

Defying the Dialectic: A Different Paradigm for Understanding Circumcision in Ancient Jewish and Christian Texts

M Adryael Tong

Interdenominational Theological Center | matong@itc.edu

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Abstract

By tracing the contours of circumcision rhetoric in the Hebrew Bible, I demonstrate that there is a consistent fluidity at the heart of circumcision discourse from its inception through the early development of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. By means of a conceptual heuristic and literary analysis, I show that the Hebrew Bible theorizes circumcision in a variety of ways—as a covenantal requirement, a borderline between Israel and other peoples, a signifier of general righteousness, and/or any combination. This fluidity of circumcision discourse then extends into Second Temple literature. Thus, the diversity of circumcision ideologies we find in Second Temple texts is no innovation or devolution from a pristine Scriptural consensus, but rather, a reflection of the fundamentally ambiguous circumcision ideologies in the Hebrew Bible itself. Nevertheless, Second Temple texts present their particular (and differing) ideologies as faithful representations of a presumed singular Biblical circumcision ideology. I thus suggest that holding this fundamental fluidity of circumcision discourse in view may help us better understand Jewish and Christian disagreements over circumcision not so much as a cataclysmic break from biblical precedent, but rather as the result of irreducible ambiguities inherent to circumcision from the very beginning.

Keywords

Circumcision, Hebrew Bible, Parting of the Ways

1. Introduction

There is a curious tendency within much of “circumcision studies” to search for some kind of unitary (or “common-denominator”) Jewish (or Christian) ideology

of the practice, while *simultaneously* acknowledging a diversity of opinions among the members or sects of any particular community. Nina Livesey makes such a critique of scholars of circumcision in antiquity:

The Jewish practice of circumcision, as treated in texts from the second century BCE to the first century CE, the time period to which interpreters turn for the definition of this rite, has no monovalent meaning ... Within all these writings, the meaning of circumcision is in every instance contingent upon context ... By contrast, the situation within the scholarship on circumcision belies this fundamental diversity in the meaning of circumcision. While several general reference works acknowledge the differences in understandings of circumcision, rarely is that same degree of variety reflected in the analytical discussions (i.e., lectures, commentaries, and specialized studies) on circumcision in the ancient world.¹

Consider, as representative of the tendency which Livesey indicates, E. P. Sanders:

As on every point, there was some variety of interpretation and practice [regarding circumcision]. Mendelson has pointed out that Philo saw circumcision not as a rite ‘whereby a male child gains entry into the congregation of Israel’, but rather a sign of ‘the spirit of compliance or non-compliance in the parents’. The allegorizers to whom Philo refers, but whose position he does not fully describe, may have wished to surrender circumcision as a sign of being Jewish. Further, it is not certain that all Jewish communities required circumcision of adult males who converted to Judaism. *Despite some diversity in interpretation and a few exceptions to the rule*, circumcision of males was commonly regarded as an essential part of Jewish practice.²

* Many thanks to Evan Hershman for his invaluable help editing this article.

¹ Nina Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 1–2.

² E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE–66 CE* (London: SCM Press, 1992), 213–214, emphasis mine. In addition to the examples Livesey collates, this tendency implicitly underpins, e.g., Daniel Boyarin’s *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). By labelling Paul (and Philo) as “radical,” Boyarin implies that there is a “normative” ideology against which Paul is “radical.”

Here, although Sanders recognizes a lack of consensus among ancient Jews concerning circumcision ideology and practice, he nevertheless reveals a desire for some kind of standard position, even if vague or ambiguous.

Similarly, Andreas Blaschke argues in his book *Beschneidung* that Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian discourse on circumcision follows a “rough schematization” based upon a “three-step dialectic of thesis (Israel or Jews), antithesis (pagan), and synthesis (Christians).”³ However, he then admits that

the individual positions in themselves are not completely uniform: There were allegorizing Jews and Jewish apostates who rejected circumcision; there were Gentiles who, as God-fearers, were sympathetic to the idea of circumcision but did not dare to do so because of their social position, and there were (especially Jewish-)Christians who still considered the execution of (physical) circumcision necessary.⁴

But if none of the three categories—Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Christian—are unitary, why argue that circumcision discourse as a whole be schematized? Why does it make more sense to propose a kind of Hegelian dialectic than to say that all circumcision discourse is fundamentally fluid? Why is a model we know to be inexact preferable to one characterized by ambiguity?

This assumption of fluidity—even inconsistency—within the biblical *text* is nothing new. As John Barton writes:

From ancient times Bible readers have been aware of apparent inconsistencies in the biblical text. Jewish scholars discussed contradictions between the various bodies of legislation in the Pentateuch, and between the Pentateuch and Ezekiel; everyone knew that Kings and Chronicles tell differing stories; and Christians were confronted by their opponents with the accusation that the Gospels were mutually inconsistent. The discovery of such inconsistencies is not the work of modern biblical critics, but of many ordinary readers of the Bible from time immemorial.⁵

³ Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (Tübingen: Franke Verlag, 1998), 491. My translation.

⁴ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 491. My translation.

⁵ John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 13.

Why then, in the case of circumcision, does a thoroughgoing desire to search for some kind of “majority opinion” regarding the *practice* of circumcision persist? Why assume consistency with regard to *praxis* and not with regard to text?

Unlike Livesey, I do not believe this desire for coherence stems from a lack of attentiveness to the diversity of meaning among Jewish and Christian texts on circumcision, leading, as she claims, to “understandings of this rite and of first-century Jews and Judaism that are both limited and false.”⁶ Rather, I wonder to what extent the desire to discover a normative Jewish ideology of circumcision might itself be a *result* of the discursive endpoint of the circumcision controversy in late antiquity: the establishment of two separate religions, Judaism and Christianity. Dominant historical narratives within both traditions present the separation of Judaism and Christianity as, in part, due to a fundamental disagreement regarding the practice of circumcision. Since the efficacy of such origin mythologies relies on an assumption within both religious traditions that circumcision ideologies within each of the communities remain stable, perhaps the desire to discover a consistent ideology of circumcision among ancient Jews and Christians derives from an anachronistic retrojection based upon our knowledge of subsequent history. Could it be, then, that from the point of view of first-century Jews, circumcision was actually an open and contentious question—and only appears to have some kind of coherency in hindsight?

This article traces the contours of circumcision rhetoric in the Hebrew Bible and argues that there is a fluidity at the heart of circumcision discourse from the very beginning. By demonstrating the variety of ways the Hebrew Bible theorizes circumcision—as a covenantal requirement, a borderline between Israel and other peoples, a signifier of general righteousness, and/or any combination thereof—I suggest that the multivalent meanings of circumcision in subsequent Jewish and Christian discourse are not an aberration or devolution from a unified theology of circumcision, but are rather a natural result of an inconsistent biblical legacy. In other words, given the variety of ways the biblical text portrays circumcision, it is perhaps more surprising that there seems to be *any* form of consistency among Jewish (and/or Christian) opinions towards the practice.

My analysis focuses on how the *rhetoric* of the Hebrew Bible gestures toward particular circumcision ideologies. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the circumcision ideologies expressed, for example, in Gen 17; Isa 52:1, or Jer 6:10, reflect “actual” historical Israelites’ attitudes towards their “actual” circumcisions (or about the “actual” foreskins of their non-Israelite neighbors or enemies). Rather, I begin from the assumption that the Hebrew Bible is a literary text that—

⁶ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 4.

while it may bear some relation to historical *realia*—cannot provide us any *direct* access to Israelite history.

Thus, I survey instances of circumcision language in the Hebrew Bible and then group these examples of circumcision discourse into a heuristic taxonomy of three main categories: “Covenantal/Ritual,” “Identity,” and “Metaphorical.” I determine an instance of circumcision discourse as “Covenantal/Ritual” when the primary meaning of the word “circumcision” or “foreskin” in the passage refers to the covenantal ritual of circumcision described in Gen 17. An “Identity” example deploys “circumcision” or “foreskin” rhetorically to emphasize difference between the Israelites as a people among peoples. A usage of “circumcision” or “foreskin” is “Metaphorical” when it signifies something other than (or in addition to) the covenantal ritual practice of circumcision, but not as a specific means of distinguishing Israelites from other peoples.

