

Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor

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In the Hebrew Bible, circumcision terminology is often used figuratively for anything that is opposed to Israel's God. Because Israel alone among all the peoples of the ancient world amputated the foreskin during the rite, prophetic rhetoric could characterize any hostility to the LORD with "foreskin" language. In rendering the Hebrew, the official targums were quick to substitute nonliteral, more concrete equivalents for the metaphorical circumcision terminology. Consequently, while the targums generally capture the voice and perspective of their parent text, they at times miss the full theological substance and cutting rhetorical jab contained therein.

Key Words: circumcision, uncircumcised, foreskin, sign, metaphor, lips, ear, heart, fruit, translation technique, targum, Targum Onqelos, Targum Jonathan, Targum Nebi'im, Genesis 17

INTRODUCTION

The following study will provide a theological survey of the "circumcision" word group in the Hebrew Bible and will examine how *Targum Onqelos* on the Pentateuch (*Tg. Onq.*) and *Targum Jonathan* on the Prophets (= *Targum Nebi'im*) render the circumcision terminology. After categorizing the various texts and noting lexical characteristics, I will

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focus on the instances where the notion of circumcision represented in the Hebrew lemma points to something more or other than the physical reality—that is, where circumcision language is used metaphorically.¹ I will evaluate whether literal (i.e., natural and obvious) or nonliteral equivalents were used in translation and whether the targum translators were justified in their renderings of the Hebrew text.²

Scholars generally agree that *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Nebi'im* are the most literal targums, closely following the Hebrew original in diction and grammatical structure and retaining the voice and perspective of the parent text. Some scholars have actually equated the authorship of *Targum Onqelos* with Aquila, the highly literalistic Greek translator of the early second century A.D.³ While exegetical expan-

1. Richard N. Soulen's definition of *metaphor* is helpful: "a figure of speech in which a name or descriptive phrase is transferred to an object or concept which it does not literally denote in order to suggest comparison between them" (*Handbook of Biblical Criticism* [2nd ed.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1981], 120). While this paper interacts only minimally with contemporary studies of metaphor, I am inclined toward Max Black's interaction theory. Black holds that a metaphorical statement occurs when a "system of associated commonplaces" connected with a "subsidiary subject" is applied to a sentence's "principal subject," thus creating a new and/or developed meaning: "The metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principle subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject" (*Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962], 74–75; cf. idem, "Metaphor," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981], 63–82). With respect to the use of circumcision terminology in the Hebrew Bible, I will argue that the meaning of physical circumcision in Israel (i.e., the word-group's "system of associated commonplaces") directly influenced the application and resulting meaning in contexts where the associated words are used metaphorically. For some other recent studies on metaphorical theory, see P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* (trans. K. McLaughlin et al.; Toronto: Seuil, 1975; repr. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); idem, "The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (ed. M. Johnson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), 228–47; J. M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); P. W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990). I thank my colleague Jim Harriman for helping me grasp the issues involved in metaphorical theory.

2. Philip S. Alexander notes that in nonliteral renderings within the targums, the interpretive element is introduced through (1) addition (of an explanatory word, clause, or clauses attached to a base-translation), (2) substitution (of a biblical word or phrase with a nonliteral equivalent), and/or (3) rewriting (with the result that a new syntactic structure is introduced that nevertheless is filled with elements derived from the biblical text in either literal or nonliteral fashion) ("Targum, Targumim," *ABD* 6:329). I employ this terminology in this article.

3. That one translator may have worked on both the Greek and Aramaic translations is suggested by the fact that the Babylonian Talmud (*b. Meg.* 3a) and Tosefta ascribe the composition of the targum on the Pentateuch to "Onqelos" (אונקלוס), whereas the Jerusalem Talmud (*y. Meg.* 71c) and the Palestinian midrashes link the act to "Aqilas" (עקיילס). Furthermore, "Onqelos" is attested elsewhere in rabbinic literature as

sions are widely recognized, especially in poetic sections,⁴ scholars agree that these explanatory elements are always declarative rather than argumentative, never include the citation of sources or exegetical reasoning, and invariably adhere to the limits of the Hebrew original.⁵

Because my comparative study is limited to the translational treatment of one semantic field, my conclusions regarding the handling of metaphor are tentative and only suggestive. This stated, my study affirms the traditional view that the translators of *Targum Onkelos* and *Targum Nebi'im* always preserve the voice of their parent text. But the evidence also suggests that even in prose texts the translators preferred to move away from abstractions toward concrete images, being quick to substitute nonliteral equivalents for Hebrew figures of speech.

a corruption of the Latin name "Aquila" (cf., e.g., *t. Demai* 6.13 with *y. Demai* 25d), and a number of similar characteristics can be found between Aquila's Greek translation and *Targum Onkelos*. For a general discussion of the issue, see S. Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 78–79. For full treatments of the subject with affirmative conclusions, see M. Friedmann, *Onkelos und Akylas* (Vienna, 1896), and A. E. Silverstone, *Aquila and Onkelos* (Manchester, 1931); cf. L. J. Liebreich, "Silverstone's Aquila and Onkelos," *JQR* 27 (1936–37): 287–91. In contrast, while identifying Aquila with Onkelos, D. Barthélemy denies that this figure had any part in the Aramaic targum on the Pentateuch. Specifically, Barthélemy believes that the Babylonian tradition was mistaken, having misunderstood a message they received from the west and then erroneously applying it to an anonymous Aramaic version that was circulating about them at the time (*Les devanciers d'Aquila* [VTSup 10; Leiden: Brill, 1963], 148–54). For a similar conclusion, see L. J. Rabinowitz, "Onkelos and Aquila," *EncJud* 12:1405–6. While there is little doubt that the translations of both *Targum Onkelos* and Aquila's Greek version are very literal, E. Tov has noted that "the precision of the Greek translation is much greater than that of the Aramaic one" (*Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 146). At the very least, this observation supports Barthélemy's conclusion that different hands translated the two works. My study will *not* interact at all with the Greek text, but conclusions will be made regarding the characteristics of *Targum Onkelos*, which in turn may be used to evaluate what is known of Aquila's Greek version.

4. That nonliteral translations or expansions occur most frequently in poetry accords with what appears to be a tendency among the targum translators to treat all Scripture as narrative, not distinguishing poetry and prose (Alexander, "Targum, Targumim," 6:329).

5. Works such as *Targum Canticles* (and also *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Targum Esther II*) show massive expansions that "put the translation form under great strain, and would have been more easily accommodated by midrashic form" (*ibid.*). Étan Levine observes that the glosses in the targums serve the following six functions: (1) to resolve textual difficulties by interpreting obscure words or simplifying syntax, (2) to harmonize conflicting texts, (3) to reconcile the biblical text with accepted tradition, (4) to incorporate specifics of Pharisaic-rabbinic Judaism into the text, (5) to provide specificity to historical, judicial, or religious allusions, and (6) to strengthen or mitigate the force of a scriptural passage ("The Targums: Their Interpretive Character and Their Place in Jewish Text Tradition," in *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* [ed. Magne Sæbø; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996], 1:1:326).

Table 1. Lexemes and Locales of "Circumcision" Terminology in the Hebrew Bible

Heb. Lexemes and Defs.	Pentateuch	Prophets	Writings
1. מוּל (v., 31x: 10 Qal ^[A] , to circumcise; 2 Qal Pass ^[B] , circumcised; 19 Niphal ^[C] , to circumcise oneself, be circumcised) [†]	Gen 17:10 ^C , 11 ^C , 12 ^C , 13(2x) ^C , 14 ^C , 23 ^A , 24 ^C , 25 ^C , 26 ^C , 27 ^C ; 21:4 ^A ; 34:15 ^C , 17 ^C , 22(2x) ^C , 24 ^C ; Exod 12:44 ^A , 48 ^C ; Lev 12:3 ^C ; Deut 10:16 ^A ; 30:6 ^A	Josh 5:3 ^A , 4 ^A , 5(2x) ^{BA} , 7(2x) ^A , 8 ^C ; Jer 4:4 ^C ; 9:24[25] ^B	
2. מוּלַל (v. den., 1x: Qal ^[A] , to cut off, circumcise) [‡]		Josh 5:2 ^{A††}	
3. מוּלָה (n.f., 1x: circumcision)	Exod 4:26		
4. עוּרַל (v., 2x: 1 Qal ^[A] , to count as uncircumcised; 1 Niphal ^[C] , to show your foreskin)	Lev 19:23 ^A	Hab 2:16 ^C	
5. עוּרְלָה (n.f., 15x: prepuce, foreskin)	Gen 17:11, 14, 23, 24, 25; 34:14; Exod 4:25; Lev 12:3; 19:23; Deut 10:16	1 Sam 18:25, 27; 2 Sam 3:14; Jer 4:4; 9:24[25]	
6. עוּרָל (adj., 35x: having foreskin, uncircumcised; Gentile)	Gen 17:14; Exod 6:12, 30; 12:48; Lev 19:23; 26:41	Josh 5:7; Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; Isa 52:1; Jer 6:10; 9:25[26](2x); Ezek 28:10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32; 44:7(2x), 9(2x)	1 Chr 10:4

[†] Perhaps one should add the 3 *Hiphil* forms of מוּלַל in Ps 118:10–12.
[‡] It may be that וְנִמְלַתֶם in Gen 17:11 is a *Niphal* perfect of מוּלַל rather than מוּל. Similarly, יִמְלֵךְ in Job 24:24, a *Niphal* imperfect of מוּלַל, may perhaps represent מוּלַל rather than מוּל and should thus be included here.
^{††} Some parse מוּל in Josh 5:2 as a *Qal* imperative of מוּל rather than מוּלַל.
Abbreviations used in all tables: v. = verb; n. = noun; adj. = adjective; den. = denominative; m. = masculine; f. = feminine; A = *Qal*; B = *Qal Passive*; C = *Niphal*; J = *Peal*; L = *Ithpeel*; M = *Pael*; O = *Ithpaal*; H = Hebrew.

