

Circumcision and Circumcisability

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Justin Martyr perceived—in his own Christianizing way—that Jewish circumcision lay at the cultural intersection of gender and ethnicity,¹ as per the theme of this special issue of *JJMJS*.² Like Justin, but with more critical acumen, the articles in this issue examine the gendered and ethnic logics of Jewish circumcision in our ancient sources. Together, they illustrate the tremendous social and religious importance not just of circumcision but of circumcisability, that is, of having the kind of body that can undergo this status-conferring ritual. Most women do not have such bodies, though Jewish women in antiquity participated in circumcision as ritual experts themselves. Most men do have such bodies, though Jewish men with certain medical conditions of the penis may not have, which illustrates the problem of coordinating circumcision with (male) Jewishness. And gentile men pose a real conundrum: Having foreskins, they might well seem to be circumcisable in principle, yet they are not subject to the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17). So, are they, or are they not, circumcisable? On this question, our sources disagree vehemently among themselves, and this vehemence is itself a measure of what is at stake in the question.³ In this article, I intervene in some of these ancient debates by means of dialogue with the other contributors to this special issue.

First, then, let us consider Isaac Soon's article. Soon helpfully draws our attention away from the great mass of ancient Jews who *were* circumcised to the equal or greater number of ancient Jews who were *not*: Jewish women, especially, but also Jewish men who either were never circumcised or who reversed their circumcisions through surgical or mechanical means. Such people, Soon argues, occupied a liminal space vis-à-vis their own tradition: Jewish they certainly were, but not *as Jewish* as the notionally ideal circumcised Jewish man. I find Soon's case mostly persuasive and certainly illuminating of many important social relations. But possibly also obscuring of some other social relations; hence, I have a few questions around the edges of Soon's thesis.

¹ See Justin, *Dial.* 23, and the discussion by Judith M. Lieu, "Women, Circumcision, and Salvation," *NTS* 40 (1994): 358–370.

² All thanks and credit go to Ryan Collman for his expert organizing of the conference that led to this special issue and of the special issue itself.

³ On this ancient disagreement, see especially Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Here is one: Soon is, of course, right to say that “If you were a woman or a eunuch or an uncircumcised male you could not serve as a priest in a temple.” But then, even if you were a duly circumcised Israelite man, you still could not serve as a priest unless you also happened to be Levite, and perhaps—depending on the era and regime—Aaronide, Zadokite, Oniad, etc. In other words, circumcision, though necessary for priestly service, was not anywhere near sufficient for it. There were very important and very fraught genealogical conditions, too.⁴ Soon knows all this, of course, but one wonders whether his singular focus on circumcision as social currency might obscure by omission.

Another related issue: I am intrigued by Soon’s perceptive point about angels representing bodily perfection, which in some texts and for some purposes, they probably do. Soon writes plausibly about the angels of the presence in Jub. 15: “Their circumcised bodies betray a sanctified form. In other words, the circumcised angelic bodies represent corporeal perfection.” Just here, however, I was reminded of the rabbinic discourse about the putative *disability* of the angels on account of a supposed bodily incapacity to keep the Torah, as in this passage from Song of Songs Rabbah: “[The angels said to God:] ‘It is your happiness that your Torah should be in the heavens.’ God, however, said to them [the angels]: ‘You have no concern with it.’ R. Judan said: ‘It is as if a man had a son with stumped fingers and took him to an embroiderer to teach him the art. The latter looked at his fingers and said: ‘The very essence of this art depends upon the fingers. How can this one possibly learn it?’ Thus you have no concern with it” (Song Rab. 8.11.2, trans. mod. from Simon). The text cites several illustrative commandments concerning menstruation and death, of which (it assumes) the angels are bodily incapable. The lesson I take from this text is that disability is relative; one might imagine angels as super-able (as Soon does, following Jubilees) or as disabled (as Song of Songs Rabbah does), depending on the particular norm one chooses to apply.⁵

And we could raise a similar question, *a fortiori*, about human resemblance (or not) to God. Soon reasons that if angels are circumcised, and they are sons of God, then God, too, is circumcised.⁶ Further, Soon reasons, this implies that only human men, not human women, have the distinction of bodily resembling God (in this particular respect, presumably, since in other respects human women surely could resemble God). He writes, “Ultimately, there was no physical opportunity for a woman’s body ever to *physically resemble God*”

⁴ See Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

⁵ See further discussion of this text in Matthew V. Novenson, *Paul and Judaism at the End of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); and on the issue more generally Candida R. Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

⁶ See the recent discussion by Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *God: An Anatomy* (New York: Macmillan, 2021).