None of these categories are airtight. There are examples of circumcision language that do not easily fall into any of these categories, and certain citations will fall into multiple categories.⁷ Still, classifying these verses according to this heuristic taxonomy tracks the meanings of “circumcision” and “foreskin,” while at the same time clarifying how particular meanings are emphasized in some contexts and not others. As a result, my analysis sheds light on the diversity of circumcision ideologies within the Hebrew Bible, from circumcision as a ritualized action, to circumcision as a mark of ethnic identification and separation, to “circumcision” as a generalized metaphor indicating one’s privileged status vis à vis God. Ultimately, my aim is not to simply sort every usage of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, but rather to sketch the parameters of a fundamentally fluid discourse of circumcision as it was received by later interpreters.⁸

⁷ For example, Jer 11:16 where the LXX mistranslates הַמִּוֹלָה גְּדֻלָּהּ in פְּרִי־תֹאֵר קָרָא יְיָ רֵעֵנִי יִפְהַ פְּרִי־תֹאֵר קָרָא as φωνήν περιτομῆς (ἐλαίαν ὠραίαν εὐσκιον τῶ εἶδει ἐκάλεσεν κύριος τὸ ὄνομά σου· εἰς φωνήν περιτομῆς αὐτῆς ἀνήφθη πῦρ ἐπ’ αὐτήν, μεγάλη ἢ θλίψις ἐπὶ σέ, ἡχρεώθησαν οἱ κλάδοι αὐτῆς). Although the LXX uses περιτομή in a non-literal manner, I am excluding this citation from my taxonomy of the semantic range of circumcision discourse since it seems so clearly to be a translation error.

⁸ For this kind of work, see, Jason S. Derouchie, “Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 14.2 (2004): 175–203.

2. Covenantal/Ritual

The *locus classicus* of biblical circumcision discourse, Gen 17, sits firmly within the “Covenantal/Ritual” category. This passage establishes the requirement, procedure, and reason for practicing the physical ritual of circumcision among Abraham and his descendants as “the sign of the covenant between me and you” (Gen 17:11).⁹ Phrases such as “Every male among you shall be circumcised” (17:10),¹⁰ “you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin” (17:11),¹¹ and “any male who does not circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that one will be cut off from his people” (17:14) all refer to this ritual procedure.¹² I also place into this category passages that primarily communicate that Abraham’s circumcision at ninety-nine years old, Ishmael’s at thirteen, and Isaac’s at eight days old were all performed according to the ritual requirements set out in Gen 17. This includes Gen 17:24–25, which reports that “Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he circumcised the flesh of his foreskin, and his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin,”¹³ and Gen 21:4, which recounts that “Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old just as God had commanded him.” Historical texts such as Josh 5, which recounts Joshua’s circumcision of all the Israelites before they cross the Jordan River, are also “Covenantal/Ritual,” since the biblical context suggests that Joshua circumcised the Israelites to conform their bodies to the ritual requirements of the Abrahamic covenant.¹⁴

⁹ וְנִמְלְתֶם אֶת בְּשַׂר עֲרֻלְתְּכֶם וְהָיָה לְאוֹת בְּרִית בֵּינִי וּבֵינֵיכֶם (MT). και περιτομηθήσεσθε τὴν σάρκα τῆς ἀρσθουστίας ὑμῶν, και ἔσται ἐν σημεῖω διαθήκης ἀνά μέσον ἐμοῦ και ὑμῶν (LXX).

¹⁰ הַמּוֹל לְכֶם כָּל־זָכָר

¹¹ וְנִמְלְתֶם אֶת בְּשַׂר עֲרֻלְתְּכֶם

¹² Similar verses: Gen 17:12, 13, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27; 21:4; and Lev 12:3. For more on authorship and structure of Gen 17, see Sean McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), 156–160; Benjamine Zeimer, *Abram-Abraham: Kompositionsgeschichte Untersuchungen zu Genesis 14, 15, 16 und 17* (BNZW 350; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2005); André Wénin, “Recherche sur la structure de Genèse 17,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 50.2 (2006): 192–211; and “Circumcision et alliance dans la Genèse. Essai d’interprétation,” in *La Circoncision: Parcours Biblique*, ed. Regis Burnet and Didier Luciani (Brussels: Lessius, 2013). For relationship between P and H, see, David Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (SBL Ancient Israel and Its Literature 3; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009); Mark Brett, “The Priestly Dissemination of Abraham,” *The Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 3.1 (2014): 87–107.

¹³ וְאֲבִרְהָם קִוִּיתְשָׁעִים וְתִשָּׁע שְׁנָה בְּהַמּוֹל בְּשַׂר עֲרֻלְתּוֹ וְיִשְׁמַעֵאל בְּנֵו בְּוִשְׁלֵשׁ עֶשְׂרֵה שְׁנָה בְּהַמּוֹל אֶת בְּשַׂר עֲרֻלְתּוֹ

¹⁴ Later Christian exegetes, such as Justin Martyr, reinterpret this episode as signifying a “second circumcision,” or “circumcision of the heart,” rather than the literal removal of

3. Identity

Paradigmatic examples of “Identity” usages of circumcision discourse include the various references to “uncircumcised Philistines” in Judg 14:3; 1 Sam 17:26 and 17:36, and 2 Sam 1:20, in which “uncircumcised” and “Philistines” are presented in parallel. For example, 2 Sam 1:20 states,

אֶל-תִּגְדּוּ בְּגַת אֶל-תִּבְשְׂרוּ בְּחוּצַת אֲשְׁקֶלֶן פֶּן-תִּשְׂמַחַנָּה בְּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים פֶּן-
תִּשְׂעֲזְנָה בְּנוֹת הָעַרְלִים:

Tell it not in Gath,
Do not proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon,
Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

Recent archeology has cast doubt on the biblical assertion that the Philistines did not practice circumcision.¹⁵ Thus, it is possible that the rhetorical force behind the modifier “uncircumcised” in “uncircumcised Philistines” is meant more to underscore the difference between Israelites and Philistines—“circumcised Israelites” versus “uncircumcised Philistines”—than to provide information about actual genital morphology. Circumcision language in these

penile foreskin (e.g. Justin, *Dial.* 113.6–7; Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 5.5; Lactantius, *Epit.* 4.17). Similarly, the Babylonian Talmud discusses Josh 5 as a “second circumcision,” and theorizes that Joshua’s second circumcision was meant to correct the Israelites’ heretofore halachically dubious circumcision by fully exposing the corona (b. Yebam 71b). Nevertheless, the text of Josh 5 in context suggests that Joshua was required to circumcise the Israelites before they entered the land because they had not yet been (literally, actually, physically) circumcised. The covenantal logic here is clear. Since the Abrahamic covenant with God specifically entails the promise of land (and progeny), the Israelites needed to be properly circumcised in order to uphold their half of the bargain before assuming possession of the land.