CATEGORIZATION OF THE FORMS AND TEXTS

The circumcision word-group in the MT (*BHS*) is made up of 6 Hebrew lexemes, together occurring 85 times: מוּל "to circumcise" (31x), מוּלַל "to circumcise" (1x), מוּלָה "circumcision" (1x), עוּרַל "to treat as one having foreskin" (2x), עוּרְלָה "foreskin" (15x), עוּרָל "having foreskin" (35x). Forty instances are in the Pentateuch, 44 in the Prophets, and one in the Writings.⁶ Table 1 presents the breakdown.

6. The single occurrence in the Writings is 1 Chr 10:4, which parallels 1 Sam 31:4. While this is passage is not covered in *Targum Onqelos* or *Targum Nebi'im* and although it adds little to the overall study, for the sake of thoroughness I have incorporated it into my analysis.

Table 2. *Semantic Groupings of “Circumcision” Terminology in the Hebrew Bible*

Heb. Lexemes	Physical Circumcision/ Male Foreskin	The “Uncircumcised”	Metaphorical Circumcision
1. מורל (v., 31x: 10 <i>Qal</i> [^A], 2 <i>Qal Pass</i> [^B], 19 <i>Niphal</i> [^C])	Gen 17:10 ^C , 11 ^C , 12 ^C , 13(2x) ^C , 14 ^C , 23 ^A , 24 ^C , 25 ^C , 26 ^C , 27 ^C ; 21:4 ^A ; 34:15 ^C , 17 ^C , 22(2x) ^C , 24 ^C ; Exod 12:44 ^A , 48 ^C ; Lev 12:3 ^C ; Josh 5:3 ^A , 4 ^A , 5(2x) ^{BA} , 7(2x) ^A , 8 ^C ; Jer 9:24[25] ^B		Deut 10:16 ^A ; 30:6 ^A ; Jer 4:4 ^C
2. מלל ² (v. den., 1x: <i>Qal</i> [^A])	Josh 5:2 ^A		
3. מולה (n.f., 1x)	Exod 4:26		
4. ערל (v., 2x: 1 <i>Qal</i> [^A], 1 <i>Niphal</i> [^C])	Hab 2:16 ^C		Lev 19:23 ^A
5. עֶרְלָה (n.f., 15x)	Gen 17:11, 14, 23, 24, 25; 34:14; Exod 4:25; Lev 12:3; 1 Sam 18:25, 27; 2 Sam 3:14; Jer 9:24[25]		Lev 19:23; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4
6. עֶרְל (adj., 35x)	Gen 17:14; Exod 12:48; Josh 5:7; Ezek 44:7, 9	Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4 // 1 Chr 10:4; 2 Sam 1:20; Isa 52:1; Jer 9:25[26]; Ezek 28:10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32	Exod 6:12, 30; Lev 19:23; 26:41; Jer 6:10; 9:25[26]; Ezek 44:7, 9

Table 2 shows the semantic force of the various words in their respective contexts. Forty-eight occurrences in 11 passages refer solely to physical circumcision or to the male foreskin.⁷ Twenty-two references in 12 passages use the (nominal) adjective עֶרְל “foreskinned/uncircumcised” as a designation (i.e., a figure of speech) for “Gentile” or “those estranged from God” and will thus deserve significant attention in our study.⁸ Finally, 15 references spanning 9 passages are clearly metaphorical and will be the major focus of our investigation. These figures of speech include (un)circumcised lips (Exod 6:12, 30), ear (Jer 6:10), heart (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16 [2 words]; 30:6; Jer 4:4 [2 words]; 9:25[26]; Ezek 44:7, 9), and fruit (Lev 19:23 [3 words]).

Table 3 details the Aramaic equivalents used in *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Nebi'im* for the various Hebrew lexemes. Significantly,

7. Cf. Gen 17:10–14, 23–37; 21:4; 34:14, 15, 17, 22, 24; Exod 4:25, 26; 12:44, 48; Josh 5:2–5, 7, 8; 1 Sam 18:25, 27; 2 Sam 3:14; Jer 9:24[25]; Ezek 44:7, 9; Hab 2:16.

8. Cf. Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4 // 1 Chr 10:4; 2 Sam 1:20; Isa 52:1; Jer 9:25[26]; Ezek 28:10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24–30, 32.

Table 3. *Literal and Nonliteral Equivalents Used in the Targums*

		Hebrew Lexemes for "Circumcision" in the Hebrew Bible						
		מָלָא	מָלַל	מָלְקָה	עָרַל	עָרְלָה	עָרַל	Other
מָרַד (v. <i>Paral</i>), to cut, split; to circumcise, have oneself circumcised; <i>lhippeel</i> ['l], to be cut off		Gen 17:10 ^l , 11 ^l , 12 ^l , 13(2x) ^l , 14 ^l , 23 ^l , 24 ^l , 25 ^l , 26 ^l , 27 ^l ; 21:4 ^l ; 34:15 ^l , 17 ^l , 22(2x) ^l , 24 ^l ; Exod 12:44 ^l , 48 ^l ; Lev 12:3 ^l ; Josh 5:3 ^l , 4 ^l , 5(2x) ^l , 7(2x) ^l , 8 ^l	Josh 5:2					Exod 4:25 (H כרת)
עָרְלָה / עָרְלָה (n., prepuce, foreskin)						Gen 17:11, 14, 23, 24, 25; 34:14; Exod 4:25; Lev 12:3; 1 Sam 18:25, 27; 2 Sam 3:14		
עָרַל / עָרְלָה (adj., uncircumcised; Gentile)		Jer 9:24[25] [†]				Jer 9:24[25] [†]	Gen 17:14; Josh 5:7; Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; 1 Chr 10:4; Isa 52:1; Jer 9:25[26](2x) [†] ; Ezek 44:7, 9	
מָלְקָה (n., circumcision)				Exod 4:26?				Exod 4:25 (H קָרַת) [†]
מָרַד? (adj., heavy)							Exod 6:12, 30	
מָרַד (v. <i>lhipaal</i> ['o], to act foolishly; to be-[come] dull, foolish)							Jer 6:10 ^o	
מָרַד (adj., obdurate, dull, stupid)							Lev 26:41	
מָרַד (n., obduracy, folly, stupidity)						Deut 10:16		Deut 10:30 (2x)
מָרַד / מָרַד (n., guilt, wickedness)						Jer 4:4		

Aramaic Equivalents

Table 3. *Literal and Nonliteral Equivalents Used in the Targums*

Aramaic Equivalents	Hebrew Lexemes for "Circumcision" in the Hebrew Bible						
	מול	מלל	מולו	ערל	ערלה	ערל	Other
רָשָׁעָא (n., a wicked person)						עָרַל	Ezek 28:10; 44:7, 9
רָשָׁעָא / חַיִּיבָא (n., sinner, wicked person)							Ezek 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32
חַיִּיבָא (v. <i>Peal</i> [], to turn, return)	Jer 4:4 ^l						
רָדַקָא (v. <i>Pael</i> [M], to remove; to loathe)				Lev 19:23	Lev 19:23		Lev 19:23
עָרַד / עָרַדָא (v. <i>Pael</i> [M], to remove)	Deut 10:16 ^M ; 30:6 ^M						
עָרַלָא (v. <i>Hiphaal</i> [O], to be stripped; to uncover oneself)				Hab 2:16 ^O			

+ Intriguingly, the Aramaic גול almost always renders the Hebrew מול, even though the latter shows up in both Middle Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic as מולל ("to cut, circumcise") (cf. HALOT, 2:552; Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targums, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* [New York: Judaica, 1971], 737). Along with meaning "to circumcise," גול is the term used for making (lit., "cutting") a covenant (כְּבֻדָּתָא = חֶבְרַת בְּרִיתָא; e.g., *ḡ. Onq. Gen* 15:18). Jeremiah 9:24–25[25–26] refers both to physical and metaphorical circumcision. Verse 24[25] in the Hebrew begins with the declaration: וְעָרַרְתִּי רַעַיִל בְּעַלְמוֹ בְּעַלְמוֹ ("and I will punish all who are circumcised with a foreskin") and then includes Judah in the list of nations that fit this category. (For clarification on the meaning of this difficult phrase, see below in the section titled "The 'Uncircumcised:'.") Utilizing a nonliteral translation by means of rewriting, *Targum Neofim* renders the phrase as follows: "I will punish all the uncircumcised nations and the house of Israel, whose deeds are like the deeds of the uncircumcised." Verse 25[26] is the one instance where the targum translator used a literal equivalent to render what is clearly a figurative reference to circumcision. The Hebrew states that all Israel was עָרַלָא ("uncircumcised of heart"), and the Aramaic follows almost exactly by stating that they were גְּלִילָא ("uncircumcised in their heart"). For more on this verse, see below in the section titled "(Un)circumcised Heart."

