

The Liminality of the Uncircumcised and Uncircumcisable Jew

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Abstract

This article ascertains what effect the uncircumcision of uncircumcised Jewish men and the uncircumcisability of Jewish women had on their social status in ancient Jewish communities and their relationship to God's covenant. To answer this question, I make use of the concept of liminality. In anthropological and ethnographic literature, liminality broadly describes things that exist at the threshold between two states, hence the emphasis on "rites of passage." In this article, I use liminality to describe a physical condition that does not completely adhere to the corporeal ideal of ancient Jewish society yet is still classified as being within the boundaries of such a community. In particular, I highlight the ways these uncircumcised Jews and uncircumcisable women deviate from the ideal Jewish body, that is, a circumcised body. Such difference pushed them into liminal spaces, where they remained Jewish yet on the threshold with non-Jews. This study is exploratory and does not aim to be comprehensive. Nevertheless, it endeavors to shed light on the neglected effect of non-circumcision on the status of women and uncircumcised Jewish men in the early Jewish period.

Keywords

Circumcision, Uncircumcision, Women, Liminality, Foreskin

1. Introduction

Almost thirty years ago, Judith Lieu argued that in "new experiences" and "new frameworks," Gen 17 invites an exploration of the "ambiguity... inherent in male circumcision as the covenant marker."¹ With the diffusion of Greek and Roman culture amongst ancient Jewish cultures in the time after Alexander, two "new experiences" invited Jews to re-examine the importance and value of circumcision. First, during the time leading up to and after the Maccabean revolt, the re-appearance of uncircumcised Jewish men for the first time explicitly in our extant sources since the Exodus (Josh 5), as well as the emergence of "re-foreskinned Jewish men" (via epispasm) forced many Jewish

¹ Judith M. Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation," *NTS* 40 (1994): 367.

writers to reaffirm the importance of circumcision in Israel's covenant with God.² Second, the question of why circumcision was not required by women was raised by Philo of Alexandria. Philo was the first in a long tradition of interpreters in rabbinic and anti-Jewish early Christian material to raise this issue (e.g., Justin Martyr, Origen, Genesis Rabbah, and eventually the Talmud).³

To my knowledge, there has not been any study on the effect of uncircumcision or noncircumcision had on the status of either uncircumcised Jewish men or women in early Judaism.⁴ The primary focus has been on circumcised Jews and their proselytes to Judaism.⁵ For circumcision and women, numerous studies have broached the subject but are primarily focused on its relevance in other time periods and literature. So, in Judith Lieu's 1994 article, she analysed the relationship between circumcision and women (native or proselyte) as it was raised in the second century with Justin Martyr and then later in works like Genesis Rabbah.⁶ Along a similar vein, Maren Niehoff briefly mentions Philo's comments about female circumcision in her discussion of circumcision as an identity marker between Philo, Origen, and early rabbinic literature.⁷ John Goldingay, in an article from the year 2000, brings the significance of circumcision and women to bear on the "bridegroom of blood" scene of Exod 4:24–26.⁸ By far, Shaye Cohen has done the most work on the history of Jewish women and circumcision, although the majority of his analyses focus on the sages and medieval interpretations and how they might be synthesised for proponents of rabbinic Judaism today.⁹ Cohen's focus on the

² There are such occasions as Jeremiah 9:26 (which may be taken figuratively and polemically). Instances in Ezekiel may also point to times when members of Israel were uncircumcised (Ezek 32:28, 44:7).

³ On this dialogue, see Maren R. Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17:1–14," *JSQ* 10.2 (2003): 89–123.

⁴ The use of "early Jewish"/ "early Judaism" nomenclature is here meant to circumvent the past use of the vague "Second Temple Period." This analysis covers the period following the Babylonian exile to the period of the Tannaim (ca. 538 BCE to 200 CE).

⁵ E.g., Solomon Zeitlin, "The Jews: Race, Nation or Religion: Which? A Study Based on the Literature of the Second Jewish Commonwealth," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 26.4 (1936): 341–342; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Christine E. Hayes, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities: Intermarriage and Conversion from the Bible to the Talmud* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 78–79; Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation."

⁷ Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity," 97.

⁸ John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 88 (2000): 3–18.

⁹ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?" *Gender & History* 9.3 (1997): 560–578; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Shaye J. D. Cohen,

subject primarily concerns canonical Jewish literature and so his investigation into extra-canonical early Jewish literature is limited to Philo.

This article explores the social effects of uncircumcision for both uncircumcised Jewish men and women, especially in relation to their covenantal status with the God of Israel. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's notion of liminality, this article demonstrates how uncircumcision pushed Jewish men and women into liminal spaces as they deviated from the ideal Jewish body (the circumcised body).¹⁰

2. The Circumcised Jewish Man as the Ideal Jewish Body

To discuss how uncircumcised Jewish men and women deviated from what was an established norm in early Judaism, we must first clarify what the established Jewish bodily ideal was in the first place. Here, we are concerned with ideal Jewish genitalia. From this perspective, there might be four class types of human bodies: the circumcised male, the uncircumcised male, the female, and the eunuch. From such a list, it seems intuitive that the circumcised male was the ideal member. Nevertheless, based on ancient evidence, how might one assess whether the circumcised male was considered the ideal?

Significant weight to the idyllic nature of circumcised male bodies comes with the fact that it is the only body type with the privilege of bearing the sign of the covenant (Genesis 17). Eunuchs were considered mutilated (Deut 23:1). The uncircumcised retain their foreskin. Women possess no foreskin. The physical witness to the covenant with God is inscribed only upon circumcised males.

