

Re-Framing Paul’s Opposition to *Erga Nomou* as “Rites of a Custom” for Proselyte Conversion Completed by the Synecdoche “Circumcision”

Mark D. Nanos

Lund University | mark@marknanos.com

JJMJS No. 8 (2021): 75–115

Abstract

In Galatians, Paul challenges some Christ-followers who are not circumcised but interested in undertaking this “rite” (ἔργον) from the premise they have failed to recognize that, according to Torah, they cannot do so because the commandment of circumcision applies to Jews and to non-Jew slaves acquired by Jews, and they are neither. Non-Jews who have already heard (faithfully obeyed) the gospel, such as themselves, cannot undertake to become proselyte Jews, even if others may seek to influence them that they should or must do so to justify the gospel-based claim to have become sons of Abraham. This essay challenges the received views of Paul’s phrase ἔργα νόμου (usually “works of the law”), which is understood to indicate Paul’s opposition to Torah, or certain elements thereof. Instead, I propose that Paul’s phrase denotes “rites of a custom,” specifically the customary rites involved in proselyte religio-ethnic initiation, which are completed by the signifying rite (synecdoche) of “circumcision.” What Paul opposed was circumcision and the related initiation rites, not Torah, which he puts into tension with πίστις (faith[fulness]), in their case. Paul argues from Torah that the custom at issue, that these non-Jews undertake proselyte transformation and thus adult male circumcision, is *not* enjoined in Torah. In the allegory of ch. 4, he identifies the custom of proselyte conversion instead with the model for incorporating slaves by adult circumcision. This custom of promoting proselyte conversion therefore disobeys Torah, which, he argues in ch. 3, invokes a curse instead of the blessing supposed. The implications for reading Paul and extrapolating biblically based warrants for or against circumcision are many, with more than a few challenges to the prevailing Pauline discourses about this topic. Finally, in keeping with the interests of the conference on the topic of circumcision more broadly, I

offer a hermeneutical reflection on circumcision for later “Christian” males apart from that qualification.¹

Keywords

Paul, Galatians, Romans, Abraham, Sons, Heirs, Slaves, Torah, Law, Custom, Judaism, rite of circumcision, *ἔργα νόμου*, works of the law, rites of a custom, curse of the law, *πίστις*, faith (fulness), allegory of Sarah and Hagar, proselyte conversion, 4QMMT, Izates, AIDS

1. Introduction

That Paul was a convert from Judaism, and concomitantly that he opposed circumcision, are cultural landmarks in Christian reasoning, equally well known to non-Christians. Without being specified, people can usually intuit that the circumcision Paul opposed was specifically the Jewish custom that applied to males, not to females. But many do not similarly qualify, or perhaps even realize, that Paul’s opposition to undertaking circumcision was expressed only toward non-Jews, not toward Jews overseeing this rite of passage for their eight-day old sons. This oversight bears witness to the habit among interpreters of Paul to universalize his rhetoric instead of carefully qualifying the contextual purpose of his arguments.

Even less well known, in fact seldom discussed even in scholarly treatments of this topic, is the fact that Paul’s opposition was expressed not toward just any non-Jews, but only those who were already Christ-followers.² What Paul addressed was not a choice between Christ or Torah, or in any sense an effort to achieve salvation, as usually conceptualized and expressed. These non-Jews had

¹ I am grateful for responses to the original conference paper and related papers on the topic of *erga nomou* for a conference in Bratislava in 2018 and at the SBL Annual Meeting in 2019, and to drafts of this essay by the peer-reviewers and others who saved me from errors and made helpful suggestions to consider, including Tom Blanton, Charles Cisco, Ryan Collman, Neil Elliott, Hans Förster, Brian Robinson, Runar Thorsteinsson, Heidi Wendt, and Kent Yinger.

² Paul’s opposition has been traditionally universalized to apply to circumcision for Jews as well, as if he simply opposes it for everyone, certainly for all who follow Christ, and for all times and situations. Recent discussions more often recognize that he opposed circumcision for Christ-followers (usually termed “Christians,” although anachronistic for Paul’s time), yet often still conceptualize the issue in terms of Christians versus Jews. To help defamiliarize and facilitate historically oriented discussion, I prefer to use “peoples,” “nations,” and “non-Jews” instead of “Gentiles” for *ethnē*, and “Christ-followers” rather than “Christians.”

already chosen Christ, and they were not considering to practice Torah per se or to achieve God's favor by human effort to do good deeds. Rather, they were considering to undertake the specific act of becoming proselytes by completing the rites involved in that process, which are summed up in the rite of circumcision. Moreover, just as important but also just as habitually overlooked, Paul's opposition was in response to a specific reason for these particular Christ-following non-Jews' interest; namely, they wanted to undertake circumcision to gain uncontested recognition as sons of Abraham by those who appeared to have the authority to confer or deny that status, at least as these non-Jews saw the case to be.

The interest of these non-Jews in circumcision was thus highly qualified. They wanted to gain the respect of some people or groups who were otherwise contesting their expectations, expectations that arose from the gospel Paul articulated, in which he explained that they were to trust in Jesus as Messiah apart from completing the initiation rites of passage that would make them Jewish proselytes. From the point of view of those advocating the need for completing those religio-ethnic initiation rites to substantiate such claims, this interest need not have anything to do with choosing Christ; their concern was with social standing according to prevailing communal norms of their Roman Jewish subgroup's communal context.³

³ See my *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), for a full discussion of the social setting and players in Galatia, including why and how acquiring Jewish religio-ethnic identity would be desirable to negotiate the constraints of "pagan" social life so as to avoid continuing to practice the family and civic cult that would otherwise be expected of them if they did not become proselytes, for which they would suffer serious consequences if not negotiated on the "customary" terms of social identification for the time.

Recent examinations of the way that Jewish thought and practice and thus Paul represented various, conflicting ways to negotiate Roman cultural possibilities and constraints for the people of the empire, each with the different emphases, include e.g., Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire* (Paul in Critical Contexts; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); idem, "The Question of Politics: Paul as a Diaspora Jew under Roman Rule," in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 203–243; Kathy Ehrensperger, *Paul at the Crossroads of Cultures: Theologizing in the Space-Between* (LNTS 456; London, et al: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013); Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

In Pauline scholarship, Paul's opposition to circumcision, even when qualified to apply only to non-Jews in Christ, remains conflated with opposition to Torah observance. The laws or commandments Paul supposedly opposed as *ἔργα νόμου* (*erga nomou*: "works of the law" is the usual translation) are sometimes qualified as Jewish ritual commandments, and by the New Perspective on Paul (NPP) as the ritual and behavioral norms that mark Jews out from non-Jews (usually negatively valued to represent "ethnocentric boundary markers," "nationalism").⁴ This more recent emphasis is signaled in shorthand phrases such as the one James Dunn made familiar to define the distinction between Torah *per se* and the "works of the law," the latter represented by Jewish-identifying behavior like "circumcision, days, and diets."⁵

The reasons for Paul's opposition to circumcision in the received views likely follow from the traditional conflation of circumcision with Torah observance, even when restricted in the way that Dunn's formulation represents (for which he received enormous push-back; see note 5), which demonstrates the habit of universalizing in a way that in effect de-Judaizes Paul's rhetoric to make it apply to everyone for all time, regardless of enormous contextual differences. The conflation depends upon the premise that circumcision is categorically of the same kind as other Torah-based (and especially ritual) norms, at least where those distinguished Jews from other people and their laws and cultural norms. This leads to a working assumption that Paul was resisting works-righteousness or legalism or ethnically marking behavior *per se*, and Torah observance and Judaism more broadly, since that is where *ἔργα νόμου* and *circumcision* are (presumed to be) commanded. One of the many implications for our topic is how the traditional approach to Paul's arguments against circumcision as well as *ἔργα νόμου* for those who have *πίστις* (*pistis*) in/to Christ functions in Pauline theological reasoning, not least for defining the meaning of justification by faith, as usually conceptualized and phrased. The received translations as well as interpretations based on the traditional reasoning shape not only major theological premises but

⁴ I will not be engaging the traditional or NPP views as much as setting out a new reading. Cf. recent monographs that support the generalizations made about the received interpretations of this topic include Robert Keith Rapa, *The Meaning of 'Works of the Law' in Galatians and Romans* (New York, et al: Peter Lang, 2001); Stephen J. Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers: Reconciling Old and New Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017); Matthew J. Thomas, *Paul's 'Works of the Law' in the Perspective of Second Century Reception* (WUNT II 468; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018).

⁵ See James D. G. Dunn, ed., *The New Perspective on Paul: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), for the key essays and the development of his thought on this matter, especially "Yet Once More—'The Works of the Law': A Response."

major ways of conceptualizing ideas like faith and action in the binary contrastive terms taken up in western philosophical as well as theological reasoning. These familiar interpretations impact not only the Christian theological interests that often concern if not drive them, but because Christianity was the religion of Europe and its colonizers and to this day represents much of the world's population, these (mis)readings have shaped and continue to shape western culture, and because of its global influence, world culture. The implications for and on Jews and Judaism can hardly be overstated.⁶

I propose that the received views of Paul's position on circumcision as well as on *ἔργα νόμου* and Torah, to which these are directly linked, are mistaken. The translation "works of the law," and others like it, misrepresent Paul's referent in the direction of Torah observance rather than identity formation, as behavior-rather than as initiation-oriented.⁷ These conflation do not allow readers to recognize that the arguments Paul mounted, including against circumcision for Christ-following non-Jews, work *from* the premise of the authority of Torah, not against or with qualified regard for Torah. They also do not adequately qualify the contextual, not least intra- and inter-Jewish communal, Roman, pre-Christianity concerns for those who look to these texts to do their Christian hermeneutical reasoning.

I propose instead that Paul used the phrase *ἔργα νόμου* to express his opposition to circumcision and related initiation rites by which a non-Jew could become a proselyte Jew,⁸ a "righteous one," a "son of Abraham." In these

⁶ E.g., see Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Studies in Jewish History and Culture 20; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009); David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2013).

⁷ The NPP fails to make this distinction in the way that it combines the concerns with initiation into Jewish identity with observance of behavioral norms, as noted already in Dunn's phrasing, in which circumcision is not distinguished in kind from observing Sabbaths or Jewish dietary norms.

⁸ The topic of how proselyte conversion arose and when it acquired that nomenclature, as we tend to understand it via the rabbis, is beyond the scope of this essay, although in some ways addressed in the excursus on circumcision below. Paul did not use this terminology; I use it etically to communicate that what is at issue is the religio-ethnic rites of transformation by which a non-Jew can become in some way a Jew that can be distinguished from identification as a non-Jew guest or fearer of God who has not undertaken this level of re-identification. Paul was concerned about that, and the argument herein is that he used *circumcision* and *ἔργα νόμου* to communicate this idea.

arguments, his goal was not to persuade Christ-following non-Jews (all the more not to persuade Jews, whether Christ-followers or not) to disregard some or all of Torah's commandments, or to dissuade them from seeking to achieve Jewish or other good deeds by human effort or for the wrong reasons, and so on, as usually conceptualized. Rather, Paul used *ἔργα νόμου* to signify the "rites" involved in *initiation into* Jewish religio-ethnic identification. In most of the arguments where this phrase appears it refers to the "custom" of proselyte conversion, a custom that was synecdochally represented by the concluding rite of male "circumcision." I will explore some of the exegetical, including lexical, bases for proposing we translate the phrase "rites of a custom," a custom completed by "circumcision," the "rite" that serves as a synecdoche for the entire religio-ethnic initiation process, and the implications for discussing circumcision with respect to Paul's voice.⁹

To be sure, Paul regarded circumcision as a rite of passage enjoined in Torah for eight-day-old boys born to Jews (Gal 2:15–16; Phil 3:5; cf. Gen 17:9–12, 14; Lev 12:3), one that he regarded to be advantageous (Rom 3:1–2;), and required for slaves born into the households of Abraham and his descendants (Gal 4:21–5:1; cf. Gen 17:12–14, 23–27); and by Paul's time it also had become a custom for incorporating non-Jews into Jewish communities as proselytes (see excursus below). Paul argues that these rites of initiation for non-Jews, however customary they may have become, should not extend to the case of Christ-following non-Jews, because they are already sons of Abraham miraculously, adopted by way of the spirit through their commitment to the gospel.¹⁰ To make his case, Paul appealed to Torah! He could do so—surprising as it may seem—because Torah never enjoined circumcision or any other rites of passage (i.e., *ἔργα νόμου*) by which

⁹ In all but the case in Rom 2:15, which differs from the other cases in several ways (e.g., the phrase is not contrasted with *πίστις*), Paul does not include an article before either the phrase or within it. Although not material to my argument, and although the particular "rite(s)" and "custom" at issue are Jewish, and thus the addition of the article is as useful for my case as it is for those I am contesting, we ought to consider if Paul chooses not to use the article in this case, perhaps just to play with the nuance that I will highlight (that this is not enjoined in "the Custom/Torah"). As we will discuss, this grammatical distinction appears to play a role in the contrast he draws when introducing his allegory in Gal 4:21. Note also that in 3:19, the diatribal question changes the topic from the previous argument against completing *ἔργα νόμου*, to the relevance of "the *nomos* [*ὁ νόμος*]."