†† In Biblical Hebrew חַיִּיבָא means "son-in-law, bridegroom," but in Aramaic and perhaps Middle Hebrew it also came to mean "child to be circumcised, infant fit for circumcision" (HALOT 1:364; Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 514). The targum translator(s) rendered the phrase in Exod 4:25 "this circumcision blood" rather than "a bridegroom of blood," knowing that the context was clearly about circumcision and perhaps applying the late rather than earlier meaning for חַיִּיבָא. In all likelihood, the choice of חַיִּיבָא over חַיִּיבָא was due to the translator's wrestling to make sense of the passage.

the targums render all but one of the 48 references to physical circumcision or the male foreskin with literal equivalents, and even in the one exception (Hab 2:16), the sense is retained.⁹ Furthermore, in 14 of the 15 instances where the circumcision word-group is clearly metaphorical, the translators of the targums substituted nonliteral equivalents. A number of other nonliteral renderings will be noted.

THE ORIGIN AND MEANING OF CIRCUMCISION IN GENESIS 17 IN THE LIGHT OF ANCIENT PRACTICE

Before beginning our comparison of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts, we should comment regarding the origin and meaning of circumcision in Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ The biblical narrative in its present form associates the inception of Israelite circumcision with the Patriarch Abraham, defining the rite as a “covenant” (בְּרִית) and “sign of covenant” (אוֹת בְּרִית) between God, Abraham, and his offspring (Gen 17:10–11, 13). From a literary perspective, it is significant that the other accounts of physical circumcision in the Hexateuch mention the rite *as if* the reader already knows what circumcision means for the patriarchs and their descendants (cf. Gen 34:13–24 [traditional opinion varies between “J,” “E,” or “P”]; Exod 4:24–26 [“E”]; and Josh 5:2–8). Indeed, Gen 17 is the first canonical reference to circumcision, and it is the *only* etiological narrative regarding the rite in all of Scripture.¹¹ Regardless of when and how Gen 17 was composed,

9. In Hab 2:16, *Targum Nebi'im* renders the Hebrew הֶעֱרַל “show your foreskin (?)” (*Niphal* impv. m.s.) more delicately by using אֶתְעַרְטֵל (“strip/uncover yourself”) (*Ithpaal* impv. m.s.). The LXX, Syr., 1QpHab, Aquila, and Vg. read הֶרְעַל (“to stagger”), an accidental metathesis of עֶרַע easily explained by the phrase “drink also yourself” in the previous clause. Significantly, the pesharist in 1QpHab was apparently aware of textual variants in view of his inclusion of לֹא מִלֵּא אֶת עוֹרֹלְתוֹ לִבּוֹ (“he did not circumcise the foreskin of his heart”) within the context. The reading in the MT provides a nice antithesis to v. 15: as the oppressor has exposed the nakedness of others (v. 15), so his nakedness will be exposed (v. 16).

10. For a very helpful overview of the origin, practice, and significance of circumcision as expressed in the Pentateuch, see P. R. Williamson, “Circumcision,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and D. W. Baker; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 122–25. Two recent monographs that wrestle with the origin and meaning of circumcision in Israel are: Klaus Gründwaldt, *Exil und Identität: Beschneidung, Passa und Sabbat in der Priesterschrift* (BBB 85; Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1992); Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 28; Tübingen: Francke, 1998). Cf. Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968); an updated edition is proposed from Two Age Press, Overland Park, KS.

11. R. W. L. Moberly is one who sees a distinction between the view of circumcision in the patriarchal narratives and that found in the rest of the Pentateuch. He states: “circumcision in the patriarchal context of Genesis 17 does not carry the kind

I suggest that the present shape of the Pentateuch necessitates evaluating all other references to circumcision in the light of the Gen 17 account.¹²

of exclusive significance that it has in specifically Yahwistic tradition" [i.e., in materials covering the period after the special revelation of the LORD's name in Exod 3 and 6] (*The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* [OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 93). Moberly assumes that, from the perspective of Mosaic Yahwism, Ishmael should never have been circumcised (Gen 17:23–26), for he was clearly not part of Israel's line of ancestors. The fact that the narrators retained this bit of information in Gen 17 supports Moberly's thesis that they saw patriarchal religion as something prior to and in many ways distinct from Mosaic Yahwism, though focused on one and the same God (p. 103). While I affirm this general thesis, which Moberly ably defends on pp. 79–104 of his monograph, I question whether it applies to the descriptions of the practice of circumcision found in the Pentateuch. Genesis 17 explicitly states that participation in the Abrahamic covenant was determined by one's membership in a promise-holder's household and not necessarily by one's direct biological descent via Sarah (cf. Gen 17:10, 12). That is, while the covenant promises were established in the second generation with Isaac and his offspring (and their households) alone (cf. 17:19–21; 21:12–13), Ishmael was a full-fledged member of the covenant community by virtue of his birth into Abraham's house. Indeed, it was because Ishmael was Abraham's son that God promised to bring forth a nation through him (21:13; cf. 17:20). Not all of Abraham's offspring are considered promise-holders, which is why Ishmael could be called Abraham's "seed" and yet not a child who would perpetuate the covenant and promise (21:12–13; cf. 17:19–21). (Similarly, we can assume that Esau was circumcised as a son of Isaac, though he too was clearly not part of the line of promise [cf. Gen 25:23; Mal 1:2–5; Rom 9:6, 12, 13, 27].) Nevertheless, while the Abrahamic covenant is not sustained through Ishmael's line, the narrative appears to say that he is a participant in the Abrahamic covenant and thus a recipient of the promises that are part of it, whether for blessing or curse—"and God was with the lad" (21:20). (Cf. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* [S. Hamilton, MA: Meredith G. Kline, 1993], 220–22, though with some differences; repr., *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* [Overland Park, KS: Two Age, 2000].) The covenant of Gen 17 necessitated that Ishmael be circumcised, and the rest of the Pentateuch suggests that Moses would have affirmed this simply because Ishmael was part of Abraham's household (cf. Exod 12:44, 48–49; Lev 12:3). As such, the text offers no hint that the "exclusive significance" given to circumcision in the Mosaic period was not present in the patriarchal period. In fact, while Moberly sees it as an example of where the Yahwistic narrators "lapsed into their own categories" (p. 104), the record of the slaughter of the Shechemites following the rape of Dinah (cf. Gen 34:13–24) strongly suggests that patriarchal circumcision was indeed "exclusive" and that the pentateuchal perspective on circumcision is unified.

12. The testimony in Exod 4:25 and Josh 5:2–3 that flint knives were used to perform circumcision suggests that Israel's traditions related to the rite are indeed ancient. But how does this harmony in the ancient witnesses align with the view that the Pentateuch is a composite of various sources? I align with the growing number of scholars who recognize significant thematic and stylistic unity across the traditional source divisions of the Pentateuch (cf., e.g., H. H. Schmid, R. Rendtorff, D. J. A. Clines, R. N. Whybray, E. Blum, R. Albertz). Indeed, Genesis–Numbers may in fact bear a Deuteronomic stamp (see esp. Schmid and Rendtorff; cf. L. Peritt). Furthermore, I believe the evidence suggests that the Priestly "layer" in the Tetratauch never existed as one independent narrative source but that Priestly materials supplemented the "JE" narrative tradition (cf., e.g., F. M. Cross, J. Van Seters, R. Rendtorff; contra K. Koch and J. A. Emerton). I also

We noted that Gen 17 designates circumcision as a “covenant” and as a “sign of covenant.” Michael Fox has observed that “signs” (אוֹתֵינוּ) in the Hebrew Bible fulfill at least one of three functions: (1) to prove the truth of something (e.g., Isa 38:7–8); (2) to symbolize or represent a future reality by virtue of resemblance or conventional association (e.g., Ezek 4:1–3); or (3) to rouse knowledge of something, whether by (a) identifying (e.g., Josh 2:12) or (b) reminding (Exod 13:9).¹³ While circumcision’s function is not made explicit in Gen 17, a number of observations suggest that in Israel the rite served primarily as a mnemonic cognition sign (#3b) and secondarily as both a symbol sign (#2) and an identity cognition sign (#3a).¹⁴

Fox has observed that all but one of the other “signs” in the Priestly material are cognition oriented, functioning to awaken knowledge of something in the observer. For example, the blood of the Passover lamb was a sign that identified the Israelite homes to the messenger of the LORD (Exod 12:13) and Aaron’s blossomed rod was a sign that reminded the community of the divine choice of the Aaronides (17:25[10]; cf. 17:20[5]).¹⁵ The prevalence of cognition signs in the Priestly materials strongly suggests that the sign of circumcision in Gen 17 is also designed to awaken knowledge in the observer.

generally affirm the conclusions of primarily Jewish/Israeli scholars that the Priestly materials are preexilic and antedate the form of Deuteronomy as we have it (e.g., Y. Kaufmann, M. Weinfeld, M. Haran, A. Hurvitz, J. G. McConville, M. Rooker, J. Milgrom, I. Knohl, J. Joosten). Recognizably, reconstructing the Pentateuch’s compositional history is a highly speculative task, and as Moberly states, “critical conjectures that depend on reading between the lines are always more persuasive if combined with a cogent reading of the lines themselves” (*The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 85 n. 4). In our attempt to read the Pentateuch as a narrative whole, then, we discover that the various pentateuchal traditions uniformly assume the description of circumcision given in Gen 17. Because of this, Gen 17 must provide the interpretive grid through which to read all other circumcision texts.

