Christophonic Experience: Possible Influence(s)
On Paul’s View of Gentiles’ Circumcision

Daniel Berchie

ABSTRACT—In Paul’s writings and Acts’ account, Paul is said to have deviated from the normal Jewish practice of requiring Gentiles’ circumcision before entering the covenant relationship with God. Despite the suggestions of different influences on his understanding, this paper reinforces his Christophonic experience on the road of Damascus as the possible influence.

Keywords: Christophonic, circumcision, Jews, Gentiles, Palestinian, Hellenistic, Judaism, Salvation

I. Introduction

The issue of origin of Paul’s rationale for exempting Gentile converts from circumcision attracted the attention of some early believers and continues to engage the minds of Pauline scholars. In the early Christian church, there is no doubt that there was disagreement among believers (See Acts 5:1-12; 6:1-3; 10-11; 15:1-31; Rom 2-8:39; 1Cor 5:1-14:40; Gal 2:1-6:18; Col 2:1-3:25). On the issue of circumcision, while Judaizing Christians were demanding Gentiles’ circumcision to validate their salvation, Paul was preaching against the need for Gentiles’ circumcision as a condition for salvation (Acts 15:1-2; Rom 3:30; 4:9-12; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 2:7-14; 5:7, 11; cf. Sanders, 1991, p. 21).

Over the years, commentators and scholars of Pauline writings have struggled to determine possible influences on the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision (Montefiore, 1973, pp. 12, 56-60, 93-101; Rubenstein, 1972, pp. 19, 90). For example, Alan F. Segal opines that Paul employs a liberal evangelistic approach in...
Judaism (1995, pp. 8-9), which required no circumcision of a Gentile convert. Segal is convinced that “Paul begs moderation and continues to argue that the Gentiles are to be added to the community of the faithful through the model of the Noachian commandments, with no specific rules of Judaism in place, especially circumcision” (Segal, 1990, pp. 187-233) (cf. Rom 2:12-16). He further argues that since some Rabbis in Palestinian Judaism were liberal on the issue of Gentiles’ circumcision, Paul could be described as a liberal Pharisee (Segal, pp. 6-7, 18-19). John J. Collins, however, believes that the possible background of the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision could be traced in his Christological world view (1985, pp. 185-186). Daniel Boyarin, like Peder Borgen (1987, 62, 220-221, 233; 1996, pp. 234-236), expresses categorically that “the congruence of Paul and Philo suggests a common background to their thought in the thought-world of the eclectic middle-platonism of Greek-speaking Judaism in the first century” (1994, p.4; see also Räisänen, 1983, pp. 251-263; Cohen, 1986, pp. 251-268). To Boyarin, Paul is a more radical interpreter of circumcision than Philo (p. 26). Francis Watson thinks that the socio-political constraints influenced Paul’s adaptation to liberalism. He is convinced that “the abandonment of parts of the law of Moses was intended to make it easier for Gentiles to become Christians; it helped to increase the success of Christian preaching” (Watson, 1986, p. 34; see also Hall, 1992, pp. 53-57; Cohon, 1987, pp. 332-333; cf. Sanders, 1983, p. 102). He further cites Paul’s statement to augment his view that “to those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... that I might win those outside the law” 1 Cor 9:21. Against this background, Watson suggests, “Paul quite frankly admits that he abandoned the Jewish law precisely in order to ensure the success of his preaching among the Gentiles” (p. 35). His argument boils down to the repulsive nature of circumcision in the Greco-Roman world. It is more of practical expediency rather than theological principle, according to Watson (p. 36). Thus, the different approaches employed by scholars from different persuasions, have, however, tended to increase diversity of opinion rather than consensus (McEleney, 1991, pp. 319-320). This paper attempts to address the questions: what were the possible influences on the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision, a sign of the covenant, in his itinerant mission? Thus, was Paul influenced by the OT, Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, or was there any other possible influence on his understanding of circumcision—a sign of the covenant? It is in search of a satisfactory answer to this question that
this research is conducted. To this end, exegetical approach, specifically a background study on the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision, is employed. To determine the possible influences, this study delves into relevant primary sources. The study consists of (1) significance of circumcision in the OT, (2) significance of circumcision in Palestinian Judaism (Hall, 1992, p. 1:1027; Neusner, 1981), (3) significance of circumcision in Hellenistic Judaism, (4) Paul’s understanding and attitude towards circumcision in Gentiles’ soteriology, and (5) suggestion of possible influences on Paul’s understanding of circumcision (Cairus, 1999, pp. 27-35; Schoeps, 1961, pp. 220-235).