Saul Olyan argues that circumcision was “both ritually and socially *enabling* and physically *normative*.”¹¹ Circumcised men could do and *be* more. If you were a woman or a eunuch or an uncircumcised male you could not serve as a priest in a temple, and as far as the limitations of our evidence are concerned, we have no substantial record of women as rabbis, members of the Sanhedrin, scribes, Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees or core members of the *yahad* at Qumran.¹² One notable exception to this pattern were the senior women of

“Your Covenant that You Have Sealed in Our Flesh’: Women, Covenant, and Circumcision,” in *Studies in Josephus and Varieties of Ancient Judaism*. Louis H. Feldman *Jubilee Vol*, ed. Shaye J. D. Cohen and Joshua J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 29–42.

¹⁰ This term had its moorings in the work of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep and was popularized by the work of Victor Turner. In anthropological and ethnographic literature, liminality broadly describes things that exist at the threshold between two states, hence the emphasis on “rites of passage.” *Arnold van Gennep, The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), 21; *Victor Turner, The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93–111.]

¹¹ Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 37, emphasis mine.

¹² Although, there were some texts that addressed women in particular (e.g., 4Q415 2 ii;

the so-called “Theraputae” described in Philo’s *De vita contemplative* (71-72).¹³ Bernadette Brooten’s classic study on the limited epigraphic evidence also shows Jewish women as heads, elders, and mothers of synagogues—possibly even as priests—show rare exceptions to this pattern.¹⁴

While circumcision was socially enabling, there was perhaps no greater indicator that this was the physical ideal than when Jewish texts begin differentiating between those circumcised *after* “birth” and those who were “born” circumcised. In Jubilees, angels that are the most proximate to God are said to have been circumcised from “birth” (15:27), “from the day of their creation.”¹⁵ If the text presumes that circumcision is possible for angels, then it must also imply that angels have foreskin to circumcise in the first place and that they might even have physical forms typical of male physiology. Since they dwelled near God’s presence, such transmundane forces should be understood as holy. By extension, their circumcised bodies betray a sanctified form. In other words, the circumcised angelic bodies represent corporeal perfection.¹⁶

Circumcision as a sign of bodily perfection is ascribed to the patriarchs in some rabbinic literature. Pseudo-Philo portrays Moses as being born circumcised (LAB 9.13).¹⁷ In Midrash Tanchuma (Yelammedenu, 4–6th CE) on Gen 6:9 (Noach 5.3) the rabbis understand the phrase *נה איש צדיק תמים היה בדורותיו* (“Noah a righteous man, perfect in his generations”) as an indication that he was born circumcised (*נה נולד מחול*, “Noah was born circumcised”). In b. Soṭah 12a, the rabbis explain that the description in Exod 2:2 that Moses is “good” indicates that he was born circumcised (*אחרים אומרים נולד כשהוא מהול*).¹⁸

1Q26 1 4–6). It should be noted that in highlighting that it was uncommon for women to occupy senior positions in ancient Jewish communities, this did not preclude them from being philosophers or exegetes themselves, as the works of Joan Taylor and Tal Ilan have shown. Joan E. Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers of First-Century Alexandria: Philo’s ‘Theraputae’ Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 237–240; Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 192–194. Also, Acts 9:36; John 20:15-16; Luke 10:38-42.

¹³ Taylor, *Jewish Women Philosophers*, 246–248.

¹⁴ Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues*, Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2020).

¹⁵ Translations on Jubilees from James C. VanderKam, trans., *The Book of Jubilees*, CSCO 511 (Louvain: Peeters, 1989), 92.

¹⁶ Isaac Kalimi, “‘He Was Born Circumcised’: Some Midrashic Sources, Their Concepts, Roots and Presumably Historical Context,” *ZNW* 93 (2002): 5.

¹⁷ Translation by Daniel J. Harrington, “Pseudo-Philo,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the “Old Testament” and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 316.

¹⁸ Indeed, the Hebrew of Exod 2:2 could be playfully translated as “And she saw his sign for [he was] good” (*והרא אותו כי טוב*). The Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 5.3) lists seven men

In the examples above, the criteria for being born circumcised is that a person is “good” (טוב), “perfect” (ישר or תם), or “righteous” (תמים). However, sometimes, figures are born circumcised because they are in the likeness of their fathers who were also born circumcised (e.g., Seth after Adam, Joseph after Jacob [Tanḥ. Noach 5.3]).¹⁹ This latter point raises an interesting quandary. In Midrash Tanchuma (Noach 5.3), Adam is born circumcised, but the text does not explain the rationale for why this is so. The midrash merely cites Gen 5:3 (בילד בדמותו כצלמו), “He begat a son after his likeness and image”). However, the text also implies that Gen 1:26–27 is relevant, that Adam was made in God’s image and likeness. Such a reading is confirmed in Avot D’Rabbi Natan 2.5, which says that “the first man came forth circumcised as it is written, ‘And God created man in his image’ (Gen 1:27)” (אדם הראשון יצא מהול שנאמר ויברא אלהים את האדם) (בצלמו). These two passages assume that Adam is circumcised because God himself is circumcised. Adam was born circumcised because he reflects the form of his father, God.