13. Michael V. Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Light of the Priestly *’ōt* Etiologies,” *RB* 81 (1974): 562–63. That symbol signs represent a *future* reality in the human sphere is noted on p. 576.

14. Although Fox limits all signs to one function, John Goldingay observes that “[circumcision’s] nature as a rite in itself perhaps precludes the idea of its having one meaning, for rites tend to be multivalent” (“The Significance of Circumcision,” *JOT* 88 [2000]: 7).

15. See also the luminaries (Gen 1:14–15), the rainbow (Gen 9:13–17), the Sabbath (Exod 31:13, 17), and the altar covering (Num 17:3, 5[16:38, 40]), all of which function as cognition signs. Exodus 7:3 is the anomalous “sign” text, and here Fox sees an “old formula” at work: the LORD declares, “But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart that I may multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt” (*ibid.*, 569). Fox also includes among the “sign” texts Num 15:39, wherein the fringe is designed to remind the covenant community of their need to heed the LORD’s word. But this reading requires the substitution of תַּשְׁבֵּץ אֵזָרָה (“tassel, fringe”), an unnecessary emendation that has no manuscript support. For a discussion of the structure of all these passages with particular focus on the function and purpose of the “signs,” see Fox, “The Sign of the Covenant,” 569–86.

The principal nature of this knowledge is clarified by the close parallels among circumcision, the sign of the rainbow (Gen 9:13–17), and the Sabbath (Exod 31:13–17). Only these “signs” in the Hebrew Bible are linked directly to בְּרִית (“covenant”), and each of these covenant “signs” is denoted by the verb נתן (“to give, confirm, make”) and qualified by the phrase “between me and you” (cf. Gen 9:12, 13; 17:2, 10, 11; Ezek 20:12 with Exod 16:29).¹⁶ Because the rainbow (cf. Gen 9:15–16) and the Sabbath (Exod 31:13–15) explicitly function to *re-mind* the covenant parties of their obligations, circumcision very likely performs the same role.¹⁷

Because the rite was performed “in the flesh” of the male covenant member (Gen 17:11, 13–14) and because human failure to observe circumcision would result in being cut off from the community (Gen 17:14), circumcision appears to function as a reminder primarily to Abraham and his offspring rather than to God.¹⁸ Specifically, the sign reminded the human parties of the LORD’s demand to “walk before me and (so) be blameless” (Gen 17:1).¹⁹ The rite was performed

16. The only two occurrences of אֹת בְּרִית in the Hebrew Bible are here in Gen 17:11 and in Gen 9:13 with reference to the rainbow. Exodus 31:16–17 offers a close parallel by designating the Sabbath as both בְּרִית (“covenant”) and אֹת (“sign”; cf. Ezek 20:12). For a recent, helpful discussion of “covenant” in the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near East, see Gordon P. Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant: Biblical Law and Ethics as Developed from Malachi* (VTSup 52; Leiden: Brill, 1994; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 168–215.

17. While the verb זָכַר (“to remember”) is not present in Exod 31, the mnemonic role of the sign is stressed by the לְדַעַת (“so that you may know”) in v. 13 (cf. Ezek 20:12).

18. In this regard, circumcision is more like the sign of the Sabbath (Exod 31:13–17) than the rainbow (Gen 9:12–17), for the former reminded Israel of their need for dependent trust in their Creator King (cf. esp. Exod 31:13—“Keep the sabbath . . . to know [ידע] that I am the LORD who sanctifies you”), whereas the latter reminded God of his perpetual promise to sustain creation (cf. esp. Gen 9:14–16). In contrast, Fox argues that the primary function of circumcision is “to remind God to keep his promise of posterity” (“The Sign of the Covenant,” 595). While I affirm that the “sign’s” placement on the male reproductive organ has direct relationship to the promise of “offspring” that dominates Genesis and the Abrahamic narrative in particular, I believe that the reminder of the promise provides primary motivation to the *human* participants. So too G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word, 1994), 23–24. For further discussion of other elements in Israel’s worship that served as reminders to God and his people, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (AB 3B; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 2014–17, 2094.

19. The Hebrew reads וְהָיָה תָמִים וְאָתְנָה בְרִיתִי בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וְאָרְבָּה אֹתְךָ בְּמֵאָד מְאֹד (“Walk before me and be blameless, so that I may confirm my covenant between me and you and so that I may multiply you exceedingly”). Similar to what is found in Gen 12:1–3, a text programmatic for all of God’s dealings with Abra(ha)m, the structure here in Gen 17:1–2 is impv. + impv. + cohort. + cohort. The sequence impv. + impv. may form a hendiadys construction, so that the two words together express a single concept: “walk before me blamelessly.” More likely, however, the second imperative is dependent on the preceding one (via *waw* consecutive) with the lead imperative containing a condition and the second imperative declaring the sure consequence or promise that the

on the male reproductive organ to remind the recipient that the oath of undefiled allegiance was binding on both him and his offspring (cf. Gen 18:19) and perhaps also to remind both covenant parties of the divine promise of posterity (e.g., Gen 12:2; 15:5; 17:4–5, 19; 18:10).²⁰

While primarily a mnemonic sign, the fact that circumcision was a cutting rite suggests that it also bore a symbolic function. Meredith G. Kline has insightfully suggested that, like the dismembering ritual in Gen 15:7–18 (cf. Jer 34:17–20), circumcision graphically portrayed the covenant curse of excision and threatened the cutting off of descendants (Gen 17:14).²¹ Indeed, the reason for God's wrath against Moses' son(?) in Exod 4:24 may partially be explained by Moses' failure to fulfill his covenant obligation with the boy.²²

Along with the mnemonic and symbolic roles of circumcision, it also served as a sign of identity, marking those who were incorporated into Israel's covenant community (Gen 17:12–13). We know that many of Israel's neighbors practiced a form of circumcision.²³ But the

fulfillment of the condition will affect: "Walk before me and (so) be blameless" (cf. GKC §110f; e.g., Gen 12:1; 1 Kgs 22:6; 2 Kgs 5:13; Isa 36:16). The impv. + cohort. narrative sequence usually expresses purpose or result (English "so that"), which suggests that the two clauses beginning with cohortatives connote promises that are contingent on the fulfillment of the lead imperative (cf. Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [New York: Scribner's, 1971], §107c; GKC §108d). That is, for Abra(ha)m to see realized the confirmation of the covenant and the multiplication of his offspring (v. 2), he first must be blameless, living in accordance with the divine suzerain's will. Abraham's test of faith climaxes in Gen 22 with the call to sacrifice his son Isaac, and the covenant promises are confirmed at that time by divine oath (Gen 22:16–18).

20. Goldingay rightly observes that circumcision "requires the cutting of the part of the male body through which God's promise will be fulfilled" ("The Significance of Circumcision," 9). For Abraham in his old age, this ritual would have been a clear reminder of his dependence on God to see the fulfillment of the promise. Less convincing is Goldingay's comment (p. 8), drawn from K. E. and J. M. Paige, that "circumcision was a ritual which tested a man's trust in his wider community, as he lets his son be circumcised and thus lets this son's reproductive potential be both threatened (if the operation goes wrong) and realized (if it is effective)." While the link with procreation fits the context, there is little support within Gen 17 that the narrator was applying this sociological interpretation to circumcision.

21. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 193. Despite the symbolic parallels, Kline does not believe circumcision is a covenant-ratification rite like the cutting-rite found in Gen 15 (contrast his earlier views: idem, "Oath and Ordeal Signs I," *WTJ* 27 [1965]: 115–19; idem, *By Oath Consigned*, 39–43). The withdrawal of the divine presence in Gen 17:22 before Abraham performed the rite along with the fact that circumcision was a recurring ordinance strongly suggest that the rite is properly understood as a sign marking incorporation into the covenant community and *not* a covenant-ratification oath-sign (*Kingdom Prologue*, 193). For more on symbolic ratification oath-signs in covenants, see Hugenberger, *Marriage as a Covenant*, 185–214.