¹⁵ See Itzhaq Shai, “Philistia and the Philistines in the Iron Age IIA,” *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 127.2 (2011): 119–134; Avraham Faust, *Israel’s Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2006); Faust, “The Bible, Archeology, and the Practice of Circumcision in Israelite and Philistine Societies,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134.2 (2015): 273–290; and Avraham Faust and Justin Lev-Tov, “The Constitution of Philistine Identity: Ethnic Dynamics in Twelfth to Tenth Century Philistia,” *Oxford Journal of Archeology* 30.1 (2011): 13–31. I would like to thank the participants in the “Expert Meeting on Male Circumcision: Ancient Attitudes in Light of Contemporary Questions” at the University of Oslo (May 9–11, 2019) for bringing this scholarship to my attention.

passages is deployed in order to signify the difference between “them” and “us.”¹⁶ Without the words’ literal/actual/physical meanings fully receding, the terms “circumcised” and “uncircumcised” nevertheless primarily signify ethnic difference. This is especially evident in passages such as Judg 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 1 Sam 31:4, and 1 Chron 10:4, where “uncircumcised” is a metonym for “Philistines.” For example, Judg 15:14–18 recounts Samson’s battle with the Philistines:

הוא־בָּא עַד־לְחִי וּפְלִשְׁתִּים הָרִיעוּ לְקִרְאָתוֹ וַתִּצְלַח עָלָיו רִיחַ יְהוָה וַתְּהִי־נֶנֶה
הָעֵבָרִים אֲשֶׁר עַל־זְרוּעוֹתָיו כַּפְּשֵׁתִים אֲשֶׁר בְּעַרְוֹ בָּאֵשׁ וַיִּמְסוּ אֶסְרוּ מֵעַל יָדָיו:
וַיִּמְצֵא לְחֵי־חֲמוֹר טְרֵיָה וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וַיִּקְחֶהָ וַיִּדְבֶּה אֶלָּף אִישׁ: וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂמִשׁוֹן בְּלַחֵי
הַחֲמוֹר חֲמוֹר חֲמַרְתִּים בְּלַחֵי הַחֲמוֹר הַכִּיתִי אֶלְף אִישׁ: וַיְהִי כִכְלָתוֹ לְדַבֵּר וַיִּשְׁלַךְ
הַלְחִי מִיָּדוֹ וַיִּקְרָא לְמָקוֹם הַהוּא רַמַת לַחִי: וַיִּצְמָא מֵאֵד וַיִּקְרָא אֶל־יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר
אֲתָה נָתַת בְּיַד־עַבְדְּךָ אֶת־הַתְּשׁוּעָה הַגְּדֹלָה הַזֹּאת וַעֲתָה אֲמֹת בְּצִמָּא וַנִּפְלַחֵי
בְּיַד הָעַרְלִים:

When he came to Lehi, the Philistines came against him shouting. The spirit of the LORD rushed upon him and the ropes on his arms became like flax that was burned with fire, and the bonds melted off his hands. He found a fresh jawbone of an ass. He picked it up and killed a thousand men. Then Samson said, “With the jaw of an ass, masses upon masses! With the jaw of an ass, I have slain a thousand men.” When he

¹⁶ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 10. I return to these verses as an example of a blend of Identity and Metaphorical circumcision later. I cite them here to underscore the fact that Identity circumcision does *not* require that the people demarcated as “uncircumcised” actually be uncircumcised in reality. Rather, Identity circumcision discourse is more interested in the use of circumcision language as a kind of differentiating “slur.” The extent to which the slur is an accurate description is less important than its expression of group differentiation. For more on slurs and debates over their descriptive vs. expressive semantics, see Joseph A. Hedger, “The Semantics of Racial Slurs: Using Kaplan’s Framework to Provide a Theory of the Meaning of Derogatory Epithets,” *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigations* 11 (2012): 74–84; “Meaning and Racial Slurs: Derogatory Epithets and the Semantics/Pragmatics Interface,” *Language and Communication* 33 (2013): 205–213; and the following engagements with his work, such as Adam M. Croom, “Remarks on ‘The Semantics of Racial Slurs,’” *Linguistic and Philosophical Investigation* 13 (2014): 11–32; “The Semantics of Slurs: A Refutation of Pure Expressivism,” *Language Sciences* 41 (2014): 227–242; Geoff Nunberg, “The Social Life of Slurs,” in *New Work on Speech Acts*, ed. Daniel Fogal, Daniel W. Harris, and Matt Moss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 237–295.

finished speaking, he threw the jawbone away, and thus the place was called Rameth-lehi. He was very thirsty and he called to the LORD, “You have given this great victory to your servant, must I now die of thirst and fall into the hands of the uncircumcised?”

Although the story does not necessarily name the “uncircumcised (הַעֲרֵלִים)” to whom Samson refers in his speech, it is clear from context that he must mean the Philistines. Thus, the purpose of the word “uncircumcised” here is not to communicate the actual physical state of the people to whom Samson refers, but rather to indicate that they are the “them” to Samson’s “us.”

The story of Dinah and Shechem in Gen 34 is one of the most puzzling examples of circumcision as an Identity discourse. The Bible recounts the rape of Dinah, Jacob’s daughter, by Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite. After he rapes her, Shechem decides he wants to marry Dinah, and he goes with his father to ask Jacob for his consent. Jacob’s sons answer, saying that Shechem will only be allowed to marry Dinah if he and the rest of his people are circumcised. Although Hamor and Shechem agree to the procedure, it is a trick. On the third day after the Hivites are circumcised, “while they were still in pain (בְּהִיוֹתָם כְּאֲבִים)”, Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, attack them, murder them all, and take their wives, children, livestock, and property as plunder, “because their sister had been defiled (אֲשֶׁר טִמְאָנוּ אָחוֹתָם)” (Gen 34:27). When they return, Jacob rebukes them, saying that his sons’ actions will cause the other people residing in the land to attack him and his family. Simeon and Levi respond with, “Should our sister be treated like a whore? (הֲכִזּוּנָהּ יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־אָחוֹתֵנוּ)” (Gen 34:31).

Scholarly attention has often focused on the gendered dynamics of this text.¹⁷ However, some interpreters have astutely recognized an inter-ethnic

¹⁷ For discussion of the rape/seduction elements in the story, see Lyn M. Bechtel, “What if Dinah is not Raped? (Genesis 34),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19.62 (1994): 19–36; Susanne Scholz, “Was it Really Rape in Genesis 34: Biblical Scholarship as a Reflection of Cultural Assumptions,” in *Escaping Eden: New Feminist Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Harold C. Washington, Susan Lochrie Graham, and Pamela Thimmes (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 182–198; Jean-Daniel Macchi, “Amour et Violence: Dina et Sichem en Gènes 34,” *Foi et Vie* 99.4 (2004): 29–38; Yael Shemesh, “Rape is Rape: The Story of Dinah and Shechem (Genesis 34),” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 119.1 (2007): 2–21. For analysis of Dinah’s silence and andocentrism, see Ronald R. Clark Jr., “The Silence in Dinah’s Cry,” *Restoration Quarterly* 49.3 (2007): 143–158; Carolyn Blyth, “Terrible Silence, Eternal Silence: a Feminist Re-Reading of Dinah’s Voicelessness in Genesis 34,” *Biblical Interpretation* 17.5 (2009): 483–506; Blyth, “Listen to

tension at play within the story. Angela Wagner, for example, argues that “the violent response of Jacob and his sons has much less to do with a distinction between seduction and violent rape, as it does with what can perhaps best be termed as ethnic concerns.”¹⁸ Julie Bokser similarly claims, “What is really at stake here is not sexual violation but the hazard posed by potential exogamous relationships.”¹⁹ It is also possible to harmonize interpretations that focus on inter-ethnic relations between the Israelites and Shechemites with readings of Gen 34 that focus on the gender dynamics. For example, Alice A. Keefe argues that in Gen 34, “the violated body of the woman functions as a metonym for the social body,”²⁰ thus suggesting that the link between sexual ethics and ethnic anxieties cannot be so easily disentangled.

Despite the clear Identity themes running throughout the story, the role circumcision plays in either undermining or shoring up an Israelite identity is ambiguous. The text can be read in two ways. In one version, Jacob’s sons offer the Shechemites the option to become circumcised and join together with the Jacobites as one people (Gen 34:15).²¹ But, because Shechem had defiled their sister (34:13),²² the brothers decided from the beginning that they would take revenge upon the Shechemites while they were still in pain from their operations (34:25). When Jacob rebukes Simeon and Levi for their violent plot, the brothers respond by asking, “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” (34:31).²³ When read this way, as Blaschke suggests we should, circumcision appears as an

My Voice’: Challenging Dinah’s Silence in Genesis 34,” *The Expository Times* 120.8 (2009): 385–387; Janell Johnson, “Negotiating masculinities in Dinah’s Story: Honor and Outrage in Genesis 34,” *Review & Expositor* 115.4 (2018): 529–555.

