’s blessing are.

The extent to which ἀκροβυστία has been a scholarly blind spot is most evident in verse 11a, where Paul describes circumcision as a sign and a seal. Scholars frequently note that Paul does something remarkable here, since rather than call circumcision the “sign of the covenant” (σημεῖον διαθήκης), as occurs in the Septuagint (Gen 17:11), he refers to the “sign of circumcision” (σημεῖον περιτομῆς). Apparently, circumcision itself becomes the sign, rather than being a signifier of something else. In addition, Paul calls circumcision a seal (σφραγίς), which was an imprint of something sharp and hard, onto something soft or malleable. While scholars sometimes explicitly wonder why Paul talks about circumcision in this new way, they do not, as far as I have been able to ascertain,

reflect on any connection to the physical reality of circumcision.²⁸ The meaning that Paul here gives to circumcision is often described as a sign of “righteousness through faith.”²⁹ This common phrase completely disregards the fact that Paul’s novel explanation of the sign of circumcision includes the word “foreskin.” None of the literature surveyed here even considers what possible meaning ἀκροβυστία might have as a reference to male anatomy, even though it is exactly the term that occurs in connection with circumcision in Gen 17:11, and elsewhere, where what is circumcised is precisely the flesh of someone’s ἀκροβυστία. This oversight seems difficult to justify.

Taking ἀκροβυστία as a reference to foreskin and understanding it in light of Paul’s question about its problematic status has important implications for how verse 11a about Abraham’s circumcision is read. Here as in the previous verse, Paul uses the preposition ἐν in connection with ἀκροβυστία (with the definite article), this time not as a characterization of Abraham directly, but of his πίστις. The sign of circumcision has to do with the righteousness of the faithfulness that was “in the foreskin” (τῆς δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ). Rather than assume that Paul’s description has reached its key point with the word πίστεως—“through faith”—and that the rest of the sentence is something of an afterthought—“while he was still uncircumcised”—the strong emphasis on ἀκροβυστία in the previous verses suggests that the crux is actually in the final words. It is the fact that Abraham’s faithfulness was “in the foreskin” which is marked by circumcision. Paul’s explanation thus indeed offers a radical—and from certain perspectives possibly even scandalous—reinterpretation of what circumcision signifies: he turns circumcision into a sign in and of the foreskin.³⁰

²⁸ Even David Bentley Hart, who expressly discusses the physical nature of the term, and is committed to literalness, translates the phrase with a reference to time: “And he received a sign of circumcision, a seal of the uprightness of his faithfulness during the time when he had had a foreskin” (*The New Testament*, 252).

²⁹ Jewett, *Romans*, 318–319. Similarly, Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 209: “a sign of the righteousness Abraham received through faith”; Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans*, 164: “a seal of the righteousness by faith”; Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 69: “nur das Siegel und Gütezeichen der ‘Glaubensgerechtigkeit’”; Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans*, 189: “the righteousness that he had previously received through faith”; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 119: “righteousness of faithfulness.”

³⁰ For a discussion of other traditions about the circumcision of Abraham, see Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, esp. 72–79; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, throughout; Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 105–128.

It is difficult to know how much to make of the introduction of the idea of circumcision as a seal (*σφραγίς*).³¹ The principal meaning of a seal as a lasting, identifying mark seems directly relevant. Circumcision described as a seal then suggests an imprint that marks the surprising fact of Abraham's faithfulness "in the foreskin" onto his body. In addition, the term *σφραγίς* could also refer to the object making the imprint, which, in Greek and Roman antiquity, often took the form of a ring, sometimes with a carved gem, suggesting another physical point of comparison. Art historian Verity Platt suggests that seals "combine the beauty and expense of precious stones and metals with a specific practical function, for the seal matrix—the carved image—can be replicated *ad infinitum* in a variety of pliable materials which are not precious at all; they become valuable only once they have been imprinted with the original object."³² If this indeed reflects an ancient understanding, it is possible to suggest that Paul here interprets the seal of circumcision along similar lines, that it turns the very un-precious material of the *ἀκροβυστία* into a valuable image, of *περιτομή*.