(emphasis original). Consequently, for Soon, “her body does not represent the Jewish bodily ideal.” I wonder, however, whether we ought to think in terms of *the* (singular) Jewish bodily ideal at all. It is not evident that there could only be one such ideal rather than several, nor that resemblance to the (putative) anatomy of God in that respect should be the only or the principal measure thereof. Here I think of the saying in m. ¹ Abot 3:19: “R. Eleazar Hisma said: [The rules about] bird-offerings and the onset of menstruation—these are the essentials of the *halakhot*.” Pirkei Abot is, of course, not any kind of feminist manifesto, but the fact that it singles out for praise the commandments about menstruation suggests—to my mind, at least—that it can imagine more than one Jewish bodily ideal. Which is a pretty humane position, come to think of it.

In her article, Carmen Palmer gives us an excellent discussion of the “problem”—as perceived by the primarily male authors of our sources—of the conversion of gentile women to Judaism in antiquity.⁷ Setting aside for the moment those few authors, like Jubilees and Paul, who refuse to countenance proselyte circumcision at all, that ritual was, for male proselytes, a wonderfully clear marker of transition from gentileness to Jewishness. Hence the telling Greek idiom μέχρι περιτομῆς ἰουδαΐζειν, “to judaize *up to and including* circumcision” (Josephus, *J.W.* 2.454; and cf. OG Esth 8:17). For the majority who did recognize proselyte circumcision, once that deed was done, you knew where the candidate stood. But here we encounter once again the thorny issue of circumcisability. What about women proselytes, who, not being equipped with foreskins, were not eligible for circumcision? How could you ever really know that they were now Jewish, no longer gentile? (Just take their word for it? That is one viable option, though many of our sources find it insufficient.)⁸ Maybe you never could know! That is arguably Josephus’s view, if Daniel Schwartz is correct, as Palmer cautiously suggests he is.⁹ On one plausible reading of Josephus, women proselytes can only ever *conduct themselves like* Jews (ὡς Ἰουδαίους in *Ant.* 20.34, used of the wives of Izates), never actually *become* Jews (εἶναι βεβαίως Ἰουδαίος in *Ant.* 20.38, used of Izates himself). Harsh but consistent, if you accept the premise that proselyte circumcision is the only possible rite of transition.

Other sources, however, do not accept that premise. As Palmer persuasively argues, the Damascus Document assumes that enslaved gentiles, whether male or female, can indeed join the covenant of Abraham, though it

⁷ See further Jill Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth: Gentile Access to Israel’s Living God in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸ On this issue, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, “How Do You Know a Jew in Antiquity When You See One?” in idem, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 25–68.

⁹ Daniel R. Schwartz, “Doing Like Jews or Becoming a Jew? Josephus on Women Converts to Judaism,” in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripentrog (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 93–110.

does not specify how an enslaved gentile woman would do so.¹⁰ The Temple Scroll and 4QDamasus fragments, however, do specify: marriage to a Jewish man, plus a seven-year period of “timed integration” (Palmer’s apt term). “You shall go in to her and marry her, and she will become your wife. But she may not touch your purities for seven years, nor may she eat the peace offering until seven years pass; after that she may eat” (11Q19 LXIII, 14–15). The point of the seven years, Palmer plausibly argues, is “to test her about her spirit and about her deeds”—to borrow a phrase from 1QS VI, 17—that is, to confirm the genuineness of her “conversion.” But why *seven* years, and why only an *enslaved* gentile woman? Palmer argues—and I can think of no better reason—that both stipulations come from scriptural precedents: the enslaved Hebrew woman who may be manumitted or choose to stay after seven years (Deut 15:12–18) and the gentile woman enslaved during wartime (Deut 21:10–14). The former passage provides the seven-year term, the latter the case of an enslaved gentile woman. The interesting upshot of all this, Palmer rightly notes, is that there is no path to citizenship (so to speak) for a free gentile woman, only an enslaved one. This contrasts with the famous cases of Ruth the Moabite and Aseneth the Egyptian, perhaps because the Temple Scroll restricts itself to precedents from among the commandments God gave to Moses. Possibly telling, however, is the parallel between the *seven years* of the enslaved woman’s probation in the Temple Scroll and the *seven days* of Aseneth’s probation in the Joseph and Aseneth romance.¹¹ Proselyte circumcision for gentile men, by contrast, is conspicuous for its immediate effect.