22. For more on this text, see the section titled "Uncircumcised Lips."

23. Three male warrior figurines from the 'Amuq Valley in northern Syria (ca. 2800 B.C.) provide the earliest evidence of circumcision in the ancient world. Significantly, at

combination of the biblical and extrabiblical evidence suggests that from the Middle Bronze Age (2000 B.C.) through the early Roman period (A.D. 125)—the time roughly associated with biblical Israel, Israel alone amputated the foreskin.²⁴ Israel's full removal of the

least two of the three statues represent the full removal of the foreskin in the manner known among the Hebrews a millennium later (cf. Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85 [1966]: 475–76). The first written text witnessing the rite appears on an Egyptian stele found at Naga-ed-Der in Middle Egypt and dated to ca. 2300 B.C. (6th Dynasty); here a man tells of his being circumcised along with 120 other men (cf. *ANET*³ 326). Dated around the same time, a relief titled "Circumcision" and found in Sakkarah in Lower Egypt within the tomb of Ankh-ma-Hor pictures "mortuary priests" circumcising youth, while an assistant restrains one of the patients (cf. *ANEP* 629; *ANET* 326 n. 2). Furthermore, the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 9:24–25[25–26]) includes Judah among the Egyptians, Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, and Arabs who are said to be both "circumcised *with a foreskin*" (מִגִּיל בְּעֵרְלָהּ, v. 25) and yet "uncircumcised" (עֵרְלִים, v. 26). (On this passage, see below under the sections titled "The 'Uncircumcised'" and "[Un]circumcised Heart.") The fifth-century B.C. historian Herodotus writes that the only peoples that circumcise are the Ethiopians, the Egyptians, the Colchians, the Phoenicians, the Syrians of Palestine, the Syrians of the valleys of the Thermodon, the Parthians, and the Macrones (*Hist.* 2.104; cf. 36, 37). He further argues that the rite derived either from the Egyptians or the Ethiopians. But the figurines found in northern Syria suggest that the rite began in northwestern Mesopotamia and moved south (so Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," 473–76; cf. Robert G. Hall, "Circumcision," *ABD* 1:1025–31). Philo includes among the circumcised the Jews, the Egyptians, the Arabians, the Ethiopians, and "nearly all the nations who dwell in the southern parts of the world" (*QG* 3.47–48). Finally, Josephus notes that the Arabians (*Ant.* 1.12.2) and Egyptian priests (*Ag. Ap.* 2.14) were circumcised, and he may also suggest that the Idumeans (= Edomites) were circumcised in some way (*Ant.* 13.9.1; cf. n. 24).

24. This tentative conclusion is drawn from the combined arguments of Jack M. Sasson ("Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," 474–76) and Richard C. Steiner ("Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah [9:24–25] in the Light of Josephus and Jonckheere," *JBL* 118 [1999]: 497–505), both of whom built off the evidence uncovered by Frans Jonckheere. Jonckheere's study of the available Egyptian texts and reliefs, along with mummified bodies, revealed that ancient Egyptians did not fully remove the foreskin during circumcision ("La circonsion [*sic*] des anciens Égyptiens," *Centaurus* 1 [1951]: 212–34). In contrast, the Jewish practice as required by the Talmud (*m. Šabb.* 19:6) included the full amputation of the prepuce. Steiner summarizes the evidence to date ("Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom," 503): "Jewish circumcision involves pulling the foreskin forward and amputating it; the removal of an annular piece of skin permanently uncovers the glans. The Egyptian procedure involved either the excision of a triangular section from the dorsal face of the foreskin or simply a longitudinal incision along the median line of the dorsal face allowing retraction of the foreskin and exposure of the glans." (For more on the surgical procedure of Jewish circumcision, see Leonard V. Snowman, "Circumcision," in *EncJud* 5:571; for more on the Egyptian operation, see Jonckheere, "La circonsion des anciens Égyptiens," 225–26). Following the lead of Morton Smith (*The Cult of Yahweh* [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 273–74), Steiner argues that Josephus's comment regarding the circumcision of the Idumeans (*Ant.* 13.9.1 §§257–58) refers not to their beginning the practice but to their switch from incomplete circumcision to the complete form practiced by the Jews ("Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom," 503–4). Furthermore, the theory

prepuce thus set them apart from the Egyptians and many of their West Semitic neighbors (cf. Jer 9:24–25[25–26]), who performed the rite only by slitting the foreskin; from the “uncircumcised” Philistines and the East Semites of Mesopotamia, who apparently had nothing to do with the ritual;²⁵ and from the Greeks and Romans of

that sees Israel’s circumcision as distinct from its neighbors clarifies better than any other view why in Josh 5:2–9 Israel needed a “second” circumcision following the Egyptian sojourn and wilderness wanderings (so Sasson, “Circumcision in the Ancient Near East,” 474) and how in Jer 9:24[25] the LORD could refer to the nations as “circumcised with a foreskin (מִיִּל בְּעֵרָה לָהֶם)” (so Steiner, “Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom,” 503). (On these two texts, see the discussion below under “The ‘Uncircumcised’” and “[Un]circumcised Heart.”) One piece of archaeological evidence that is not mentioned in any recent discussions of circumcision but that may counter at least part of our thesis is a thirteenth-century B.C. Palestinian incised ivory plaque found in the palace of Megiddo, Stratum VIIA (ANEP 332; cf. Gordon Loud, *The Megiddo Ivories* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939], pl. 4.2a/2b; Harold A. Liebowitz, “Horses in New Kingdom Art and the Date of an Ivory from Megiddo,” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 7 [1967]: 129–34; idem, “Military and Feast Scenes on Late Bronze Palestinian Ivories,” *IEJ* 30 [1980]: 165; idem, “Late Bronze II Ivory Work in Palestine: Evidence of a Cultural Highpoint,” *BASOR* 265 [1987]: 5–6). The scene to the right of the vertical row of plants pictures a prince in a chariot driving two bound and naked prisoners (of war), each of which has the corona of his penis completely exposed. Because the context in no way suggests that erection is represented, the figures appear to be circumcised in the Jewish pattern with full removal of the foreskin. Finding many parallels between the ivory picture and the depiction of Canannite-Israelite interactions in Judg 5, J. Philip Hyatt has suggested that the prisoners were in fact Israelites captured by a Canaanite prince (“Review of *Megiddo Ivories*, by Gordon Loud,” in *JBR* 8 [1940]: 225–26). Hyatt based his views on Loud’s late dating of the ivory to ca. 1350–1150, a period to which many link the Israelite conquest and settlement. But more recently Harold Liebowitz has argued that the Megiddo plaque is best dated to the reign of Ramesses II (ca. 1279–1213 B.C.; “Late Bronze II Ivory Work in Palestine,” 5) and that the picture itself most likely depicts the same scene found on four carved panels also from Megiddo that date to a late phase of the Amarna period (ca. 1375–1360 B.C.), a time that the Tell-Amarna Letters testify was characterized by continual warfare and to which some conservative scholars date the Israelite conquest (“Military and Feast Scenes on Late Bronze Palestinian Ivories,” 162–65, 169). The Amarna Letters themselves give us little help, though EA 243.8–22 intriguingly mentions how Biridi[ya], a king of Megiddo, guarded his city with chariots from the ‘*apiru*’ (W. L. Moran, ed. and trans., *The Amarna Letters* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992; ET of *Les Lettres d’El-Amarna*], 297; on the identification of the ‘*apiru*’, cf. M. G. Kline, “Hebrews,” in *New Bible Dictionary* [ed. I. Howard Marshall et al.; 3rd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996], 457–58; Niels Peter Lemche, “Ḥabiru, Ḥapiru” and “Hebrew,” *ABD* 3:6–10, 95; for other references to Megiddo in the Amarna Letters, cf. EA 234.19; 242.4; 244.24, 42; 245.26). If these figures are non-Israelite, then we know that during the Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.) some other peoples, probably from the Levant, circumcised like the Israelites. Special thanks is due Dr. Richard C. Steiner (Yeshiva University, New York), Dr. Theodore J. Lewis (Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore), and Prof. A. R. Millard (University of Liverpool) for dialoging with me regarding this ivory.