The understanding of *ἀκροβυστία* and *περιτομή* reflected in this passage may seem paradoxical. Why would circumcision mark faithfulness in the foreskin, if it is only circumcision that makes foreskin exceptional in the first place? The logic here might be more difficult to grasp from the consensus view that "before circumcision" or "uncircumcision" is simply a neutral state, where all men are the same. Yet it is less paradoxical if we accept that *ἀκροβυστία* is seen through the lens of circumcision, so that its main characteristic is that it is the feature that is and should be removed through circumcision. Paul's reasoning makes sense in a worldview in which *περιτομή* self-evidently belongs to God and *ἀκροβυστία* is a negative and problematic category, which, as we have seen, is the opposition Paul assumes. It is this opposition he is attempting to undermine, by showing, in Rom 2:25–27, that under the right circumstances, foreskin can actually also be regarded as circumcision. In Rom 4 then, in a similar way, it is through *περιτομή* that *ἀκροβυστία* becomes a positive sign, if it is associated with faithfulness.

3.5. *Making Sense of δία in Verse 11 and τοῖς in Verse 12*

The interpretation suggested above, that Paul understands Abraham's circumcision as a mark of faithfulness in the foreskin, is strengthened by how it clarifies verses 11b and 12 and the two further occurrences of *ἀκροβυστία* there.

³¹ LSJ gives as the meanings of *σφραγίς* "seal, signet," "gem," and "impression of a signet-ring."

³² Verity Platt, "Making an Impression: Replication and the Ontology of the Graeco-Roman Seal Stone," *Art History* 29.2 (2006): 233–257, at 238.

These verses are frequently understood as a reference to two groups who both have Abraham as their ancestor: the uncircumcised in verse 11b and the circumcised in verse 12, specifically there the circumcised who follow Abraham's uncircumcised faith.³³ This reading rests on two problematic interpretations: it takes δι' ἀκροβυστίας in verse 11 as relating to "all who are faithful" and assumes that the second τοῖς in verse 12 is redundant.

In the problematic reading, the phrase δι' ἀκροβυστίας in verse 11b is understood as referring to τῶν πιστευόντων, so that Abraham is seen as the father of all who are faithful "while uncircumcised." Scholars who take this position rarely reflect on how the preposition διά is used here (with a genitive, suggesting agency or means), or why Paul shifts from ἐν ἀκροβυστία to δι' ἀκροβυστίας, a phrase that does not occur anywhere else, either in Paul or more generally. Furthermore, πᾶς and the phrase "all who are faithful" are used to refer to both Jews and non-Jews elsewhere in the letter (explicitly in 1:16 and 10:11–12, more implicitly in 3:22 [οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή] πᾶς occurs in connection with Jew and Greek in Rom 2:9–10 and 3:9). If δι' ἀκροβυστίας limits Abraham's fatherhood to those who are uncircumcised, the use of πᾶς here contradicts this pattern and it is rather unclear why it is needed.

It makes more sense instead to understand δι' ἀκροβυστίας as referring not to τῶν πιστευόντων, but rather to εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν πατέρα and therefore to Abraham.³⁴ Here as before, it is Abraham's status with regard to circumcision that is relevant to Paul. Through foreskin, Abraham becomes the father of all who are faithful, which, as earlier, can be understood as a reference to both Jews and non-Jews. Again, as the question in verse 9 indicates, and the previous references to περιτομή confirm, it is only the status of "the foreskin" that is in doubt, that of "the

³³ So, e.g., Adams, "Abraham's Faith and Gentile Disobedience," 63; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 210–212; Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 69; Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 183–184; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 137–138; Wright, "Paul and the Patriarch," 214; Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 288–294.