Jewish women may not have been *circumcisable*, but they were likely *circumcisers* in more than a few cases, as Thomas Blanton’s article helpfully demonstrates. Contra Andreas Blaschke¹² and others who have tended to read the late ancient rabbinic mohel—a male ritual expert from outside the household—back into Roman, Hellenistic, and even earlier texts, Blanton persuasively argues that prior to the clear attestation of the office of mohel in the Talmud, Jewish circumcision seems to have belonged to domestic religion, such that the person normally responsible for circumcising Jewish boys was either the mother or the father. And this is more or less exactly what we find in our (admittedly few) extant sources. (Here, Blanton builds on excellent discussions of this issue by Carol Meyers and Susan Ackerman.)¹³ Literary

¹⁰ Palmer discusses all this at greater length in her *Converts in the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Ger and Mutable Ethnicity* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹¹ And perhaps also the seven days antecedent to the circumcision of an infant boy. See Matthew Thiessen, “Aseneth’s Eight-Day Transformation as Scriptural Justification for Conversion,” *JSJ* 45 (2014): 229–249.

¹² Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (Tübingen: Francke, 1998).

¹³ Carol Meyers, “From Household to House of Yahweh: Women’s Religious Culture in Ancient Israel,” in *Congress Volume: Basel 2001*, ed. André Lemaire (Leiden: Brill, 2002),

artifices these sources may be, but even so, they seem generally to assume that the circumciser is a male or female head of household. Whether, and under which circumstances, it is a specifically *male* or *female* head of household is a more interesting and complex question. To the extent that Jewish circumcision was performed in infancy (as per the norm prescribed in Gen 17:12), the portrayal of *mothers* as circumcisers—such as in the famous story of Zipporah and Gershom in Exod 4:24–26—is historically quite plausible. In those cases where (contrary to the norm prescribed in Gen 17:12) pubescent or postpubescent boys or men underwent circumcision, the portrayal of *fathers* as circumcisers—such as in the famous story of Abraham and Ishmael in Gen 17:23–27—is likewise historically plausible. In either case, however, it belongs to the religion of the household.

One striking consequence of Blanton’s argument is the very fact of a ritual role for women in ancient Jewish circumcision. It is striking precisely because of the point raised by Justin Martyr, Shaye Cohen, Isaac Soon (above), and many others, namely, that women would seem to be excluded from the covenant of Gen 17 by virtue of their putative uncircumcisability.¹⁴ And yet, Jewish women are Jewish. It seems that the very interpretive tradition that restricts the covenant of Gen 17 to boys and men also seeks and finds ways to integrate girls and women through other means. (Life finds a way, one is tempted to say.) The ancient role of mothers as circumcisers is one example *par excellence*. But so, too, is the rabbinic rule that any child born to a Jewish mother—though not any child born to a Jewish father—is Jewish.¹⁵ Or, from a later period, the interpretation of Gen 17:11 by the twelfth-century commentator R. Joseph Bekhor Shor: “Since God commanded the males, and not the females, we may deduce that God commanded to seal the covenant on the place of maleness. And the blood of menstruation that women observe by telling their husbands of the onset of their periods—this for them is covenantal blood.”¹⁶ As Shaye Cohen rightly notes, Bekhor Shor ingeniously reads menstrual blood as the counterpart to the blood of circumcision, a sign of the covenant on the bodies of Jewish women to complement that on the bodies of Jewish men.¹⁷ As with my comment about m. ’Abot 3:19 above, I am not implying that this is at all feminist in a modern sense. But it does acknowledge the fact—obvious and yet all too easily ignored—that circumcisable infant boys do not just spring directly from the loins of their fathers.

