

# (Un)Making a Theological Mountain Out of a Cardiological Mohel: Heart-Circumcision in Paul's Epistles\*

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## Abstract

This article offers a reexamination of the place of heart-circumcision in Paul's epistles. Historically, Paul's interpreters have understood that he repudiates the necessity of physical circumcision and redefines the category of "the circumcision" by replacing the physical practice with the spiritualized circumcision of the heart. To make this claim, readers typically appeal to Rom 2:28–29, Phil 3:3, and Col 2:11 as evidence. Through my reassessment of these texts, I argue that Paul does not repudiate the necessity of physical circumcision for Jews and that heart-circumcision does not play an important role or have a prominent place in his epistles.

## Keywords

Paul, Circumcision of the Heart, Romans, Philippians, Colossians

## 1. Introduction: Redefining Circumcision

It is no secret that circumcision was a point of contention within the early Jesus movement. Given that Jesus' earliest followers comprised a Jewish messianic sect, as soon as non-Jews began to join them in their veneration of Jesus as God's messiah, the questions of circumcision and ethnicity were unavoidable.<sup>1</sup> What

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, the question of how to include non-Jews within Judaism pre-dates Jesus and his followers. For a comprehensive treatment of this, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); see also, Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. 68–91; Matthew Thiessen,

did it look like for non-Jews to join this messianic group? Did they need to become circumcised and, therefore, become Jews?<sup>2</sup> Texts from some early Jewish followers of Jesus, notably Paul and the author of Acts, are clear that non-Jews should not be circumcised to participate in these Christ-assemblies (e.g., Gal 2:3; 5:2–6; 1 Cor 7:17–20; Acts 15).<sup>3</sup> But shortly after this messianic movement began—roughly a decade or so after Jesus’ death—gentile Christians began identifying with and claiming for themselves the symbol of circumcision. Despite not bearing the mark of circumcision upon their bodies, they began to proclaim that they possessed a superior circumcision—namely, a spiritual circumcision, the circumcision of the heart—which displaced the physical, fleshly rite. As Andrew Jacobs observes, this type of “repudiation and appropriation” of circumcision became a common feature in gentile Christian polemics against Judaism.<sup>4</sup>

Notably, Justin does not appeal to Paul (or any NT text) for his argument that heart-circumcision has replaced physical circumcision. Like the Epistle of Barnabas, he primarily looks to Deut 10:16 and Jer 4:4 and 9:25–26<sup>5</sup> as evidence for this replacement (*Dial.* 15.7; 16.1; 28.2–3; 137.1).<sup>6</sup> While other early, gentile Christian interpreters also look to references to heart-circumcision in the Hebrew Bible to justify its superiority, many ascribe this perspective to the apostle Paul (e.g., Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.16.1; Clement, *Strom.* 7.9; Tertullian, *Marc.* 5.13).<sup>7</sup> Of particular interest is Origen of Alexandria, who appeals to both Phil 3:2–3 and Rom 2:28–29 to argue that Paul elevates this spiritual form of

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*Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a lucid account of early Christianity as a movement within Judaism, see Paula Fredriksen, *When Christians Were Jews: The First Generation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> This is inherently androcentric, failing to address the situation of women.

<sup>3</sup> On the Jewish identity of the author of Acts, see Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE*, WUNT 2/355 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), esp. 447–448.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew S. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised: A Study in Early Christian History and Difference* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 35.

<sup>5</sup> In addition to these classic heart-circumcision texts, Justin also interprets the “second circumcision” of Josh 5:2 as prefiguring the circumcision of the heart Christ performs (*Dial.* 113.6–7; 114.4; cf. Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 3.6; *Hom. Jos.* 5.5).

<sup>6</sup> While the author of Barnabas and Justin do not directly reference Paul or his epistles, the reasons for their lack of appeal to Paul are complex but can partially be attributed to their anti-Jewish rhetoric. Rather than appeal to Paul—a “Christian”—they may only appeal to the Hebrew Bible to discredit their rhetorical Jewish foes. See James Carleton Paget, “Paul and the Epistle of Barnabas,” *NovT* 38 (1996): 359–381. On the possibility that Justin was familiar with Paul’s epistles, see Rodney Werline, “The Transformation of Pauline Arguments in Justin Martyr’s Dialogue with Trypho,” *HTR* 92 (1999): 79–93.

<sup>7</sup> For more on early Christian interpreters and spiritual/heart-circumcision, see Everett Ferguson, “Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity,” *SJT* 41 (1988): 485–497.

circumcision, while deriding its physical practice. In his third homily on Genesis, Origen says:

We, therefore, instructed by the apostle Paul, say that just as many other things were made in the figure and image of future truth, so also that circumcision of flesh was bearing the form of spiritual circumcision about which it was both worthy and fitting that “the God of majesty” give precepts to mortals. Hear, therefore, how Paul, “a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth,” teaches the Church of Christ about the mystery of circumcision. “Behold,” he says, “the mutilation”—speaking about the Jews who are mutilated in the flesh—“for we,” he says, “are the circumcision, who serve God in spirit and have no confidence in the flesh” [Phil 3:2–3]. This is one opinion of Paul about circumcision. Hear also another: “For he is not a Jew who is so outwardly; nor is that circumcision which is outwardly in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly with circumcision of the heart in the spirit, not in the letter” [Rom 2:28–29]. (Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 3.4 [Heine])<sup>8</sup>

Origen understands that he shares Paul’s allegorical interpretation of circumcision, which leads him to conclude that “the circumcision of the Church is honorable, holy, worthy of God; that that of [Jews] is unseemly, detestable, disgusting, presenting a thing vulgar both in condition and appearance” (*Hom. Gen.* 3.6 [Heine]).<sup>9</sup> Building on his interpretation of Phil 3:2–3, Origen even claims that the “true circumcision of the flesh of the foreskin” (*vera circumcisio carnis præputii*, *Hom. Gen.* 3.6 [PG 12:181a]) belongs to Christians.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, FC 71 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982). Origen makes a similar argument about heart-circumcision in *Comm. Rom.* 2.12.1, where he discusses Phil 3:2–3 and Rom 2:28–29 alongside each other (cf. *Princ.* 4.3.6).