³⁴ Benjamin Schliesser also connects δι' ἀκροβυστίας to Abraham, but draws a rather problematic inference from this. According to Schliesser, "Abraham's universal fatherhood has been realized in his uncircumcised status (δι' ἀκροβυστίας) and not after his circumcision. According to God's plan, therefore, he became the father of Jews and Gentiles before their differentiation into 'circumcised' and 'uncircumcised.'" (Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4*, 363; emphasis in original). Schliesser here makes explicit the assumption that informs much of the consensus view on this passage, that before circumcision there existed an undifferentiated, "universal" state. Other scholars who take δι' ἀκροβυστίας as a reference to Abraham include, e.g., Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans*, 165, and Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 83 n.35.

circumcision” is a given (this is what the “Jew first and also Greek”-message underlines in this letter [Rom 1:16; 2:9–10; 3:9; 10:12]). If non-Jews are now also included in Abraham’s children “through foreskin,” then it is “through foreskin” that Abraham becomes the father of *all* who are faithful, because Jews were already counted as his offspring.

The second problem occurs in verse 12, if this is understood to describe Abraham as the father of only one group, made up of those Jews who follow in Abraham’s faith. This reading disregards the apparent introduction of another group in verse 12b, through the occurrence of a second τοῖς: καὶ πατέρα περιτομῆς τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς Ἰχνησιν τῆς ἐν ἀκροβυστία πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ. Some scholars who interpret this verse as a reference to one group only simply ignore this second τοῖς and its implications.³⁵ Others argue explicitly that the logic of the argument, as well as the particular form of the οὐ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ construction, make it likely that the word is a mistake, made either by Paul or an early copyist.³⁶ The idea that Abraham is not the father of those “from circumcision” generally, but only of a specific sub-group, is so compelling that τοῖς is removed from the text, even though it appears in all extant manuscripts.³⁷

Not all scholars assume that τοῖς can simply be ignored or crossed out.³⁸ James Swetnam devotes an article to this “curious crux” and argues that the οὐ

³⁵ E.g., Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 127–129; Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans*, 189–190; Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 183–184; Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham*, 137–138; Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 83.

³⁶ Scholars who omit τοῖς here include Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 237; Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, 266; Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, 210–211; Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles*, 267 n.18. For a full history of this conjecture and its reception, see *The Amsterdam Database of New Testament Conjectural Emendation* (<http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/nt-conjectures>).

³⁷ The critical apparatus of Nestle Aland 28 does not include any variant reading for Rom 4:12, suggesting that there are no witnesses that lack the word. Nestle Aland 27 mentions two conjectures: the substitution of αὐτοῖς for τοῖς suggested by Hort (see Brooke F. Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort, *The New Testament in the Original Greek: Introduction; Appendix* [Cambridge: Macmillan, 1881], 108b) and the omission of τοῖς, a conjecture which according to *The Amsterdam Database of New Testament Conjectural Emendation* was first made by Erasmus (see *Responsio ad collationes cuiusdam cuvenis gerontodidascali* [Antwerp: Sylvius. 1529], LB IX, c. 981 B), and incorrectly attributed in NA 28 to Beza, who suggests a transposition instead (*Novum D. N. Iesu Christi testamentum* [Geneva: Robertus Stephanus, 1556], 180), see <http://ntvmr.uni-muenster.de/nt-conjectures>.

³⁸ Brian Tucker offers an extensive discussion of the issue and concludes that Paul has two groups in view in verse 12: “non-Christ-following Jew” and “those who have followed in

μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ construction as it occurs here is not a sufficient reason to dismiss the second τοῖς.³⁹ While the construction “οὐ μόνον Α ἀλλὰ καὶ Β” is the more common one, the pattern “Α, οὐ Α μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ Β” also occurs. This pattern is used “for the sake of emphasis in connection with the development of some contrasting aspect or aspects.”⁴⁰