II. Significance of Circumcision in OT

The scripture is a witness to the institution of circumcision, a sign of the covenant, between God and Abraham. (Gen 12:4; 17:1-14) (Keil and Delitzsch, n.d., p. 222). Circumcision was practiced by many of Israel’s neighbors in the ancient Near East, among them the Egyptians, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and certain nomadic elements (cf. Jer 9:24-25) (Steiner, 1999, pp. 497-526; Wenham, 1994, p. 23; Speisser, 1964, pp. 126-127). However, the significance of the rite being performed outside Israel remains obscure. On the other hand, the circumcision God gave to Abram is termed as a sign of the covenant (Gen 17:11; cf. 15:18). This clearly suggests an importance being attached to this kind of circumcision.

Context of Gen 17:1-14

In the context of Gen 17:1-14, God establishes an external mark of the invisible bond which united Him and Abram (Gen 15:18). In chap. 17, there is no new covenant which is established to substitute for the first. The Hebrew kārath (Qal perfect 3rd masculine singular) in 15:18 can be rendered as ‘made or set up’ covenant. The covenant in 15:18 was made together with some notable promises which were to make the covenant realized in the future. The same provisional promises are repeated in chap. 17:1-14 which presupposes that they are the same covenant (15:18; 17:2f). The phrase wēʾ ettēnāh (Qal imperfect 1st singular) in 17:2 may mean ‘I put into force, or to make operative the things promised in the b’rîthī “covenant”’ (cf. 15:18) (Keil and Delitzsch, p. 223; Skinner, 1930, p. 294). The purpose of
chap. 17 may be to give the graphic picture of the realization of the covenantal promises in the life of Abram (15:18; cf. 17:2f).

In 17:1b the expression ‘walk before me and “be perfect” needs to be considered since reference will be made frequently to. The Hebrew word תם means “complete,” “sound,” “whole,” “healthful,” “perfect,” and “entire.” It is mostly used in connection with blemish-free sacrificial animals (cf. Lev 1:3,10; 22:21-22). It is also used to show God’s standard required of human (Gen 17:1; Deut 18:13) (Olivier, 1980, pp. 973; Brown, 1952, s.v. “תם”). In this context it is masculine and used as an adjective qualifying the state that God wants Abram to be in their relationship. Being ‘blameless or perfect’ in this context suggests a faithful walk with God which should be in totality of Abram’s life as the covenantal promises are being effected (cf. Deut 18:13) (Keil and Delitzsch, 223).

In Gen 17:10,11 God calls circumcision a covenant which was a sign of the covenant. H. C. Leupold observes that circumcision was a metonymy for covenant-sign or covenant condition which makes Abram and his descendants dutiful in the covenant with God (17:8-9) (1942; Goldingay, 2000, p. 3). If so, the function of the sign was to serve as a reminder for Abraham and his descendants in their response to duty. However, John Skinner maintains that it was a token by which God was reminded of the existence of the covenant (1930, p. 294). These two distinct ideas are probable, however, the context favors the view that circumcision was the sign of obedience to the covenant. It represented an outward physical sign and reminder of membership to the covenant (17:10,13). This understanding establishes the immediate context of 17:1-14. Therefore, ‘walking before God and being perfect’ as an introductory statement to the establishment of circumcision, sign of the covenant, may be a summary statement of what constitutes Abraham’s obedience to this sign. If Abraham accepts this sign, he becomes wholly acceptable before God.

After Abraham, reports of physical circumcision are few. The only individuals who are specifically mentioned as having been circumcised are Isaac (Gen 21:4), Gershom (Exod 2:22; 4:25), and the Israelites before they entered the land of Canaan (Josh 5:2-7). Basically, Biblical authors/editors used the absence of circumcision to characterize non-Israelites, such as the men of Shechem (Gen 34), the Philistines (Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6, 17:26,36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20) and other enemies of Israel (Isa 52:1; Ezek 32:19). Even non-Israelites who lived in the land of Israel and were not circumcised
were called *gērīm* which means “temporary dwellers” (Gilbert, 1991, p. 302; Alexander, 1983, pp. 17-22).

Not only Abraham and his descendants were to be circumcised, but also their Gentile male servants were to be identified with them through circumcision. After the exodus experience, it became imperative for any sojourner, who wished to share in the historical identity of the Hebrews, to be circumcised. This rite entitled him to the partaking of the Passover (Exod 12:44, 48-4; cf. Gen 34:22). The Passover could only be shared by circumcised Hebrews for they are the beneficiaries of the Promised Land and YHWH’s faithful relationship (Gen 17:7-8; Exod 12:21-27). Circumcision made a sojourner belong to the people of God (Sanders, p. 102).