A physical interpretation of the *imago dei*, though perhaps not the only legitimate one, makes most sense of the language of צלם and דמות in Gen 1:26–27, 5:3 and again in 9:6 (only צלם). Such an interpretation may reflect a more ancient Israelite belief, one that by the time of the Priestly editor(s) would unlikely have been favorable. However, just because the priestly tradition was not comfortable with representations of God in physical form, this is not to exclude that God had a physical form.²⁰ In fact, it confirms the opposite, that God had some bodily form able to be imitated in “likeness” and “image” in some way, but it was forbidden to try to manufacture an image in place of that form. As Benjamin Sommer has argued, it is not that the Hebrew Bible denies that God has a body, so much as it attests to the various competing agendas ancient Jews had in dealing with it.²¹

One of the ways in which God’s presence is made manifest arises with

born circumcised: Adam, Seth, Noah, Jacob, Josephus, Moses, and Job (Buber’s Tanchuma mentions ten). Avot D’Rabbi Natan 2.5 lists Adam, Seth, Noah, Shem, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Balaam, Samuel, David, Jeremiah, Zerubabel, and Job. A Midrash on Ps 9:7 gives a list of thirteen. The Prophet Muhammed is also said to have been born circumcised in a Hadith transmitted by Anas b. Mālīk and recorded by Al-Munāwī. See M. J. Kister, “...and He Was Born Circumcised...: Some Notes on Circumcision in Hadith,” *Oriens* 34 (1994): 12–13.

¹⁹ So Kalimi, “‘He Was Born Circumcised,’” 4–5.

²⁰ Similarly argued by Ithamar Gruenwald, “God the ‘Stone/Rock’: Myth, Idolatry, and Cultic Fetishism in Ancient Israel,” *The Journal of Religion* 76.3 (1996): 441; Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8.

²¹ Sommer, *The Bodies of God*. Sommer outlines the priestly and deuteronomic traditions which try to limit God’s body to a singular body, in juxtaposition to other traditions which are more comfortable with God having multiple “bodies” (things that denote presence in time and space, See Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 2).

the odd and oblique references to oaths sworn by Abraham's genitals (גִּדְיָ) in Gen 24:2 (cf. Gen 47:29–31, Gen 21:23). Although circumcision is not mentioned explicitly here, ancient and modern interpreters of this text understood it as a reference to Abraham's circumcised penis.²² The reason why the grasping of the circumcised penis was significant in these texts is less clear. David Freedman puts forward the most convincing argument, drawing on ancient Babylonian practices of holding a divine image in hand as a surrogate for the presence of the deity in order to swear oaths: "When the temple of the god was too far away, or if other circumstances prevented going to the temple to try the case in the presence of the god, then a part of the god's image was sent from the temple to the site of the dispute; and this part of the god's image was used to represent the divine presence."²³ The circumcised penis was a "sacred object" (אִתְּכֶם, b. Šeb. 38b) by which the ancient patriarchs made oaths before the God of the covenant.²⁴ The rationale was that circumcision as a sign of the covenant itself was a viable alternative to images of God.²⁵

The rabbinic interpretations combined with our understanding of the *imago dei* and circumcision as an appropriate symbol for oaths in Genesis has explanatory power for why circumcision (especially circumcision native to a body) might be associated with bodily perfection in the early Jewish period. If God is holy and a requirement to be in his presence is to be like God in holiness, then circumcision as a sign of perfection allows angels, Moses, and Israel, for that matter, to be "with God." The privilege of being born circumcised like the angels reflected a nature pure enough to be in the presence of the holy God. Circumcision was synonymous with holiness. If God is holy, then it follows that circumcision is an adequate image like him or that God was circumcised.²⁶

Indeed, if we take seriously Paula Fredriksen's recent arguments about the "Jewishness" of God, then we may be more confident that underlying Jubilees is the idea that God was circumcised. In Jubilees, God is himself a staunch keeper of the Sabbath (Gen 2:2–3; weekly in Jub. 2:17–20).²⁷ The

²² Gen. Rab. 59.8; b. Šeb. 38b; Tg. Ps.-J. 24:2; Nahum M. Sarna, "Genesis," The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 162.

²³ R. David Freedman, "Put Your Hand under my Thigh²—The Patriarchal Oath," *BAR* 2.2 (1976): 22.

²⁴ That the circumcised penis could be a sacred object is later affirmed by Rabbi Berekiah in Genesis Rabbah: "Because it [the penis] was given to them in privation, therefore it is precious and nothing was sworn except by it." Gen. Rab. 59.8. אמר רבי ברכיה לפי שנתנה להם. בצער לפיכך היא חביבה ואין נשבעין אלא בה.

²⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 747.

²⁶ Also recognised by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 182 and Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 74.

²⁷ Paula Fredriksen, "How Jewish Is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul's Theology," *JBL* 137.1 (2018): 198–199. See also Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale

language at least of kingship and perhaps also of parentage might be drawn from Jub. 15:31–32, where the author says while other nations have angels and spirits to rule them, the Lord is ruler of Israel, to guard and bless them and “so that they may be his and he theirs from now and forever.”²⁸ The author recognizes that *Adam* was made in God’s image (Jub. 6:8). Furthermore, God’s “body” is not absent from Jub. 15 but is implied since the closest angels to him are called the “angels of the presence” (Jub. 2:2; 15:27). In Jubilees, God is *there*, among the closest and holiest layers of his angels (those of “presence” and “sanctification”) who are born circumcised with him, and the author states that he has “sanctified Israel” (sanctification being synonymous with circumcision in the context) so that they might be with him. It is not farfetched to infer that in the assembly of the circumcised, God, the epitome of holiness, would also bear the marks of covenant.

What follows from this is that the most ideal ancient Jewish body was the circumcised body of God himself. Considering this above analysis, both the angels of the presence/sanctification in Jubilees and Moses in Pseudo-Philo reflected this ideal. Admittedly, most Jewish men were not born circumcised. However, males circumcised on the eighth day were as close as men could be to the idyllic circumcised bodies of Moses, Noah, the angels, and even God himself. They were the Jewish ideal.

Since the circumcised body was seen at least by some Jews in the early Jewish period as the ideal Jewish body, what then did this mean for bodies that differed? Saul Olyan, stimulated by a conversation with Victor Horowitz, recognized the overlap between the treatment of the disabled and the uncircumcised in the Hebrew Bible but came just short of calling it a disability.²⁹ How did this apply to those born as Jews? Were uncircumcised or noncircumcised Jewish bodies *impaired*? Did it have a negative social impact on them? To this, we now turn.