<sup>9</sup> Origen’s argument about the allegorical interpretation of circumcision is fascinating and complex. For a helpful overview of his views on circumcision, see Maren R. Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17: 1–14,” *JSQ* 10 (2003): 89–123, esp. 108–114; Susanna Drake, *Slandering the Jew: Sexuality and Difference in Early Christian Texts* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 45–50.

<sup>10</sup> Here, Origen argues that physical circumcision leads to the control of one’s sexual impulses and chastity, which is similar to the perspective found in Philo’s writing (e.g., *QG* 3.48; *Spec.* 1.9). Since Origen believes that Christians are exceedingly chaste and do not give in to improper sexual relations, he can claim that they do possess truly circumcised penises. On Philo and circumcision, see Niehoff, “Circumcision,” 92–102; Carmen Palmer, “Circumcision of the Heart in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Second

Many of Paul's interpreters throughout history broadly share Origen's understanding of Paul and his repudiation and appropriation of circumcision. A brief survey of the vast literature on Paul shows that it is fairly common to appeal to Phil 3:2–3 and Rom 2:28–29 in the same breath to demonstrate the superiority of heart-circumcision and its replacement of physical circumcision.<sup>11</sup> While there has been a shift in thinking about how some scholars understand Paul's supposed repudiation of circumcision over the past decade or so, many still find Paul redefining or universalizing circumcision in these texts.<sup>12</sup> As outlined by Joshua Garroway, the majority position is that in Phil 3:3, Paul's statement that, "we are the circumcision," indicates that the category of circumcision has been transformed so that it can include both the

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Temple Period: Spiritual, Moral, and Ethnic," in *Dead Sea Scrolls, Revise and Repeat: New Methods and Perspectives*, ed. Carmen Palmer et al., EJL 52 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2020), 327–351, esp. 339–343.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 78–82, cf. 94–95; Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 298–299; Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte*, TANZ 28 (Tübingen: Francke, 1998), 403–404, 412–414; Ralph P. Martin and Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC 43, rev. ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 2004), 175; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 69; Simon Claude Mimouni, *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine: Histoire d'un conflit interne au judaïsme*, CREJ 42 (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 229; John M. G. Barclay, "Paul And Philo on Circumcision: Romans 2.25–9 in Social and Cultural Context," *NTS* 44 (2009): 536–556, esp. 553; Joshua W. Jipp and Michael J. Thate, "Dating Thomas: Logion 53 as a Test Case for Dating the Gospel of Thomas within an Early Christian Trajectory," *BBR* 20 (2010): 237–256, esp. 248–249; N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), 921; 1076; 1146; 1432–1433; Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. Robert L. Brawley (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 443; Christopher Zoccali, *Reading Philippians After Supersessionism: Jews, Gentiles, and Covenant Identity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 22–23, 87, n.6; cf. Joshua D. Garroway, "The Circumcision of Christ: Romans 15.7–13," *JSNT* 34 (2012): 303–322, esp. 317–318; Peter-Ben Smit, "In Search of Real Circumcision: Ritual Failure and Circumcision in Paul," *JSNT* 40 (2017): 73–100, esp. 92–93.

<sup>12</sup> This shift has been a result of the way scholars have approached Paul's identity as a Jew. Interpreters who identify with the broadly defined "Paul within Judaism" perspective tend to uphold the significance of physical circumcision in Paul's thought, though their readings of Phil 3:3 and Rom 2:28–29 are nuanced in various ways. For an overview of the continuing significance of physical circumcision for Paul, see Ryan D. Collman, "Just A Flesh Wound? Reassessing Paul's Supposed Indifference Toward Circumcision and Foreskin in 1 Cor 7:19, Gal 5:6, and 6:15," *JJMJS* 8 (2021): 30–52; Paula Fredriksen, "'Circumcision Is Nothing': A Non-Reformation Reading of the Letters of Paul," in *Protestant Bible Scholarship: Antisemitism, Philosemitism and Anti-Judaism*, ed. Arjen F. Bakker et al., JSJSup 200 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 79–105.

circumcised (Paul) and the uncircumcised (the gentile believers in Philippi).<sup>13</sup> The circumcision referred to in Phil 3:3 is the circumcision of the heart that Paul speaks of in Rom 2:28–29. In this reading, most of “the circumcision” are actually uncircumcised in the flesh of their foreskins.<sup>14</sup> Thus, “Those in Christ require no circumcision in the flesh because they already have been circumcised in the way that truly matters, figuratively in the heart by means of the spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

My aim in this article is not to argue against the importance of heart-circumcision in ancient Judaism or in the history of Christian thought, but to contend that Paul’s epistles do not share in the universalizing vision of heart-circumcision that is commonly attributed to him. Paul does not redefine the category of “the circumcision,” nor does he replace physical circumcision with heart-circumcision. I argue below that given the scarcity of evidence for this theme in Paul (and the NT), it is possible that Paul’s interpreters—both ancient and modern—have overemphasized the centrality of this theme in his thought. Or, to state it differently, Paul’s interpreters have made a theological mountain out of a cardiological molehill.

## 2. The Data: Mountain or Molehill?

In Paul’s undisputed epistles, the noun περιτομή (“circumcision”) occurs twenty-five times (Rom 2:25 [2x], 26, 27, 28, 29; 3:1, 30; 4:9, 10 [2x], 11, 12 [2x]; 15:8; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 2:7, 8, 9, 12; 5:6, 11; 6:15; Phil 3:3, 5) and the verb περιτέμνω (“to circumcise”) occurs eight times (1 Cor 7:18 [2x]; Gal 2:3; 5:2, 3; 6:12, 13 [2x]). In the disputed Pauline epistles, the noun περιτομή occurs six times (Eph 2:11; Col 2:11 [2x]; 3:11; 4:11; Titus 1:10) and the verb περιτέμνω occurs once (Col 2:11). In all of these instances, a direct reference to circumcision of the heart (περιτομή καρδίας) only occurs in Rom 2:29.<sup>16</sup> In the vast majority of these

<sup>13</sup> Garroway, “Circumcision of Christ,” 317–318.