¹⁸ Angela B. Wagner, “Considerations on the Political-Judicial Proceedings of Genesis 34,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 38.2 (2013): 145–161 (146).

¹⁹ Julie Bokser, “The Rape of Dinah: Gender, Body, Text, and the Israelite Nation,” *Cithara* 37.2 (1998): 5–14 (5). For more on ethnic relations in Genesis 34, see Pablo Andinach, “Dina, un Mujer Víctima de Violencia Sexual y Étnica: Estudio Preliminar de Génesis 34,” *Revisita Bíblica* 66.1 (2004): 37–52; Matthew Thiessen, “Protecting the Holy Race and Holy Space: Judith’s Reenactment of the Slaughter of Shechem,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 49 (2018): 165–188.

²⁰ Alice A. Keefe, “Rapes of Women/Wars of Men,” *Semeia* 61 (1993): 79–97 (79). See also, Anatheia Portier-Young, “Daughter of Simeon and Daughter of Dinah: Genesis 34 in Judith and *Joseph and Asenath*,” paper presented at the Catholic Biblical Association, August 5–6, 2006.

²¹ אַם תִּהְיוּ כְּמֵנוּ לְהַמְלִל לָכֶם בְּלִיָּבָר

²² וַיַּעַנּוּ בְנֵי־יַעֲקֹב אֶת־שְׂלֹמֹם וְאֶת־חַמּוֹר אֲבֵי־בְמִרְמָה וַיֹּדְבִרוּ אֲשֶׁר טָמְא אֶת דִּינָה אֲחֹתֹ

²³ וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַכּוֹזֵנָה יַעֲשֶׂה אֶת־אֲחֹתָנוּ

efficacious (and necessary) means of joining a non-Israelite community with Israel.²⁴ Readers are led to believe that had Simeon and Levi not gone ahead with their murderous plot—or, if Shechem had not raped Dinah, but had instead respectfully approached her father in the first place and asked to marry her—the Israelites and Shechemites would have peacefully merged and become one people. In this interpretation, the problem is the act of sexual violence perpetrated against Dinah, and not exogamy in general.

A second way of reading the story, suggested by Matthew Thiessen, presumes that Simeon and Levi's offer to circumcise the Shechemites and join them with the Israelites was always disingenuous, not because Jacob's sons were already determined to punish the Shechemites for the rape of their sister, but because they (as the author/redactor of Gen 34 depicts them) believe that joining ethnic lines is immoral and/or impossible.²⁵ In this version of the story, Shechem is a problem because he is from an ethnic group whom the Israelites are destined to destroy (Deut 7:1–3), and not because he committed an act of sexual violence against Dinah. Presumably, had Shechem been an Israelite, Jacob would have simply consented to have him marry Dinah in accordance with Exod 22:15–16 and Deut 22:28–29, which allow a rapist to marry the woman he rapes if her father agrees. If Thiessen's interpretation is correct—i.e., that “Genesis 34 explicitly and emphatically rejects the possibility that the circumcision of the Canaanites would result in their becoming part of Jacob's family”²⁶—then we might conclude that the text imagines circumcision as a marker of a predetermined stable ethnic identity rather than as a means by which such an identity is constituted.

According to both interpretations of the story, Gen 34 construes circumcision as a mechanism of identity—either a means by which ethnic identity is formed (version 1), or demarcating the boundaries of a stable ethnic identity that cannot be crossed (version 2). Regardless, the narrative is difficult to understand, no matter which interpretation one prefers. Claudia Camp writes that in the story of Dinah and Shechem, “the mythic preference for endogamy comes to its fullest, and fully circular expression. But this circularity—the story of an insider who must become an outsider in order to be accepted inside—contains a

²⁴ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 32. See also Klaus Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität: Beschneidung, Pass und Sabbat in der Priesterschrift* (Frankfurt am Main: Hain, 1992), 7; Saul Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 65.

²⁵ Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47–51.

²⁶ Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 63.

myth-exploding contradiction that is obvious when read from the other direction.”²⁷ In other words, if the author/redactor is using the story in Gen 34 as a means of undermining a competing idea that circumcision can ethnically transform a person, he does a rather odd job of it.²⁸ The moral implications of the story are vague, and it is hardly clear that Simeon and Levi acted righteously, especially in light of Jacob’s curse in Gen 49:5–7.²⁹ Furthermore, the only version of circumcision explicitly articulated in the text is one where circumcision *does* constitute ethnic identity—even if it is implicitly refused by the plot of the story.

The question of how to interpret the circumcision subplot in Gen 34 was just as puzzling for ancient readers as it is for modern scholars. For example, Theodotus’s account of the story follows an ethnicizing interpretation, and presents the circumcision of the Shechemites as a good-faith effort to have the group join with the Israelites, which is spoiled by Simeon and Levi’s anger at their sister’s treatment.³⁰ Similarly, in one manuscript of the *Testament of Levi*, the brothers urge Jacob *not* to circumcise the Shechemites because they know Jacob’s offer to allow the Shechemites to join the Israelites is genuine.³¹ Jubilees follows an identity-based interpretation of the story more closely. It focuses on the crime of exogamy rather than sexual violation (Jub. 30) and—perhaps in an attempt to resolve the strangeness in the biblical text that Camp identifies—it leaves out the

²⁷ Claudia Camp, *Wise, Strange, and Holy: The Strange Women and the Making of the Bible* (JSOTSup 320; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 294.

²⁸ It is possible that some of this strangeness should be ascribed to Genesis 34’s process of redaction. See, Sigo Lehming, “Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte von Gen 34,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 70 (1958): 228–250; Albert de Pury, “Genèse 34 et l’histoire,” *Revue biblique* 76.1 (1969): 5–49.

²⁹ See Stanley Gevirtz, “Simeon and Levi in ‘The Blessing of Jacob’ (Gen 49:5–7),” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 52 (1981): 93–128; Joseph Fleishman, “The Legal Background to the Punishment of Simeon and Levi,” *Beit Mikra* 58 (2013): 120–152 [Hebrew].

³⁰ See John Collins, “The Epic of Theodotus and the Hellenism of the Heasmoneans,” *Harvard Theological Review* 73 (1980): 91–104; Reinhard Pummer, “Genesis 34 in Jewish Writings of the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 75.2 (1982): 177–188; Mary Anna Bader, *Tracing the Evidence: Dinah in Post-Hebrew Bible Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 102–106.

³¹ James Kugel, “Simeon and Levi’s Attack on Shechem, or: The Mystery of Ms C of the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*,” in *Sibyls, Scriptures, and Scrolls: John Collins at Seventy*, ed. Joel Baden, Hindy Najman, and Eibert Tigchelaar (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 655–672. See also James Kugel, “The Study of Dinah in the ‘Testament of Levi,’” *The Harvard Theological Review* 85.1 (1992): 1–34; Bader, *Tracing the Evidence*, 91–95.

circumcision subplot altogether.³² Josephus also omits the circumcision narrative elements, perhaps, as Louis H. Feldman suggests, in order to counter Greco-Roman stereotypes of Jews as overly aggressive proselytizers.³³ Philo, however, unlike other ancient interpreters (although resonant with his preferred mode of biblical interpretation), allegorizes the entire narrative. He presents Simeon and Levi as symbols of virtue, who attack the Shechemites while they were “still occupied by pleasure-loving, passion-loving, uncircumcised business” (*Migration* 224).³⁴ Circumcision is thus depicted, in Philo’s presentation, in metaphorical terms, as a signifier of unvirtuous hedonism, rather than as a marker of ethnic identity.

4. Metaphorical

The use of “circumcision” and “foreskin” in a primarily metaphorical (non-penile) sense in the Hebrew Bible is rarer than its Covenantal/Ritual or Identity usage, but the examples become central to later Jewish and Christian disputes over circumcision. In Exod 6:12 and 6:30, for example, Moses describes himself as “foreskinned of lips (עָרַל שְׂפָתַיִם).” Jer 6:10 laments those who are “foreskinned of

³² See Marth Himmelfarb, “Levi, Pinehas, and the Problem of Intermarriage in the Time of the Maccabean Revolt,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 6.1 (1999): 1-24; Bader, *Tracing the Evidence*, 106-110; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 67-86.