25. The Bible alone indicates that the Philistines (cf. Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4 // 1 Chr 10:4; 2 Sam 1:20) and East Semites (cf. Isa 52:1; Hab 2:16) were “uncircumcised.” It is possible that these references are merely rhetorical. But because

the Intertestamental and NT periods, who were repulsed by all forms of circumcision.²⁶

ancient circumcision is well attested and, because comments in ancient texts regarding circumcision usually refer to those who participated in the ritual rather than to those who did not, the biblical witness probably points to the fact that neither of these practiced any form of circumcision. Cf. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," 476. If indeed the West Semites practiced a form of circumcision and the East Semites did not, the question arises whether Abra(ha)m, having originated in Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen 11:31), would have known of the rite before heading to Canaan. Scholars commonly designate a site located at the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent on the west bank of the Euphrates in southern Iraq as Ur. Following this lead, Troy W. Martin has recently argued that the patriarch's circumcision in Gen 17 marked not only his new commitment to God but also a clear renunciation of his former life in Ur, where no form of circumcision was practiced ("The Physiological Pertinence of ΠΕΡΙΤΟΜΗ in Paul's Epistles" [paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Region of the SBL, Grand Rapids, MI, February 21, 2003], 2). While I affirm that Abraham's amputation of the prepuce permanently distinguished him from his pagan past (cf. Josh 24:2), I suggest three reasons that the rite was not particularly directed against his former life in Ur. First, nothing in the context of Gen 17 suggests that we are to read Abraham's practice of circumcision in the light of his earlier years in Mesopotamia. Second, the text explicitly states that Abraham was 99 when he first performed the rite (Gen 17:1, 23), which means he had already lived in Canaan about 24 years (cf. Gen 16:3, 16 with 12:4). The patriarch's former life in Ur, therefore, would have been far from his thoughts. Third, almost 50 years ago, Cyrus H. Gordon made a compelling case for locating Ur not in southeastern Mesopotamia but just north of Haran in modern-day southern Turkey (cf. "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *JNES* 17 [1958]: 28–31; "Abraham of Ur," in *Hebrew and Semitic Studies Presented to G. R. Driver* [ed. D. W. Thomas and W. D. McHardy; Oxford: Clarendon, 1963], 77–84; for a recent treatment of the question, see H. Shanks, "Abraham's Ur: Is the Pope Going to the Wrong Place?" *BAR* 26/1 [Jan./Feb., 2000]: 16–19, 66–67). As observed in n. 23, the earliest evidence of the practice of circumcision comes from northern Syria, not far from Urfa and Ura in the Khabur Valley, where Gordon posits Abraham's Ur. While the Syrian warrior figurines date one millennium before Abraham, they may suggest that the patriarch became acquainted with the rite while growing up in the region (so Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," 476). Though not conclusive, these observations suggest that Abraham's circumcision did not serve as a *direct* polemic against his former life in Ur. I nevertheless affirm that his loss of foreskin pointed to a letting go of all that is hostile to God.

26. Cf., e.g., 1 Macc 1:44–50, 60–61; 2 Macc 6:10. For a more extensive discussion of the negative attitude that Greeks and Romans bore toward circumcision, see Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1027–29. Goldingay has recently argued that "it was Jewish attempts to reverse it [i.e., circumcision] in the Greek period which led to the introducing of the version [of circumcision] with which we are familiar, involving the exposure of the crown of the penis and not merely the cutting off of the foreskin" ("The Significance of Circumcision," 5). But this argument fails to account for a number of factors. Because the earliest evidence of circumcision graphically presents the full removal of the foreskin, we know that the Jewish practice has early antecedents in some area of Mesopotamia. Furthermore, the thirteenth-century Megiddo ivory has its origin in or directly around Canaan and clearly portrays captives circumcised in the Jewish way. Finally, a view that sees Israel's circumcision as distinct from their neighbors in some way best explains the "second" circumcision of Josh 5:2 and the "incomplete" circumcision of Jer 9:24[25].

THE TARGUMS' HANDLING OF HEBREW METAPHOR

The comparative study of the Hebrew and Aramaic texts that follows is structured topically rather than chronologically or canonically. We will evaluate the translation patterns in the 22 references to the peoples who were disdainfully designated "uncircumcised" and then analyze the 9 passages that clearly use the language of "circumcision" metaphorically.

The "Uncircumcised"

We noted above that the practice of uncovering the glans of the male reproductive organ by amputating the prepuce was unique to Israel. All those outside the Israelite community had foreskin, and within Israel, therefore, foreskin naturally came to represent hostility to the LORD and his people. As will be shown, the Hebrew Bible often negatively applies the term עָרְלָה (adj., lit., "foreskinned"; trad., "uncircumcised") to *any group* with a foreskin, whether (partially) circumcised or not.

For example, the main enemies of Israel during the period of the judges and the early stages of the monarchy are often termed "uncircumcised (i.e., foreskinned) Philistines" rather than just "Philistines" (cf. Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4 // 1 Chr 10:4; 2 Sam 1:20). The Hebrew Bible appears to suggest that the Philistines did not practice any form of circumcision. But rather than viewing the phrase "uncircumcised Philistines" merely as physically descriptive, commentators invariably view it as "a standard epithet of contempt."²⁷ C. F. Keil went so far as to assert that the phrase is used for those "standing . . . outside the covenant with Jehovah."²⁸

Similarly, in Isa 52:1 the prophet declares that in the age of restoration "the uncircumcised and the unclean" will never again enter into the holy city of Jerusalem. Placed side by side with the "unclean," the "uncircumcised"—the foreign enemies of Israel (East Semites / Babylonians?) who desecrated and destroyed the city and Temple²⁹—

27. Robert P. Gordon, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 137; cf. Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel* (WBC 10; Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 136. The ancient testimony is clear that a great majority of the Semitic peoples practiced circumcision of some kind. Because of this, many have attributed non-Semitic origin to the Philistines because they failed to practice the rite in any form (cf. Gordon, *I and II Samuel*, 137). While possible, the fact that the East Semites also appear not to have practiced the rite calls this line of reasoning into question (cf. Isa 52:1; Hab 2:16).

28. C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2: *The Books of Samuel* (ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866–91; repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 485.

29. As identified by numerous commentators: e.g., F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 7: *The Prophecies of Isaiah* (ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Edinburgh:

are clearly being pictured negatively as a group hostile to the holiness of God and his dwelling (cf. Exod 12:48).

The targums used literal equivalents in each of above passages, which may suggest that the translators saw no direct disdain but only a reference to the physical presence of foreskins.³⁰ In Ezekiel, however, *Targum Nebi'im* renders with nonliteral equivalents 14 of the book's 16 instances of עָרֵל, thus adding support to our proposition that the term "foreskinned/uncircumcised" became a figure of speech for all those opposed to the LORD and his people. Note first the targum's handling of Ezek 28:10. Where the Hebrew has the LORD declaring to the king of Tyre, "You will die a death of uncircumcised ones (עָרֵלִים)," the targum develops the sense behind the words by translating: "You will die a death of *wicked ones* (רְשָׁעִין)" (cf. 44:7, 9).³¹ Similarly, 11 times in Ezek 31 and 32 where the Hebrew states that, after death, Pharaoh and/or the Edomites will exist in the realm of the dead with the "foreskinned (עָרֵל)," the targum substitutes the noun חַיֵּיבָא / חַיֵּיבָא ("sinner, wicked").³²

These texts from the exilic prophet contribute significantly to our understanding of how the Israelites of Ezekiel's day applied circumcision terminology. Some scholars see the prophet using עָרֵל strictly in a metaphorical way, creating a rhetorical insult by placing groups known to have practiced circumcision alongside those who did not.³³ But because the Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Edomites all practiced *incomplete* circumcision (i.e., uncovering the penis glans while retaining the prepuce), their link with the "foreskinned" is derogatory strictly in the sense that they showed animosity toward the LORD and his people.³⁴

T. & T. Clark, 1866–91; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), part 2:295; Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 247; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 405.

30. While the Hebrew text of Isa 52:1 renders the two adjectives "uncircumcised" and "unclean" in the singular, *Targum Nebi'im* puts them in the plural.

31. Hebrew = מוֹתֵי עָרֵלִים ("deaths of wicked ones"). Walther Zimmerli calls the form of מוֹת a "plural of intensity" comparable with Arabic *māmatim* and Hebrew מְמוֹת, which are always plural (*Ezekiel* 2 [Heremenia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 75 n. 8; compare "deaths of slain ones" [מְמוֹתֵי הַלֵּל] in Ezek 28:8 and "deaths of diseases" [מְמוֹתֵי תַחֲלָאִים] in Jer 16:4 with "a death of righteous ones" [מוֹת יְשָׁרִים] in Num 23:10).

32. Ezekiel 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32. Cf. A. Lods, "La 'mort des incircconcis,'" *CRAIBL* (1943): 271–83.

33. E.g., Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25–48* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 99, 218; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 21–37* (AB 22A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 576.

34. For some of the evidence that ancient Phoenecia, Egypt, and Edom practiced a form of circumcision, see nn. 23–24 above. Kline has observed that Ezekiel links the death of the "uncircumcised" with the imagery of the sword, echoing the curse anticipated in Gen 17:14—the wicked were "cut off" (Ezek 28:10; 31:18; cf. 32:10; "Oath and Ordeal Signs I," 119 n. 11; idem, *By Oath Consigned*, 43 n. 11).

This conclusion finds support in the oracles of Ezekiel's senior contemporary, Jeremiah, who designates Egypt and Edom among the "uncircumcised nations" (9:24–25[25–26]). The Hebrew text may be translated as follows:

Behold, the days are coming—a declaration of the LORD—when I will punish all who are circumcised with a foreskin (כָּל-מוֹל בְּעֶרְלָה) —Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all those [whose hair is] clipped at the temples, who are dwelling in the desert. For all the nations are uncircumcised (כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם עֶרְלִים), and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart (כָּל-בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל עֶרְלֵי-לֵב).