3. The Uncircumcised Jewish Man

The proliferation of worries concerning uncircumcision arose in the early Jewish period, due in particular to the pogroms of Antiochus Epiphanes in Judea

University Press, 2017). Fredriksen does not say explicitly that God is circumcised but her language is suggestive: “If heaven itself holds circumcised angels—who keep God company on Shabbat while lower angelic orders keep the world running to time— and if God himself, not only in Genesis but also evermore thereafter ‘rests’ one day out of seven (with these circumcised angels for company), then God is ‘Jewish.’” Fredriksen, “How Jewish Is God? Divine Ethnicity in Paul’s Theology,” 199.

²⁸ VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees*, 93.

²⁹ Indeed, Olyan’s focus is on circumcision as an exception to defects in the Hebrew Bible. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 37–38. For the origination of the Olyan’s idea see Saul M. Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 173, n. 43.

(1 Macc 1:48). But even before Antiochus outlawed circumcision, 1 Maccabees suggests that the encounters between Israel and the Greeks led to a number of Jews “making foreskins for themselves” (1 Macc 1:15).

The evidence we have of uncircumcised Jewish men in the early Jewish period is scant and often relies on inference. We find that the bulk of our sources come from Palestine. So, Mattathias and his friends circumcised uncircumcised youth in the land of Israel (1 Macc 2:46).³⁰ In Jubilees, the writer anticipates that the Israelites will not circumcise their sons properly, either leaving some of the flesh or leaving them completely uncircumcised (15:33), corroborating the accounts in 1 Maccabees. In the late first or early second century C.E., the prophet in 2 Bar 66:5 sees a vision of the king “Josiah” (king of Israel ca. 640–609 B.C.E.) leaving none uncircumcised. There is no explicit mention of Josiah circumcising anyone in 2 Kgs 22–23 or 2 Chr 34–35.³¹ It is therefore most likely that like 1 Maccabees and Jubilees, 2 Baruch emphasizes uncircumcision because of its prevalence in this period. Amongst the rabbis, in t. Šabb. 15.9, we find indicators also that during the Bar Kochba revolt, numerous Jewish men extended their foreskins (המשוך צריך למוֹל) to be uncircumcised.

Amongst Diaspora Jews, one might take the apostle Paul’s injunction in all his churches that those who were uncircumcised should remain uncircumcised (1 Cor 7:18–20). While this command would have applied predominantly to Gentile members, we cannot exclude the possible presence of uncircumcised Jewish men in Paul’s churches. In Greek locales like Corinth or Asia Minor, for Diaspora Jews to participate in civic life (the gymnasium, baths where business was conducted, etc.), uncircumcision was the social physical norm.³² Jewish men were either at the mercy of parents to leave them uncircumcised in order to conform to Greek social ideals or to uses prosthesis like a Greek kynodesme or a Roman fibula to secure the foreskin in place.³³ Also, depending on the way one interprets Acts 16:3, Timothy may also be an example of a Jew in the Diaspora who was left uncircumcised by his parents. Taken cumulatively, we know that uncircumcised Jewish males did exist in the early Jewish period in both Palestine and likely in the Diaspora.

While an uncircumcised Jewish male reflected his parents’ abandonment of parts of Jewish religious custom, such an abandonment did not necessarily prevent either them or him from being Jewish. There is no indication

³⁰ See Isaac T. Soon, “‘In strength’ not ‘by force’: Re-reading the Circumcision of the Uncircumcised ἐν ἰσχύι in 1 Macc 2:46,” *JSP* 23.3 (2020): 149–167.

³¹ It is possible but unverifiable that 2 Baruch may be drawing on information from non-extant sources noted in 2 Kgs 23:28 or 2 Chr 35:27.

³² Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm: Circumcision in Reverse,” *BRev* 8 (1992): 52–57.

³³ Martial jibes on a Jew whose fibula has fallen out (*Epigrams* 7.82). On kynodesme in Greece and Rome see Frederick M. Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the *Kynodesme*,” *The Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75.3 (2001): 375–405.

in the ancient material that uncircumcision ever stopped these men from being *Ioudaioi*, especially since genealogy was one critical aspect of being Jewish.³⁴ Parentage (whether of the father or mother) was a determining factor whether one was Jewish or not in a way that circumcision never was.³⁵ There is, however, plenty of indication that uncircumcision caused men to violate God's covenant with the patriarchs and Israel. What tied uncircumcised Jews to Israel was their ancestry since it was to them and their forefathers (!) that God's covenant was made in Genesis 17. By not being circumcised, they jeopardized their access to God's eschatological blessings.

The liminality of uncircumcised Jewish men is expressed by the two forces exerted upon them. Uncircumcised Jewish men were either *pushed* away from God's people or *pulled* into conformity with the ideal Jewish body, the circumcised Jewish man. From its inception in Gen 17, uncircumcised Jewish males were commanded to be "cut off" from their kin (Gen 17:14). Jubilees intensifies this consequence by saying the person who has not been circumcised on the eighth day "does not belong to the people of the pact" but belongs "to the people (meant for) destruction" (Jub. 15:26).³⁶ While this primarily applies to Jews circumcised apart from the eighth day, this statement presumably also includes uncircumcised Jewish males.³⁷ What is perplexing is that at such an early age, a Jewish male is not able to decide whether to be circumcised or not. Still, Jubilees says that "he has violated the covenant of the Lord our God"