³³ Louis H. Feldman, “Philo, Pseudo-Philo, Josephus, and Theodotus on the Rape of Dinah,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 94.2 (2004): 253-277.

³⁴ ἔτι ὄντας ἐν τῷ φιληδόνῳ καὶ φιλοπαθεῖ καὶ ἀπεριτμήτῳ πόνῳ. For additional scholarship on circumcision discourse in Philo, see Valentin Nikiprowetzky, *Le commentaire de l’écriture chez Philon d’Alexandrie: son caractère et sa portée, observations philologique* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), 237-238; Richard D. Hecht, “The Exegetical Contexts of Philo’s Interpretation of Circumcision,” in *Nourished with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, ed. Fredrick E. Greenspahn, Earle Hilgert, and Burton L. Mack (Chicago: Scholars Press, 1984), 53-61; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 197-216; Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, 13-38; Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 206-209; Ellen Birnbaum, “Allegorical Interpretation and Jewish Identity among Alexandrian Jewish Writers,” in *Neotestamentica Et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, ed. David E. Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen, (Leiden: Brill, 2003): 307-329; Maren Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17:1-14,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10 (2003): 89-123; Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 61-63; Nina Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 41-76.

ears (עַרְלָה אָזְנוֹם).³⁵ Lev 26:41 warns the people that God will humble “their foreskinned heart (לִבְבָבְם הָעָרְלָל).” Deut 10:16 urges the people to “circumcise the foreskin of their hearts (וּמְלִתֶּם אֶת עַרְלֹת לִבְבָבְכֶם),” and in 30:6 assures Israel that “The LORD your God will circumcise your heart (וּמָל יְהוָה אֶתְלִבְבָבְךָ).” Jer 4:4 similarly exhorts the people to “Circumcise yourselves for the LORD and remove the foreskins of your hearts (הַמְלִלוּ לַיהוָה וְהִסְרוּ עַרְלֹת לִבְבָבְכֶם).” Finally, Lev 19:23 does not relate “foreskin” to the human body as in the examples above of lips, ears, and hearts, but rather commands that the first three years of fruit from a plant “be considered as its foreskin (וְעַרְלֹתָם עַרְלֹתוֹ)” and since “it will be foreskins for you, do not eat it (יְהִיֶּה לָכֶם עַרְלִים לֹא יֵאָכֵל).”³⁶

Although I categorize these usages of “foreskin” and “circumcision” as metaphorical, they are not necessarily allegorical or disembodied. Instead, I use “metaphor” in a sense drawn from cognitive linguistics: “metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain.”³⁷ Some scholars read Exod 6:12 as an allegorical or figurative usage of “foreskin” to describe Moses’s lack of oratorical (or perhaps even linguistic) skill,³⁸ but others argue that this verse describes a physical condition.³⁹ Regardless, *both* readings

³⁵ Although the LXX keeps the circumcision metaphor (ἰδοὺ ἀπερίτμητα τὰ ὦτα αὐτῶν), Targum Jonathan changes “Look, they are foreskinned of ears (הִנֵּה עַרְלָה אָזְנוֹם)” to “Look, their ears are dull (הָא אֶטְפֶּשׁ אוֹדְנֵיהוֹן).” Due to the late date of the Targumim, however, we cannot rule out the possibility that this is in part due to Jewish and Christian debates surrounding this passage.

³⁶ This detail will form a (tautological) basis for why circumcision takes place at the penis in t. Šabb. 15:9.

³⁷ Zoltán Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4. See also, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5; and Nick Reimer, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Semantics* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 90–104.

³⁸ Noth argues that “the word ‘uncircumcised’ bears the transferred meaning ‘incompetent’” (61), while Dozeman says it signifies an “inability to speak persuasively” (168). White claims that “This is the first figurative use of noncircumcision that we find in the Torah” (58). (Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962]; Thomas Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009]; Thomas White, *Exodus* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016]).

³⁹ See Jeffrey H. Tigay, “‘Heavy of Mouth’ and ‘Heavy of Tongue’: On Moses’ Speech Difficulty,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 231 (1978): 57–67; Nahum Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 33; Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, “Mosaic Disability and Identity in Exodus 4:10, 6:12, 30,” *Biblical*

understand one conceptual domain in the terms of another conceptual domain, i.e. “foreskin.” Whether or not “foreskinned of lips” designates an allegorical lack of oratorical skill or a physical disability, the use of the word “foreskin” refers to a different concept to understand something about Moses’s condition. In fact, the word “foreskin” tends to disappear in ancient translations of Exodus, indicating that it functioned to frame Moses’s speech in terms of something conceptually separate. For example, the LXX translates Exod 6:12 as

ἐλάλησεν δὲ Μωυσῆς ἔναντι κυρίου λέγων Ἰδοὺ οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ οὐκ εἰσήκουσάν μου, καὶ πῶς εἰσακούσεται μου Φαραω; ἐγὼ δὲ ἄλογός εἰμι

Moses said in the presence of the Lord, “Look, the sons of Israel do not listen to me, so how will Pharaoh listen to me? I am ineloquent.”

The Greek translation of Exod 6:30 similarly avoids the metaphor:

καὶ εἶπεν Μωυσῆς ἔναντίον κυρίου Ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἰσχνόφωνός εἰμι, καὶ πῶς εἰσακούσεται μου Φαραω

And Moses said before the presence of the Lord, “Look, I am weak-voiced, so how will Pharaoh listen to me?”

Likewise, Targum Onqelos uses “heavy with speech (ליקר ממלל)” instead of “foreskinned of lips” for Exod 6:12 and 6:30, thus rendering it consistent with Exod 4:10. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan has “difficult of speech (קשי ממליל)” as does Targum Neofiti.⁴⁰ Regardless of whether ערל in the Masoretic Text is meant to signify something physical or something allegorical, it is clear that ancient translators treated it as metaphorical.

5. Analysis of the Categories

Instances of Covenantal/Ritual circumcision discourse follow the ritual logic of the narrative set out in Gen 17, wherein circumcision signifies the covenant between God and the offspring of Abraham through Isaac (Gen 17:21).⁴¹ Unlike

Interpretation (2008): 429–433. For interpretations that propose both and/or either a physical or metaphorical explanation of “foreskin,” see J. Phillip Hyatt, *Commentary on Exodus* (London: Oliphants, 1971), 95; Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 93; William Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 274.

⁴⁰ Texts from *The Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon* (Targum Studies Module), available online: <http://cal.huc.edu/>.

⁴¹ וְאֶת־בְּרִיתִי אֶקְיָם אֶת־יְצִחָק אֲשֶׁר־תֵּלֵד לְךָ שְׂרָה לְמוֹעֵד הַזֶּה בְּשָׁנָה הָאַחַר־תָּה

an Identity narrative, the covenantal narrative does not depict the primary purpose of circumcision as the separation of Israel from other peoples. Gen 17 specifically notes that Ishmael was circumcised, and constituted as a separate people from Israel—“he will be the father of twelve princes and I will make him a great nation” (Gen 17:20).⁴²

Gen 17 thus depicts the primary division between Israel and other peoples as lineage rather than circumcision. Josh 5 reaffirms this emphasis on the covenanted promise of land and progeny in the (re-)circumcision of the sons of the Israelites who had come up from Egypt:

כִּי־מַלְּיִם הָיוּ כָּל־הָעָם הַיִּצְאָיִם וְכָל־הָעָם הַיְלִידִים בְּמִדְבָּר בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם
 לֹא־מָלוּ. כִּי אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה הָלַכְוּ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִדְבָּר עַד־תֵּם כָּל־הַגּוֹי אֲנָשִׁי
 הַמְּלַחֲמָה הַיִּצְאָיִם מִמִּצְרָיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־שָׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹל יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לָהֶם
 לְבַלְתִּי הָרְאוֹתָם אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה לְאֲבוֹתָם לֵאמֹר לָנוּ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב
 וְדָבָשׁ. וְאֶת־בְּנֵיהֶם הַקִּיָּים תַּחְתָּם אַתֶּם מִל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בִּיַּעַרְלִים הָיוּ כִּי לֹא־מָלוּ
 אוֹתָם בְּדֶרֶךְ:

Now, while all the people who came out of Egypt had been circumcised, none of the people born in the desert on the way when they were coming out of Egypt had been circumcised. Since the Israelites had wandered in the desert for forty years until the entire nation—men of military age who came out of Egypt—had perished; they who had not obeyed the LORD, the LORD swore never to let them see the land that the LORD had promised to their fathers to give to us—a land flowing with milk and honey. But He had raised up their sons in their stead, and it was them that Joshua circumcised—for they were uncircumcised at the time, having not been circumcised on the way (Josh 5:5–7).