It is against this background that this paper is to compare both Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism’s understanding of the sign of the covenant and that of Paul’s.

### III. Significance of Circumcision in Palestinian Judaism

Circumcision played a vital role in the understanding of Palestinian soteriology since it initiated one into the covenant (cf. Gen 17:12-13; Exod 12:40). Avoidance of this act of circumcision on the part of an Israelite can result in death (cf. Exod 12:15, 19; Lev 7:20, 21, 25; 17:9, 10).

Circumcision continued and grew in importance during the second temple period and beyond. Basically, in Rabbinic Judaism, conversion into Judaism required two processes: (1) circumcision and (2) baptism. After one had gone through these processes, one was regarded as an Israelite (*b. Yebamoth* 46b; Cohon, p. 327; Moore, 1927, p. 1:332; cf. Daube 1998) or ‘a covenant-proselyte’ in contrast to the heathen (Kuhn, 1964-1976, pp. 6:727-744). The proselyte is placed on terms of equality with Israel in all spheres of life; especially both in social and religious status in the community. Therefore, upon this understanding, Moore shares the view that the Jewish law does not recognize a semi-proselyte in its socio-theological view (Moore, p. 1:326-331).

The preeminence of circumcision over baptism as a means of initiating a non-Israelite into the covenant has been an ongoing debate among Rabbis. *B. Yebamoth* 46a reads,

> If a proselyte was circumcised but had not performed the
prescribed ritual ablution, R. Eliezer said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that our forefathers were circumcised and had not performed ritual ablution’. If he performed the prescribed ablution but had not been circumcised, R. Joshua said, ‘Behold he is a proper proselyte; for so we find that the mothers had performed ritual ablution but had been circumcised (b. Abodah Zarah 59a).

Despite these differences in understanding, the Sages have said:

Whether he had performed ritual ablution but had not been circumcised or whether he had been circumcised but had not performed the prescribed ritual ablution, he is not a proper proselyte, unless he has been circumcised and has also performed the prescribed ritual ablution (b. Yebamoth 46b).

Although the Sages offered a solution to the divergent views, it seems a number of Rabbis exalt circumcision above baptism in the Palestinian soteriology. The reason for the importance attached to circumcision can be traced in some of the rabbinic statements. For example, the Mishnah reads:

R. Jose says: Great is circumcision which overrides even the rigour of the Sabbath. . . . Rabbi says: Great is circumcision, for despite all the religious duties which Abraham our father fulfilled, he was not called ‘perfect’ until he was circumcised, as it is written, Walk before me and be thou perfect. After another fashion [it is said], Great is circumcision: but for it the Holy One, blessed is he, had not created this world, as it is written, Thus saith the Lord, but for my covenant day and night, I not set forth the ordinances of heaven and earth.

For the purposes of this study, the perfection of Abraham by circumcision is again considered. Basically, the dictionary of the targum defines ‏תָּמִים‏ (tōmīm) as something without blemish, perfect, upright. It also defines ‏שָׁלֵלֶם‏ (šallēm) as perfect, complete, finished, and spent (Jastrow, 1950, p. 1588; Brown, s.v. “תָּמִים and שָׁלֵלֶם”; Cf. b Zebahim 116a). Philological survey suggests that ‏תָּמִים‏ and ‏שָׁלֵלֶם‏ are synonymous in their usages in the targums. Since both suggest
completeness and uprightness in both physical and spiritual senses, they are used interchangeably.

The following findings attest to this fact that righteousness is attached to circumcision. In connection with Gen 17:1 the targum Pseudo-Jonathan of Genesis renders 17:1-3 of the MT with these interpolations: “... worship before me and be perfect in your flesh. ... But because Abram was not circumcised he was not able to stand” (Maher, 1992, p. 64).

The targum Neofiti 1 of Genesis 17:1 also renders ‘be perfect’ as perfect in good works (McNamara, 1992, p. 100). According to the rabbinic exegesis on Gen 17:1, R. Judan says:

Just as a fig contains nothing inedible save its stalk, and with its removal even this defect ceases, so did God say to Abraham: ‘There is nought unworthy in thee save thy foreskin: remove it and the blemish ceases’; hence, WALK BEFORE ME, AND BE THOU PERFECT (Genesis Rabbah 49:1-5).