¹⁰ Rom 8:14–17; Gal 3:29–4:7. See Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

non-Jews (better: non-Israelites) could become Jews (Israelites/sons of Abraham).¹¹

The traditional view fails to recognize that Torah does not contain any such commandment regarding circumcision for non-Jews that Paul could be dismissing or breaking. When this is recognized, we can begin to read Paul's opposition to proselyte conversion/transformation, represented in his arguments by the synecdoche *circumcision* and the phrase *ἔργα νόμου*, not in contrast to but instead based upon appealing to the fact that Torah did not provide for the religio-ethnic transformation that was being advocated. Paul appealed to the voice of Torah to make his case that the proposed "rites" he opposed represented disobedience rather than observance of God's Guidance for Israel (i.e., Torah). His arguments represent one of the many intra-Jewish debates of his time as well as before and after it, in which, as Christine Hayes explains, "the messy multidimensional biblical conception of divine law discourse" enables "readers to claim a biblical pedigree for radically different constructions of divine law."¹²

The reading proposed demonstrates how Paul within Judaism approaches, which some Pauline scholars have begun to explore in recent years,¹³ can lead to new insights to pursue and test and put into conversation with the

¹¹ Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 43, helpfully highlights this absence in Tanakh. However, I do not agree with Thiessen that Paul's objection began from a primordial objection to the idea itself, unlike the premise from which the author of Jubilees's rhetoric seeks to persuade. Paul had advocated the rite in the past (Gal 5:11). Paul's objection followed from his theological reasoning of the implications of the Shema Israel in view of the revelation of Christ, discussed below. Working from that conviction, Paul then discovered and seized upon this argument from Torah to supplement the otherwise gospel-based basis for his objection, also discussed more below.

¹² Christine Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law?: Early Perspectives* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 3. Although Hayes is here emphasizing how this developed in response to Greco-Roman discourses of divine law, her argument reaches into areas such as the one I am investigating, and helpfully grounds intra-Jewish debates in their non-Jewish cultural contexts. Because the idea of circumcision for non-Jews as a part of proselyte conversion appears to arise in the Greek and Roman periods and not earlier (see excursus below), we should consider how local and empirical concerns and constraints may have shaped the interests of the influencers in Galatia, for example, to advocate the completion of proselyte rites of passage; I explore this dynamic, albeit without the benefit of Hayes's insights and from a construction of Paul that differs from hers in some ways, in *Irony of Galatians*, 203–283.

¹³ The essays in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*, explain this perspective and some of the influential scholarship from which it draws.

received views. In addition, I hope the reading will contribute to the investigation of circumcision not only with respect to interpreting the historical Paul, and, closely related to that, for discussing Paul's voice in matters relevant to Christian-Jewish relations, but also to discussions of circumcision in contemporary cultural discourses and policy making when his voice is invoked as a factor. My reading of Paul's opposition to *ἔργα νόμου* as well as circumcision destabilizes the received views on faith versus works and justification, and thereby offers a very different way to construct Paul in terms of his theology of faithfulness apart from proselyte conversion. In this article, I will focus discussion on the role of *ἔργα νόμου* in Paul's reasoning with regard to the role of circumcision and proselyte conversion for the Christ-following non-Jews his letters addressed.¹⁴

2. Defining *ἔργα νόμου* in terms of Circumcision and Proselyte Conversion

The traditional translation of the phrase *ἔργα νόμου* as “works of the law” reflects the traditional premise that Paul opposes observing behavior (*ἔργα* as “works/deeds”) enjoined in Torah (*νόμος* as “the Law”), which is contrasted with what he is understood to advocate instead, *πίστις* (“faith”). As mentioned, prevailing New Perspective interpretations also conflate the deeds of circumcision with the deeds of observing days and diets and other specifically Jewish behavioral norms. But Paul does not raise any objection to Torah-based behavior in the contexts that this phrase appears, or anywhere else in these letters—if one does not define *ἔργα νόμου* to do so. Elsewhere, I have demonstrated why the few cases where Paul supposedly opposed Torah observance according to the traditional

¹⁴ There is not space to present a comprehensive examination of *ἔργα νόμου* and the larger theological implications that follow from my reading thereof, or put these into conversation with the many elements in the received views; some of this was covered in previously published essays, e.g., my “The Question of Conceptualization: Qualifying Paul's Position on Circumcision in Dialogue with Josephus's Advisors to King Izates,” in Nanos and Zetterholm, *Paul within Judaism*, 105–152; and in “Paul's Non-Jews Do Not Become 'Jews,' But Do They Become 'Jewish?': Reading Romans 2:25–29 Within Judaism, Alongside Josephus,” *JMJS* 1 (2014): 26–53; updated in *Reading Paul within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 1* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 127–154; additional elements are the focus of forthcoming research adumbrated in my “For Second Temple Jewish Texts, Reading Paul's *erga nomou* as 'Works of the Law' Does Not Work: A New Proposal,” presented at “The Message of Paul the Apostle within Second Temple Judaism” conference, Bratislava, Slovakia, Oct. 2018; and “For Paul's Intra-Jewish Context 'Works of Law' Does Not Work for *erga nomou*, or 'Faith [alone]' for *pistis*: Why Not? What Works?” in the “Paul within Judaism” session at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, San Diego, CA, Nov. 2019.

readings point instead to his commitment to Torah and his expectation that his readers know that to be the case; herein I will concentrate on the topics of circumcision and *ἔργα νόμου*.¹⁵ For example, when we take account of the probable situation in Galatia based on how Paul makes his arguments, we find him opposing circumcision and *ἔργα νόμου* for his addressees because they are non-Jews in Christ, but not Torah observance itself. It seems highly unlikely that the influencers there were urging Torah observance, but rather the need for these non-Jews to become circumcised. Note that he argues against trusting those proposing they should be circumcised because they are failing to emphasize the obligation to do the whole of Torah that follows after becoming under Torah (5:3; 6:12–13). Whether that accurately portrays the influencers' objectives or not, Paul must have expected this to be a feasible enough observation about what the influencers emphasized to expect this line of argumentation to have persuasive weight.¹⁶ In other words, Paul's approach requires that the addressees have understood the focus of the influencers' concern to be on them undertaking circumcision, not Torah observance per se. Galatians is a call for non-Jews in Christ to remain circumcision- or proselyte-conversion-free, if you will, but is not about them needing to become Torah-free.

In Galatians and Romans, the letters where the phrase *ἔργα νόμου* and most of Paul's references to *circumcision* arise, he is opposing the specific signifying *rites* (*ἔργα*) involved in the process of proselyte conversion. He specifies the *rite* (*ἔργον*) of *circumcision*, and his opposition is directed only to non-Jews who already are *faithful* to the gospel—those with *πίστις*—undertaking this “rite.” The specific *custom* to which this refers is the religio-ethnic initiation into identity as a Jew. Both the rite of circumcision and *ἔργα νόμου* function as metonyms for ethnic transformation rites; *circumcision* also functions as a synecdoche for the entire process. I will thus proceed to translate Paul's phrase as “rites of a custom.” A useful paraphrase to defamiliarize and clarify would be, “rites of a custom [completed by circumcision; namely, proselyte conversion].” A useful modern

¹⁵ See my “The Myth of the ‘Law-Free’ Paul Standing Between Christians and Jews,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 4 (2009): 1–21; updated in *Reading Paul within Judaism*, 77–107, for a survey, along with many other essays included in *Reading Paul within Judaism*. See also Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 232–252.

¹⁶ In addition, Paul's approach would also fail to be persuasive if he, as a circumcised Jew, was not believed by the addressees to be obliged to observe the whole of Torah; otherwise, they would be expected to rejoin that, if he was not obliged thereby to do so, why should they be held to a different standard.

language translation might be, “rites involved in completing proselyte conversion.”

Circumcision is of course only one *rite*, but Paul refers to ἔργα, *rites*. Paul employed the phrase ἔργα νόμου to refer to the entire process that we now usually refer to as proselyte conversion (better: religio-ethnic transformation). His use of *circumcision* as a synecdoche highlights this to be the one exemplary “rite” that demonstrates the transition to religio-ethnic identification as a proselyte Jew has been completed. This act had become a signifier of Jewish identity, albeit one that was confined to male Jews. His choice of the plural suggests there are rites besides the rite of circumcision, but he never makes them explicit. The habit of referring to *rites* of passage even when discussing any given rite is evident in the language used by ritual theorists: the act is accompanied by rituals and also involves more than the rites themselves in the sense that the one undertaking this passage is also learning new behavior and related cultural dynamics, although those will not by themselves function in the same way as completing the defining rites or rite. It is one thing to act like a Jew, another to become a Jew, but in the liminal process of transformation one is learning to behave in the new ways that the completion of this process will confirm as obligatory for life.

The warrant for translating ἔργα in this phrase (and surrounding contexts when used alone) as *rites* rather than as *works* or *deeds*, which have been understood to refer to the accomplishing of behavioral norms rather than the rites of initiation is—in addition to the contextual case that will be made for Paul’s usage—informed by the way that Josephus used this same language. Josephus’s discussion of the case of King Izates in *Antiquities* 20 provides a particularly relevant parallel. It is one of the few examples from Paul’s time (in this case slightly later, but discussing a case overlapping Paul’s time) that discusses the apparently by this time familiar (albeit still controversial) custom that a non-Jew can become a Jew by way of completing certain ἔργα, and the ἔργον of circumcision in particular, which Louis Feldman translated as “rites” and “rite” for the Loeb volumes.¹⁷ Since I have explored that example in detail, a few comments should suffice here.¹⁸

¹⁷ Note for Paul the case of ἐργαζόμενοι in 1 Cor 9:13, and for Josephus, see *Ant* 8.111; 12.241 (which are but a few of the many cases tracing the cultic usage by Kathy Ehrensperger in her “Imagine – No ‘Works of Law’!: Struggling with ‘Ἔργα νόμου’ in Changing Times and Places” (paper presented at the “Paul within Judaism” session of the SBL Annual Meeting in San Diego, Nov. 2019).

¹⁸ See my “The Question of Conceptualization,” 105–152; also my “Paul’s Non-Jews Do Not Become ‘Jews’?”

In *Ant.* 20.17–48, Josephus relates that King Izates of Adiabene, a client kingdom of Parthia during Paul's time, was a non-Jew who practiced a Jewish way of life. He was instructed in how to do so by a Jew named Ananias, although there is no mention of a Jewish community. When Izates expressed interest in actually undertaking to complete the “rites [ἔργα]” that would make him a Jew as well—circumcision being the “rite [ἔργον]” specifically discussed, and no others—Ananias and Izates's mother (who also already practiced a Jewish way of life), were opposed to this as “improper” in his case. They feared (rightly, it turns out) that undertaking this rite would cause the people of his kingdom to rebel against his rule, for it signified the treasonous behavior of becoming beholden to another people and their god in a way that continuing to merely practice Jewish behavior apparently would not be expected to represent (41; cf. 46–48). Ananias instructed the king “to worship [σέβειν] God without circumcision; even though he by all means did resolve to be zealous for the ancestral traditions [πάτριος] of the Jews, this is superior [‘lordlier’] to being circumcised” (41). Moreover, Ananias argues that God “will have forgiveness” toward Izates for “not performing τὸ ἔργον [the rite]” of circumcision because of the constraints of his situation as the king of a people who are not Jews (42). Notice the *singular* and *plural* forms both point to *circumcision* in particular as a transformative religio-ethnic action for a non-Jew that is distinguished from behaving like a Jew.