The “Α, οὐ Α μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ Β” pattern thus allows Paul to emphasize specifically that Abraham is the father of circumcision in a new sense: of those not from circumcision only, as it would be conventionally understood, but also of those who follow Abraham’s “in-foreskin-faithfulness,” because this is what circumcision points to, as had just been argued. Since Paul has offered a new way of understanding what Abraham’s circumcision signifies, he now clarifies the way in which Abraham’s fatherhood of circumcision is also different. It includes Jews—whose lineage was never in question—and additionally also those who walk in the footsteps of Abraham’s “in-foreskin-faithfulness,” of which circumcision is the sign. This second category is new and therefore needs specific emphasis. It is because Paul has redefined circumcision as a sign that points to the foreskin, that Abraham as the father of circumcision is also the father of those who are faithful “in foreskin.” The second τοῖς does not appear to be a mistake, but can rather be understood in light of Paul’s unusual interpretation of the circumcision of Abraham. The interpretation of διὰ in verse 11 and τοῖς in verse 12 proposed here still result in a parallelism between verse 11b and verse 12, since Abraham is presented as the father of Jews and faithful gentiles in both verses: in 11b through foreskin and in 12 via circumcision.

4. Conclusion

As this analysis has shown, a consistent focus on the meaning and significance of ἀκροβυστία provides a plausible, if probably surprising, interpretation of the passage. There is no need to assume that Paul is concerned with time and sequence, and introduce words such as “still” and “before” to make sense of his

the footsteps of Abraham’s faith, a group that is not ethnically defuse [*sic*] but maintains their distinctness.” Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 70. Other scholars who do see τοῖς as authentic include Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 382; Jewett, *Romans*, 305, 320–321; Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith in Romans* 4, 363; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 118 n.144.

³⁹ John Swetnam, “The Curious Crux at Romans 4,12,” *Biblica* 61.1 (1980): 110–115. Swetnam mentions John 11:51–52; 1 John 2:2; 5:6 as examples.

⁴⁰ Swetnam, “The Curious Crux,” 114.

reasoning. Nor is it necessary to suppose that Paul is concerned with the value or meaning of circumcision, much less with putting it in its place, as secondary to faith, and devaluing it in some sense. As argued above, the notion that ἀκροβυστία is merely an absence has informed the assumption that Paul explains something about justification in a general sense, that it comes through πίστις and not circumcision. However, a contextual understanding of ἀκροβυστία makes it unlikely that ἐν ἀκροβυστία can be understood as a general state, where πίστις is the distinguishing factor between otherwise similar people, who have not yet been divided into circumcised and uncircumcised.

Instead, ἐν ἀκροβυστία should be recognized as referring to an outsider state, where πίστις is an exceptional saving characteristic. Paul's argument is thus wholly focused on the category of "the foreskin" and its inclusion into the children of Abraham, not on relegating circumcision to a secondary status. The extent to which ἀκροβυστία has been a non-issue and a blind spot in Pauline scholarship, which has allowed this passage to be read as concerned with justification through faith and as diminishing the significance of circumcision, shows that as a discipline, we are still to some extent only paying lip service to the idea that Paul should be understood within his Jewish context.

It is certainly possible to suppose that in the larger discussion about Abraham and circumcision taking place at the time, Paul's argument for the inclusion of some of those who are "in foreskin" into Abraham's children would have been seen as a challenge to the status of circumcision as a mark of Jews (or of Jews and proselytes). Yet this does not mean that Paul himself in any sense presents his argument as a diminishing of circumcision or as disputing the position of Jews.

The interpretation offered in this article strengthens the recent scholarly view proposed by Nina Livesey, Matthew Thiessen, Mark Nanos, and others, that Paul's letters oppose the circumcision of gentiles who are "in Christ," rather than circumcision more generally, let alone eighth-day circumcision of Jews.⁴¹ Even if Paul does not argue specifically about proselyte circumcision here, as he does in Galatians, his argument that Abraham's circumcision is a sign of his faithfulness "in the foreskin" and that gentiles can follow in the footsteps of the "in-foreskin-faithfulness" of Abraham, would support such a position. In both letters, Paul's gospel to the ἀκροβυστία makes sense within the larger tradition of Jewish end-time expectation, in which the nations could turn to the God of Israel and worship him as gentiles, along with Jews, without becoming Jews themselves.

⁴¹ See especially Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 121; Nanos, "The Question of Conceptualization," 121; Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 73–104.