In rabbinic traditions it seems circumcision is one of the most important and revered mitzvot (p. Nedarim 3.9; p. 38a-b).

Secondly, circumcision has redemptive aspect. This means that circumcision is linked with shedding of blood. In the biblical account where Zipporah saved her son by circumcision had fortified the rabbinic theology of redemption by the shedding of blood. b Shabbath 137b reads,

He who circumcise proselytes say, ‘Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who hast sanctified us with Thy commandments and hast commanded us concerning circumcision.’ He who pronounces benediction recites, ‘... Who has sanctified us with Thy commandments and hast commanded us to circumcise proselytes and to cause drops of the blood to flow from them, since but for the blood of the covenant Heaven and earth would not endure, as it is said, if not my covenant by day and night, I had not appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth. Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who makes the covenant.

Neil J. McEleney notes from the perspective of redemptive aspect of circumcision that symbolically the blood unites humanity to God as displayed by Zippora (p. 334).
This theological understanding of the sign of the covenant which also reflects the social strata of Palestinian Judaism has influenced sociological perspective and how they regard a convert and a non-convert in Judaism. Therefore, in Palestinian Judaism there is no place for semi-proselyte or any other proselyte, apart from a proselyte who has been circumcised and baptized.

It is against this background that some scholars think that during the Maccabean period (165-134 B.C.E) and the Hasmonean Period (134-63 B.C.E) circumcision was forced on both Hellenistic Jews and non-Jews on Jewish borders. For instance, 1 Maccabees intimates that Mattathias' family and the Hasidaean party (See 1 Macc 2:42-44) forced circumcision on Jews who had abandoned the rite as a result of the persecution of the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV. It continues that Maccabees fought Gentiles, yet they did not impose circumcision on them (1 Macc 1:15,48,60-61; 2:46; 5:3-5; Josephus Antiquities of the Jews, 12.278). On the contrary, Josephus hints us of the Hasmonaen forced circumcision on Gentiles: Idumeans and Itureans (Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 13.257-58; Cf. 2 Kings 27:24-8; Esth 8:17). During the Hasmonean period, the Hasidaean party was not interested in the Hasmonean external policy of degentilization which was more of Hellenism; thus, there was great tension between the Hasidims and the Hasmoneans (Surburg, 1978, PP. 40-44; Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 13.427; 14.14-21). In his comparative study between the rationale behind these forced exercises in these periods, Steven Weitzman observes that force was necessary for the restoration of circumcision among Jews in the Maccabean period on religious basis whereas it was necessary for degentilization of the Jewish land and for political stability in the Hasmonean period (Weitzman, 1999, pp. 37-59; Josephus Antiquities of the Jewish War 13:249,374,427.)

In Palestinian Judaism it seems probable that almost all Rabbis are strict adherents to circumcision as Jubilee 15:26 declares, “Circumcision is a sign of belonging to the Lord.” This declaration is witnessed in the conversion of Izates, king of Adiabene by a Jewish merchant Ananias (ca. 46 C.E). According to Josephus, upon the insistence of Eleazar, a Galilean Jew, Izates had himself circumcised, removing all doubt of his full conversion to Judaism (Josephus Antiquities of the Jews 20.35-46). It is worth noting that in theory a proselyte has equal status in Judaism, but not in practice. For instance, the Mishnah reads: “and when a Proselyte prays in private he should say, ‘O God of the fathers of Israel’; and when he prays in the synagogue he should say, ‘O God of your fathers’. But if his
mother is an Israelite he may say, ‘O God of our fathers’” (Bikkurim
1.4. See also Baba Kamma 4.7; 5.4; Shekalim 1.3, 6; Yebamoth 6.5;
8.2; Horayoth 3.8; Kerithoth 2.1).

In summary, it seems that in Palestinian Judaism, circumcision is
of great value in one’s salvation. Therefore, for Gentiles to be fully
recognized in the soteriology of Palestinian Judaism, they must be
circumcised, at least.

VI. Significance of Circumcision in Hellenistic Judaism

Although [Paul] was rabbinically trained, his appraisal of
the whole spirit and content of his earlier training was so
radical that many Jewish scholars have had difficulty in
recognizing him as the production of a rabbinical
education. They have found it easier to appreciate those
indeed, who were not rabbinically trained than the apostle
to the Gentiles. Paul presents enigma with which they
cannot readily come to terms (Bruce, 1977, p. 462).