The story of Izates takes a turn with the introduction of another Jew's arrival in Adiabene, Eleazar. He urges Izates “to complete the rite [τὸ ἔργον]” of circumcision (43–45). Eleazar argues that in the Mosaic Torah (τὸν Μωυσέως νόμον) Izates was reading, circumcision is commanded, so it is hypocrisy to merely behave in (other) Jewish ways as if sufficient for himself (44). Here we have an example of promoting *a νόμος* that is not actually enjoined in *the νόμος* for non-Jews such as Izates, but it is presented as if it was. His provocation had the desired effect: Izates called for the physician in order to be circumcised and “complete what was commanded,” thereby accomplishing “the rite” (46). Not without interest for comparing this case to Paul's argument, Josephus called this act “faith(fulness) [to God] alone [μόνῳ πεπιστευκόσιν]” (48); that is, instead of taking the expedient, safe path recommended by his mother and Ananias of avoiding circumcision, he was faithful to that which God instructed per Eleazar, regardless of the risk.

At issue in Josephus's story was *the practice of Judaism* [a Jew's way of life] by a non-Jew/Judean *apart from becoming a Jew/Judean religio-ethnically* by *completing the rite of circumcision*. Eleazar (per Josephus, of course) said this custom of circumcision was enjoined in *the νόμος*; Ananias seems to assume the same, but offers a reason that Izates ought not to apply this to himself based upon

political expedience, given the context. Eleazar, however, argued that it would be disobedient to Torah for someone (although not a Jew) as interested in the worship of Israel's God and the cultural way of life of Jews/Judeans (i.e., Judaism), not to complete circumcision. We thus witness, via Josephus, that there were a variety of views among Jews of Paul's time with regard to how non-Jews who showed interest in fully practicing Jewish customs should understand the relevance of the rite of circumcision for themselves. And in this case, circumcision is understood to signify the choice for an adult male to "definitively/certainly [βεβαίως]" become "a Jew" (38).

The translation of νόμος in this phrase as *custom* (or *convention* or *norm*) is based both on the normal lexical¹⁹ as well as Paul's contextual usage of this phrase, including in some other cases when used alone but in close proximity, where it seems to connote the same rite of circumcision for religio-ethnic initiation. As will be discussed, Paul opposed a recently developed cultural custom that supposedly pertained to the non-Jews he addressed, yet the behavioral norms of Torah ("the Custom") were not given to non-Jews. There is no νόμος (custom, norm, law) in "the νόμος" (Torah, God's Guidance for Israel) that enjoins the rite of circumcision (or related rites) for non-Jews (non-Israelites, non-Abrahamic genealogical descendants, except for Ishmael as slave-son), by which they can become Israelites or Jews. That many supposed that it was enjoined in Scripture can be observed in the argument of Eleazar (and the implicit understanding of Izates and his mother as well as of Ananias) per Josephus, but one searches in vain in those same Scriptures, all the more the Pentateuch alone, to find non-Jews enjoined to complete circumcision, or that by doing so they became a Jew/Judean, as Izates is led by Eleazar to suppose (20.38–48). For some Jews and Jewish communities, circumcision may be becoming or already have become *a* or even *the* "customary rite" of religio-ethnic passage by which non-Jews could become Jews, but Izates, a non-Jew, would not have found anywhere in Torah (in manuscripts known to us) that it applied to himself.

To keep this distinction salient, and to defamiliarize so as not to perpetuate the habit of supposing that Paul is referring to behavioral norms rather than the rites involved in the religio-ethnic transformation process, we could use νόμος (*nomos*) and keep our options open, but, since many will gloss νόμος as "law," I think it is better to use a word like "custom," "convention," or "norm," or some similar word other than "law." In addition, avoiding the use of "law" is useful to avoid the familiar habit of supposing that circumcision for non-Jews in order to become Jews is legislated by Torah, and thus that Paul is in some way opposing

¹⁹ LSJ, νόμος, 1180.

Torah when he opposes circumcision in the case of its role in proselyte conversion. Paul argues from the fact that this is not enjoined in Torah, although the received views do not appear to have even considered that Paul might be arguing for obedience to, rather than dismissal of that which is enjoined in Torah.

In summary, Paul uses the synecdoche *circumcision* just as he also uses the phrase *ἔργα νόμου*, *rites of a custom [completed by circumcision]*, to signify the rites of passage involved in the religio-ethnic transformation by which non-Jews can become Jews, a norm that was not present in the Tanakh but had become broadly accepted and promoted in the Diaspora communities of Paul's time, for a variety of reasons, some of which are discussed in the excursus below. Paul was not discussing or opposing the observance of Torah in principle, or observing Torah for the (wrong) reasons (such as works-righteousness or ethnocentric nationalistic boundary marking behavior), as variously argued in the traditional and New Perspective on Paul readings.

2.1. *Excursus on Circumcision in Torah and Tanakh*

Circumcision meant and means different things to different people and groups, and often enough is understood to signify several different things to the same people and groups, depending upon the context.²⁰ Torah enjoined that Israelite males should be cut off from the people if not circumcised on their eighth day of life (Gen 17:9–12, 14),²¹ whether the practice was always followed, or the punishment enacted.²² Thus circumcision functioned as an ethnic marker of

²⁰ There are many discussions of the topic of circumcision, including several recent ones that focus on the implications for interpreting Paul, although not necessarily to similar conclusions; e.g., Nina Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (WUNT 2.295; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Asha K. Moorthy, "A Seal of Faith: Rereading Paul on Circumcision, Torah, and the Gentiles" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 2014).

²¹ Cf. Num 15:30–31, for the broader pronouncement that would have included circumcision; see also Jub. 2:27; 15:26–29; 33–34; David A. Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (Ancient Israel and Its Literature 3; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 70–75; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, esp. for highlighting the element of the rite being performed on the eighth day.

²² There are many indications that neither were the case, e.g., why would circumcision be enjoined in Josh 5:1–8 for those who were to enter the land after the period of wandering if it had been practiced all along? Just when circumcision became such the central identifier of Israelite/Judean/Jewish identification that it was by the time of Paul is unclear. There are many complicating issues that the rabbis have navigated, which were presumably matters of disagreement all through the centuries. For example, even a seemingly simple issue such as determining when the child is eight days old depends on debatable decisions about when

Israelite status for males born to Israelites. But completing circumcision was not similarly enjoined as a religio-ethnic marker by which foreskinned non-Israelites became Israelites.²³

Genealogical descent was required to be an Israelite,²⁴ although there are exceptions to rules, for example Ruth, for whom the topic of circumcision does not arise since she is a woman. The question of her ethnic identification as an Israelite remains unclear.²⁵ Abraham was also commanded to circumcise his slaves as members of his extended household, although they did not thereby become his descendants (Gen 17:12–13; 23–27; Ishmael is a different case, yet still not the line of the covenant descendants of Isaac; Gen 17:19–21); these slaves were extensions of the master's person.²⁶ The Mosaic covenant also commanded the circumcision of male slaves of Israelites if they are to eat the paschal offering, but they did not thereby become Israelites (Exod 12:44); they also remained distinguishably different from the hired laborer, who could be circumcised but still would not be entitled to eat the paschal sacrifice (v. 45).²⁷

The male *ger* (resident alien living among Israelites and bound by their laws) who wanted to join the Passover meal was also required to be circumcised, but he remained identifiably a *ger*, not an Israelite (Exod 12:43–49; Lev 17:8, 10,

the day begins and ends, and more complicated issues involve deciding how to proceed when that day falls on a Sabbath or other holy days, and related to the health of the child on that day.

²³ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (HCS 31; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 119–125; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 43 (cf. 63).

²⁴ Cohen, *Beginnings*, 119–125, 130–132, 341–343.

²⁵ Also, other people might be blessed or used by Israel's God, even offer acceptable sacrifices. See Volker Haarmann, *JHWH-Verehrer der Völker: Die Hinwendung von Nichtisraeliten zum Gott Israels in alttestamentlichen Überlieferungen* (Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 91; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich [TVZ], 2008).

²⁶ Bernat, *Sign*, 14–20, 45–46, 75–76, 125.

²⁷ Bernat, *Sign*, 43–44, 125; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 57–60. The commandment is often understood to mean that these slaves had to become circumcised, but the wording leaves open whether they had to do so apart from partaking of the meal, such as would be natural for a house slave, but perhaps not apply to some slaves who would not necessarily be present in the home for the meal.

13, 15; 20:2; 22:18).²⁸ The *ger*, and thus the circumcision of the *ger*, is not discussed in the Abraham accounts in Genesis, or by Paul in the *ἔργα νόμου* texts.

Israelite women were not circumcised, or the woman slave or *ger*; they were identified apparently by the ethnic status of the father or husband.²⁹

There are stories about the circumcision of non-Israelites, but they do not thereby become Israelites. Jacob's sons trick the Shechemites into being circumcised as a part of their plot to avenge the wrong done their sister, but the ethnic distinction remained salient (Gen 34).

Later, under the Hasmoneans, some Judeans/Jews were forcibly circumcised and made to practice Jewish norms, and certain neighboring peoples were too, but it was far from clear that they had become Judeans/Jews, or instead half-Jews (used as a challenge to Herod's authenticity), or were simply subject peoples, perhaps on the model of acquired slaves.³⁰ Such circumcisions did not reflect the completion of religio-ethnic rites of passage in the same way as did either the practice for eight day old males born to Israelites/Jews, or later of proselytes; these were acts forced upon subject people groups.

Moreover, and not without relevance for the distinction between circumcision and *ἔργα νόμου* in Paul's argument to which I am trying to call attention, Egyptian priests and Arab descendants of Ishmael and others practiced circumcision during the writing of the Torah and Tanakh, but they were not in any way understood to be Israelites or Judeans/Jews (Herodotus, *Hist.* 2.36–37, 104; Jer 9:24–25).³¹ Their circumcision would not have been confused with the ethnic identification rites of passage undertaken by Israelites and later

²⁸ Bernat, *Sign*, 21–22, 43–48, 125; Cohen, *Beginnings*, 119–125; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 60–63. The *ger* is discussed in Exod 12:19, 48–49; Lev 16:29; 17:8, 10–15; 18:26; 19:10, 33–34; 20:2; 22:18; 23:22; 24:16, 22; 25:35, 47; Num 9:14; 15:14–16, 26, 29–30; 19:10; 35:15.

²⁹ Bernat, *Sign*, 22, 33–34, 48–50, 125; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

³⁰ 1 Macc 2:46; Josephus, *Ant.* 12.278 (of foreskinned Jews); 13.257–258 (of Idumeans by Hyrcanus), 318–319 (Itureans by Aristobulus); Cohen, *Beginnings*, 110–119. On Herod's contested identity, see Cohen, *Beginnings*, 15–24; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 87–110.

³¹ Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85.4 (1996): 473–476; Cohen, *Beginnings*, 44–46; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 52–57. The practice is attested among many aboriginal peoples from all over the world, many of whom would not likely be aware of any of these parallel cases, and may predate that of Abraham and the Israelites; see David L. Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 53–71.

Judeans/Jews, which were commanded in Torah, which is not the authority to which they looked; similarly, their circumcision would not have been confused with the dynamic of *ἔργα νόμου* that Paul opposed.

In short, one could say that circumcision did not function as an ethnic boundary marker per se, that is, other people were circumcised too, and the Israelite slave and stranger among them were circumcised and yet not Israelites. At the same time, it was a necessary one for those who were ethnically identified as Israelites; a foreskinned male descendent of Abraham was to be cut off from the people: in that sense circumcision was an ethnic boundary marker for Israelites/Judeans/Jews, and the circumcision of those closely affiliated with them was also a salient indicator of the role circumcision played in Israelite/Judean/Jewish identity.³² The specificity of circumcision of eight-day-old boys (as the ideal) may have particularly distinguished Jews from other peoples who practiced circumcision.³³

The role of circumcision as a religio-ethnic marker became highlighted in certain Second Temple Jewish groups of the Greek and Roman worlds, and later yet in rabbinic Judaism, when circumcision was understood to distinguish Jewish identification, although there remained a variety of views about converts, not least to what degree they remained identifiably distinguishable from Jews by genealogical descent.³⁴

³² Bernat, *Sign*, 48 (also 132), concludes that the fact that slaves and *ger* were circumcised means that “circumcision in P is not a symbol of Israelite ethnicity,” but it does seem to be an ethnic symbol if Israelites lose their standing in the covenant when not circumcised; however, it is not the case that everyone who is circumcised is an Israelite ethnically.