³⁴ I use the terminology "Jews," "Judaism," and "Jewish" to refer to those who lived as Ἰουδαῖοι in the early Jewish period. The scholarship on whether the term Ἰουδαῖος should be translated as "Jew" or "Judean" is complex (a prodigious overview and evaluation of the arguments can be found in David M. Miller, "The Meaning of *Ioudaios* and its relationship to Other Group Labels in Ancient 'Judaism,'" *Currents in Biblical Research* 9.1 [2010]: 98–126; David M. Miller, "Ethnicity Comes of Age: An Overview of Twentieth-Century Terms for *Ioudaios*," *Currents in Biblical Research* 10.1 [2012]: 293–311; David M. Miller, "Ethnicity, Religion and the Meaning of *Ioudaios* in Ancient 'Judaism,'" *Currents in Biblical Research* 12.2 [2013]: 216–265). I follow Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness*, who understand the term as encompassing both the ethnic (shared ancestry, history, geographical associations, customs, etc.) and the religious. So, Miller, "Ethnicity, Religion and the Meaning of *Ioudaios* in Ancient 'Judaism,'" 257; John M. G. Barclay, *Against Apion*, Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary (Leiden: Brill, 2007), LX–LXI; John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017), 18–19.

³⁵ See Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Was Timothy Jewish (Acts 16:1–3)? Patristic Exegesis, Rabbinic Law, and Matrilineal Descent," *JBL* 105.2 (1986): 267.

³⁶ Here I am using VanderKam's more recent translation: James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees 1–21*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

³⁷ Segal (*The Book of Jubilees: Rewritten Bible, Redaction, Ideology and Theology*, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 244) proposes that the group the author of Jubilees argues against here is in fact the Pharisees with their views represented in m. Šabb. 19. The problem with this view is the lateness of the Mishnaic text, as Thiessen (*Contesting Conversion*, 82–83) notes.

(15:26).³⁸ For an uncircumcised Jewish male, then, without circumcision (and with the issue of eighth-day circumcision aside) there was “no sign on him that he belongs to the Lord.” Being uncircumcised not only meant that one looked physically like the nations but that he was also covenantally in the same position as foreigners, being marked for expulsion from God’s blessing in the land (Jub. 15:26, 28, 34) and whose ultimate end was divine judgment (15:28, 33–34). Since he broke the law of an “eternal command,” an uncircumcised Jewish male was thus excluded from God’s covenant people.

The association of foreigners with uncircumcision was already present in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Philistines). It is clear from the development of the Hebrew Bible that circumcision becomes identified with covenantal boundaries and access to God’s promises to Abraham. For example, in the law of Passover (Exod 12:43–51), circumcision becomes the pre-requisite for participating in the festival. Those who are not circumcised cannot be a part of the ritual. From this passage, the mark of circumcision distinguishes “citizens/natives” (אזרח, 12:48) of the “community of Israel” (עדת ישראל, 12:47) from “foreigners” (בְּיַנְכֹר, 12:43). Likewise, the stipulation for Shechem to marry Dinah and for the Jacobites and Shechemites to become “as a people-one” (לעם אחד, Gen 34:16), was circumcision. Intriguingly, the use of עם as well as the specific expression המול לכם כל-יזכר (word for word from Gen 17:10) suggest an invitation to become a part of the descendants of Isaac and thus the promise of Abraham. In short, like those who want to take Passover, for Dinah to marry a non-Israelite, and for the two nations to become one, the Shechemites “must lose ‘foreign’ status by being circumcised.” Josephus echoes the sentiment in Jubilees and the Hebrew Bible when he notes that Abraham was circumcised so that his descendants would not be confused with other nations (*A.J.* 1.192). It is not suggesting that an uncircumcised Jewish male’s genealogical connection with Abraham comes into question (thus marking him a non-Jew). Rather, should a Jewish male remain uncircumcised, there would be little to distinguish him physically from the nations around him.

Uncircumcised Jewish males were also often viewed as unclean just by association with uncircumcision. For example, the author of 1 Maccabees viewed sons left uncircumcised as equivalent to profaning the sabbath, defiling the sanctuaries, and sacrificing swine to idols; all things which Mattathias and Judas Maccabeus had to correct in the land.³⁹ Additionally, one of the hymns from the *Hodayot* at Qumran (1QHa XIV, l. 20) equates the paths the uncircumcised take with those of “the unclean” (טמא) and “the lawless” (פריז).

³⁸ Philo offered an allegorical interpretation (*QG* 3.52) that what is meant is not the physical man should be cut off but his soul (his intellect) that should be cut off. Thus, for Philo a Jewish boy is exempt from the consequences from the decisions of his parents.

³⁹ Aside from the reversal of 1 Macc 2:46 compare also 1 Macc 1:45 and 4:53–56; 1:46 and 4:36–51; 1:49 and 3:48, 56; This pattern suggests that Mattathias and Judas liberated the land and restored it to its previous state before Antiochus’s prohibitions.

Even for Philo, uncircumcision leaves the body both physically and morally unclean (*Leg.* 1.5; *QG* 3.46, 48).

In sum, the foreignness, profanity, and covenantal violation of an uncircumcised Jewish male point to its abnormality when compared to the ideal Jewish body. An uncircumcised Jewish male is still Jewish, but he is unable to participate as a covenant member of the Jewish nation by nature of the fact that he exists in a perpetually law-breaking state. The nature of the uncircumcised Jewish male was liminal *outside* of God's people, but he did not have to remain there.