<sup>14</sup> For many interpreters, this also means that women can be the recipients of this “superior” form of circumcision. Whereas they were excluded from the physical rite, they can now participate as circumcised equals alongside men. The issue of circumcision and women is raised by a number of ancient Christian interpreters who argue for the superiority of heart or spiritual circumcision (e.g., Justin, *Dial.* 23.5; Cyprian, *Test.* 1.8; Epiphanius, *Pan.* 30.33.2; Zeno, *Tract. circ.* 1.3.21, 23). On the issue of women and circumcision, see Cohen, *Why aren’t Jewish Women?*; see also, Joshua D. Garroway, “Engendering Judaism: Paul, Baptism, and Circumcision,” in *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 219–243; M Adryael Tong, *Difference and Circumcision: Bodily Discourse and the Parting of the Ways* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Garroway, “Circumcision of Christ,” 318.

<sup>16</sup> The only other reference to heart-circumcision in the New Testament is in Acts 7, when Stephen accuses some fellow Jews of having “uncircumcised hearts” (ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίας, Acts 7:51)—like the prophet Jeremiah (9:26)—to critique their failure to

occurrences, Paul uses circumcision—typically in contrast to foreskin (ἀκροβυστία)—to refer to the state of a penis or as a metonym for Jews.<sup>17</sup> For example, in 1 Cor 7:18 those who were circumcised (Jews) when they were called to join the *ekklēsia* are contrasted with those who were called in foreskin (non-Jews). In Rom 3:30, both the circumcision (Jews) and the foreskin (non-Jews) are rightwised based on trust. In Gal 2:7–9, Paul uses circumcision three times to refer to Jews in contrast to people from other nations (τὰ ἔθνη). This employment of circumcision to refer to Jews is also present in the disputed Pauline epistles (Eph 2:11; Col 3:11; 4:11; Titus 1:10). What Paul signifies with the circumcision language is mostly consistent in his extant writings.<sup>18</sup>

There are, of course, two instances in the Pauline corpus that interpreters have commonly appealed to as instances of Paul redefining circumcision and/or referencing the circumcision of the heart, despite not explicitly using this language: Phil 3:3 (“We are the circumcision”) and Col 2:11 (“circumcision made without hands”). In addition to Rom 2:28–29, these texts serve as the primary pieces of data for this article to reexamine the place of heart-circumcision in Paul’s epistles. In what follows, I first examine the undisputed Pauline texts (Phil 3:2–3; Rom 2:28–29) and then turn to a disputed Pauline text (Col 2:11).

### 3. Phil 3:3: Who are the Circumcision?

Similar to his discussion of circumcision in Galatians, Paul introduces the topic of circumcision in Philippians due to the threat of a group of rival teachers who seek to promote circumcision amongst the Philippians: “Beware the dogs! Beware the wicked workers! Beware the mutilation!” (Phil 3:2). After this brief philippic, Paul states, “For we are the circumcision; the ones who serve by the *pneuma* of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (3:3). Despite Paul’s consistent pattern of usage, interpreters are nearly unanimous in agreeing that Paul’s reference to circumcision in Phil 3:3 indicates

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recognize Jesus as the Righteous One. In the Hebrew Bible, heart-circumcision and foreskinned hearts are referred to in Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25–26; and Ezek 44:7, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Paul’s use of this metonym is overwhelmingly androcentric. It seems possible, however, that Paul includes Jewish women when using this androcentric metonym to refer to the Jewish people.

<sup>18</sup> The exception to this rule is how Paul uses the present passive/reflexive participial form of περιτέμνω (οἱ περιτεμνόμενοι) in Galatians. In Gal 6:13 (cf. 5:2–3), Paul uses this to refer to gentiles who “have had themselves circumcised” or “have received circumcision,” not to natural-born Jews. On this, see Michele Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game: Gentile Christian Judaizing in the First and Second Centuries CE*, SCJud 13 (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2004), 35–36; Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 95–96.

that he is redefining what it means to be a member of the circumcision.<sup>19</sup> Here, it is typically claimed that circumcision does not refer to actual penises or to Jews, but has been redefined to refer to “Christians” who possess the “true” circumcision of the heart.<sup>20</sup> In one particularly flagrant display of this type of supersessionist thinking, Ralph Martin and Gerald Hawthorne write:

Because Israel lost sight of the spiritual significance of circumcision, focused on the external ritual, and failed to boast in the Lord alone (cf. Jer 9:23–25), it has forfeited its right to the title ‘The Circumcision.’ The church of Jesus Christ, however, is the true Israel (Gal 6:16), heir of all the rights and privileges belonging to it (Rom 9:24–26; cf. 1 Pet 2:9–10), including the right to the title περιτομή, ‘circumcision’.<sup>21</sup>

This type of interpretation, which is deeply rooted in Christian exceptionalism, assumes that since Paul is a representative of Christianity and is opposed to circumcision, the object of Paul’s warning must be a group of Jews. He renounces their identity as the circumcision and claims it for Christians. Interpreters then try to read Paul’s tripartite invective back through the lens of this assumption. While “dogs” and “wicked workers” have been used to justify that Paul’s opponents are Jews, his identification of them with mutilation is commonly taken to be his harshest critique of Jewish circumcision.<sup>22</sup> Here, Paul

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<sup>19</sup> N. T. Wright: “The covenant God has not given up on the category of ‘circumcision’, on the idea of there being an elect people; he has merely *redefined it*, as in Philippians 3:3” (*Faithfulness of God*, 921, emphasis added).

<sup>20</sup> Thus, the RSV translation of ἡμεῖς γὰρ ἔσμεν ἡ περιτομή: “We are the *true* circumcision.” The inclusion of the adjective “true” is unwarranted, given that ἀληθινός does not appear here or anywhere with περιτομή until Justin, *Dial.* 18.2.