³³ The argument of Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, who discusses the anomalous case of Paul circumcising Timothy in Acts 16 (120–123). Timothy had a Jewish mother but not father and was not circumcised as an infant, so it is unclear whether he had been born a Jew or not, and thus whether he should be circumcised to correct an oversight in his case, which was apparently a matter of debate between Jewish communities of the time.

³⁴ Esth 8:17 LXX; Jdt 14:10; Josephus, *Ant.* 20.17–96 for Izates, suggests circumcision of non-Jew converts, and this became the norm in later rabbinic tradition (Sipre Num. 108); see discussion above. There are more ambiguous cases in Josephus too, see Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), 279–361; Nanos, “Paul’s Non-Jews Do Not Become Jews.” That Antiochus Epiphanes could have professed that he would become circumcised to become a Jew by the author of 2 Macc 9:17 bears witness that by the second century BCE the undertaking of this religio-ethnic transformation was recognized as possible in some circles, and for various, including questionable reasons. Just after Paul’s time, Josephus relates that the Roman commander Metilius sought to save his life during the Revolt by promising to “judaize” to the degree of becoming circumcised (*War* 2.454). Philo writes

In the few cases where *ioudaizien* appears, which are during the Greek period, the usage is ambiguous enough to lead to debates about whether this indicated that a non-Jew *acted like* a Jew (transformed religio-behavior, what we could call converting to Judaism in the sense of practicing Jewish cultural norms) or *became* a Jew (transformed religio-ethnic identification, what we could call converting in the sense of becoming a member of the Jewish people, at least distinguished from other people who are not Jews and have not completed the

about welcoming proselytes (Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993], 295–296), but he does not mention that they undertook circumcision specifically, although spiritual circumcision is implied in *QE* 2.2. Philo also does not mention Abraham's circumcision when discussing *Gen* 17 (*Abr.* 81–84), even though he identifies Abraham in terms of being the model for the proselyte convert, since he was the first to turn from idolatry to the Lord God (*Virtues* 212–219; *Dreams* 1.161); see Maren R. Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on *Gen* 17: 1–14," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10.2 (2003): 89–123. At the same time, Philo does foreground the significance of physical circumcision, and advocates for respect toward proselytes in ways that suggest the kinds of tensions over identity that I propose were at work in Galatia, even though he does not explicitly link the undertaking of circumcision to proselytes (*Spec. Laws* 1.2–11, 51–53; *Rewards* 152; *QE* 2.2). Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 235–239, however, concludes from Philo's logic in *QG* 3.50, 62, that Philo understood proselytes to be circumcised (266–267). Donaldson also observes that Philo's preferred term for commenting on passages in *LXX* that use proselyte is to use instead *ἐπηλύτων* (for Donaldson's overall and useful discussion of Philo's views, 217–278, and of *QE* 2.2 in particular, where he argues, convincingly, that Philo's logic suggests the assumption that these proselytes are circumcised in the flesh, 268–272).

That Greco-Romans regarded circumcision to be a marker of Jewish identification can be seen in comments (some negative, some simply observations about those from Judea) by Horace, *Sat.* 1.9.68–74; Petronius, *Sat.* 68.8; 102.14; Martial, *Epig.* 7.30, 44, 55, 82; 11.94; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96, 99; Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.37; Celcus, *De Medicina*, 7.25.1; Suetonius, *Dom.* 12.2; Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.1–2; see Cohen, *Beginnings*, 39–49, among others who trace these developments. But circumcision of non-Jews in Jewish terms was still controversial, and not all groups recognized this transformation for making non-Jews into Jews; see Thiessen, *Contested Conversion*. At the same time, Paul's rhetoric suggests that Jewish groups in Galatia and Rome with whom Paul's assemblies operated or had contact did promote the model of proselytes, however named. For the complexity of the rabbinic period, including the conversion ritual, see Cohen, *Beginnings*, 198–238 (esp. helpful discussion of b. Yevamot 47a–b and tractate *Gerim* 1:1), 308–340; Gary G. Porton, *The Stranger within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (CSHJ; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

rites to suppose that they are Jews). Not without significance, completing the act of circumcision in these stories of *judaizing* represented a distinguishably different action from merely adopting other Jewish behavior; circumcision functions as the marker of going all the way.

The way that circumcision is coupled with *ioudaizien* in these stories has led me to understand them to be relating early cases where non-Jews became in some way recognized as transforming into Jews, what became known as proselyte converts, rather than simply to indicate non-Jews who behaved in some ways like Jews.³⁵ They were being distinguished from non-Jews who were in some ways behaving Jewishly, what might be described as behaving Jewish-ish culturally rather than becoming Jewish religio-ethnically. Shaye Cohen argues that this same language instead indicates that these are non-Jews merely acted Jewishly even to the point of undertaking circumcision, but that this did not indicate that they had become Jews. The ambiguity may indicate that circumcising non-Jews as part of a religio-ethnic transformation process was a relatively new custom in development. Some people and groups understood this to indicate only adopting cultural behavior to varying degrees while others understood it to indicate transformation of ethnic identification, not unlike the current debates about this distinction.

The ambiguity around which this debate swirls among scholars today plays to the point I wish to make about the issues Paul confronted: Paul tried to expose that the undertaking of circumcision and any other rites by which it was being argued that non-Jews need to become transformed into Jews ethnically to make the claim of Abrahamic sonship they were making based upon the gospel, represented an innovative custom, an *ἔργα νόμου* rather than a commandment. He thereby sought to delegitimize undertaking these rites or this rite for his addressees as a proper, self-evident interpretation of Torah as it applies to themselves, since they were non-Jews rather than Jews from birth. It was only the

³⁵ Esth 8:17 LXX; Jdt 14:10; Josephus, *War* 2.454; Mark D. Nanos, “What Was at Stake in Peter’s ‘Eating with Gentiles’ at Antioch?” in *The Galatians Debate: Contemporary Issues in Rhetorical and Historical Interpretation*, ed. Mark D. Nanos (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 303–312 (282–318), explains my view in more detail, and interacts with the other major viewpoints at that time, such as by Shaye Cohen, *Beginnings*, and James Dunn, and remains the case, contra the later argument by Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 38 (2007): 457–512. Cf. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 30–33 on Esth 8:16–17 LXX; Philip F. Esler, “Making and Breaking an Agreement Mediterranean Style: A New Reading of Galatians 2:1–14,” in *The Galatians Debate*, 278 (261–281).

latter who were enjoined to be circumcised (ideally) when infants as a rite of passage related to identification as Jews.

3. Qualifying Circumcision in the Context of Paul's Usage of *ἔργα νόμου*

Paul seldom uses the phrase *ἔργα νόμου*, and when he does so it is to argue that faithfulness for non-Jews does not consist of the same responsibility to Torah's commandment regarding circumcision that applies to Jews. In all but one case he also uses the phrase *ἔργα νόμου* in a negative binary contrast to the role of *πίστις* for the non-Jews he addresses (Gal 3:2–5, 10, 12; Rom 3:20, 28; also relevant: Rom 2:15; 3:27; 4:9–12).

In these cases, Paul argues against non-Jews in Christ undertaking *ἔργα νόμου* because in their case doing so would signal that they, having remained non-Jews, now sought uncontested status as sons of Abraham on prevailing local, present age customary terms (hence, “rites of a custom” or “customary rites”), which involved completing proselyte conversion. That course of initiation—according to Paul's reasoning after his revelation—involved the denial of the gospel's claim that they already had that status as non-Jews, as members from the other nations *also* (hence, the contrast to *πίστις* is in terms of “faithful obedience” to the gospel “heard”; see Gal 3:1–6).

Paul uses the phrase *ἔργα νόμου* positively several times in one argument to refer to himself and Peter as Jews (Gal 2:15–17). They experienced the initiation rites associated with circumcision as infant sons of Jews (which was a choice made by their parents to be faithful to Torah; thus not a choice they made themselves, except for their own sons, if they had any): Paul and Peter were “Jews from birth.” Rather than a binary contrast, Paul appeals to a complimentary relationship in their case; they have the benefit of *ἔργα νόμου* (circumcision rites, a seal of their identity as sons of Abraham) and yet also have *πίστις* in the gospel claims for Jesus as Messiah.³⁶ Jews already had the status of Abrahamic sonship, so they did not face that problematic consideration; their experience of circumcision, if raised by observant parents, was enjoined in Torah for those identified as Israelites/Jews,

³⁶ That Paul would argue based on the complementary nature of their experience of *ἔργα νόμου* and *πίστις* as Jews is so universally incomprehensible that translators and commentators continue to render *ἐὰν μὴ* in v. 16 as “but,” even when noting that this refers to “except”; that is, Paul is referring to their experience as Jews who express trust in Christ although circumcised in contrast to the non-Jews in Christ being discussed, who have not experienced circumcision because they have not undertaken *ἔργα νόμου*.

and completed independent of their own initiative.³⁷ The argumentative point is that since they have made the same choice to trust the gospel's truth claim about Jesus as Messiah that the non-Jews in their Jewish subgroup assemblies have made, it is illogical—even harmful—to teach or behave so as to suggest that these non-Jews are not equal members of the righteous ones with themselves as Jews, and thus “compel” these non-Jews to suppose that they must become Jews to gain uncontested equal status in these assemblies.³⁸

Paul's arguments, in context, involve insisting that these non-Jews already in Christ resist the social pressure to gain normative, uncontested status as sons of Abraham (already enjoyed by Jews/Israelites through genealogical descent and confirmed by circumcision of infant sons) by way of the prevailing custom of completing proselyte conversion. Their resistance would bear witness to the gospel's chronometrical claim, that is, that the age to come had dawned, and that they were already, miraculously, by way of the spirit, also sons of Abraham from the nations rather than from Israel. This claim would be made manifest by the way that they mixed in their Jewish subgroup assemblies, wherein those from the nations (foreskinned) joined alongside of Israelites (circumcised) to worship the One God and await God's restoration of all humankind. Proselyte conversion (completed by circumcision) would compromise the claim of the gospel that this awaited time had begun. The differences between Jew and non-Jew must remain for the demonstration of age-to-come shalom to be highlighted by their Shema-based commitment to non-discrimination as they assembled

³⁷ The infant's *circumcision* is a feature of ἔργα νόμου in the traditional and NPP views (and ought to be, the Antioch Incident revolves around non-Jews in Christ resisting “those from circumcision”)—even if not confined to the rites of initiation as I propose ἔργα νόμου should be—but the circumcision of Jews as infants undermines their premise that Paul was opposing prideful human achievement, whether categorized in traditional terms as “works-righteousness” or “legalism,” or in NPP terms as “ethnocentric nationalism”; the child never chose to become circumcised, and thus to perform ἔργα νόμου versus πίστις.

³⁸ My interpretation of the Antioch Incident along these lines has been argued in several essays; the most recent are “How Could Paul Accuse Peter of ‘Living *Ethné*-ishly’ in Antioch (Gal 2:11–21) If Peter Was Eating according to Jewish Dietary Norms?” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 6, no. 2 (2016): 199–223; and “Reading the Antioch Incident (Gal 2:11–21) as a Subversive Banquet Narrative,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters* 7, no. 1–2 (2017): 26–52. Both will be updated for inclusion in my *Reading Galatians within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 3* (Eugene: Cascade Books, forthcoming).

together within the still present evil age (characterized, among other things, by social discrimination based on hierarchical social rank).³⁹

To undermine the normative appeal of proselyte conversion as *rites* (ἔργα) of initiation for non-Jews enjoined in Torah, Paul plays off the fact that this represented an innovative *custom* (νόμος) developed during the Greek and Roman periods. Paul apparently “invented” the phrase ἔργα νόμου to make this argument.⁴⁰ The phrase corresponds to his synecdochal use of *circumcision*, because it was the

³⁹ Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 179–201; idem, “Paul and the Jewish Tradition: The Ideology of the Shema,” in *Celebrating Paul: Festschrift in Honor of Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, O.P., and Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.*, ed. Peter Spitaler (Washington D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2012), 62–80; revised in my *Reading Paul within Judaism*, 108–126.