While some Jews forced uncircumcised Jewish males to the margins of the covenant, others desired to bring their abnormal bodies into conformity with standards of covenantal corporeality. Indeed, the effect of texts like *Jub.* 15, which condemns uncircumcision in many forms, is to pressure the uncircumcised to be circumcised (although there is the question of whether circumcisions after the eighth day would be legitimate). The pressure to circumcise uncircumcised Jews has precedence in the Hebrew Bible, such as in *Exod* 4:24–26 (the Bridegroom of Blood episode, both in the case of Moses or Gershon) and *Josh* 5 (the “second” circumcision of the Israelites before celebrating Passover). In the early Jewish period, we have several instances where uncircumcised Jewish males were circumcised. To draw on *1 Macc* 2:46 once again, Mattathias circumcises the sons of Israel who have been left uncircumcised due to Antiochus's anti-Jewish laws.⁴⁰ Also in *2 Bar* 66:5, as mentioned above, no one is left uncircumcised in the land by King Josiah, likely meaning that any uncircumcised Jews (whether due to be circumcised or left uncircumcised because of previous sin) were properly circumcised. In both *1 Maccabees* and *2 Baruch*, one senses the magnetic pull for uncircumcised Jewish males to be brought firmly back into the fold, or rather to have their folds firmly brought back.

Later early Christian tradition preserved/transmitted Jewish traditions that endorsed a similar animosity against uncircumcised Jewish males. So, the third-century heresiologist Hippolytus of Rome, in his *Refutation*, records a particular sub-group (“party”) of the Essenes whom he designates with the label *Sicarii/Zelot*.⁴¹ This group, “when they hear someone discoursing concerning God and his laws, if he is uncircumcised, one of them watches closely until he is in some place alone. He threatens to kill him unless he is circumcised.”⁴² The

⁴⁰ Steven Weitzman, “Forced Circumcision and the Shifting Role of Gentiles in Hasmonean Ideology,” *HTR* 92.1 (1999): 37–59.

⁴¹ Scholars generally argue that underlying Hippolytus's accounts of the Essenes, Sadducees, and Pharisees are Josephus's accounts, although the specific details of the *Sicarii/Zelots* here are not found in his works (cf. *J.W.* 2.254–255; 7.253–255). Unmentioned here is Origen who suggests that the *Sicarii* may have practiced self-circumcision (*Cels.* 2.13).

⁴² ἔτεροι δέ, ἐπὶ ἀκούσῳ τινος περὶ θεοῦ διαλεγόμενου καὶ τῶν τούτου νόμων, εἰ ἀπερίτμητος

likelihood that the person meant here is a gentile is unlikely since forced circumcision on Gentiles was rare. Most ancient sources are ambiguous, with the only “clear evidence” of forced non-Jewish circumcision happening under the hand of John Hyrcanus against the Idumeans (*Ant.* 13.257–258), even though some scholars debate whether Josephus and Ptolemy should be accepted over and above Strabo’s account as well as whether the Idumeans as a whole were reticent towards adopting Jewish customs.⁴³ Gentiles in Josephus as well as in early Christian texts like Galatians record Gentiles adopting circumcision voluntarily, whether through conversion (so Izates in *Ant.* 20.17ff), marriage (*A.J.* 20.139ff), or social pressure (Paul’s Galatian agitators).⁴⁴ What there is not evidence for is Jews forcibly circumcising non-Jews. Thus, Hippolytus’s account of the Sicarii/Zelots likely refers to Jews who were bringing uncircumcised Jews into conformity with the law of Moses. But can we trust Hippolytus’s account of the Jews? Eisenman suggests that his account may be based on a variant version of Josephus.⁴⁵ His description of their customs and social life lacks the kind of invective found in other anti-Jewish writings, with the concentration of his critique focusing on their views of the resurrection and the Messiah. There seems to be little reason to doubt Hippolytus (and the source he is using).

The practice of circumcising uncircumcised Jews reveals both a fervent zeal on behalf of some Jews for the Torah as well as some of their blatant disgust toward uncircumcision as a physical abnormality. Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah (c. 80–120 CE) said in *m. Ned.* 3:11 “Foreskin is disgusting since the wicked by it are disgraced” (רבי אלעזר בן עזריה אומר מאוסה ערלה שנתנגו בה הרשעים). That uncircumcision is viewed as an impairment can be seen in the way uncircumcision becomes synonymous with malfunctioning body parts. Moses’s well-known claim that he is a “poor speaker” (NRSV) is an idiomatic rendering of the much more specific phrase ערל שפתים, “foreskinned (uncircumcised) lips” (*Exod* 6:12, 30). Considering *Exod* 4:10, it seems clear that Moses had some kind

εἴη, παραφυλάξας <τις αὐτῶν> τὸν τοιοῦτον ἐν τὸ πῶ τι μόνον, πονεῦειν ἀπειλεῖ εἰ μὴ περιτμηθεῖη. For critical editions of the text see Mirosalve Marcovich, ed., *Hippolytus Refutatio Omnium Haeresium*, PTS (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986), 371 and M. David Litwa, *Refutation of All Heresies*, Writings from the Greco-Roman World (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 682.

⁴³ Katell Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land? The Hasmonean Dynasty Between Biblical Models and Hellenistic Diplomacy*, trans. Margaret Rigaud (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 293. Others have argued that the Itureans, also recorded by Josephus, most likely already practised circumcision and Josephus merely imposed the example of the Idumeans upon their alliance with Judea. Berthelot, *In Search of the Promised Land?* 314.

⁴⁴ On the coercion of the Galatian communities see Isaac T. Soon, “The Bestial Glans: Gentile Christ Followers and the Monstrous Nudity of Ancient Circumcision,” *JJMJS* 8 (2021): 90–104.