Richard Steiner has observed that the literary structure of Jer 9:24–25[25–26] (cf. 25:17–26) follows the *inclusio* pattern known in rabbinic literature as *כלל ופרט וכלל* ("generalization, specification, generalization"), so that the nations listed in v. 24 are described as being both מוֹל בְּעֶרְלָה ("circumcised *with* a foreskin," v. 24) and yet עֶרְלִים ("uncircumcised," v. 25).³⁵ In the past, the meaning and connection of these phrases has been problematic, for the most natural reading of מוֹל בְּעֶרְלָה appeared contradictory, as did the literary link between מוֹל בְּעֶרְלָה of v. 24 and עֶרְלִים of v. 25. But as was observed, Israel alone in biblical times is known to have amputated the foreskin during circumcision. Accordingly, when מוֹל is properly understood as meaning "having uncovered the glans" and עֶרְלֵי is rendered "having a foreskin" (rather than "uncircumcised"), no contradiction remains in the passage.³⁶ Judah's inclusion among those *with* a prepuce is at the very least a cutting stab against Israelite pagan practices. Jeremiah's point is that the Israelites also had incomplete circumcision (at least metaphorically) and thus were no better off than their pagan neighbors.

Targum Nebi'im on Jer 9:24–25 includes some major additions. It reads:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the LORD, "when I will punish all the uncircumcised nations (כָּל עַמֵּי אֵי אֵי עֶרְלִיא) and the house of Israel,

35. Steiner, "Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom," 499–500. He further notes, "The clearest examples consist of a phrase containing the word כל that denotes a set of objects or kinds of objects, followed by a list of members of the set (e.g., Exod 39:33–40) or some representative members of it (e.g., Exod 22:8, Lev 14:9, and Deut 14:26), followed by a second (resumptive) phrase that again contains the word כל and denotes the entire set." That an appositional relationship exists between עַל-כָּל-מוֹל בְּעֶרְלָה ("upon all who are circumcised with a foreskin") and the list of peoples that follows is highlighted by the fact that appositional lists repeat before each item in the list the preposition that governs the head noun: D-וּעַל C-וּעַל B-וּעַל A-וּעַל X-כָּל (e.g., Exod 22:8; Lev 1:2; Deut 14:26; 1 Kgs 2:5; cf. Joüon §131i). See Jer 25:17–26, where the accusative marker אֵת, functioning in the same manner as a preposition, is repeated before each item in the list.

36. So Steiner, "Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom," 503. See n. 24 above.

whose deeds are like the deeds of the uncircumcised (עֲרִלִּים)—Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all those [whose hair is] clipped at the temples, who are dwelling in tents in the desert. For all (כָּל) the nations are uncircumcised in their flesh (בְּבִסְרֵהוֹן), and all (כָּל) the house of Israel are uncircumcised in their heart (עֲרִלִּין בְּלִבָּהוֹן)."

While it is unclear whether the targum translator understood the Hebrew phrase מִל בְּעֲרִלָּה in the way argued for above, he thoroughly grasped the ironic nature of Judah's inclusion among the pagan peoples. One wonders, however, whether the expansion in v. 24 and the addition of בְּבִסְרֵהוֹן ("in their flesh") in v. 25 arose because the translator felt obligated to clarify that the Israelites' problem was their heart and *not* the physical presence of the abominable foreskin.

Uncircumcised Lips

The first canonical use of figurative circumcision language occurs in Exod 6:12 and 30, where the narrative records Moses declaring to God a second and third time that he is unskilled in communication (lit., עֲרִל שְׁפָתָיִם "uncircumcised of lips"). *Targum Onqelos* translates the phrase קִיֵּר מְזַלֵּל ("heavy of speech"), following its earlier rendering in 4:10, where the Hebrew reads כְּבִד־פֶּה ("heavy of mouth"). Even in this prose text, the Aramaic translator did not hesitate to render the phrase with nonliteral equivalents for the sake of clarity. But was he justified in understanding the different phrases in Exod 4:10 and 6:12, 30 as synonymous?

Keil and Delitzsch believe that the Hebrew עֲרִל שְׁפָתָיִם of 6:12 and 30 is equivalent to the earlier כְּבִד־פֶּה of 4:10 and that the phrase merely connotes one whose lips are, so to speak, "covered with a foreskin, so that he cannot easily bring out his words."³⁷ Three preliminary observations, however, suggest that the distinct Hebrew terminology in these passages is more than stylistic variation and that the phrase "foreskinned lips" in 6:12 and 30 was intended to stress something more than Moses' mere lack of skill.³⁸

37. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1: *The Pentateuch* (ed. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1866–91; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), part 1:469.

38. Scholars traditionally have assigned Exod 6:2–7:7 to "P" and viewed it as a parallel account to the first call narrative in chaps. 3–4, which are considered a composite of "J" (3:2–4a, 5, 7, 8, 16–22; 4:1–16) and "E" (3:1, 4b, 6, 9–15; 4:17; so Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974], 52, 111). But even Martin Noth, who affirmed that Exod 6 was originally "an independent treatment of the theme of the one call and commissioning of Moses," nevertheless recognized that in the present narrative structure Exod 6 plays a *unique* role: "within the sequence of events in the Pentateuch as a whole the latter call now appears in connection with the

First, we have noted that “foreskin” bore a negative and even abominable connotation within Israel. Accordingly, the removal of Israel’s foreskins under Joshua’s leadership was viewed as “rolling away the reproach (הַרְפָּה) of Egypt” (Josh 5:9; cf. Jer 6:10). The sign of circumcision reminded Israel of their distinctiveness from the world and of their allegiance to God and his ways. It was a token, marking the people’s loyalty oath to “walk before God blamelessly” (Gen 17:1). From the start, then, physical circumcision was about consecration to God.³⁹ As such, John Goldingay is certainly correct that “passages which refer to metaphorical circumcision do not spiritualize what was earlier a ‘merely’ external rite.”⁴⁰ Rather, from the beginning Israel’s covenant sign pointed to an inward reality, and all instances of metaphorical circumcision seem to have grown out of this basis.⁴¹

Second, nearly all scholars see a direct allusion to Gen 17 at the beginning of Exod 6. Specifically, in Exod 6:3–4 the LORD declares that he appeared to the patriarchs as אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי (“God Almighty”) and established his בְּרִית (“covenant”) with them. The only other passage in Scripture that links the patriarchs with the title אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי and the term בְּרִית is Gen 17 (vv. 1–2; cf. 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25), which strongly suggests that the premier circumcision text in all the Hebrew Bible is on the mind of the narrator in Exod 6.

Third, since the last mention of Moses’ communicative inability in Exod 4:10, Moses has experienced numerous challenges that appear to have devastated any confidence in himself. Not only has he seen the heightening of the Israelites’ work load due to his own confrontation with Pharaoh (Exod 5), but also the Israelites themselves have refused to listen to his words (Exod 6:9). Moreover, the narrator relayed in 4:24–26 Moses and Zipporah’s enigmatic experience concerning the

promise of 6.1 as a confirmation of the commission given to Moses and an invitation to make new demands of Pharaoh” (*Exodus* [trans. J. S. Bowden; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962; orig. German: Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959], 58). More recently, R. W. L. Moberly (*The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 5–35, quotation from p. 34) has persuasively argued that “Exodus 6 is inherently a sequel, not a parallel, to Exodus 3,” thus affirming the conclusion of Cross, Van Seters, Rendtorff, Blum, and others that “P” was never an independent account of Israel’s traditions but only a supplementary development of the “JE” narrative materials. My own conclusions that follow support Moberly’s thesis that Exod 6 is integral to the narrative and that the commission in chap. 6 is complementary to the commission found in chaps. 3–4.

39. Cf. Kline, “Oath and Ordeal Signs I,” 120–26; *By Oath Consigned*, 43–49.

40. Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision,” 15.

41. Similarly, Nahum Sarna states that circumcision from the beginning bore “a spiritual aspect that betokened dedication and commitment to God” (*Genesis* [JPS Torah; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989], 387). Likewise, William H. Propp affirms: “For the ritualistic priestly writer, as for Ezekiel (44:9), it is likely that ‘circumcision of the heart’ and ‘circumcision of the penis’ amounted to almost the same thing, i.e., piety” (“The Origins of Infant Circumcision in Israel,” *HAR* 11 [1987]: 357).

circumcision of her son. While many questions regarding this text remain unresolved, clearly the circumcision performed on the child was overdue and a further prolonged presence of the boy's foreskin would have resulted in his death—a fact that points to Moses' own negligence regarding the boy's circumcision (cf. Gen 17:14).⁴²

Given the facts that the narrator of Exod 6 has just alluded to Gen 17, that Hebrew circumcision terminology often connotes loyalty to God, and that Moses showed a direct lack of loyalty related to circumcision in Exod 4, we suggest that the use of "uncircumcised lips" in Exod 6:12 and 30 not only relates to Moses' physical speech impediment but also alludes to a spiritual impediment that he thought was hindering his effectiveness as a mouthpiece for God. Although the LORD had promised to give him words to fulfill his mission (Exod 4:15–16), Moses' words were clearly impotent. Just as he had failed with his son (Exod 4:24–26), so now he was failing with his people (Exod 5:9). And the only conclusion for Moses was that the problem must be *with him*. The LORD had recalled his covenant with the patriarchs in order to enliven persevering trust in Moses. But the reminder of the promise had only brought discouragement, for Moses realized he himself had not followed through with his own covenant obligations (cf. Gen 17:1, 14). But like the prophet Isaiah years later (Isa 6:5–10), Moses longed for his lips to be cleansed, for his disloyalties to be laid aside, so that he then might be able to fulfill his mission.⁴³

As many commentators have noted, Exod 6 contains no hint of the divine hostility that was present in Exod 4:10–14, when Moses first resisted God's call. I suggest that the reason is because Moses' stance in Exod 6 is more of dependence and humility rather than resistance. And because of this, God reaffirms Moses' call and sends him off again as a new man. From this point on in the narrative, the part of Moses that was hostile—i.e., foreskinned—to God was no more.⁴⁴ If

42. Whether Moses or his son is under attack is difficult to determine. I follow Hall ("Circumcision," 1:1027), who provides a good contextual reading and observes that if Moses' son were to have remained uncircumcised, he would have been outside the covenant and unable to live once the power of God went forth against Egypt's first-born (cf. Exod 4:23). For an alternative view along with an excellent discussion of the interpretive history and issues related to this difficult passage, see Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 95–101, 103, 104.