<sup>21</sup> Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 175. See also, John Henry Paul Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 474–475. For an alternative treatment of Paul and Israel, see the discussion in Matthew Thiessen and Paula Fredriksen, “Paul and Israel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Pauline Studies*, ed. Matthew V. Novenson and R. Barry Matlock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 371–388.

<sup>22</sup> Since the time of Chrysostom (*Hom. Phil.* 11), Paul’s usage of “dog” has been interpreted as a clever inversion of a supposed Jewish slur about gentiles. Recently, a few scholars have dismantled the idea that Jews were in the habit of referring to gentiles as dogs; there is no evidence that Jews in the ancient world did this. On this, see Mark D. Nanos, “Paul’s Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles ‘Dogs’ (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?,” *BibInt* 17 (2009): 448–482; Matthew Thiessen, “Gentiles as Impure Animals in the Writings of Early Christ Followers,” in *Perceiving the Other in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Michal Bar-Asher Segal, Wolfgang Grünstäudl, and Matthew Thiessen, WUNT 394 (Tübingen: Mohr

uses paronomasia to contrast mutilation (κατατομή) with circumcision (περιτομή) for a powerful rhetorical effect. While κατατομή and περιτομή are aurally similar and share a common root, their intended meanings from an ancient Jewish perspective could not be further from one another; one signifies pagan ritualistic cuttings (OG/LXX Lev 21:5; 3 Kgdms 18:28; Hos 7:14; Isa 15:2; cf. Lev 19:28) and the other the mark of the covenant with Abraham and the Jewish people. Therefore, this is not only taken to be a critique of circumcision but a critique of Judaism in general.<sup>23</sup>

While Paul's language suggests he is critiquing these individuals because of their practice or promotion of circumcision, how is it that Paul could equate Jewish circumcision with mutilation?<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere, Paul affirms the ongoing significance of circumcision for Jews (Rom 3:1–2) and continues to identify Jews with circumcision (Rom 3:30; 4:9, 12; 15:8; Gal 2:7–9, 12). Paul even appeals to his own eighth-day circumcision in Phil 3:5 as one of the reasons why he is able to have confidence in his flesh (3:4). Adding to this perplexing equation of circumcision with mutilation is Paul's later remark about these individuals as those "whose god is the belly and the glory in their shame" (Phil 3:19).<sup>25</sup> Both belly (κοιλία) and shame (ἀσχημοσύνη) are used in Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible as euphemisms for genitals (Exod 20:26; Lev 18:6–19; 2 Kgdms 7:12; 16:11; 1 Chr 17:11; Ps 131:11).<sup>26</sup> So in Phil 3, Paul is not only equating their circumcisions with mutilation, but he accuses them of worshipping their own circumcised penises!

But who are these individuals, and why does Paul not recognize them as "the circumcision"? In light of Paul's statements elsewhere, it seems implausible—if not absurd—that Paul would denounce the circumcision of Jews

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Siebeck, 2017), 19–32; Ryan D. Collman, "Beware the Dogs! The Phallic Epithet in Phil 3.2," *NTS* 67 (2021): 105–120. Here Paul uses "dogs" as a phallic epithet.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, WUNT 29 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1983), 258; Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, "Der Verzicht auf die Beschneidung im frühen Christentum," *NTS* 42 (1996): 479–505, esp. 501; John Paul Heil, *Philippians: Let Us Rejoice in Being Conformed to Christ* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 118–119.

<sup>24</sup> On this, Hyam Maccoby comments, "The great mystery about Paul is, how did a person of his allegedly Pharisaic background and upbringing arrive at views so incompatible with Judaism and hold such a contempt for Judaism's holiest rite?" ("Paul and Circumcision: A Rejoinder," *JQR* 82 [1991]: 177–180, esp. 180).

<sup>25</sup> Grammatically, belly (κοιλία) and glory (δόξα) are functioning as a single subject joined by καὶ with θεὸς functioning as the predicate (Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 225). The punctuation attests to this in most Greek editions; however, the majority of translations overlook this (e.g., "[T]heir god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame." NRSV).

<sup>26</sup> Chris Mearns, "The Identity of Paul's Opponents at Philippi," *NTS* 33 (1987): 194–204, esp. 198–200; Smit, "Real Circumcision," 84.



as mutilation or that he would accuse Jews of phallus worship. A more likely explanation is that Paul is not critiquing a group of Jews (or Jews en masse) but a group of gentile proselytes who have undergone circumcision and seek to impose it upon other gentiles. This group is comparable to the agitators in Galatia “who have themselves circumcised” (περιτεμνόμενοι, Gal 6:13) and encourage the Galatian men to undergo adult proselyte circumcision.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the type of thing Paul is critiquing is not the standard eighth-day circumcision practiced by Jews, but the proselyte circumcision of gentiles. He does not denigrate the circumcision of Jews but objects to the unnatural and law-breaking circumcisions practiced by these non-Jewish individuals.<sup>28</sup> In this reading, then, the “we” of “we are the circumcision” can be understood in its natural Pauline sense of referring to Jews—specifically Paul and Timothy,<sup>29</sup> the Jewish authors of the letter (1:1).<sup>30</sup> While these individuals *claim* to be the circumcision and are characterized by their improper proselyte circumcisions, Paul and Timothy (“we”) actually *are* the circumcision and are characterized by serving by the *pneuma* of God, boasting in Christ Jesus, and not placing confidence in the flesh (3:3).<sup>31</sup> This is not to say Paul is claiming that all of the circumcision do these things or that doing these things constitutes membership within the circumcision,<sup>32</sup> but that the circumcised individuals in question do these things in contradistinction to those who claim to be the circumcision but are merely mutilated. Thus, in Phil 3:3, Paul does not redefine circumcision as the (true) circumcision of the heart that belongs to Christians but uses circumcision in a specific rhetorical context to identify a group of Jews against a group of circumcised, gentile poseurs.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Murray, *Playing a Jewish Game*, 35–36; Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 95–96.