⁴⁰ Of course, I do not know if anyone before Paul used the phrase, but there is no evidence of it, especially in the way that Paul used it. Some argue that the Hebrew phrase, *miqsat ma'ase ha-torah* (“some works of the Torah”) in the Qumran letter, 4QMMT C 27, represents a parallel that precedes Paul's usage, and should inform how to best interpret Paul's usage. The likelihood that Paul (or anyone else outside of the specific parties involved in the dispute) read that particular letter is low, but that is not the primary problem with this proposition. This phrase is used very differently in 4QMMT to address a conflict between Jews regarding rival interpretations of halakha for defining the behavior of Jews, not of non-Jews, and does not address circumcision or rites associated with initiation of non-Jews, or even how non-Jews should behave. Moreover, the matters addressed concern priestly administration of Temple cult. Paul, in contrast, is specifically dealing with the question of circumcising adult male non-Jews (and related initiation rites), not about priestly duties or related to Temple cult. Also, the phrase was not used in contrast with πίστις, unlike Paul's cases. This distinction is relevant, because the issue was not about whether what was faithful for a non-Jew was the same as what was faithful for a Jew with respect to the matters at dispute, and thus the question of πίστις in connection with ἔργα νόμου for non-Jews does not arise.

The contextual if not also the semantic differences disqualify much of what has been made of this ostensible parallel, because, well, it is *not* a parallel usage even if a similar phrasing of words (the article in the Hebrew phrase but not in Paul's Greek phrase should not be ignored, but is easily overlooked because the familiar translations of Paul's usage add the article). The supposed similarities are not that similar and depend upon defining Paul's usage in the prevailing ways that I am contesting, which exposes the circularity upon which the usual positive comparisons depend (attributing the traditional construction of Paul's usage to the concerns of the earlier Qumran case); cf. the interesting interaction with Dunn by Martin G. Abegg, Jr., “4QMMT C 27, 31 and ‘Works Righteousness,’” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 6.2 (1999): 139–147; and James D. G. Dunn, “4QMMT and Galatians,” *NTS* 43 (1997): 143–157.

rite (ἔργον) most representative of the rites being promoted to ensure the change of religio-ethnic status at issue for non-Jews. At the same time, circumcision also functioned for Paul as a synecdoche for the ethnic standing of Jews (Israel), but in that case the rite was enjoined in Torah, and his own circumcised identification was a point of pride for himself and other Christ-following Jews (Phil 3:4–6;⁴¹ Gal 2:15–17). In the case of non-Jews, however, undertaking circumcision signaled what would come to be known as proselyte conversion, which was not enjoined in Torah.

Therefore, it was not circumcision per se but the religio-ethnic initiation rites of passage for non-Jews this rite signaled that he so vehemently opposed in the case of these particular non-Jews, because they already had, through Christ, what completing those rites offered. For them, therefore, undertaking these ἔργα νόμου, completed by *circumcision*, would undermine the gospel claim that they had become sons of Abraham in Christ already. I suspect the familiar assumption that Paul considered the role of Torah inferior and completed and thus *passé* at best, if not also the binary opposite choice to believing in Jesus Christ, has led to lack of consideration that Paul's arguments in Galatians (and Romans, as well as in other letters) are actually based on appeals to Torah and Tanakh as the ultimate authority for the positions he advocates, in this case against the undertaking of circumcision by non-Jews already in Christ.

Paul opposed Christ-following non-Jews undertaking this rite or these rites of initiation to proselyte standing for at least three reasons. The initial reason came from his revelation (Gal 1:10–17). Although Paul's description is short on details, his change of view about Jesus as Messiah was connected to his change of view about the nations. This had nothing to do with converting from as in leaving Judaism (i.e., a Jewish way of life developed by Jews for Jews), as usually conceptualized, but with the conviction that how he should live as a Jew now, and how the Jewish community should live now, had changed in view of the arrival of the awaited age to come of reconciliation of the nations through Jesus.⁴²

⁴¹ I explain why Paul is neither comparing circumcision to mutilation nor spiritualizing it in Phil 3:2–4, in “Paul’s Polemic in Philippians 3 as Jewish-Subgroup Vilification of Local Non-Jewish Cultic and Philosophical Alternatives,” *Journal for the Study of Paul and his Letters* 3, no. 1 (2013): 47–92; updated in my *Reading Corinthians and Philippians within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos, Vol. 4* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 142–191.

⁴² I have examined this in more detail in “Paul and Judaism: Why Not Paul’s Judaism?,” in *Paul Unbound: Other Perspectives on the Apostle*, ed. Mark Douglas Given (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010), 141–150 (117–160); updated in *Reading Paul within Judaism*, 29–40 (3–59).

Apparently, he became convinced that the way he should practice Judaism (a Jewish way of life) was not to be quite the same as he had practiced Judaism formerly, especially with respect to Israel's role as heralds of God's oracles to the nations (Rom 3:1–2). He concluded, according to the gospel's chronometrical claim, that is, that the awaited end of the ages had begun, thus he should no longer advocate circumcision (proselyte conversion) of non-Jews (Gal 5:11). Instead, they were to be recognized, in Messiah, as fellow participants in the people of God (2:15–17, *passim*). This was a theology of the Shema, as noted above.

As Paul made that case in the following years, it appears that he began to develop a second argument against the custom of proselyte conversion, which he had formerly advocated (5:11); namely, that this custom was not enjoined in Torah, or even present in written Scripture. He used the language of circumcision and *ἔργα νόμου* to make this case. The potentially new emphasis, if not entirely new idea that this was *contra* Torah, could suggest Paul had not yet considered this particular angle when he was in Galatia—although maybe, when present, he just did not emphasize it as much as he felt would be useful to do now in the letter he wrote in response to developments after he left. His rhetorical approach implies that he did not expect his non-Jew target addressees to be as concerned as they should be that, for themselves, circumcision was not enjoined in Torah, or to be as aware of the concomitant relationship to guard Torah entirely that this created for those who completed the rites, since he exploited this dynamic to undermine trust in those who promoted these rites of passage (esp. Gal 5:2–12; 6:12–13).⁴³ In other words, at some point Paul discovered that Torah did not enjoin proselyte circumcision of non-Jews in order to make them Jews, members of Israel, which may have been some years later than his revelatory understanding of the chronometrical gospel proposition that non-Jews turning to God in Messiah Jesus must remain non-Jews. Whatever the case may have been, in Galatians we witness Paul offering a second way to make the case against non-Jews in Christ who apparently feel compelled to consider undertaking these initiation rites.

Paul developed yet a third approach to the matter in the allegory in Gal 4:21—5:1, to which we will return again below. Here he argued that the rites of proselyte conversion they were considering to undertake fell under the model of circumcision for the inclusion for “slave” sons of Abraham rather than “free” sons. In other words, there is a case in Torah where circumcision is enjoined for adult male non-Jews, but it is not the model for becoming sons like Isaac, which the gospel claims they have become through the spirit they already received when they

⁴³ Argued differently, but compatible with this point, see Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 91–95.

turned to God through Jesus. Paul’s ironic rebuke turns on the implicit rhetorical question: Did you want to choose to become circumcised like slave sons of Abraham through Hagar when you have experienced being born as adult sons miraculously, like the miraculous birth of the free son Isaac through Sarah, which is according to the blessing that in Abraham’s seed all the nations would be blessed also? That claim is proven instead by them having already experienced God’s spirit apart from becoming proselytes (rites of passage completed by circumcision in order to be qualified to receive the spirit, but modeled on the way to initiate non-Jew slaves).

To put this in broader terms, when Paul’s rhetoric is approached from the hypothesis that he practiced and promoted a Torah-based Judaism, and that this was what he expected his audiences to assume to understand his arguments, his comments on circumcision and *ἔργα νόμου* read very differently, in a way that some of us now refer to as reading Paul within Judaism, even if we may nevertheless still do so to different conclusions.

4. Survey of Paul’s use of *ἔργα νόμου* in Romans and Galatians

The phrase *ἔργα νόμου*, which is contrasted with *πίστις*, only arises in Galatians and Romans where Paul discusses whether it is legitimate (justified) for non-Jews in Christ to conclude that they are those promised to Abraham from the other nations apart from circumcision. The phrase appears six times in Galatians (2:16, 3 times; 3:2, 5, 10), and twice in Romans (3:20, 28).

Romans 3:28 is exemplary: “For we consider a man is legitimated [justified] by faithfulness without *ἔργων νόμου* [*λογιζόμεθα γὰρ δικαιούσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου*].”⁴⁴ The argument in the surrounding verses concerns Jews (3:27—4:25), who are signified as “the circumcision,” while non-Jews are signified as “the foreskinned.” Paul explains how the latter, by faithfulness to the gospel apart from becoming members of Israel by undertaking circumcision, represent those promised to Abraham *also* (the former are self-evidently understood to be so). We have already discussed how Paul theologized from the Shema as part of his argument here.

In both letters *ἔργα νόμου* signifies the rite of circumcision associated with the claim to Abraham as father and to being counted among the righteous ones, which in the case of non-Jews would likely include other rites for completing the

⁴⁴ I use *man* here because the phrase has to do with circumcision; otherwise, I am in agreement with gender-neutral choices when appropriate to the context. NRSV translates, “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

ethnic transformation by which they become in some way what is referred to as proselytes by the rabbis. Most of Paul's arguments regarding *ἔργα νόμου* are designed to uphold the claim that the non-Jews in Christ are already the legitimate children promised from the other nations, and that they must remain such; but for Jews that is assumed. He instead argues from that settled premise to how their allegiance to Jesus as Messiah nevertheless attests that they now, although Jews, should view themselves on equal terms with these non-Jews (Gal 2:15–17). In Galatia, that means the non-Jews in Messiah must be confident and resist the temptation to become circumcised, and the Jews in Messiah must live so as to support that conviction, regardless of the social risk that runs. In Rome, that means these non-Jews must not become resentful toward any Jews who contest that claim, but instead be confident and generous toward the circumcised who do not share (yet) their gospel-based convictions about what is appropriate now.

4.1. *Romans*

The texts in Romans that weave together the elements of Abraham, circumcision, and use the phrase *ἔργα νόμου*, are concentrated in Rom 3:27–4:25. Paul argues that the non-Jews who trust (*πίστις*) Christ are those promised to Abraham in Gen 17:1–14. The covenant with Abraham includes the promise that “You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (v. 4 NRSV, also 5–6), but also distinguishes his offspring who will inherit the land, who are to circumcise their eight-day-old sons or be cut off from the people (v. 14). Paul also appeals to Gen 15:6 to define Abraham's *πίστις* while still foreskinned to argue that this occurred without *ἔργα νόμου*: “And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (NRSV).

The current translations and most interpretations Rom 3:27–4:25 proceed from the premise that Paul is problematizing the “work” of doing the Torah—although they may emphasize different elements of Torah, such as certain rituals, or that the problem is more the motives for observing a certain given commandment or commandments. I suggest we read this passage very differently. At issue is not observing Torah, but whether one is circumcised or foreskinned. Paul does not refer to Torah-based norms except regarding the matter of circumcision, and then only with respect to non-Jews in Christ, to whom circumcision does not apply in Torah.