277–303; Susan Ackerman, “Why Is Miriam Also among the Prophets? (And Is Zipporah among the Priests?),” *JBL* 121 (2002): 47–80.

¹⁴ See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁵ On this matrilineal principle, see Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 263–307.

¹⁶ Yehoshafat Nebo, ed., *The Commentary of R. Joseph Bekhor Shor on the Torah* (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994) (Hebrew).

¹⁷ Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised*, 192–198.

I turn now to Martin Sanfridson's article. If Carmen Palmer drew our attention to *gender* in circumcision, then Sanfridson does to *ethnicity*. He asks why the gentile-men-in-Christ whom Paul addresses in Galatians would have been attracted to Jewish circumcision at all. And he argues, convincingly to my mind, that it had to do primarily with ethnic belonging. Paul himself had exhorted these gentiles to judaize to a considerable extent already (although he, Paul, balks from using that word for what he tells them to do),¹⁸ and there were tangible social benefits to their taking one step further to proselyte circumcision. So much so that the transitory pain of the ritual may have been a small price to pay. It was better to be a Jew-by-proselytism than a socially alienated neither-Jew-nor-gentile of the kind Paul engineered. On this whole issue, Sanfridson gives us a quite compelling reading of Galatians.¹⁹

I have two questions of significant detail, however. First: What exactly should we make of the relevance of Nancy Jay's ingenious hypothesis to the circumcision controversy in Galatians? Sanfridson cites Jay about halfway through his article, quite rightly, as a preeminent authority on the relation between genealogy and cult in antiquity.²⁰ I was waiting for him to make an explicit connection to circumcision, but I do not think it ever came. Interestingly, Jay herself mentions circumcision almost not at all in her magisterial *Throughout Your Generations Forever*. (She only briefly cites Joshua 5, where Joshua circumcises the Hebrews before their march on Jericho, in her introduction, and not in connection with sacrifice.) Jay shows that "*sacrifice* was a powerful tool to create social patrilineal descent," as Sanfridson aptly puts it. But is *circumcision* such a tool? Or, more provocatively still, is circumcision itself a form of sacrifice in Sanfridson's use of Jay's theory? I could not tell, and he does not say. Pamela Eisenbaum has argued that Jay's theory fits Paul's argument in Romans, where the death of Jesus is a sacrifice effecting gentile adoption as sons of Abraham.²¹ Patrick McMurray argues that the son-making sacrifice in Romans is not the death of Jesus but the living sacrifice of gentile bodies in Rom 12:1.²² But what about Galatians? Does Sanfridson think that proselyte circumcision is a kind of living sacrifice of gentile body parts, foreskins, effecting sonship (not by Paul's lights, of course, but by his rivals'?)

Second question: What kind of new cult, actual *cult*, does Paul offer his gentiles-in-Christ in Galatians? I take Sanfridson's point that we can think of

¹⁸ See Paula Fredriksen, "Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul's Gospel," *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–252.

¹⁹ See Martin Sanfridson, "Are Circumcision and Foreskin Really Nothing? Re-reading 1 Corinthians 7:19 and Galatians 5:6; 6:15," *SEA* 86 (2021): 130–147.

²⁰ Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

²¹ Pamela Eisenbaum, "A Remedy for Having Been Born of Woman: Jesus, Gentiles, and Genealogy in Romans," *JBL* 123 (2004): 671–702.

²² Patrick McMurray, *Sacrifice, Brotherhood, and the Body: Abraham and the Nations in Romans* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress, 2021).

the Galatian Christ *ekklēsia* as a “cult” in the sense that other voluntary associations are, or at least involve, cult. But there is a stricter sense of cult (re: Latin *cultus*, Greek *λατρεία*, Hebrew *עֲבֹדָה*) that means service to the gods at shrines, by priests, with sacrifices. Paul gives his gentiles-in-Christ precisely none of these things: no shrines, no priests, no sacrifices.²³ Sanfridson says, more or less accurately, that Paul’s gentiles must now worship only the God of Israel. But in fact, they are ineligible to *worship* him, that is, to bring sacrifices to him at his temple in Jerusalem (hence the riot in Acts 21:27–29). Paul certainly gives his gentiles cultic *prohibitions*: no idols! no feasts with demons! But how many positive cultic *provisions* does he make for them? (Teresa McCaskill has recently made a plausible case that the *pneumata* and *charismata* are all that Paul can offer gentiles by way of compensation.)²⁴