Josh 5, despite its later reinterpretations, makes most sense understood as an affirmation of the covenantal nature of circumcision. Since God deemed the Israelites who came out from Egypt as undeserving of the covenanted land and offspring, he did not allow them to enter the land. Even so, circumcision is a signifier of this covenant. Thus, this generation of people needed to be circumcised by Joshua. This story, therefore, imagines circumcision’s primary purpose as a condition of the covenantal agreement between God and Israel, rather than a division from other peoples.

⁴² שְׁנַיִם־עָשָׂר נְשִׂאִים יוֹלִיד וּנְתִיתוּ לָנוּ גְדוֹל

Identity circumcision discourse, on the other hand, presents circumcision as a technology of ethnic difference—i.e., as a means of separating “us” from “them.”⁴³ As such, circumcision takes on a moral implication that is absent from Covenantal/Ritual discourse. While the Covenantal/Ritual narrative of circumcision portrays circumcision as a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for receiving God’s covenanted gifts, it is not presented as a good in and of itself. This is especially clear in the above passage from Josh 5, which juxtaposes two groups: the circumcised men who came out of Egypt and their uncircumcised sons (whom Joshua subsequently circumcises). God favors the uncircumcised sons over the circumcised men who escaped from Egypt because the Israelites who came out of Egypt failed to obey God. Identity circumcision, however, characterizes circumcision as a moral good and uncircumcision as a moral stain. For example, in Isa 52:1, “Put on your beautiful garments, oh Jerusalem, the holy city; for the uncircumcised and the unclean shall enter you no more,” the passage presents “uncircumcised and unclean” as a hendiadys in opposition to Jerusalem’s beauty and holiness.

Blaschke speculates that some dimensions of Identity circumcision can be attributed to a specific historical situation: “it compensates during the exilic period for the loss of the institutions of temple, land, and kingdom, which had hitherto established identity.”⁴⁴ Without their institutions of cultural identity, Blaschke argues, the Israelites shifted identity concerns onto a different signifier, namely circumcision. In addition, the oppression of the Israelites during the exilic period might also explain why Identity circumcision came to carry such a clear moral resonance. So, rather than circumcision itself being considered positive, it became laden with moral and theological significance (in response to oppression) as the new signifier of Israelite identity in the absence of temple, land, and kingship.⁴⁵ On this account, circumcision carries no specific moral value (negative or positive) on its own but rather acquires its moral implications via its function as a group divider. Thus, the Israelites do not hate the Philistines because they are

⁴³ I use the term “technology of ethnic difference” as shorthand for “a means by which ethnic difference is materialized.” For more on what I mean by “materialization,” see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1–19.

⁴⁴ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 104. See also Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Klaus Grünwaldt, *Exil und Identität*. Against arguments that locate circumcision’s increasing importance to the exilic period, see, Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant*, 115–122.

⁴⁵ This may also explain the intense moral significance of circumcision in Second Temple texts such as Maccabees.

uncircumcised. Rather, the Israelites hate the Philistines and, since the Philistines are uncircumcised, by extension foreskin must be morally repugnant because the Philistines are morally repugnant.⁴⁶

While Identity circumcision assumes circumcision's positive moral value due to its ability to divide "us" from "them," Metaphorical usages of "foreskin" and "circumcision" likewise denote something of positive or negative value. Exod 6:12, 30 and Jer 6:10, for instance, rely on the idea that uncircumcision is negative, although to different degrees. "Uncircumcised lips" in Exod 6:12, 30 seems to suggest that Moses is simply unfit to speak (whether because of a lack of skill or a physical disability), whereas "uncircumcised ears" seems to signify something more problematic, such as a willful refusal to listen and obey. Instances of "circumcision of the heart," e.g., in Lev 26:41, Deut 10:36, 30:6, and Jer 4:4, are all portrayed as uncomplicatedly positive. Lev 19:23, however, is more difficult to categorize. The first three years of fruit are forbidden—considered "foreskin"—either because they are unclean or because they are otherwise harmful (the biblical passage does not clarify). In many ways, the Lev 19:24 passage makes far more sense within the Covenantal/Ritual framework where circumcision is morally neutral but ritually productive.⁴⁷ Another option is that Lev 19:24 is an example of a Metaphorical version of Covenantal/Ritual circumcision.

⁴⁶ This elision of morality, ethnic division, and circumcision will become decoupled in Paul, who will argue that circumcision's function as an ethnic divider does not imply a moral valuation, e.g., "circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing (ἡ περιτομή οὐδὲν ἔστιν, καὶ ἡ ἀκροβυστία οὐδὲν ἔστιν)" (1 Cor 7:19). Later Christians will "flip the script" and argue that circumcision's function as an ethnic divider proves that it is immoral, e.g., Tertullian, *Adversus Marcionem*, 5.

⁴⁷ Here, I am informed by the distinction drawn by Jonathan Klawans in his *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), particularly his discussion of Niddah (104–108). Klawans points out that although Niddah is generally considered an issue of ritual impurity, sex with a Niddah is considered a moral impurity. He suggests that medieval and modern emphasis on menstrual impurity was the result of changes within Judaism resulting from the destruction of the Temple. I suggest that, in addition, there was an elision of a Niddah with *sex with a Niddah*. In other words, woman could not be thought of (by rabbinic men) outside of her appropriate role as sexual object. This meant that women—inasmuch as to be a woman meant to be potentially Niddah and necessarily a sexual object—posed a perpetual moral "threat" to men. The elision, I hypothesize, mirrors the elision of circumcision as ritual guarantee of God's covenant with circumcision as a moral good. So, in the same way that, over time (perhaps sometime between the tannaitic and amoraic period), woman as potential Niddah and woman as sexual object could not be thought as separable, neither, over time (sometime in the Second Temple period to the

What makes the Metaphorical circumcision category so difficult is the impossibility of classifying *all* metaphorical usages of “foreskin” and “circumcision” according to the same explanation. Exod 6:12 and 6:30 make sense as extensions of the Covenantal/Ritual category, wherein circumcision takes on a positive moral value and foreskin a negative one *as a result* of their ability to produce a ritual outcome—i.e., in their ability to correctly certify the covenant. Conversely, the citations of “circumcision” and “foreskin” in Jeremiah seem to extend Identity circumcision, especially in the context of Jeremiah’s overall concerns regarding Israel’s identity vis-à-vis the nations. As a result, there is no one clear explanation for how “foreskin” and “circumcision” take on morally negative or positive connotations *even though* the metaphorical usages seem to rely on precisely those connotations. Basically, the Metaphorical category takes the “circumcision = good, foreskin = bad” connotations that arise from the other two categories and then applies them metaphorically to other concepts that are not directly related to either Covenant/Ritual or Identity.