<sup>28</sup> On non-Jews being naturally foreskinned (Rom 2:27) and Jews being naturally circumcised (cf. Gal 2:15), see Collman, “Just A Flesh Wound?,” 33–34. On Paul and the laws of circumcision, see Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, esp. 67–68, 78–82, 91–95. For these individuals, their circumcisions can be considered law-breaking because they were not performed with the correct timing (eighth day), and they were not performed on descendants of Abraham.

<sup>29</sup> For Timothy’s circumcision in Acts 16, see Collman, *Apostle to the Foreskin*, 143, n.88.

<sup>30</sup> Lionel J. Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel: How Paul’s Jewish Identity Informs His Apostolic Ministry, with Special Reference to Romans*, BZBW 205 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 53–55; Thiessen, “Gentiles as Impure Animals,” 28. D. W. B. Robinson (“We Are the Circumcision,” *ABR* 15 [1967]: 28–35) expands this to include all Jewish Christ-followers. Here, Robinson uses the category of “true circumcision” to describe Jews who trust in the Messiah over against those who do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Within the rhetorical context of 3:2–3, however, it should be understood as simply referring to Paul and Timothy.

<sup>31</sup> The next occurrence of the first-person plural pronoun in 3:17 (“the example you have in us”) further supports this interpretation.

<sup>32</sup> Contra Smit, “Real Circumcision,” 87.

<sup>33</sup> This identification of circumcision as referring to Jews (Paul and Timothy) is also

#### 4. Rom 2:28–29: Who Receives Praise from God?

In the only explicit mention of heart-circumcision in Paul's epistles, the interpretive consensus is that in Rom 2:28–29, Paul redefines what it means to be a Jew and what constitutes proper circumcision.<sup>34</sup> For example, John Barclay writes, "...what [Paul] argues in 2.25–9 thoroughly redefines the terms 'Jew' and 'circumcision' in a way which preserves their honorific status but cancels their normal denotation."<sup>35</sup> Andreas Blaschke comments, "In 2:17–29, Paul redefines who actually is a Jew and what circumcision actually is."<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Nina Livesey notes, "With such [metaphorical] definitions, Paul provides a means by which a foreskinned Gentile can be both a 'Jew' and 'circumcised.'"<sup>37</sup> If Paul is redefining circumcision and Jewish identity in this text, then this would be a departure from how he uses the terms Jew and circumcision elsewhere in his writings. Every other instance of Ἰουδαῖος in Paul's epistles refers only to ethnic Jews, and nowhere is the category of περιτομή applied to non-Jews.<sup>38</sup> While Paul could be redefining these terms to include non-Jews, this would be startlingly novel in the ancient world. As far as I am aware, no other ancient Jewish source applies the categories of circumcision and Jew to foreskinned gentiles.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, if Paul is decoupling heart-circumcision from physical penile-circumcision in 2:28–29, this would constitute a departure from all ancient Jewish sources.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to the majority of interpreters, William S. Campbell rightly comments on Rom 2:28–29 stating, "There are not many texts in Paul that offer clear evidence for an explicit redefinition of Jewish tradition, and this

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bolstered by Paul's appeal to his ethnic bona fides in 3:5–6.

<sup>34</sup> See the representative reading in Timothy W. Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant to Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17–29*, SBLDS 175 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000), 151–155. On the impact of this line of interpretation and how it influenced Nazi ideology, see Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 209–224.

<sup>35</sup> Barclay, "Paul and Philo," 546. Barclay's comments on this text in *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) are more nuanced: "Paul by no means wishes to exclude Jews in favor of Gentiles, and there is no reason to think that he here applies the label 'Jew' to all believers, Gentiles as well as Jews. Rather, he is asking how, in the sight of God, Jewish identity is received and recognized" (469).

<sup>36</sup> Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 414 (my translation). "Paulus definiert in 2,17–29 neu, wer eigentlich Jude und was eigentlich Beschneidung ist."

<sup>37</sup> Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, WUNT 2/295 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 111.

<sup>38</sup> Rom 1:16; 2:9–10, 17; 3:1, 9, 29–30; 4:9, 12; 9:24; 10:12; 1 Cor 1:22–24; 7:19; 9:20; 10:32; 12:13; 2 Cor 11:24; Gal 2:7–9, 12–15; 3:28; 1 Thess 2:14; cf. Eph 2:11; Col 3:11; 4:11. The only instance where this may be the case is Phil 3:3, but as I have argued above, Paul uses περιτομή in his typical way to refer to Jews—himself and Timothy.

<sup>39</sup> m. Ned. 3:11 does the opposite and treats circumcised *goyim* as if they are still foreskinned, and foreskinned Jews as if they are circumcised.

<sup>40</sup> The lone exception may be the allegorists Philo mentions in *Migr.* 89–93. Heart-circumcision is not in view there but the internal excision of pleasure is.

is not one of them.”<sup>41</sup> While Paul may be offering an innovative take on these categories based on his revelation of the Messiah (Gal 1:15–16), we should not rush to try and see him as innovating at every turn. I contend the syntax of Rom 2:28–29 demonstrates that Paul’s perspective on heart-circumcision is not innovative or new.

The standard reading of Rom 2:28–29 relies on supplying several additions to the elliptical Greek text. This is how the NA<sup>28</sup> renders this passage:

οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερωῖ Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερωῖ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομή, ἀλλ’ ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος, καὶ περιτομὴ καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι, οὗ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.