In Ryan Collman’s article, Collman highlights the fact—which, to my embarrassment, I had not appreciated until reading his work—that there is only a single mention of heart-circumcision in the letters of Paul (Rom 2:29), and that this is the only such reference anywhere in the New Testament. Given the importance of the idea to Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and other gentile Christian writers,²⁵ I assumed it must have lain more on the surface of their canonical sources. And of course, it does in their canonical Old Testament: Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16, 30:6; Jer 4:4, 9:25–26; Ezek 44:7, 9. But as Collman convincingly argues, in all these scriptural references, heart-circumcision is a *supplement to*, not a *replacement for*, Jewish genital circumcision. Ritual circumcision of Jewish baby boys is assumed to continue, but it should be accompanied by a moral renewal, which is figured as a circumcision of the heart. Moreover, Collman argues—provocatively but again, convincingly—this is also what Paul means in Rom 2:29: “Circumcision of the heart, in spirit not letter, receives praise from God.” Paul speaks of heart-circumcision as Jeremiah and Ezekiel do, not as Justin and Tertullian do. Paul insists that gentiles-in-Christ receive righteousness, the spirit, and much else, but not heart-circumcision. The idea that gentiles receive heart-circumcision, it turns out, is a gentile Christian innovation.²⁶

This is confirmed by the few other New Testament references that are at all proximate to the question. The jeremiad by Stephen the martyr in Acts 7 includes one suitably prophetic reference to uncircumcised hearts and ears: “O

²³ It was for this reason that Edwin Judge (“The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community,” *JHR* 1 [1960]: 1–60) ruled earliest Christianity a philosophy, not a religion at all. His conclusion was overdrawn, but we do owe some account of the phenomena, in any case.

²⁴ Teresa Lee McCaskill, *Gifts and Ritual: The Charismata of Romans 12:6–8 in the Context of Roman Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington/Fortress, 2023).

²⁵ Everett Ferguson, “Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity,” *SJT* 41 (1988): 485–497.

²⁶ Collman explains this development further in his *The Apostle to the Foreskin: Circumcision in the Letters of Paul* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

stiff-necked people, uncircumcised of heart and ears, you always oppose the holy spirit; as with your ancestors, so also with you! Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?" (Acts 7:51–52) But here, as in the scriptural texts that this speech is meant to echo (Deut 9–10, especially), the point is that the Jewish audience needs to supplement their (ritual) flesh circumcision with (moral) heart circumcision; gentiles are nowhere in view.²⁷ Colossians 2 is a different case entirely. It does not mention circumcision of the heart at all. (And the author does speak more than a little about the heart, at Col 2:2; 3:15, 16, 22; 4:8, so he certainly could have mentioned circumcision of the heart had he wanted to!) Colossians speaks instead of "a circumcision not made with hands" and "the circumcision of Christ," but this is not a circumcision of the heart. Ironically, the author expressly says that it is a circumcision of the *flesh*: not just the foreskin, but the entire body. Περιετημήθητε περιτομή ἀχειροποιήτω ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, "You were circumcised with a not-manual circumcision, in the putting off of the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11). For this author, human beings hope to put off their fleshly bodies, like a circumcised foreskin, and this is precisely what Christ achieved for them by his death and resurrection (Col 1:22; 2:11–13). Admittedly, this is a kind of "circumcision" for gentiles, but not of the foreskin nor of the heart.

Now to Andrew Rillera's article. As Rillera rightly insists, we know that the distinction between *milah* and *periah* was crucial for Jews (at least those who worried about this kind of thing) in late antiquity, from the tannaim onward.²⁸ Thus m. Šabb. 19:2: "The things necessary for *milah* are cutting [מלה ליד], *periah*, sucking [the wound], and applying a bandage and cumin." And m. Šabb. 19:6: מל ולא פרע את המילה כאלו לא מל, "If one is circumcised without *periah*, it is as though he had not been circumcised." But Rillera makes a strong case that this rabbinic policy was an innovation, that prior to Hadrian and Bar Kokhba, simple *milah* was the norm, and the more radical *periah* the exception. (Otherwise, we would not hear so much about the possibility of epispasm in our sources.)²⁹ This is mostly persuasive, but what about Jub. 15:33? "I am now telling you that the Israelites will prove false to this ordinance. They will not circumcise their sons in accord with this entire law because they will leave some of the flesh of their circumcision when they circumcise their sons" (trans. VanderKam). Does