Paul explains why these non-Jews should be confident that they are those promised to Abraham from many nations by their “faithfulness” without *ἔργα νόμου* (“rites of a custom [of proselyte conversion].”) One reason, already discussed, is based on the Shema Israel. His argument presupposes that God is the God of Jews, the circumcision, to argue that “our God” is *also* the “only” or “one”

God, and thus the God of those from the foreskinned from other nations who turn to worship our God as their God too, through faithfulness to the gospel (3:23–30). Another reason is that they are, like Abraham was when he trusted God, foreskinned, which they were when trusting God’s message to them (πίστις), and which they have remained.⁴⁵ This point is made throughout the passage, but see especially 4:1–3, 9–12. If we read 4:1 graphically, it depicts Abraham looking down to discover that he is foreskinned when he trusted God’s promise.⁴⁶ This demonstrates that the foreskinned Abraham (who was later circumcised) is the model for Christ-following non-Jews who have become his sons by πίστις apart from *circumcision*, which here functions as a synecdoche for ἔργα νόμου.⁴⁷

In 4:16–18, we can see that Paul is still arguing from the premise that the circumcised Jew has Abraham as father, but the question is whether these foreskinned non-Jews who trust the gospel do too: “in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants (i.e., ‘seed’),” not only the one circumcised according to Torah (the Jew)... “(for he is the father of all of us, as it is written, ‘I have made you the father of many nations’)” (16b–17b NRSV). I propose that νόμος is generally referring to the convention of circumcision throughout this argument, not to Torah. Moreover, ἐξ ἔργων, for example in v. 2,

⁴⁵ Pauline theologizing is reflected in the traditional habit of translating the Greek word for “foreskinned,” ἀκροβυστία, as “uncircumcised,” as the not-Jewish way of being that is privileged for Christ-followers. This approach empties the distinction of its original contextual salience, as Karin Neutel highlights in her paper too: foreskinnedness is not theologized as much as lack of circumcisedness is. That habit inhibits recognition of the dynamic, at least as it is being argued herein. See Karin B. Neutel, “Restoring Abraham’s Foreskin: The Significance of ἀκροβυστία for Paul’s Argument about Circumcision in Romans 4:9–12,” in this volume: *JMJS* 8 (2021): 53–75; also Nina Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (WUNT 2.295; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 108–110, 118–120, although I disagree with her conclusion that Paul is allegorizing circumcision in Rom 4 so that “circumcision is not a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11), but instead a sign and seal of the righteousness of faithfulness” (119). Although not focused on circumcision, Pamela Eisenbaum’s reading of Romans is useful for this discussion (“A Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman: Jesus, Gentiles, and Genealogy in Romans,” *JBL* 123, no. 4 [2004]: 671–702).

⁴⁶ I am grateful to an unnamed peer-reviewer for pointing out that Ambrosiaster, *Romans* on 4.1, states: “In saying *the flesh*, Paul meant circumcision,” as well as supportive observation that “nowhere in the Abraham Narrative is *basar/sarx* used for anything other than a reference to the penis”; cf. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 206 n. 34.

⁴⁷ In Rom 2:25–3:2, I understand Paul’s argument about circumcision of the heart to apply to those who are already circumcised in the flesh, i.e., Israel/Jews, not to the foreskinned Christ-followers he is addressing directly; see my “Paul’s Non-Jews Do Not Become Jews.”

is referring to the *rites* involving circumcision, not to the doing of Torah-based deeds, which would not apply to Abraham anyway, since he preceded the giving of Torah (the rabbis later argued that he already had Torah too, but Paul does not seem to engage that argument, so perhaps it was not yet made in his Pharisaic subgroup or expected to be made in his addressees' Roman Jewish circles). The case of David is raised because his declaration, although made by a circumcised Israelite, is broad enough to include anyone who recognizes the need for God's mercy, as do the foreskinned non-Jews to whom Paul writes—Jews have long known this to be the case, as exemplified by David (Ps 32:1–2), to which Paul appeals in 4:6–9.

4.2. *Galatians*

In Galatians 3 Paul similarly weaves together the topics of circumcision and Abrahamic family status with the theme of πίστις apart from undertaking to complete ἔργα νόμου. Paul is not confronting the observance of Torah but whether or not the non-circumcised addressees should now—after their trust in Christ through the gospel—also become circumcised in order to confidently consider themselves those from the nations promised to Abraham. The language in 3:1–5, which is followed by direct reference to Abraham's receipt of righteousness for trusting what God promised in v. 6 (citing Gen 15:6), delivers Paul's rebuke for considering ἔργα νόμου as if “you now can complete by flesh [what] you began by spirit?” (v. 3). Paul almost certainly refers to completing the rites of passage at issue by undertaking circumcision. Circumcision is highlighted if one reads ἔργα νόμου as I propose, as *rites of a custom* that, if completed, offers uncontested status as “sons of Abraham” (v. 7). For the Scripture, Paul next reveals, “foreseeing that God would justify [legitimate] the Gentiles [nations] by faith[fulness], declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, ‘All the Gentiles [nations] shall be blessed in you’” (vv. 8–9 NRSV with my glosses in brackets; Gen 13:3). The issue is not, as usually supposed, between two as of yet unmade choices between Christ and Torah, or about “being saved”; rather, the issue is whether to add circumcision to the choice already made to trust Christ; that is, according to Paul, an inappropriate additional choice for them to undertake.

In vv. 10–14 Paul continues the argument, but it is quite difficult to navigate, with many enigmatic statements and decisions that to date have been shaped by the certainty Paul is opposing the observance of Torah. We will return to this after discussing other texts in the letter wherein Paul is dealing with circumcision and the question of whether these non-Jews have the right to understand themselves as those promised to Abraham.

At the end of chapter 3, in vv. 25–29, Paul argues that both Jew and non-Jew are one in Christ by their shared πίστις, “but if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise” (29). The concern is still the same, to communicate their legitimate claim to be the recipients of the promise made to Abraham regarding the nations.⁴⁸ In 4:1–7 the argument continues, making this an unfortunate chapter break. Although we must forgo examination of the diatribal nature of Paul’s personal pronoun shifts, which the familiar translations tend to ignore, the conclusion focuses on this same central concern, which my bracketed comments draw out (and bring into conversation with Paul’s allegorical argument that follows; see that below): “Now because you [i.e., non-Jews in Christ] are sons, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts [i.e., as Jews in Christ], we [i.e., together in Christ as Jews and non-Jews] cry out, ἀββα! ὁ πατήρ!⁴⁹ Because you [i.e., as non-Jew in Christ] are no longer a slave [i.e., of other gods or of the need to become a proselyte on the slave model for Ishmael] but a son [i.e., of Abraham, like Isaac], but if a son then also an heir through God [i.e., by God’s miraculous agency, like Isaac, not by way of completing a custom designed for slaves/proselytes]” (vv. 6–7).

Following the allegory of 4:21–5:1, Paul writes in 5:2 that he will now state plainly its implications. The issue he addresses in 5:2–6 is only his opposition to circumcision—or better, why these non-Jews must not become circumcised because they are already in Christ, and thus for them to seek to gain what they have already is to deny that they have it. In vv. 7–12 the topic remains circumcision, but Paul’s focus is to undermine the intentions of those who are influencing them to consider undertaking the rite: in effect, Paul communicates, “they should not be trusted, certainly not more than me, for they serve their own interests, not yours, as I do” (a major point of 4:12–20, preceding the allegory). Paul makes the interesting claim that if he “still” promoted circumcision (i.e., like they do), he would not be suffering the persecution ([διώκω] better: contestation/prosecution) he is currently experiencing on their behalf, and he also

⁴⁸ That Paul is not here expressing that identification distinctions between Jews as circumcised or non-Jews as foreskinned do not matter, but rather that they should not create hierarchical superiority among Christ-followers, and for other rhetorical purposes, 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,” in this volume: *JMJS* 8 (2021): 30–52. Paul’s adamant objection to circumcision for the addressees who want to undertake the rite in Galatia (“you cannot”) does not square with the common assertion that he was indifferent (or, “you don’t have to”); if indifferent, he would argue that it was not necessary or important, etc., not that it was prohibited for them.

⁴⁹ “Father,” in their respective native tongues, whether Aramaic or Greek.

makes a sarcastic remark about these influencers in circumcision-based terms (vv. 11–12).⁵⁰ Although Abraham is not mentioned, Paul calls them to be steadfast in their hope of righteousness rather than to try to escape their present contested status by undertaking circumcision, and he begins the transition to the next part of the letter that calls them, in social rivalry terms, to serve each other rather than to seek their own gain because “faithfulness works through love” (v. 6). In other words, they ought to worry about upholding each other in their shared marginal state as foreskinned followers of Christ rather than to seek to gain uncontested status by becoming circumcised, or, alternatively, considering themselves to be but “pagan” guests, and thus still to understand themselves in the various ways that Paul proscribes as fleshly (foreskinnedly) rather than spiritual (righteous ones, representing the foreskinned peoples in Christ). That remains the message, as I read it, from here through 6:10.

The closing section of 6:11–18—which likely expresses Paul’s summary concerns by his own hand rather than that of the secretary—tersely restates Paul’s opposition to these non-Jews undertaking circumcision under the influence of whoever is promoting this rite for them. He repeats that the influencers should not be trusted, that their interests are self-serving rather than toward the addressees, unlike Paul’s. Paul accuses the influencers of not “guarding” νόμος because “they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh” (v. 13). This may signal, as Paul sees the matter anyway, that by putting their interests ahead of those of the addressees they fail to live according to Torah, which guides toward love. Their goal is to be able to report to whomever they answer that they have brought a problematic development (non-Jews seeking to claim more than guest status apart from undertaking to become proselytes) in certain subgroups into compliance with the larger community’s norms (and of those of the non-Jews to whom the Jewish communal leaders must report) more so than to serve the best interests of these non-Jews, as Paul sees the case from his chronometrical perspective;⁵¹ alternatively, Paul may be drawing from his argument that Torah does not prescribe a “custom” of circumcision for them,⁵² thus to advocate proselyte conversion provokes a curse instead of a blessing.

Having traced that Paul’s rhetoric throughout the letter revolves around the issue of Paul’s resistance to these non-Jews undertaking circumcision, and that

⁵⁰ See Mark D. Nanos and Heidi Wendt, “Galatians: An Epistolary Microbiography.” Forthcoming in *T&T Clark Handbook of the Historical Paul*, ed. Heidi Wendt and Ryan S. Schellenberg.

⁵¹ See my *Irony of Galatians*, 226–233, 270–283.

⁵² Drawing from Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 95–96.

this is directly related to whether they have a legitimate claim to understand themselves to be those promised to Abraham from the nations by faithfulness to the gospel apart from undertaking “rites of a custom” by which non-Jews can rightfully do so as proselytes, according to the influencers, we can now return to the allegory in 4:21—5:1.

4.2.1. *The Allegory of Gal 4:21—5:1*

In the allegory of Gal 4:21—5:1, Paul analogizes circumcision for these non-Jews (because they are Christ-followers who already have the spirit, so this may not be his opinion about other non-Jews undertaking these rites of passage), with choosing the model for slaves of Abraham’s household, like Ishmael, after they have already been incorporated like Isaac instead, as miraculously free-born sons by way of *πίστις* in the gospel proclaimed to them, and to Abraham on their behalf (3:6–9). This mirrors the argument all along against them undertaking circumcision to gain that which the gospel proclaims they have already, thus doing so would undermine the claim to be sons of Abraham through the promise of the gospel he received, to which they had declared loyalty (*πίστις*) (5:2–6).

Paul introduces the allegory with a rebuke delivered in ironic style: “Tell me, you who want to be under [a] νόμος, do you not hear *the νόμος?*” (v. 21). I suggest his message is: “Tell me, you who want to be under [a] custom [i.e., for becoming proselytes, which is completed by *circumcision*], do you not hear *the Torah* [i.e., The Custom given to Israel, which guides about—or better, does not guide about circumcision of non-Jews in the manner proposed by the influencers, all the more when the awaited age to come arrives]?” He then presents an allegory to demonstrate that it would be foolish for them to pursue the circumcision model that applied to Abraham’s slaves, since they are free-born sons. He does so by way of appealing to what Torah teaches rather than the custom that they are being persuaded by to suppose otherwise. I recognize that this is not how the allegory has been interpreted,⁵³ so I need to briefly explain why I make this claim; a more detailed treatment is forthcoming.⁵⁴

⁵³ E.g., Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 112, representatively begins his reading of the allegory from traditional assumption that Paul here claims Torah “warrants the *rejection* of lawkeeping.”