C. E. B. Cranfield fills in the gaps in this text and renders it in his *Romans* commentary this way, with his additions in brackets:

οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερωῖ [Ἰουδαῖός] Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερωῖ ἐν σαρκὶ [περιτομὴ] περιτομὴ [ἐστιν] ἀλλ’ ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος [Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν], καὶ περιτομὴ καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι [περιτομὴ ἐστιν], οὗ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων [ἐστιν] ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.<sup>42</sup>

For the Jew on display is not [a Jew], nor [is] the circumcision on display in the flesh [circumcision], but the Jew in secret [is a Jew], and the circumcision of the heart by the *pneuma*, not the letter, [is circumcision]; the praise for such a person [is] not from people, but from God.<sup>43</sup>

While such additions make for an easier text to translate, they drastically alter the content of the text and lead the reader to particular interpretive conclusions.<sup>44</sup> As Matthew Thiessen and Matthew Novenson demonstrate, there is a straightforward, alternative way to translate this difficult text that does not

<sup>41</sup> William S. Campbell, *Romans: A Social Identity Commentary*, T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on the New Testament (London: T&T Clark, 2023), 108.

<sup>42</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975–1979), 1:175. See the similar additions in Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 219.

<sup>43</sup> My translation of Cranfield’s reconstruction. Compare this with the NRSV: “For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not the written code. Such a person receives praise not from humans but from God.”

<sup>44</sup> In contrast to the RSV, Cranfield’s additions avoid the insertion of the adjectives “real” and “true” when referring to Jews and circumcision.

rely on excessive additions.<sup>45</sup> While the standard translation of this text interprets Paul as asking “Who is a Jew?” and “What is circumcision?” on their translation, the question being asked is “Who receives praise from God?”<sup>46</sup>

For it is not the Jew on display, nor the circumcision on display in the flesh, but the Jew in secret, and the circumcision of the heart in *pneuma*, not letter, whose praise [is] not from man, but from God.

In this translation of the text, the traditional interpretation is left without legs to stand on.<sup>47</sup> Paul is not redefining who is a Jew or what counts as circumcision but is arguing that displays of Jewishness and physical circumcision do not automatically translate into receiving praise from God.

The rhetorical context of this passage further confirms this reading of the text. Since Rom 2:17, Paul has been engaging an individual who “calls himself a Jew” (σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ). While this individual is commonly understood to be a Jew, Paul’s language does not necessarily indicate this. Paul does not address this individual as *a Jew* but as one who *calls himself a Jew*. To be a Jew and call oneself a Jew are not the same thing.<sup>48</sup> As some recent interpreters have argued—following the work of Runar Thorsteinsson—Paul’s interlocutor is not a natural born, ethnic Jew, but a circumcised, gentile proselyte.<sup>49</sup> He has sought to receive praise from God through his Jewishness on display via the circumcision of his flesh, but lacks the hidden Jewishness and circumcised heart necessary to receive praise.<sup>50</sup> As Paul has argued in 2:17–27, this type of

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Thiessen, “Paul’s Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17–29,” *NovT* 56 (2014): 373–391, esp. 337; idem, *Gentile Problem*, 58; Matthew V. Novenson, “The Self-Styled Jew of Romans 2 and the Actual Jews of Romans 9–11,” in *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 133–162, esp. 138, 149–150.

<sup>46</sup> On the traditional understanding of the question Paul seeks to answer, see Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, 152. See Ralph Bisschops, “Metaphor in Religious Transformation: ‘Circumcision of the Heart’ in Paul of Tarsus,” in *Religion, Language, and the Human Mind*, ed. Paul Chilton and Monika Kopytowska (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 294–329.

<sup>47</sup> As Novenson (“The Self-Styled Jew,” 138) notes, regardless of one’s interpretation of Romans 2:28–29, this translation (or a version of it) should become the standard.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Origen, *Comm. Rom.* 2.11.4; John Chrysostom, *Hom. Rom.*, Homily 6 (NPNF<sup>1</sup> 11:368); Euthymius Zigabenus, *Comm. Rom.* 2.17.

<sup>49</sup> Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*, ConBNT 40 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003). See also the essays in *The So-Called Jew*.

<sup>50</sup> Like the “neither/nor” texts in 1 Cor 7:19 and Gal 5:6 and 6:15, Paul is not negating the importance of being a visible Jew or possessing circumcision in the flesh but is employing

individual boasts in the law, yet is a transgressor of the law. Even the circumcision he possesses constitutes a violation of the law because it was not performed on the eighth day on a descendant of Abraham.<sup>51</sup> His circumcision and Jewishness on display will only earn him praise from men (cf. Matt 6:1–18).<sup>52</sup> The praise that comes from God is given to the Jew in secret,<sup>53</sup> whose physical, penile-circumcision is accompanied by circumcision of the heart (cf. Jer 9:25–26).<sup>54</sup>

It is important to note that Paul is not unique in his emphasis on the importance of heart-circumcision. Like many ancient Jewish thinkers, Paul notes that circumcision of the foreskin should be accompanied by circumcision of the heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Lev 26:41; Jer 4:4; 9:25–26; Ezek 44:7, 9; 1QpHab 11.13; 4Q434 Frag. 1, 1.4; Jub. 1:23; Odes Sol. 11.1–3 Philo, *Spec.* 1.304–5; QG 3.46; cf. 1QS 5.5).<sup>55</sup> In all of these texts, circumcision of the heart is never

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the “not/but” contrast to make his point about what receives praise from God. On these texts, see Collman, “Just a Flesh Wound?”

Regarding the status of having a circumcised heart, I agree with the assessment of Mark Nanos that since circumcision of the penis does not apply to non-Jews, neither does the circumcision of the heart (“Paul’s Non-Jews Do Not Become ‘Jews,’ But Do They Become ‘Jewish’?: Reading Romans 2:25–29 Within Judaism, Alongside Josephus,” *JJMJS* 1 [2014]: 26–53, esp. 51). On this understanding, Paul’s emphasis on heart-circumcision may also have a polemical edge to it since it would exclude the judaizing gentile interlocutor from receiving praise from God as a “so-called Jew.” This is not to say that Paul is speaking polemically against Jewish identity or circumcision, but against an interlocutor who incorrectly thinks that judaizing and circumcision can earn him praise from God and deliver him from being under sin (3:9).