²⁷ A. F. J. Klijn, "Stephen's Speech—Acts VII.2–53," *NTS* 2 (1957): 25–31 notes a parallel between our verse and 1QS V, 4–5, from which he infers a close relation between the two, but in fact the parallel is easily explicable in terms of their shared dependence on Deuteronomy.

²⁸ Nissan Rubin, "Brit Milah: A Study of Change in Custom," in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 87–97.

²⁹ The chronological issue is noted by Robert G. Hall, "Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writing," *JSP* 2 (1988): 71–86.

Jubilees already insist on *periah*, a century-and-a-half before Philo and three centuries before the Mishnah?

Whether Jubilees does or not, it does not strike at the heart of Rillera's argument. But does Philo insist on *periah*? That question does strike at the heart of Rillera's argument. I think I am mostly persuaded, although if it were that important to Philo, I might have expected him to be clearer about it. Other texts that insist on *periah* (e.g., Jubilees perhaps, Mishnah and Bavli certainly) expressly contrast it with mere *milah*, which (as far as I know) Philo never does, alas. (He does famously contrast Jews who circumcise with Jews who *only* allegorize circumcision in *Migr.* 89–93, but that is another matter.) His use of $\pi\acute{o}\sigma\theta\eta$ in *Spec.* 1 is admittedly suggestive but not decisive. One wishes that he spoke unfavorably of $\lambda\upsilon\pi\acute{o}\delta\epsilon\rho\mu\omicron\varsigma$ somewhere, but I do not know of such a reference. There might be more grist for Rillera's mill in *Somn.* 2.25, where Philo speaks of $\tau\acute{o}$ δις περιτέμνειν, “the twofold circumcision,” which he glosses with $\text{περιτομῆς περιτομῆ}$, “circumcision of circumcision.” But I am not certain what Philo means by this.

Finally, and most interestingly, is Paul's circumcision polemic (especially in Galatians, but also Philippians and Romans) directed at this ostensibly Philonic *periah* for gentiles? Rillera gives a pretty impressive reading of a large mass of evidence. Much of it is spot on: Paul never redefines circumcision to exclude born Jews; he never says or even implies that the law of Moses is un-doable; his opponents (and here I am out on the same limb with Rillera) are not born Jews but recent proselytes. Amen and amen.³⁰ On Rillera's key claim that Paul's quarrel is with *periah*, however, I struggle to be convinced. My objection is as follows: Let us assume for argument's sake that Rillera is right. If Paul's opponents were to suddenly repent and agree to a more modest *milah* circumcision, would Paul be satisfied? Would there then have been no need for a Letter to the Galatians? That seems unlikely. I think that Paul's beef in Galatians (and elsewhere) is not with one circumcising procedure as opposed to another, but with proselyte circumcision as such (because—and here I agree with Matthew Thiessen—there is no going back to your eighth day after birth).³¹ Paul thinks Jewish infant circumcision is natural, gentile proselyte circumcision unnatural ($\kappa\alpha\tau\alpha\tau\omicron\mu\eta$ in Phil 3:2). I reckon that Rillera is correct that the Jewish circumcision Paul approves is *milah*, not *periah*. But what Paul objects to is not just *periah*, but any proselyte circumcision at all.

Or so it seems to me. I think I am right in the interpretations I have advanced in this short article. But if not, the answers are likely to be found in the excellent contributions from Isaac Soon, Carmen Palmer, Thomas Blanton,

³⁰ See my discussion in Novenson, *Paul and Judaism at the End of History*.

³¹ Matthew Thiessen, “Paul's Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17–29,” *NovT* 56 (2014): 373–391; idem, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Martin Sanfridson, Ryan Collman, and Andrew Rillera above. These colleagues have helped us all see more clearly how circumcision and foreskin, circumcisable and uncircumcisable bodies work in the logic of our primary sources, for whom these questions were very pressing indeed.



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