⁵⁴ I presented this reading of the allegory in several papers; e.g., “What Does ‘Present Jerusalem’ (Gal 4:25) in Paul’s Allegory Have to Do with the Jerusalem of Paul’s Time, or the Concerns of the Galatians?” at the Central States Society of Biblical Literature Meeting, St. Louis, 2004; and “Reading Paul’s Allegory (Gal 4:21—5:1) as Haftarah: A Jewish Liturgical Explanation for Paul’s Characterization of ‘Jerusalem Presently in Slavery with

The allegory begins by introducing two lines of descendants for Abraham through sons born to two women, Sarah and Hagar, the latter being Sarah's slave, by appealing to the well-known storyline in Gen 16–17 and 21. Paul refers to each woman representing a covenant, although he otherwise uses the allegory to highlight the sons of Abraham born to each. Traditionally, these covenants have been understood to be the old as in Mosaic and new as in Christ based (Christian) or even Abrahamic, and there are some other proposals, but all of them basically work from the idea that Paul is referring to Jews versus Christians, however named. This has naturally led to the conclusion (or been driven by the *a priori*) that Paul is arguing that the Jews are sons of Hagar and Law and no longer the sons of promise, superseded and replaced by the Christians as the sons of Sarah.

As I read this, the covenant with Sarah is the covenant of “promise,” the covenant that God provides for those faithful to the promises made (God working miracles); the covenant with Hagar is the covenant of “custom,” one by which a slave can have a slave son in Abraham's household (human innovation to achieve the promised outcome).⁵⁵ God makes different covenantal agreements in each case, one for free born and one for slave born; both are blessings, but one is certainly more prized than the other.⁵⁶ The covenant with Abraham and Sarah includes all Jews (faithful to that covenant), Christ-believers or not: they descend through Sarah by way of Isaac (not just “like Isaac,” but *through* Isaac), who was born miraculously to a barren woman by the spirit of God according to promise. That Jews are sons in Paul's argument is implied in the premise from which Paul argues for the inclusion of these non-Jews also, because of their miraculous birth

Her Children,” at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, San Antonio, TX, 2016. I am in the process of revising this research for publication.

⁵⁵There is not space to examine many complicated elements in the allegory, including how Paul plays on the word Hagar, and many manuscript variants with very different grammatical implications, esp. for v. 25, where Mt. Sinai is connected to Hagar and present Jerusalem and is understood in the received view to indicate that Paul is devaluing Mosaic Torah as enslaving (or Jews who observe Torah as children of Hagar), whereas I see the link is with exilic suffering. It would be highly illogical for an allegory Paul introduces to demonstrate the correct way to hear (interpret) Torah to then dismiss Torah as enslaving by definition, or obsolete.

⁵⁶The indifferent and unjust attitude shown toward Hagar and her descendants in Paul's reading and in the Torah stories to which he appeals, and to slaves more generally, as well as the inequality it involves toward both (all) women and their roles, all of which have had harmful impacts on “others,” and still do, should also be considered in a fuller treatment of the allegory.

apart from being members of Abraham's genealogical descendants (thus, unlike Jews) through the spirit by way of the gospel. These non-Jews are thus born "like Isaac," but not born sons of Isaac genealogically, which applies only to Jews. At the same time, these non-Jews are "in Messiah," Abraham's genealogical seed, so this creates ambiguity, to say the least, which may account in part for Paul's appeal to the metaphor of adoption.⁵⁷ In this argument, Isaac is the model for free-born sons of Abraham who will inherit the promises made to him, whether they are from Israel or from the nations through his descendant Jesus, according to what he (and Sarah) was (were) promised.

Paul analogizes an interpretive tradition prescribing that adult male non-Jews undertake circumcision to gain Jewish/Israelite status (*ἔργα νόμου*/proselyte conversion) with the covenant model articulated in the Torah for slave born sons. The innovative *νόμος* of circumcising non-Jews to make them Jews is based on the model for incorporating slaves of Abraham's household, and thus for slaves of Israelites, and, in Paul's time, slaves of Jews. Paul thereby aligns Christ-following non-Jews with Jews as sons of Sarah, and proselytes with sons of Hagar. Thus, the slave son model is not a legitimate ethnic transformation rite for non-Jews in Christ; Jews, however, are circumcised as infants according to the Torah, whether Christ-followers or not.

One wonders, however, about a natural question that would still arise: Since Isaac was circumcised, and Torah teaches the need for circumcision to be declared sons of Abraham, and Abraham was circumcised as an adult, do not we non-Jews now in Christ need to be circumcised, like Isaac was, albeit as an infant, or at least like Abraham was as an adult? Paul does not address these questions directly.⁵⁸ He appears to reason that, in their case, since they are unlike Isaac, not newborns who can be circumcised according to what Torah prescribes for Isaac and his descendants on the eighth day, but adults, they cannot be circumcised except on the slave model.⁵⁹ The topic of the *ger* does not arise directly (see excursus).

⁵⁷ See Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*.

⁵⁸ It is also not the concern of the author of Gen 17 or Jub. 15:12–14; see Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, 77–84; Moorthy, "A Seal of Faith," poses the question slightly differently, but answers that the Galatians could be circumcised as long as it was a "sign or seal of the righteousness of faith" and not "for justification and spiritual perfection," among other similar mistaken theological reasons for doing so that logically competed with solely "looking to Christ" (241) for righteousness.

⁵⁹ Paul also does not indicate the distinction between the specific case of Ishmael, which occurred at puberty, representing an Arab custom, and the case of adult household slaves of Israelites/Jews, although, presumably, Paul was addressing adult males in Galatians.

In a fuller treatment of this allegory I examine the very interesting intertextual case Paul makes by way of citing the prophet Isaiah in 54:1, which resembles the haftarah liturgical tradition linking the reading of the story of Sarah and Hagar in Genesis with this text in Isaiah.⁶⁰ Isaiah analogized Hagar with her many sons to the way things appeared *presently* to the exiles returning to Jerusalem, where other sons occupied the land, with the ostensibly barren Sarah promised more sons in due time but currently in lament. Paul did so to call his non-Jew addressees to trust that things would turn out as God promised from God's point of view, the view from *above* Jerusalem that Isaiah articulated, which was that the returnees would succeed in the end by God's miraculous help if they remained faithful in spite of contested rights to the land by those who had occupied it, just as Sarah did eventually have the promised heir, even when contested by the slave son and his mother. So too the addressees must steadfastly resist the path of becoming proselytes even though it presently appears the better choice from their vantage point; it is not from God's (per Paul's own).

To the degree that Paul could make the case that the model available to warrant the circumcision of these adult male non-Jews in terms of the Abrahamic household is that of the slave son, Ishmael, and associated with choosing exile (in Sinai for Hagar and her sons; in Babylon for Jerusalem's sons "now" in Isaiah's time) over enjoyment of the promise (in Israel for Sarah with her eventual, promised sons; in Jerusalem restored for Isaiah, as seen from "above," from God's point of view rather than as things appear "now"), Paul's attack depends on the implied ironic rebuke, "How attractive is the influencers' proposed model for you?" "Will you escape the marginality you now experience by submitting to the model for marginalized slave-born sons?" Paul argues instead that they already have the spirit bearing witness they are sons according to the promise to Abraham

Furthermore, Paul does not engage the idea that Abraham could be regarded as the standard for proselytes, if he knew of the argument (which is likely, I think), unlike his older contemporary in Alexandria (Philo, *Virt.* 217–219), and later rabbis (Genesis Rabbah 46.2), who do; see Moorthy, "A Seal of Faith," 108–118. The case of Timothy per Acts 16 also raises awareness that there was a question (at least some decades after Paul, but almost certainly earlier than Paul too) whether someone identified as a Jew or Israelite from birth who had not been circumcised should be as an adult, and how that identification would be determined, including whether matrilineal or patrilineal descent, or both, were required.

⁶⁰In the papers noted above on this allegory, I argue that Paul uses *συστοιχέω* in 4:25 not to denote columns of opposites, as is commonly argued, but rather to "connect" as in link the Torah passages in Genesis to the Prophetic passage in Isaiah that he uses to explain "what they should hear from Torah" on this matter in a way familiar for creating homilies in later rabbinic haftarah traditions.

that he would be the father of the nations—the premise from which he has argued throughout the letter and to which he would presumably have oriented them initially when in Galatia—it can hardly be appropriate or desirable for them, therefore, to now seek to be incorporated by the model for slaves. Things are not as they may appear; the proselytes may appear to be heirs from the other nations now, like Hagar’s Ishmael (the product of resorting to a custom of expedience) appeared to be when Isaac was born, like those who possessed Jerusalem appeared to be upon the return of the exiles from Babylon. But in the end, those who steadfastly trust in God’s promise to bless Abraham with many sons miraculously through Sarah will be his heirs, and possess Jerusalem when freed from the constraints of life under enslaving, foreign lords, which proselyte conversion serves to negotiate in their Roman era. Or, as Paul puts the matter in 5:5 in his summary explanation following the allegory: “for we, out of faithfulness to spirit, eagerly await hope of justice.”

Paul even uses the Christ-following non-Jews’ suffering of “contested” identification as Abraham’s foreskinned heirs—which may imply that the influencers are themselves former non-Jews who believe they have the legitimate claim because they have become circumcised proselytes; that is, sons of Abraham on the model for slaves, according to Paul’s argument—to make his case. He analogizes the addressees’ present contested right to consider themselves legitimate heirs of Abraham to the suffering that Isaac experienced from his older brother Ishmael regarding Isaac’s right to inherit as the younger son. Thus, Paul writes: “But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted [contested] the child who was born according to the spirit, so it is now” (v. 29). Although the text in Genesis does not specify that Ishmael persecuted Isaac, it does indicate that the right of the second and younger son to inherit was a central problem to be solved, and the change from “playing” with Isaac to “persecuting” him as in Ishmael “contesting” Isaac’s right to Abraham’s inheritance because he is the older son, is attested in the Targums.⁶¹ If Paul considers the rite of proselyte conversion a νόμος *not* actually authorized by *the* νόμος of written Scripture, which appears to be the message in 3:10–14 (see below)

⁶¹ Gen 21:7–10; e.g., Tg. Ps.-J. Gen 22.1. The theme of Ishmael’s persecution of Isaac is developed in later rabbinic literature (e.g., Pesiq. Rab. 48.2; Pirqe R. El. 30). Parallels in rabbinic literature in addition to the targums are well enough known in traditional Pauline interpretation, yet do not lead to the observation that Paul was still promoting Judaism, but rather, are used to argue that these were things he had learned before he converted from Judaism; see esp. Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC 41; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 200–206. I explore these and other parallels in the aforementioned unpublished papers on this allegory.

as well as here, then the influencers are probably proselytes whom Paul is accusing of reacting to the claims of the non-Jews Paul addresses with Johnny-come-lately envy. Whether they have envied the addressees or not—an historical question that cannot be answered from Paul's rhetoric—if the influencers are former non-Jews who have been willing to undertake the rites to make the claims at issue, unlike the addressees, Paul can draw from the believable cultural assumption that the addressees' suffering of status discrimination might represent being "evil eyed," a begrudging rather than welcoming response to the addressees' receipt of a new good (the spirit and miracles)⁶² without paying the same dues the influencers had. Thus, he accuses the addressees of having naively failed to consider the influencer's begrudging designs to put them in their place as the cause of their heightened interest in completing the rites at issue, in order to undermine trust in them and enhance trust in his concern for their best interests, even if this includes a call to continue to suffer for a while longer (cf. 3:1; 6:12–13).⁶³

The theme of resisting because they are suffering contested identification is also the concern of the conclusion in 5:1, where the call to grasp hold of the freedom that comes with free son identity and concomitantly to resist returning to a "yoke of slavery" is not a call to resist observing Torah, as traditionally supposed. After all, since they were not under obligation to Torah in the past, it makes no sense to call them to resist to return to such behavior "again," as traditionally interpreted. Rather, they are being called to resist returning to understanding the options for gaining Abrahamic sonship in terms of the prevailing norm to which the influencers appeal; that is, either considering themselves still "pagan guests" or else candidates preparing to undertake proselyte transformation. Note that Acts 15:10 refers to the same custom of circumcising non-Jews as a burdensome "yoke" Jews have had to bear, thereby approaching the custom from the opposite side of this cultural constraint on Jews from a Jew's perspective.⁶⁴

Paul uses this allegorical analogy to instruct the addressees from Torah that they should remain steadfastly faithful to the gospel and avoid the custom on offer, although it seems like it would provide resolution. In spite of how things appear *now* in Galatia, just as had been the case in Jerusalem *now* then, when

⁶² See now Jennifer Eyl, *Signs, Wonders and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁶³ I have argued that is the case throughout the letter, in *Irony of Galatians*.