For Samuel Sandmel, the only key to the understanding of Paul is
familiarization of oneself with the Greek background of Paul since he
lived in Greek environment which had great influences on his
thought-world. Sandmel categorically calls Paul Hellenist because he
was loyal to Hellenistic Judaism (1979, pp. 15-16, 23, 70). Owing to
this thought about Paul’s theology, there arises a problem as to
whether Paul’s interpretation of circumcision, the sign of the covenant,
can be traced to Hellenistic thought.

Hellenistic Jews were identified as those who embraced, one way
or the other, the culture of the Greeks. Martin Hengel asserts that
Hellenism respected no geographical boundaries and almost all Jews
in the first century were Hellenized to some degree (Hengel, 1974, p.
104). Since Hellenization is a complex phenomenon, Hengel insists
that its components comprising political, social, educational and
religious, should be distinguished for a true identification of its kind
(Hengel, 1989, p. 69).

In his investigation on Paul’s mutation of the Jewish tradition with
the socio-cultural stances of the diaspora Jews, John M.G. Barclay
divides the concept of Jewish Hellenization into three main categories
by which one is affected ideologically:

1. Assimilation is in a sense of social integration.
2. Acculturation is in a sense of cultural exposure; especially educational aspect.

3. Accommodation is how a Jew uses the Greek cultural heritage to re-express the essence of Judaism (Barclay, 1995, p. 90).

In the light of these categories, some of the diaspora Jews who were more Hellenized in the field of both acculturation and accommodation are considered. The works of Philo help make these phenomena more glaring. History of biblical interpretations indicates that in the first century Alexandria was the center of allegorization where Aristobulus, Philo, and Aristeas were leading Jewish allegorical interpreters (Sloan and Newman, 2002, p. 61; Buchsel, 1964-76, p. 1:260). In this same environment of allegorical interpretation of the bible, there were different opinions on the importance of circumcision among Jews.

In the treatise on the Migration of Abraham, Philo, though allegorist, criticized some spiritual allegorists for trying to do away with the observance of the Sabbath, circumcision, and feasts (Philo, Migration of Abraham 89-93. See Conf 2; Qust. Gen. 1.53; 3.43; 4.168; Conf. Ling 2-3). Robert G. Hall observes, “These Jews interpreted the torah to justify their neglect of circumcision, which suggests that in their own eyes they remained observant Jews” (Hall, p. 55). This undoubtedly suggests that there were some Jews who thought that they could be part of Abrahamic covenant without the visible mark. On the other hand, on the part of Philo, physical circumcision was still binding as the sign of the covenant to Israel.

Although Philo argues by agreeing with the spiritual allegorists on the hidden meaning of circumcision, he rejects their one sided view of allegorization by harmonizing the spiritual and physical importance of circumcision. Barclay recognizes that Philo’s harmonization of soul and body as Platonist in this context is primarily based on the opinion of the masses since teaching for good reputation was his prime motive (Barclay, 1998, p. 541; Philo, Migration of Abraham, 89-93).

Notwithstanding, Philo defends circumcision in Greek terms by listing some physical and allegorical advantages. The first two are of medical and practical importance. First, circumcision prevents infection of the penis from anthrax. Second, it promotes the cleanliness of the whole body. Thirdly, it helps the assimilation of the penis to the heart: if the heart, which generates thought, is to be circumcised, so must be the member which generates physical offspring. Fourth, the removal of the foreskin facilitates the delivery
of sperm; thus, explaining why the circumcised nations are the most prolific in offspring. In addition, it inhibits one’s sexual pleasure or drive since sex is the most pleasurable human activity. Finally, it symbolizes the excision from the mind of the malady of conceit (Philo On the Special Laws, 1.1.1-7; 1.2.8-11). The first four advantages, according to Philo, are from the fathers while the last two are his.

Philo considers the Jewish tradition superior to all others in quality of piety and virtue. Therefore, for him, proselytes who have renounced their mythical fictions and have tied themselves with the new and godly commonwealth should be held in high esteem (Philo, 1.9.51-53). The foregoing suggests that Philo is a strict adherent to the observance of the Mosaic law. For him, Gentiles cannot enter the covenant without being circumcised since he expects them to keep the laws and customs, as well as worship the one God. He does not seem to be explicit on circumcision as salvific, however, it is implied based upon his insistence of it. Philo’s interpretation of Exod 22:20 with referent to Proselyte (Kuhn, pp. 727-744) in the LXX text has been a contentious issue among scholars. According to Philo:

Proselyte is not the one who has circumcised his uncircumcision, but the one who has circumcised his desires and sensual pleasures and the other passions of the soul. For in Egypt the Hebrew nation was not circumcised, but being mistreated with all mistreatment of the cruelty shown by the inhabitants against strangers, it lived with them in self-restrain and endurance, not by necessity, but rather of free choice, because it took refuge in the Savior, God, Who sent His beneficent power and delivered the suppliants from their difficult and hopeless situation (Philo Questions and Answers on Exodus II:2).