⁴⁵ Robert Eisenman, “Sicarii Essenes, ‘Those of the Circumcision,’ and Qumran,” *Journal of Higher Criticism* 12.1 (2006): 17.

of problem speaking or at least that he felt insecure about his speaking.⁴⁶ Either way, his ability to speak is viewed as impaired, and Moses fears that he will not be able to speak properly and communicate to Pharaoh what is necessary for Israel to be freed from slavery. A similar expression occurs in the *Hodayot* (1QHa X, ll. 18) when it says men of deceit against the hymn-writer have altered God's knowledge with "foreskinned lips and another tongue" (בערול שפה ולשון (אחרת)). What is significantly stressed in these texts is that uncircumcised (read: impaired) body parts distort divine knowledge. Likewise, also with physical uncircumcision. Circumcision is first and foremost a sign of God's covenant (Gen 17:10). Epistemologically speaking, uncircumcision not only obfuscates knowledge of God's covenant but also indicates the lack of knowledge on the part of the uncircumcised Jewish male (and his parents). They knew what God had commanded, what the law of Moses stated, and yet they refused to act on it. Uncircumcision for a Jewish male was a sign of both epistemological as well as physical impairment.

4. Uncircumcised and Uncircumcisable Jewish Women

Because they lacked male genitalia, Jewish women were not caught up in the exact same social and cultural centrifugal liminality as uncircumcised Jewish men. They could not be forced "in" or driven "out" since there were no physical realia that gave way to such an opportunity.⁴⁷ In light of this fact, one might wonder why the question of circumcision should ever have been applied to women in the first place. Obviously, circumcision was intended for men, and so judgments applicable to uncircumcised Jewish men who were supposed to be circumcised were not necessarily applicable to women, on whom circumcision was not required nor possible. Yet, the fact that the issue came up for Philo suggests that it is not as illegitimate a question as one might think.⁴⁸ Indeed, the text in Gen 12 invites the question: What about Sarah? What piece of her flesh marks the covenant?

Even though Philo is the only writer to address the issue of why women are left uncircumcised, his account in QG 3.49, extant only in Armenian, is terse. Shaye Cohen analyses the passage in detail, concluding, "Since Philo nowhere says that circumcision is an essential criterion for membership in the people of Israel ... for him the *status* of women within Israel is not affected by the absence

⁴⁶ On Moses's disability see Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and Identity in Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30," *BibInt* 16 (2008): 428–441.

⁴⁷ The evidence of Strabo's account of Jewish excision of women is suspect. See Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 59–61, who argues that the best explanation is simply that Strabo thinks Jewish circumcising practices mimic exactly those of Egyptians.

⁴⁸ Niehoff argues that Philo's audience here is are non-Jewish practitioners of circumcision who want to understand its significance more deeply. Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity," 97, n. 28.

of circumcision. Circumcision does not determine *status*.⁴⁹ While Cohen is correct that Jewish women remain a part of God's people, he is wrong to state that in Philo, their uncircumcision does not affect their *status within his people*.

For our purpose here, I focus on Philo's second reason for why women were not circumcised: it was because they were the least indispensable part of procreation:

The second [reason] is that the matter of the female in the remains of the menstrual fluids produces the fetus. But the male (provides) the skill and the cause. And so, since the male provides the greater and more necessary (part) in the process of generation, it was proper that his pride should be checked by the sign of circumcision, but the material element, being inanimate, does not admit of arrogance.⁵⁰

Niehoff notes that Philo specifically highlights these "biological" givens because he is apologetically making a distinction between Jewish and Egyptian customs.⁵¹ The active role of the male and the passive role of the female reflects the Aristoteilian theory of generation.⁵² Aristotle argues that in generation the female provides all the material of the child's substance in her menstrual blood while the male semen acted as a kind of catalyst (some use the language of enzyme) in order to actively act on the female substance (*Gen. an.* 1.20–21 [729a–730b]).⁵³ As Nolan notes, "So it is true that Aristotle sees the male matter as active and the female matter as passive in the act of fertilisation [male viewpoint] or conception [female viewpoint], but this is not to say that he sees the female as passive in the entire process of reproduction."⁵⁴ Philo takes up this active/passive view of generation and argues that circumcision restrains men's pride for being the catalyst for procreation. Conversely, he shows the "humble position" of Jewish women who do not need to face the same temptation to arrogance.

⁴⁹ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 63.

⁵⁰ QG 3.49 translation by Marcus (LCL), emphasis mine.

⁵¹ Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity," 97.

⁵² e.g., Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity," 97, n. 28. Lieu says that Philo's understanding is in line with "contemporary biology" Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation," 362.

⁵³ In connection with Jesus's conception, Aristotle's theory adds an interesting angle: "On Aristotle's theory, a woman accepts no physical contribution from a man when she becomes a mother. The fact therefore that Jesus had no physical father did not make him less human. In a sense, for Aristotle no one has a physical father, that is, one whose substance comes to form part of the child's substance." Michael Nolan, "Passive and Deformed? Did Aristotle Really Say This?" *New Blackfriars* 76.893 (1995): 247.

⁵⁴ Nolan, "Passive and Deformed?" 249.

Cohen, drawing on Dorothy Sly's work, recognizes that Philo views the feminine "with passivity, incompleteness, and irrationality."⁵⁵ But his analysis focuses solely on Philo's metaphysical argument, on concepts of pride and passion without recourse to the physical reality of the Jewish women Philo whose bodies and substance are acted upon and the implications this relationship entails both to men and the status of women.

With his explanation of generation in connection with circumcision, Philo recalls the themes of generation, fertility, and family that underlie circumcision in Genesis 17. A man (Abraham) inseminates his wife (Sarah) to produce a son (Isaac). Although Philo focuses on circumcision as a physical restraint on male pride, his illustration cuts to the structural core of the Jewish people: the family and its continuation. As noted by Lieu, Philo's association of circumcision with procreation can also be found among the latter rabbis (Gen. Rab. 46.4).⁵⁶ In this family, the uncircumcised woman has but one role: to be inanimate, breathless, and lifeless material (*anjoawntch*). Certainly, some of her leftovers are used in the generation process, but she remains inert. Implicit in what Philo says is that a Jewish woman's body is a lifeless vessel that a circumcised male penetrates to generate the life of another male to be circumcised. An uncircumcised Jewish woman is thus a covenantal waypoint through which circumcised men pass through. She is a liminal member of God's community. An ancient Jewish woman provided the means of the covenant, while the man provided the instrument. For Philo, the absence of circumcision *did* determine status, not whether one was in or out of God's people, but *how* one lived as a part of that community.