<sup>51</sup> Paul’s statement in 2:27 that it is “though the letter and circumcision” (διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς) this individual breaks the law. See Thiessen, “Paul’s Argument,” 385–388.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Eduard Schweizer, “Der Jude im Verborgenen..., dessen Lob nicht von Menschen, sondern von Gott kommt”: Zu Röm 2,28 f und Mt 6,1–18” in *Neues Testament und Kirche: Für Rudolf Schnackenburg*, ed. Joachim Gnilka (Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 115–124.

<sup>53</sup> While the reference to the “Jew in secret” is likely analogous to the pattern of hidden piety encouraged by Jesus in Matt 6, this identification could indicate a special status beyond being Jewish. Carmen Palmer argues in the DSS Serekh tradition, circumcision of the heart turned a normal Judean into a “supra-Judean” (*Converts in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Gēr and Mutable Ethnicity*, STDJ 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 129–157, esp. 153–154). Notably, this special status is closed off from gentile converts since this tradition rejects gentile converts due to their perceived genealogical impurity (see Palmer’s [116–121, 127] discussion of 4QpNah Frags. 3–4, II, 7–10 and 4QFlor Frag. 1, I, 1–4).

<sup>54</sup> This reading helps make sense of the questions that the interlocutor asks in 3:1: “What then is the advantage of the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?” If Paul has just stated that not all Jews and circumcisions receive praise from God (2:28–29), then it is logical for the interlocutor to ask if there is any value in being a circumcised Jew.

<sup>55</sup> On heart-circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Judaism, see Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, *Sprache und Ritus im altisraelischen Kult: zur „Spiritualisierung“ der*

divorced from physical circumcision of the foreskin, nor is there any privileging of the former over the latter.<sup>56</sup> It is incorrect to assume that by emphasizing the circumcision of the heart Paul is in any way denigrating penile-circumcision or claiming that is no longer necessary for Jews.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, both Jeremiah and Jubilees are stringent regarding the proper implementation of circumcision while also maintaining the importance of the circumcision of the heart (Jer 9:25–26; Jub 1:23; 15:14, 25–26).<sup>58</sup>

In Rom 2:28–29, Paul does not redefine or replace physical circumcision of the penis with heart-circumcision. Like the prophet Jeremiah, Paul argues that physical circumcision alone is not sufficient to receive praise from God—one must also possess a circumcised heart. Within the context of his dialogue with a circumcised, gentile proselyte—one who calls himself a Jew—Paul employs heart-circumcision in a polemic against those who think that physical circumcision on its own will merit praise from God. Despite the long history of interpreting this text, there is no redefinition or replacement of circumcision to be found here.

### 5. Col 2:11: What is Hands-Free Circumcision?

The final text under examination is Col 2:11, where the author writes, “In whom you were also circumcised with a circumcision not made by hands, by stripping off the body of flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.”<sup>59</sup> Here, the author describes the circumcision that the Colossians have experienced in three ways: it is not

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*Kultbegriffe im Alten Testament*, WMANT 19 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1965), 72–76; Roger Le Déaut, “Le thème de la circoncision du coeur (Dt. XXX 6; Jér. IV 4) dans les versions anciennes (LXX et Targum) et à Qumrân,” in *Congress Volume: Vienna 1980*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 32 (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 178–205; Werner E. Lemke, “Circumcision of the Heart: The Journey of a Biblical Metaphor,” in *God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 299–319; Palmer, *Converts*, 148–152. See the discussion of the relevant heart-circumcision texts in Blaschke, *Beschneidung*.

<sup>56</sup> It must be noted that many of these texts do not explicitly discuss circumcision of the foreskin alongside heart-circumcision. This fact, however, does not indicate that their employment of heart-circumcision functions as a replacement of or polemic against physical circumcision.

<sup>57</sup> For example, Barclay comments that the circumcision of the heart is “the only sort that matters” (“Paul and Philo,” 552”). Similarly, Le Déaut (“Le thème,” 203–204) says Paul follows the pattern of the Hebrew Bible in which the theme of spiritual circumcision prevails over material circumcision. See also, James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 127.

<sup>58</sup> See Thiessen, *Gentile Problem*, 68–70.

<sup>59</sup> While the authorship of Colossians is debated, its author is familiar with Paul’s thoughts and writes authoritatively in his name. For an up-to-date evaluation of the question of the authorship of Colossians, see Paul Foster, *Colossians*, BNTC (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 61–81, esp. 78–79.

made by hands (ἀχειροποίητος), it constitutes the removal of the body of flesh, and it occurs through the circumcision of Christ.<sup>60</sup> Given that the author describes this circumcision as being made without hands and experienced through baptism (2:12), most interpreters conclude that this rules out physical circumcision of the foreskin and points toward a spiritual circumcision or the circumcision of the heart.<sup>61</sup> But this may not be the case.

Joshua Garroway proposes that the adjective ἀχειροποίητος does not necessitate that circumcision of the foreskin is not in view; rather, the adjective serves to highlight the agent or means of this circumcision. “The author’s point is simply that the circumcision has been achieved through divine, rather than human, agency.”<sup>62</sup> While one expects circumcision to be performed by hands, this circumcision is noteworthy not because it is anything other than circumcision of the foreskin, but because it occurs without human intervention. This follows the standard usage of circumcision and foreskin language in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament where it always refers to the foreskin of the penis unless a different object is specified (e.g., heart, lips, ears).<sup>63</sup> That circumcision of the foreskin is in view is supported by the author’s reference a couple of verses later to the Colossians’ former state of being “dead in [their] trespasses and the foreskin of [their] flesh” (2:13). While interpreters generally take “the body of flesh” in Col 2:11 to refer to the sinful nature of humanity,<sup>64</sup> the author clarifies that the flesh that they previously possessed in their state of

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<sup>60</sup> Here, I take the two dative clauses (ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός and ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ) to function instrumentally. See Garroway, “Circumcision of Christ,” 314.

<sup>61</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, 2nd ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 103–104; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 156; Foster, *Colossians*, 262–263; cf. Cohen, *Jewish Women*, 71. Eduard Lohse proposes that the circumcision spoken of here is simply baptism (*Colossians and Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris, Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], 101–103).