⁶⁴ Additionally, Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 89, observes that the word "yoke" conjures a visual association with the rite of circumcision. It is a ring-shaped object and fits over a body part...."

Isaiah prophesied, and *now* then, when Sarah was not the one who had begotten the heir to Abraham, so too will they receive the desired outcome in due time—if they remain steadfastly faithful. Interpreting Paul’s allegory as the way that non-Jews in Christ should hear and interpret Torah correctly according to Paul, represents a Jewish way of appealing to a prophetic text in order to create a homily (attested in Philo already, and later in the Targums and rabbinic Haftarah). It thereby provides an alternative to the usual habit of understanding Paul to be disparaging Judaism and the role of Torah for Christ-followers, as well as Jerusalem, and instead reads the allegory “within Judaism,” if you will.

Before we leave this topic, we ought to consider what this allegory, as well as other language throughout the letter about slaves and slavery, might have meant to the addressees if they were actually slaves, all the more if they were slaves of Jewish households. If many or even some of these non-Jew Christ-followers were actually slaves, then the relevance of Paul’s rhetorical move is enhanced, for they presumably would not “want” to choose to be slaves if not required, and Paul’s rhetorical identification of his own choice of being a slave to Christ, as well as Paul’s rhetorical arguments throughout the letter that they have moved from being slaves to being sons, might register on several levels worth consideration, including for the themes on which this essay is focused.

4.2.2. *Gal 3:10–14*

In the argument in 3:10–14, the phrase *ἔργα νόμου* is also used in v. 10, which remains relevant to the argument through v. 14. Translations of the phrase *ἔργα νόμου*, as well as the rest of the language in v. 10 and following, reflect the received view that Paul is referring to observing Torah to oppose his addressees doing so. But I submit that he is still referring to the rite of circumcision, and associated rites involved in this religio-ethnic transformation. This text introduces many complicated elements, but for our purpose, notice that with respect to *ἔργα νόμου* and the topic of circumcision, Paul appeals to *written* Torah (the *νόμος*) against the convention of proselyte conversion (a *νόμος*).

The argument of this section concerns certainty of Abrahamic sonship for non-Jews: it begins in 3:6–9 with reference to the promise “gospelled” to Abraham that “all the nations will be blessed in you,” and concludes in v. 14 a diatribal voice declares the outcome of the argument that apart from becoming members of Israel through undertaking circumcision, the blessing of Abraham has come to members of the other nations in Messiah Jesus, “in order that we might receive the promise of the spirit through the faithfulness.” The tension is

not between belief and action; at issue is which action represents faithfulness by which non-Jews gain Abrahamic sonship in view of the gospel's claims for Jesus.

The received interpretations proceed from the premise that Paul is resisting a commandment in Torah, but we have already traced the fact that no such commandment is present in Torah, or in the written Scripture's to which Paul appeals. Although the νόμος of circumcising non-Jews to make them proselyte Jews was an innovation, it had apparently become familiar enough even in Paul's time that, as we saw in the Izates' example as well, arguments were made then as they are today on the (mistaken) basis that circumcision was self-evidently enjoined in Torah for non-Jews who wanted to complete the process of becoming Jews. If we approach Paul's argument aware of this anomaly, his argument in this section appears to work from very different premises than the commentary tradition understands it to proceed.

Paul's argument appeals to the fact that this "custom" adds to Torah in a way that is proscribed in *written* Torah in the very text that he cites. According to Deut 27:26 LXX in its context, which Paul cites to justify his argument, adding to Torah creates a curse: "Cursed be anyone who does not uphold all the words of this custom/law [τοῦ νόμου] by observing them.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'" Gal 3:10 reads: "For as many as are [accounted as righteous] by means of *rites of a custom* [ἐξ ἔργων νόμου; i.e., proselyte conversion, completed by circumcision] are under a curse, for it is *written* that, 'everyone is cursed who does not remain steadfast in all that is *written* in the scroll of the custom [i.e., Torah], to do [practice] them.'" The received view interprets this as a case where Paul negatively values Torah, but Paul is citing Torah, *the written νόμος*, against a developing tradition that has created the custom (νόμος) of proselyte conversion rites [ἔργα], within which the central rite of circumcision is often used synecdochally.

In v. 11, Paul continues the argument by appealing to what is written in Hab 2:4 in order to claim that no one is legitimated by God through a νόμος, for "the righteous will live from faithfulness." The issue still is "rites of a custom," the rite of circumcision in particular. In v. 12 Paul cites Lev 18:5 to argue that "the νόμος [at issue, circumcision of non-Jews] is not from faithfulness [to the written νόμος], rather, the one who practices [or: makes] them [i.e., additional customs] will live by them." Lev 18:5 LXX reads, "And you shall keep all my ordinances and all my judgments, and you shall do them; as for the things a person does, he shall live by them..."⁶⁵ A central element of the argument in Lev 18:1–15 is that Israelites must not add to Torah but faithfully guard and practice the Torah given by Moses.

⁶⁵ Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Of course, there were different, even strongly oppositional interpretations of the written commandments and how they were to be lived, and these differences are frequent topics in Second Temple Jewish texts, not least those of the Dead Sea Scrolls' authors. Paul is not interested in describing the alternatives on offer. He communicates his interpretation in the enigmatic statement that follows in 3:13–14, which he builds around the citation of Deut 21:23: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the νόμος [custom], becoming a curse for us, because it has been *written* [i.e., in the Torah scrolls]: ‘cursed is everyone who hangs upon a tree,’ [which took place] in order that the blessing of Abraham for the nations might come in Christ Jesus, in order that we might receive the promise of the spirit through the faithfulness.” Among the many complicated elements in this passage we do not have space to engage here is the sequence of first person plurals that indicate its diatribal character. Nevertheless, it is relatively clear that at issue is whether the blessing of Abraham for those from the nations, which is linked to the receipt of the spirit, is thereby legitimated apart from undertaking circumcision.

In summary, in Paul's arguments in chapters 3 and 4, as is the case throughout Galatians, we witness Paul challenging proselyte conversion as an innovation that does not guard what Torah teaches about circumcision. This way of reasoning may be related to the way he learned to reason in the specific Pharisaic (sub)group within which he had been a member previously, in which he claims to have been the most zealous advocate that non-Jews seeking full group affiliation as sons of Abraham—such as the Christ-following non-Jews to whom he writes Galatians claim—should complete this rite of circumcision in order to become Jews (1:10–17; 5:11). But that is no longer how he views this “rite” and the “custom” it signifies.⁶⁶ The revelation of Messiah he experienced led him to the chronometrical realization of the gospel that non-Jews in Messiah remain non-Jews in Messiah to demonstrate that the arrival of the awaited age had begun. That he does not subject this revelation-based conviction to the consensus of his peers, whom he refers to as “flesh and blood” (1:17), and as “human agents or human agencies” whom he does not seek to please (1:1, 10–11), may refer, albeit ambiguously, to the Pharisaic subgroup in which he had excelled (1:12–16),⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Hayes, *What's Divine About Divine Law?*, 214–218, discusses developments in the rabbinic period on the topic of proselyte conversion that demonstrate the kind of issues Paul's arguments may suggest were already in play.

⁶⁷ See my, “Intruding ‘Spies’ and ‘Pseudo-brethren’: The Jewish Intra-Group Politics of Paul's Jerusalem Meeting (Gal 2:1–10),” in *Paul and His Opponents*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 59–97.

which (apparently) promoted proselyte conversion (5:11). Paul develops the case that the righteous live according to what is faithful to Torah for themselves; for Jews, that includes circumcising their infant sons, but for non-Jews in Christ, faithfulness *to* Torah does not include circumcision, at least not as an initiation rite by which to become Jews.

5. Conclusion

Paul wasn't against circumcision. Paul wasn't against Torah. Paul wasn't against practicing or promoting Judaism, a Jewish way of life; instead, he advocated circumcision (he even boasted of his own to warrant his authority, Phil 3:4–6), he practiced and promoted Torah and a Jewish way of life, even for Christ-following non-Jews. They were to behave Jewish-ishly.⁶⁸ What Paul was against, adamantly so, was non-Jews already faithful to the gospel of Christ undertaking the rites by which they also could gain un- or less-contested status related to the claims they were making for themselves. That rite signaled that male non-Jews had completed the religio-ethnic transformation ritual by which they could become one of the circumcised, sons of Abraham, members of Israel, what the rabbis later called proselytes. Paul argued that is not who Torah guided to become circumcised, or why. The development of that custom, that *ἔργα νόμου*, added to Torah in the way Torah pronounced accursed. In his view, his opposition to undertaking these rites, signaled by the rite of circumcision, constituted his commitment to *πίστις* to/of Messiah Jesus, to the faithful guarding of Torah, to which the Messiah was faithful even if cursed therein for being hung upon a tree. That is the *πίστις* to which these non-Jews also must remain faithful, regardless of the price they may pay presently to do so: they must, “out of faithfulness to spirit, eagerly await hope of justice.”

6. Afterword: Some Implications for Contemporary Debates about Circumcision

It is my hope that many of the points made in this essay might be attractive to Christians who want to find ways to conceptualize and discuss the rites and identity and behavior as well as motivations of the Jewish other in more respectful ways, theological and practical. Pauline interpreters should respect the fact that the Jewish custom of providing a course for religio-ethnic transformation for non-Jews is an inclusive, Torah based interpretation no less than Paul's own innovative interpretive moves, which are based on his Jesus as Messiah particularistic way of reasoning for how to include non-Jews in Abraham's promised blessing for the

⁶⁸ Nanos, “Paul's Non-Jews Do Not Become ‘Jews.’”

nations. The aims of this essay, however, are not limited to these and related Christian and Pauline matters.

Throughout the development of this essay, which was initially presented as a paper for a conference entitled, “Expert Meeting on Male Circumcision: Ancient Attitudes in Light of Contemporary Questions,” I have had in view implications that extend to reasoning about circumcision where it arises in contemporary debates and policies among those who are not for the most part Jews or circumcised, or considering to complete rites of passage to become proselytes. For if Paul’s contextual concern with circumcision is approached as a part of rites involved in proselyte conversion rather than treated as a Torah commandment that applies to everyone, the consideration of circumcision unrelated to becoming Jews can be addressed, for example, as a purely medical procedure, not a theologically loaded one. When Paul’s opposition is qualified with respect to Christ-following non-Jews within the nascent Christ-following Judaism of which he was a leader, the relevance for Christians today, who are not considering circumcision as part of a proselyte conversion ritual, can be dismissed as unrelated, even irrelevant. For them, Christianity is not a movement within Judaism, unlike the case was for Paul and his audiences.

This can have important practical implications. For example, I learned from the husband of a member of the medical team in Africa advocating male circumcision to fight the spread of AIDS, that they encounter resistance from Christians based upon their unqualified universalistic understanding of Paul’s opposition. However, if these Christians are not considering to undertake circumcision as a rite whereby they become in some way affiliated with Abraham and Jewish communal identity in addition to that which they already claim as Christians—which represent the kinds of qualifications I have articulated for understanding Paul’s opposition to *circumcision* as a part of *ἔργα νόμου*—then I question the appeal to Paul’s opposition to warrant resistance to the medical advice on the basis of being Christians loyal to Paul’s teaching. For the medical advocates, it seems to me there is a hermeneutical gap that they could usefully explore to make a convincing case to Christians in the Pauline cultural (theological as well as historical-critical) terms to which the resistance appeals, whether the advocates share those theological convictions or not.

I am not trying to weigh in on the merits of this medical advice. What interests me is that to the degree Paul’s voice is invoked, perhaps even accepted on those interpretive terms by medical personal who may or not be Christians or that familiar with Pauline theology, there is a theoretical basis for changing the discourse. The books on circumcision I consulted that focused on medical interests, pro and con, showed no awareness that Paul’s rhetoric could and should

be historically qualified—including particularized rather than universalized—in the directions proposed herein, and thus of the very different meanings that might be made.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Not surprisingly, since these ideas have not been discussed in the Pauline scholarship that could have made them aware of these considerations; even the focus on the particularity of Paul's positions is a relatively recent development in this scholarship. For medically oriented discussions, see e.g., Gollaher, *Circumcision*; Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).