The uncircumcision of women had further implications for their association and function within Jewish communities. The statement about an uncircumcised Jewish male in Jub. 15:26, that "there is no sign on him that he belongs to the Lord," has a haunting corollary for a Jewish female. Not only was there no sign on a woman's body of God's covenant, but there was no sign that she belonged to God *at all*. Even more so, there was no physical opportunity for a woman's body ever to signal kinship with God. Ultimately, there was no physical opportunity for a woman's body ever to *physically resemble* God.

On the other hand, when Josephus remarks that the purpose of circumcision was to keep Abraham's descendants "unmixed" from other nations (A.J. 1.192), it implies that men's bodies serve as the boundary marker for both Abraham's children and the Jewish people. Both Israelite ancestry and covenantal significance are unidentifiable from a woman's body alone. One had to refer to her husband or son or father or brother.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* 145. Cohen quotes with reference to Dorothy Sly, *Philo's Perception of Women*, BJS 209 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

⁵⁶ Lieu, "Circumcision, Women and Salvation," 362.

⁵⁷ As Cohen notes that before the second century C.E. regardless of the ethnicity of the mother, what determined the Jewishness of her children was if they were the offspring of

The liminality of ancient Jewish women due to uncircumcision in these readings can be summarised by two relationships: The first is at a familial level. What is clear from Philo and Josephus's reading of Genesis 17 is that in terms of circumcision, Sarai/Sarah is bracketed by her circumcised husband, Abraham, and her circumcised sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Her sole blessing, though not insignificant, is not just the ability to contribute material that eventually becomes children but the ability to contribute material that eventually generates male descendants who can then bear the covenant of God. Covenantally, she is significant because she is married to a circumcised Jewish man and bears circumcised Jewish sons.

The second liminal relationship can be described on an ethnic level. Women are also bracketed between circumcised Jews (by which we mean circumcised Jewish males primarily) and the nations (foreigners, uncircumcised non-Israel). She is Jewish, but her body does not represent the Jewish bodily ideal. She bears no mark of God's covenant with the Jewish people yet is a part of that covenant by nature of the fact that she has been born from a father who bears that mark.

The gravitation toward ideal bodies in ancient Judaism can be seen in Joseph and Aseneth. One of the principal conclusions of Jill Hick-Keeton's book on Joseph and Aseneth is that "Jewishness," however defined, was not accomplished singularly by circumcision.⁵⁸ This is demonstrated precisely in Aseneth's case because she is a woman and women were not required by Jewish law to circumcise. Although Aseneth is not required to circumcise, this does not mean that the text lacks a cultural inertia to conform this gentile woman's body to a Jewish physiological ideal. While her genitals might not match the features of the patriarch Abraham, in the very first chapter of Joseph and Aseneth, the narrator describes aspects of her physical appearance that matched the matriarchs: "...and she was tall as Sarah and handsome as Rebecca and beautiful as Rachel" (Jos. Asen. 1.5).⁵⁹ It is not portrayed merely as novelistic beauty, as in other ancient romances. It is explicitly Jewish. Her body is later rendered immortal, a forever beauty (Jose. Asen. 16.16), and Aseneth later realizes her body (her eyes, cheeks, lips, teeth, hair, neck, and breasts) has been transformed, almost on a cosmic scale (Jos. Asen. 18.9).⁶⁰ So while Aseneth is not required to

a Jewish father. Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew," *HTR* 82.1 (1989): 25.

⁵⁸ Jill Hicks-Keeton, *Arguing with Aseneth: Gentile Access to Israel's Living God in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 137.

⁵⁹ Translation from C. Burchard, "Joseph and Aseneth" in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and the New Testament: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1985), 203.

⁶⁰ For an analysis of the latter passage in the context of Aseneth's epiphanies see Rivkah Gillian Glass, "Aseneth's Epiphanes," *JSJ* 53 (2022): 54–56.

circumcise, she is portrayed as embodying as much of the ideal Jewish woman's body as possible—if not also surpassing that ideal—coming as close as she could to the Jewish body so often portrayed as central to the covenant with the God of Israel, the circumcised man. In this reading, the debate on circumcision is not bypassed or circumvented; rather, it is stalled by the physical limitations of Aseneth's body as a woman, unable to incorporate circumcision.

5. Conclusion

Uncircumcision on Jewish bodies signals liminality and abnormality from the ideal. While both uncircumcised men and women were liminal, they were so in different ways. Uncircumcised men were caught in the Jewish desire to resolve that liminality through exclusion or conformity. In a sense, both exclusion from the Jewish people and surgery into the community may be conceived of as a “cure” for the uncircumcised Jewish male, either removing the abnormality from the community or removing it from the person. Either way, his liminality was eliminated. The excising of the foreskin of a Jewish male was the nexus through which he gained admittance into the community of those who inherit the promises of Genesis 17, a sign of covenant loyalty, and also a transformation from an impure, uncircumcised state to a normal clean circumcised state.

Jewish women were never “out” of God's people, but they were never as far “in” as was physically possible. At least uncircumcised Jewish men could escape their impairment by simply circumcising. Jewish women did not have the same luxury. For women there was no opportunity for resolution. Being uncircumcised and uncircumcisable, women did not and could not reflect the ideal Jewish body. They remained permanently bracketed between the men in their lives.