6. Blended Categories

The purpose of the taxonomy above is to clarify the semantic fields potentially operative in any given ancient text on circumcision, while simultaneously illuminating the ways in which circumcision discourse remains fluid and ambiguous. While the examination of specific usages helps situate a citation’s context within a broader conception of circumcision discourse, no one citation determines the absolute parameters of that discourse—or renders our heuristic illegible. Here, I want to explore four cases where a blending of categories seems, on the surface, to undermine my heuristic taxonomy, but upon closer inspection, demonstrates its usefulness. Thus, even if the heuristic taxonomy does not capture every instance of biblical circumcision language, the parameters of the categories nevertheless provide a vocabulary for describing such instances of blending. For example, Exod 12:43–49 appears to blend Covenantal and Identity circumcision tropes:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן זֹאת חֻקַּת הַפֶּסַח כָּל־בְּנוֹנֵי־כַר לֹא־יֹאכְלוּ בּוֹ:
 וְכָל־עֶבֶד אִישׁ מִקְנֵת־כֶּסֶף וּמִלֶּחֶה אִתּוֹ אִזּוֹ יֹאכֵל בּוֹ: תוֹשֵׁב וְשֹׁכֵר לֹא־יֹאכְלוּ בּוֹ:
 בְּבֵית אֶחָד יֹאכְלוּ לֹא־תוֹצִיאוּ מִן־הַבַּיִת מִן־הַבֶּשֶׂר חוּצָה וְנֹעֲצִים לֹא תִשְׁבְּרוּ־בוֹ: כָּל־
 עַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל יַעֲשׂוּ אִתּוֹ: וְכִי־יָגֹר אִתּוֹ גֵּר וְעָשָׂה פֶסַח לַיהוָה הַמּוֹל לְזֶה כָּל־זָכָר

advent of Christianity), could circumcision as covenantal be thought as separable from circumcision as moral good (at least for a certain plurality of Jews).

וְאֵלֶּיךָ יִקְרָב לַעֲשׂוֹתוֹ וְהָיָה כְּאַזְרַח הָאָרֶץ וְכָל־עַרְל לֹא־יֹאכַל בּוֹ: תּוֹרַה אֲמַת יְהוָה
 לְאַזְרַח וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם:

And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “This is the law of the Passover offering: No foreigner shall eat it. But any slave a man bought may eat it once he has been circumcised. No bound or hired laborer shall eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house—you shall not take any of the flesh out of the house, nor shall you break a bone of it. The whole community of Israel shall offer it. If a stranger, who dwells with you, would offer the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, all his males must be circumcised. Then he shall be admitted to offer it. He shall then be as a citizen of the land. But no uncircumcised person shall eat [the Passover sacrifice]. There shall be one law for the citizen and the stranger who dwells among you.

As in Gen 17 and Josh 5, this passage presents circumcision as a ritual requirement—in this case, as a prerequisite for eating the Passover sacrifice. In Josh 5, the uncircumcised Israelites are not depicted as morally problematic (and indeed, are implied to be in better moral standing than the previous generation), but they nevertheless cannot enter the land until they are circumcised in accordance to the stipulations of the covenant. Exod 12:43–49 similarly does not depict the slave (עֶבֶד אִישׁ) of an Israelite household,⁴⁸ or the sojourner who lives among the Israelites (לִיגֵר אֲתֶּדָּ גֵר) as somehow morally compromised. They can eat the paschal sacrifice once they are circumcised. At the same time, the language of the text clearly states that individuals who are forbidden from eating the sacrifice are “foreign (כָּל־בְּגוֹרֵי נֶגֶר לֹא־יֹאכַל).” Taken together with the circumcision requirement, the text implies that to be uncircumcised (and therefore forbidden the paschal lamb) is to be foreign—and to fulfill the ritual requirement of circumcision is “to become like a native of the land (וְהָיָה כְּאַזְרַח הָאָרֶץ).” As a result, the text blends the ritual logic of Covenantal circumcision with the idea of circumcision as ethnic boundary, characteristic of Identity circumcision.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ See Gen 17:12–13.

⁴⁹ The Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (Pischa 15) clearly wrestles with this elision of ritual and identity functions of circumcision in this passage. For example, the Mekilta asks why the text repeats “no uncircumcised person may eat of it” (Exod 12:48) after saying that “no foreigner may eat of it” (12:43) and reasons that had it not said so, one might think an uncircumcised Israelite was permitted to eat of it (למה נאמר והלא כבר נאמר) וכל ערל לא יאכל בו. למה נאמר והלא כבר נאמר (כל בן נכר לא יאכל בו אבל ישראל ערל שומע אני יהא כשר לאכול בפסח ת"ל וכל ערל לא יאכל בו).

Exod 4:26—and the entire episode of Exod 4:24–26—is an especially complicated example of circumcision discourse, and thus difficult to characterize within our heuristic. It recounts a strange circumcision performed by Zipporah:

וַיְהִי בַדְרָד בַּמַּלְאָךְ וַיִּפְגְּשֵׁהוּ יְהוָה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הִמִּיתוֹ: וַתִּקַּח צִפּוֹרָה צֶרֶךְ וַתִּכְרַת אֶת־
עֶרְלַת בְּנֵהּ וַתִּגַּע לְרַגְלָיו וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי חֲתוּד־מַיִם אַתָּה לִי: וַיִּרְף מִמֶּנּוּ אִזּוֹ אֶמְרָה
חֲתוּ דָמַיִם לְמוֹלַת:

At a night encampment on the way, the LORD encountered him and tried to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’s legs with it saying, “You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!” And when He let him alone, she added, “A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.”

The puzzling anecdote has bewildered scores of readers, ancient and modern alike. As Jacobs argues, the interpretation of Exod 4:24–26 often reveals far more about the interpreter than the text itself.⁵⁰ Although this story is hard to categorize, there does seem to be a clear lack of Identity elements. Rather, circumcision seems to function as a kind of ritual action meant to prevent something horrible from happening. Although it is not clear that God (or an angel)⁵¹ attacks Moses because he is uncircumcised, it is clear that circumcision resolves the issue. Nevertheless, it is hard to say for certain whether circumcision is meant to fulfill a specific ritual requirement or not. Rather, the text seems to assign circumcision (at least in this very narrow circumstance) a kind of apotropaic function. At the same time, the action is hardly morally neutral. As a result, I suggest this passage blends the logic characteristic of Covenantal/Ritual circumcision, where circumcision is a ritual prerequisite, and the moral implications (and/or threat of danger) that Metaphorical usages of circumcision language tend to convey.

Ezekiel’s circumcision idiom likewise blends aspects of different categories. For example, Ezek 44:6–9 says:

⁵⁰ Andrew S. Jacobs, “Blood Will Out: Jesus’ Circumcision and Early Christian Readings of Exodus 4:24–26,” *Henoch* 30 (2008): 311–332. For more studies on the variety of interpretations of Exod 4:24–26, see S. M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries*, (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 72–77; John T. Willis, *Yahweh and Moses in Conflict: The Role of Exodus 4:24–26 in the Book of Exodus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010).

⁵¹ See, for example, Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.47 and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30.27.3.

וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־מִרְי אֶל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּה אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה רַב־לָכֶם מִכְּלַתּוֹעֲבוֹתֵיכֶם
 בַּיַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל: בַּהֲבִיאֲכֶם בְּגַיִן־נֶכֶר עַרְלֵי־לֵב וְעַרְלֵי בָשָׂר לְהִזּוֹת בְּמִקְדָּשִׁי לְחַלְלֵנִי
 אֶת־בֵּיתִי בַּהֲקָרִיבְכֶם אֶת־לֶחְמִי חֶלֶב וְדָם וַיִּזְכְּרוּ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אֵל כָּל־תּוֹעֲבוֹתֵיכֶם:
 וְלֹא שָׁמַרְתֶּם מִשְׁמַרְתִּי קִדְשִׁי וְתִשְׁמֹנוּ לְשֹׁמְרֵי מִשְׁמַרְתִּי בְּמִקְדָּשִׁי לָכֶם: כֹּה־אָמַר
 אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה כָּל־בְּגוֹנֶכֶר עַרְל לֵב וְעַרְל בָּשָׂר לֹא יָבֹא אֶל־מִקְדָּשִׁי לְכָל־בְּגוֹנֶכֶר
 אֲשֶׁר בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

You shall say to the rebellious house of Israel: Thus said the Lord GOD, “For too long, O House of Israel have you committed all your abominations, admitting foreigners, foreskinned of heart and foreskinned of flesh, to be in My Sanctuary and profane My Temple when you offer up My Food—the fat and the blood. You have broken my Covenant with all your abominations. You have not carried out the duties concerning My Sacred Offerings, but have appointed them to carry out the duties of My Sanctuary for you.” Thus the Lord GOD said, “Do not let any foreigner, foreskinned of heart and foreskinned of flesh, enter My Sanctuary—no foreigner whatsoever among the people of Israel.”