It is against this background that Borgen asserts that Philo did not see any importance to physical circumcision as a sign of the covenant. In his view, Philo advocated spiritual proselytes who needed not to circumcise their flesh but their pleasures and desires and other passions of the soul (Borgen, 1987, pp. 65,221). On the other hand, Barclay contends that Philo tries to explain:

how the scriptures (Exod 22:20; 23:9 LXX) can refer to the Israelites in Egypt as ‘proselytes’ although they were not circumcised (the end of the section confirms that this
question is its central theme). The reference to the ψυχήν τοῦ προσελήνου (Exod 23:9) helps him to find the answer in the common circumcision of pleasures and desires’. But this explanation is required only because Philo knows that proselytes are circumcised and thus prime facie not comparable to the Israelites in Egypt. The ‘not...but’ structure statement shifts the weight of the meaning of ‘proselyte’ onto ethical discipline, but only for tactical, exegetical reasons which presuppose that in its normal sense, ‘proselyte’ means ‘one who has been physically circumcised (Barclay, 1998, p. 543).

In view of Philo’s definition of a proselyte, Khun concurs with McEleney with the view that in a typical Hellenistic Judaism the true Proselyte is the one “who is circumcised not merely in the foreskin but in lusts and desires and other passions of the soul (Khun, 732. See also McEleney, 392). Although Philo does not categorically express that physical circumcision is required for becoming a proselyte in any of his writings, it seems reasonable to conclude at this point that he never deviates from his stance on the observance of bodily circumcision.

V. Circumcision in Paul’s Understanding

The root of hostility in the early Christian church can be clearly seen on the issue of whether gentiles could be converted to Christianity without undergoing circumcision (Acts 10:1-11:18; 15:1-31; Gal 2:1-21). In his itinerant mission on the Gentile lands, Paul, an Apostle of Christ, meets opposition on the issue of circumcision as a means through which one could finalize one’s salvation process. For this reason, Paul’s understanding of circumcision will be brought to light from his epistles as well as Acts’ account on his attitude towards circumcision.

To begin with, Paul’s Damascus experience re-defined his entire life and aspirations. This experience consisted in his conversion and call (Acts 9:15). As his writings have shown, Paul understood that salvation is found only in Christ (Rom 1:16; 3:22-24; 1 Thess 5:9). Therefore, his call to the ministry was to bring this gospel of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 9:15; Rom 1:16). This experience may have affected his self-understanding, theological views, and
goals (Betz, vol. 5, 1992, p. 187). He states that his circumcision-free
gospel is not intended to please human beings but God (Gal 1:10). He
did not receive this gospel from human beings but through the
revelation of Jesus Christ (v. 12; 2:6). He is bold to say that anyone,
be it himself or any heavenly angel, who preaches any different
gospel should be accursed (1:8). He does not own the content of the
gospel (cf. Acts 9:5-16; 23:10-14). If Acts’ account on the
circumcision-free Gospel preached to Cornelius and household by
Peter is taken seriously, then the Christ-experience may have been
shared by both Paul and Peter (10-11). Paul was not alone in his
understanding of the *theophonic orientedness* of circumcision-free

gospel ministry.

In his attempt to defend the status of the Gentiles in the family of
God, Paul writes in Rom 2:25-29. He contends that circumcision is of
value when it goes with obedience. However, he argues that the true
circumcision is of the heart wrought by the Spirit (See also Lev
26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; 9:25-26; Ezek 44:7,9; 1 Cor 7:19; cf.
Jub 1:23; 1QpHab 11:13; 1QS 5:5). In Rom 3:1, 30, Paul says that
God will justify both circumcision and uncircumcision through faith.
In 4:9-12, Paul argues that Abraham was considered righteous by God
on the basis of faith, before he received circumcision, which was the
seal of his righteousness (see Gen 15:6; cf. Acts 15:1). According to
Paul, Abraham became a case study for righteousness by faith for the
circumcision; one is not justified by any taint of works. For Paul, faith
is the controlling factor in making one righteous, but it is not