<sup>62</sup> Garroway, “Circumcision of Christ,” 315. See the similar usage in Mark 14:58 and 2 Cor 5:1. Garroway takes this observation further, “Such insistence may even suggest a kind of circumcision that can be hand-made, which would rule out a circumcision of the heart, as it cannot be circumcised manually.”

<sup>63</sup> The texts mentioning non-penile circumcision or foreskin are: Exod 6:12, 30; Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4; 6:10; 9:25; Eek 44:7, 9; Acts 7:51; Rom 2:29.

<sup>64</sup> See the discussion in Foster, *Colossians*, 263–265. This interpretation made its way into the textual transmission of this verse. Some later manuscripts and scribal correctors inserted τῶν αμαρτιῶν into the text so that it reads “the body of the sins of the flesh.” Additionally, some see this as a reference to Christ’s death, e.g., Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Astrid B. Beck, AB 34B (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 365–367; cf. Garroway, “Circumcision of Christ,” 314.

death that was shed was foreskin. Since they have been made alive (σὺζωποιέω) with Christ, they are no longer dead in their trespasses, and it stands to reason that this transformation also modifies the foreskin of their flesh.<sup>65</sup> If this is the case, how does one experience a hands-free circumcision of their foreskin through baptism?

Here, I think the author's reasoning broadly follows Paul's thought on baptism and the individual's union with Christ. The overarching logic of this section focuses on the Colossians' union with Christ, as indicated by the continued use of "in him" (2:6, 7, 9, 10), "in whom" (2:11), and "with Christ" (2:20).<sup>66</sup> The author also highlights this theme by using συν- compound verbs (συνθάπτω, συνεγείρω, σὺζωποιέω) in 2:12 and 13 to describe what these individual's experience. In Paul's epistles, baptism unites all believers into one physical body and joins them to Christ.<sup>67</sup> "For in one *pneuma*, we were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:3; cf. Rom 7:5; 1 Cor 10:17; Gal 3:27–28). Paul notes that God has blended together this body (συνέκρασεν τὸ σῶμα, 1 Cor 12:24) from many members into a single unified body (1 Cor 12:27) and that all who are united to Christ are one *pneuma* with him (1 Cor 6:17). Thus, by receiving the divine *pneuma* and sharing in the physical body of Christ in baptism, believers can physically participate in Christ's circumcision.<sup>68</sup> Through their pneumatic union with him they are circumcised with a hands-free circumcision, which removes the flesh of their foreskin, by their participation in Christ's physical circumcision.<sup>69</sup>

While I'm not confident that Paul would agree with this author who writes in his name regarding the pneumatic hands-free circumcision of non-Jews through union with Christ, this text does not offer a redefinition of

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<sup>65</sup> Garroway, "Circumcision of Christ," 315–316. Garroway also offers a helpful comparison with the similar discussion in Eph 2:11–13.

<sup>66</sup> On the theme of union in this section, see Foster, *Colossians*, 254, 261.

<sup>67</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, trans. William Montgomery (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 101–140.

<sup>68</sup> The author of Colossians indicates he is familiar with this idea of a shared, pneumatic corporeality in 2:5. "For though I am absent in the flesh, I am with you in the *pneuma*."

<sup>69</sup> While Origen links the individual's participation in Christ's circumcision to the purification of baptism through a clever interpretation of Luke 2:21–24, he seems to present a similar line of reasoning in *Hom. Luc.* 14. Origen notes that Christians "have no need for circumcision of the flesh" because "[Christ's] circumcision took place for us" and "we were circumcised with him" (*Hom. Luc.* 14.1). See the discussion of this passage in Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 123–125. I take the "circumcision of Christ" to be an objective genitive rather than a subjective genitive. It is not the circumcision that Christ performs on individuals, but the circumcision that Christ received as an infant (Luke 2:21). On the function of this genitive, see Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 26–28. One could also take this to be a "mystical genitive." On this, see Foster, *Colossians*, 264–265; Adolf Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, trans. William E. Wilson (New York: Harper, 1957), 162–164.



circumcision or a replacement of it with heart-circumcision. The novelty of the author's approach to circumcision is that now the rite can be performed without the need for human intervention. Those who were once dead and in foreskin have now been raised to life with Christ and have shed their foreskin by participating in Christ's circumcision.

## 6. Conclusion: Where is the Cardiological Mohel?

This brief examination of heart-circumcision in the authentic and disputed Pauline epistles has demonstrated that Paul had little to say about the topic. In fact, he only discusses it once (Rom 2:28–29), and there it serves a specific rhetorical purpose in his ongoing discussion with a judaizing gentile. Heart-circumcision has a rich tradition in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. Still, Paul's epistles should not continue to be used as evidence for this theme in the early days of the Jesus movement.<sup>70</sup> While early Christian writers adopted this theme from the Hebrew Bible and by reading Paul in light of those texts, Paul's epistles (and Colossians) do not actually add to this discussion. Rather, in their attempt to separate Christianity from Judaism, they read their supersessionist assumptions into Paul's texts, assuming that he said what they already knew: that the church was the true Israel and that heart-circumcision replaced physical circumcision. Indeed, Paul's interpreters have made a theological mountain out of a cardiological mohel.

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<sup>70</sup> If this idea was as central to Paul's thinking as some interpreters claim, it should be surprising that Paul does not utilize heart-circumcision in Galatians. If Paul believes that non-Jews can receive the only kind of circumcision that matters—circumcision of the heart—then it seems that Paul would have used this to his rhetorical advantage in his critique of the circumcision proposed by the agitators. This Pauline lacuna is noted by Garroway, *Paul's Gentile-Jews: Neither Jew nor Gentile, but Both* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 132–133. He argues that Paul may have avoided discussing heart-circumcision because it could have confused the Galatians. It could also be that Paul had not developed this line of thinking by the time he wrote Galatians. I think, however, that this lacuna has a simpler explanation. Paul does not use heart-circumcision to his rhetorical advantage in Galatians because he does not think it applies to foreskinned gentiles and because he does not think it replaces circumcision of the penis.