Werner Lemke notices Ezekiel’s peculiar language and argues that the prophet’s description of foreigners as “foreskinned of heart and foreskinned of flesh (עַרְל לֵב) (וְעַרְל בָּשָׂר)” (Ezek 44:7,9) notably contrasts with other citations of “foreskinned of the heart.”⁵² Lemke is correct in his observation that Ezekiel’s use of “foreskin” language is distinct from other metaphorical uses of circumcision, such as in Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6, and Jer 4:4.⁵³ I disagree, however, with his explanation that Ezek 44:7–9 represents “a dismissal of the metaphorical in favor of the literal meaning of circumcision.”⁵⁴ Lemke argues that because Ezekiel implies that “all foreigners who are uncircumcised in flesh, are, by definition, also uncircumcised

⁵² Werner Lemke, “Circumcision of the Heart: The Journal of a Biblical Metaphor,” in *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller*, ed. Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003): 299–319. For more on the exclusivist rhetoric in Ezek 44:7–9, see Mark A. Awabdy, “YHWH Exegetes Torah: How Ezekiel 44:7–9 Bars Foreigners from the Sanctuary,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 131.4 (2012): 685–703. For more on the identity of the “foreigners” in Ezekiel 44:7,9, see Benjamin Kilchör, “Ezechiel und Ägypten: Ein Vorschlag zur Identifikation der Fremden in Ezechiel 44, 7,9,” *Biblische Notizen* 179 (2018): 3–17.

⁵³ Lemke, “Circumcision of the Heart,” 311.

⁵⁴ Lemke, “Circumcision of the Heart,” 312.

in heart ... the close correlation between the two in effect obliterates the distinction between them.”⁵⁵ But, how does it follow that Ezekiel dismisses the metaphorical in favor of the literal? Does it not make more sense to say that Ezekiel correlates the *literal* foreskin of the penis with the *metaphorical* foreskin of the heart? If this is the case, I think rather than classifying Ezekiel’s circumcision idiom as strictly metaphorical, it makes sense to understand Ezekiel’s usage of circumcision language as a symbiotic blend of Metaphorical and Identity tropes. Thus, the moral implications of *both* Metaphorical and Identity circumcision mutually reinforce one another in order to amplify Ezekiel’s rhetoric.

Jer 9:24–25 (MT)/25–26 (LXX) likewise combines an instance of Identity circumcision with a Metaphorical one, but to a different end than Ezekiel. Jeremiah says,

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם יְהוָה וּפָקַדְתִּי עַל־כָּל־מוֹל בְּעֵרְלָה: עַל־מִצְרַיִם וְעַל־יְהוּדָה
וְעַל־אֲדוֹם וְעַל־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וְעַל־מוֹאָב וְעַל־כָּל־קְצוּצֵי פְאֵה הַיְשָׁבִים בְּמִדְבָּר כִּי כָל
הַגּוֹיִם עֵרְלִים וְכָל־בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל עֵרְלֵי־לֵב:

Lo, days are coming—declares the LORD—when I will take notice of all who are circumcised with foreskin, of Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all the desert dwellers who have the hair of their temples clipped. For all these nations are foreskinned, but all the House of Israel are foreskinned of heart.

While Ezekiel equates “foreskinned of flesh” with “foreskinned of heart,” Jeremiah constructs a contrasting relationship between “Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all the desert dwellers who clip the edges of their hair” who are “foreskinned,” and “the House of Israel” who are “foreskinned of heart” (Jer 9:25/26). Furthermore, the structure of the passage initially groups all who are “circumcised in the foreskin (בְּעֵרְלָה)” together (Jer 9:24/25), and only distinguishes the “foreskinned” nations from the “foreskinned of heart” in the following verse. Blaschke has a particularly compelling interpretation of the passage. He suggests that בְּעֵרְלָה ought to be translated as “all who are circumcised with foreskin,” i.e., “all who are circumcised yet still are foreskinned.”⁵⁶ Following this translation, Jeremiah then distinguishes between the nations that are “foreskinned” because they are not of Israel, and the House of Israel that is “foreskinned” because it is “foreskinned of heart.” Thus, unlike

⁵⁵ Lemke, “Circumcision of the Heart,” 312.

⁵⁶ Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 57–60.

Ezekiel's elision of Identity and Metaphorical circumcision tropes, Jeremiah's rhetoric relies on a distinction between Identity and Metaphorical circumcision.

7. Conclusion

In summary, my heuristic map of circumcision discourse in the Hebrew Bible has identified three (or, perhaps, two and a half) literary strands: Covenantal/Ritual, Identity, and Metaphorical circumcision. To reiterate, these tropes group textual instances of "circumcision," "foreskin," and related words. They rely on the literary context of the aforementioned words and do not necessarily indicate how the "average Israelite" may or may not have understood his circumcision. Rather, this heuristic helps us understand how the Hebrew Bible *presents* circumcision. Covenantal/Ritual circumcision follows a ritual logic. It is a prerequisite for the reception of the Abrahamic covenant, as instituted in Gen 17. This ideology of circumcision does not portray the physical action of circumcision or the state of circumcision as a means of differentiating Jews from others, nor does the ritual carry a moral value beyond its necessity as a ritual element. For example, Josh 5 does not depict the generation of Israelites about to enter the land as any less Israelite before Joshua circumcises them than after, nor are they considered less righteous before their circumcision than after. Rather, their circumcision is necessary in order to fulfill the necessary requirements of the covenant before they can assume the land. Conversely, Identity circumcision, exemplified by the phrase "the uncircumcised Philistines," imagines circumcision as differentiating "us" from "them." As a result, circumcision assumes a moral value due to its association with the in-group, while foreskin is denigrated because it signifies an outsider status. Finally, Metaphorical examples of circumcision language function primarily as signifiers of value—of something being either in good order or disordered. So "foreskinned of lips" (e.g., Exod 6:12) implies that one's speech does not function as it should; people who are "foreskinned of ears" (e.g., Jer 6:10) do not listen properly as they should; and those who are "foreskinned of heart" (e.g., Lev 26:41) are morally disordered.

Although different circumcision ideologies can be identified to some extent, these categories do not account for every instance of circumcision language in the Hebrew Bible. The specific mechanics of each discursive category are somewhat elastic. Furthermore, certain examples seem to blend different circumcision discourses together—sometimes in mutually reinforcing ways, but not always. In the end, "circumcision in the Hebrew Bible" reveals itself not to be a systematic or coherent ideology, as much as it is a collection of sometimes competing—and sometimes cooperating—discourses deployed in various ways to serve a diversity of agenda.

As a result, it would be misleading to say there is *a* discourse of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, we should speak of discourses of biblical circumcision. The ambiguity of these discourses, and the confusing and complex ways they shift in response to particular rhetorical aims, mean that when later Jewish and Christian intellectuals attempt to articulate a single coherent circumcision ideology, derived from the biblical text, they will choose from a huge buffet of options. As a result, we might understand the differences in Jewish and Christian articulations of circumcision—as well as the different conceptualizations of circumcision within Jewish and Christian communities—not as a cataclysmic break from a biblical consensus, but rather as a continuation of an already contentious conversation about circumcision within the Hebrew Bible itself. No Jewish or Christian text can claim to faithfully represent circumcision as it is articulated in the Bible, since the Bible itself is not consistent. In the end, then, it is the differences between Jewish and Christian ideologies of circumcision—as well as the diversity of opinion within each of these communities—which are more faithful to biblical circumcision than any paradigm that attempts to establish one ideology as “normative.” Indeed, it seems that there is nothing more biblical than disagreement.