In addition, in Gal 5:2-4, Paul states that if the Gentiles circumcise,
they are debtors to the whole law, and that Christ is of no effect to
their salvation. And they have fallen from grace (cf. 3:10-13). Paul’s
statement here seems to suggest that Gentiles need not to become
Jews before they would be saved, but, for them, Christ is their all in
all in respect to salvation. (cf. Acts 15:1; Gal 6:13). This is what Paul
calls ‘the true gospel which gives liberty to Gentiles in Christ’ (Gal
2:4,5). In Eph 2:11-15, Paul uses the word uncircumcision in
reference to the former state of the Gentiles and how they were far
away from salvation. He, however, adds that they are now part of the
commonwealth of Israel because of Christ’s death, but not the blood
that flows from circumcision which unites them to God (cf. Rom
3:24; 5:9; Eph 1:7; 2:13; Col 1:29). Paul throws more light on this
assertion: “For in Christ neither circumcision avails anything, nor
uncircumcision; but faith which works by love (Gal 5:6). This
understanding authenticates Paul’s thesis of ‘new creation in Christ or the Israel of God’ (6:15,16; cf. 3:28).

Moreover, Paul considers those who worship God in Spirit and do not show any confidence in the flesh as the true circumcision (Phi 3:3,4,5; cf. Rom 2:29). In Col 2:9-10, Paul encourages his addresses that they are complete in Christ who is the head of all principalities and power. Paul adds, “in him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the putting off of the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ (v. 11) (O’Brien, 1982, pp. 116-117). Paul seems to define the kind of circumcision that the believers have undergone, which is Christ’s. Christ’s circumcision is a metaphor which reechoes Paul’s metaphorical usage of circumcision elsewhere (see v. 13; Rom 2:29; Phil 3:3) (Bruce, 1957, p. 236; Robertson, 1931, p. 493). Believers’ circumcision is not done by hand, which presupposes that it is an act of God. God does not circumcise the member of the believer’s heart. Rudolf Butmann sheds light on Paul’s usage of the concept of circumcision of ‘heart’. He points out that the ‘heart’ is the real self in contrast to what a man appears to be, and that it is not some ‘inner self’ in principle separable from the body, but the willing and thinking person (1951, p. 222). A circumcised heart is a transformed person, turned towards obedience (cf. Rom 6:17) and faith (Rom 10:8-10).

Notwithstanding, in Acts 16:1-3, Paul circumcises Timothy, whereas Paul refuses to circumcise Titus (Gal 2:3). Some scholars see inconsistency in Paul’s teaching on circumcision (Cohon, pp. 251-268). According to the rabbinic law, a child of a Jewish mother is considered a Jew (b Yebamoth 45b; Bryan, 1988, pp. 292-94). On this basis, Paul considers it to be in line with cultural norm to circumcise Timothy as he joins him to the mission field where Jews reside. Circumcision, as Paul understands, is the sign of belonging to the Abrahamic covenant, the fleshly inscription of genealogical identity, marking the ancestral heritage of every male Jew (cf. Phi 3:5; See 1 Macc 1:15, 48, 60-61; 2:46; 2 Macc 6:9-10; Josphus Antiquities of the Jews 12.241.). Luke recounts another incident when James and the elders in Jerusalem accused Paul of forbidding the Jews among Gentiles not to circumcise their children. In response to this accusation, Paul accepted to make a vow indicating that he never taught the Jews not to circumcise their children (Acts 21:17-26). This clearly suggests that Paul regards the rite of physical circumcision as important and restricted to the Jewish identity (Martin, 2003, pp. 111-25).
On the other hand, Paul refuses to circumcise Titus because he is Greek. Circumcising a Greek will contradict the true gospel he has been advocating (Gal 2:3-5). For he calls himself, the apostle of the uncircumcision (Gal 2:7; cf. Acts 22:17-21). In 1 Cor 7:18, he makes a remarkable statement which explains his attitude towards circumcision: “is any man called being circumcised? Let him not be become uncircumcised (Hall, 1992, pp. 53-57. Bauer, s.v. “epispaomai; Celsus, De Medicina 7.25.1.2; Martial, Epigrams 7.35.82; Suetonius, Domitian 12.2; 1 Macc 1:11-15; b Yoma 85; b Yebamot 72a). Is any called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised.” This unequivocally suggests that Paul urges his converts to stay as they were when grace called them (7:19; cf. Phi 3:3).

In summary, Paul has no animosity towards circumcision as a cultural practice; neither circumcision nor uncircumcision are anything significant in themselves relative to salvation in Christ (Gal 5:6; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19). However, when circumcision is required for salvation, then Paul resists it adamantly.

VI. Comparison between Paul and, Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism on Circumcision

In trying to determine the possible influences on Paul’s understanding of circumcision, the sign of the covenant, it is necessary to compare Paul’s understanding with Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism’s. In this section, both the similarities and dissimilarities will be brought to light.

According to Acts, Paul was born outside Palestine but educated in Palestine (22:3). He speaks Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek (vv. 2; 13:43; 2 Thess 3:17). He bears a Jewish name, Saul, and goes to the Jerusalem temple (Acts 21:26; 24:11). Luke adds that he argues with the Hellenists (9:29). Paul calls himself twice a Hebrew (2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5). Then, the question that comes to mind is, is Paul an apostate? In the first place, it can be deduced from the foregoing analysis that Palestinian Judaism and Paul, at least, share a common understanding on the maintenance of circumcision, the sign of the covenant, among the Jews, as a cultural identity.

However, Palestinian Judaism sees that Abraham became righteous after he perfected himself by circumcising his member. Therefore, Gentiles are obliged to perfect themselves by circumcising their member, and that their socio-theological status in Judaism would
be complete. On the other hand, Paul sees that Abraham became righteous by exercising faith in God before God gave him circumcision, which was the seal of his righteousness. From his Christological viewpoint, Paul considers Abraham as a prototype for both the circumcision and uncircumcision who follow the footsteps (faith) of Abraham. In Paul’s theology of salvation, faith is the controlling factor to be righteous before God, not circumcision. Thus, on the socio-theological viewpoint, Paul’s theology seems to bridge the gap between circumcision and uncircumcision with ‘faith’ as compared to Palestinian Judaism. In other words, whereas circumcision serves as means of earning salvation by perfecting oneself in Palestinian Judaism, righteousness by faith alone serves as a means of being justified in Paul’s understanding.

More so, in Palestinian Judaism, circumcision is seen as redemptive, whereby the blood of the covenant unites the circumcised to God. In Paul’s theology, the blood of Christ unites Gentiles to God and the commonwealth of Israel. Palestinian Judaism’s circumcision of a proselyte is limited to the circumcision of the member, whereas Paul employs a metaphor of circumcision of Christ, which takes care of the whole sinful body and is not done by human words but a supernatural work.

There is observable similarity between the Hellenistic Judaism (represented by Philo) and Paul on the understanding of circumcision, the sign of the covenant. Both parties are strict adherents to the observance of physical circumcision among Jews, as the foregoing analysis has shown.

There are considerable dissimilarities between Philo and Paul. Philo regards Jewish tradition superior to all others in piety and virtue. Paul recognizes this fact (cf. Rom 2:1ff; Phi 3:5), however, redefines a true Jew as the one whose heart is circumcised in the Spirit (Rom 2:29). Thus, a true Jew does not boast.

In addition, Philo’s maintenance of circumcision by allegorical interpretation does not account for its real spiritual meaning as Paul noted by the biblical metaphor. Philo’s hermeneutical approach to the value of circumcision is hellentistically oriented whereas Paul’s is biblically oriented.

On the basis of the analysis drawn, it seems reasonable to conclude that there is a common understanding on the observance of the rite of physical circumcision between Paul and, Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism which is traceable in the OT (Gen 17:10-14). However, there is no trace of any influence whatsoever in either
Palestinian or Hellenistic Judaism on Paul’s view of circumcision from the NT’s perspective. It is probable that Paul was influenced by his new experience in Christ; specially his Christophonic experience on Damascus road. Thus, his basis for not requiring circumcision of the Gentiles was that salvation in Christ does not require any contribution of human beings in perfecting themselves. Rather, it is Christ who justifies Gentiles on the basis of their belief in Him as the Savior of humanity.

VII. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis has shown that Paul’s understanding seems to differ from both the Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. Christ personally committed the circumcision-free gospel to Paul (Gal 1:12; cf. Acts 9:5-15; 22:6-15). This gospel was not an outgrowth of his encounter with both Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. He considers himself accursed if he preaches another gospel different from the circumcision-free one (v. 8). Not even he or a heavenly angel can change the content of the gospel. Like Peter, Paul’s Christophonic experience may have informed his preaching of this gospel (cf. Acts 11:1-18). Both Peter and Paul’s Gentile audience experienced signs of salvation as their Jewish counterparts (vv. 14-15; Gal 5:6). It is reasonable to conclude that the possible influence on Paul’s understanding on circumcision was his Christological worldview.

References

All Talmudic references in this paper are to the Soncino edition unless otherwise noted.
Ancient Sources (from the Loeb Classical Library):
The Works of Philo.
The Works of Josephus.


70 Daniel Berchie