43. In this regard, R. Alan Cole writes (*Exodus: An Introduction & Commentary* [TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973], 86), "Perhaps the 'uncircumcised lips' has a reference to Moses' mysterious experience at the caravanserai. His body may now be circumcised and dedicated to God, but can his lips be, if even his own people turn away from him?" See the discussion below regarding Jer 6:10 and the "Uncircumcised Ear."

44. Moberly observes (*The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, 33–34): "As the story of Exod. 2:23–7:7 stands, Moses' response to the call of God is a gradual process of

this is correct, the targum translator understood the general issue being related in 6:12 and 30 but missed the narrative connections between Moses' disobedience in Exod 4:24–26, his ineffectiveness in 6:9, the allusion to Gen 17 in 6:2–5, and the “uncircumcised lips.”

Uncircumcised Ear

Jeremiah 6:10 provides another metaphorical use of the “foreskin” motif. Here the LORD declares that Israel's ear is “uncircumcised” (עֲרֵלָה אָזְנִים). That is, they are unable to hear and thus heed the voice of God because it “has become a reproach (תְּרִפָּה) to them; they have no delight in it” (cf. Josh 5:9). Like Moses' lips that were “fore-skinned” and thus hindered from effectively fulfilling God's will, Israel's ears were covered over by the ways of the world and were thus unresponsive to the word of God.

Targum Nebi'im replaces the adjective עֲרֵל with the *Ithpaal* perfect 3rd f.s. of טָפַשׁ (“to be[come] dull, foolish”) and then follows it with a literal rendering of the rest of the verse. In translating the metaphor this way, the targum captures the sense but loses the rhetorical jab that comes in applying to Israel a term reserved for pagans.

(Un)circumcised Heart

In ancient Near Eastern anthropology the “heart” often referred to one's inner self—one's disposition, thought, mind, will, or intention.⁴⁵ In Israelite understanding, the human heart was the locus of the LORD's influence, and thus “heart” language frequently occurs in contexts that express the LORD's claim to human allegiance. Because “circumcision” terminology was closely tied to the concept of covenant fidelity, “heart” and “circumcision” language naturally came together to form one metaphor.⁴⁶

Leviticus 26:41. Leviticus 26:41 provides the first canonical example of the link between “heart” and “circumcision” terminology.

reluctance, obstacles, and disappointment being met by repeated reassurance from God; the process is not straightforward but uneven and full of surprises, as, for example, a high point (4:31) is followed by a low point (5:21–23), and Moses continues to be hesitant (6:12) even after the Lord's reassurance (6:2–8). Finally, however, Moses reaches a point where he can speak and act confidently and consistently in the Lord's name.” Moberly then adds, “Once one has felt the force of this portrayal, it is difficult not to feel that it is an intentional and integral part of the tradition.”

45. Cf. H.-J. Fabry, “לֵב; לֵבָב,” *TDOT* 7:399–437.

46. For a general overview of the theme of circumcision of the heart in the targums, see R. le Déaut, “Le theme de la circoncision du coeur (Deut XXX6; Jer IV4 dans les versions anciennes [LXX et Targum et a Qumran]),” in *Congress Volume: Vienna, 1980* (VTSup 32; Leiden: Brill, 1981), 178–205.

While the grammatical relationship between vv. 40–41 is difficult to discern, Israel is clearly called to humble their “uncircumcised heart” (לְבַבְכֶם הָעֵרֶל), which seems to be descriptive of what it means for Israel to “confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their forefathers” (v. 40).⁴⁷ Following what appears to be a guiding principle of clarification, *Targum Onqelos* renders the Hebrew adjective עֵרֶל with טַפְשָׂא, so that the call is now for Israel to humble their “obdurate, dull, stupid” hearts.⁴⁸

Deuteronomy 10:16. The same Aramaic root shows up again in its noun form in *Tg. Onq. Deut 10:16* and *30:6*. In the former Hebrew text, Israel is exhorted, “You must circumcise the foreskin of your heart (וּמְלֶתְם אֶת עֵרְלַת לְבַבְכֶם) and stiffen your neck no longer.” The circumcision language here is thoroughly metaphorical. Man’s inner makeup is pictured as having a shell that renders it hostile to God, just as the presence of a physical foreskin identified those distant from God and his ways. The challenge for Israel is to remove their heart’s shell—to stop being stiff-necked—and in so doing to realize the ultimate significance of the oath of allegiance to which physical circumcision points—that is, the call to walk before God blamelessly (*Gen 17:1*). The overall context supports this interpretation, because

47. Leviticus 26:40–42 in the TEV reads: “But your descendants will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors, who resisted me and rebelled against me, and caused me to turn against them and send them into exile in the land of their enemies. At last, when your descendants are humbled [lit.: *when* their uncircumcised heart is humbled] . . . I will remember my covenant with Jacob and with Isaac and with Abraham, and I will renew my promise to give my people the land.” This rendering takes the difficult conjunction וְאִי at the beginning of v. 41 as continuative or additional (“also”), thus making the entirety of vv. 40–41 subordinate to the restoration blessing of v. 42 and establishing vv. 40–46 as a new section dealing with covenant renewal. While this seems to me the most favorable conclusion, some have read the conjunction וְאִי in v. 41 as contrastive or emphatic (cf. v. 44). The result of this rendering would be, “Even though they confess their sin . . . yet I will still oppose them.” That is, in spite of the confession of the new generation (v. 40), they will still suffer in exile (v. 41a) before ultimately experiencing the forgiveness of God (v. 42). In support of the former conclusion, Erhard S. Gerstenberger (*Leviticus: A Commentary* [OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 430) has observed that, when vv. 40a and 41b are read in sequence, they bear no syntactical difficulties and make perfect sense: “But they will confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their ancestors, the treachery that they committed against me, . . . and then their uncircumcised heart will be humbled and they will make amends for their iniquity.” The intervening material (vv. 40b–41a) involves the mention of the LORD’s reaction of hostility toward Israel’s disobedience, a familiar theme in this chapter (cf. vv. 24a, 28a), and may simply be parenthetical or perhaps a later editorial/narrative insertion. The first option is further supported by the fact that the pattern of initial repentance bringing forth restoration is found in the parallel passage in *Deut 30:1–6*.

48. The word טַפְשָׂא is the adjectival form of the same Aramaic root used to render עֵרֶל in *Jer 6:10*.

Moses' exhortation to Israel in Deut 10:12–13 parallels closely the Abrahamic commission: "Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God in order to walk in all his ways, to love him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul in order to keep the commandments of the LORD and his statutes, which I am commanding you today for your good." Moreover, 10:15 recalls the love God had for the patriarchs and the special election of their offspring (cf. Deut 7:6–8).⁴⁹

In place of "circumcise the foreskin of your heart" in 10:16, *Targum Onqelos* translates the clause "Remove the obduracy of your heart (וּתְעָרוֹן יִתְּפָשׂוּת לְבָבוֹן) and stiffen your neck no longer." The word תְּפָשׂוּת ("obduracy, folly, stupidity") replaces the Hebrew noun עָרְלָה ("foreskin"), while the *Pael* imperfect עָרָא / עָרָא ("to remove") replaces the Hebrew *Qal* consecutive perfect מוּל ("to circumcise"). This latter move is significant, because the Aramaic verb גָּזַר ("to cut, circumcise") almost always renders מוּל in the targums. Obviously, the targum translator was not content with the contextual markers of the Hebrew text that clarified the meaning of the "circumcision of the heart" metaphor. He replaced all abstraction with concrete images.

Deuteronomy 30:6. Deuteronomy 30:6 reiterates in promise form what Deut 10:16 demands. The Hebrew text records that, in the new age, "The LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring (וּמָל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת־לְבָבְךָ וְאֶת־לְבַב וְרֵעֶךָ) in order that you may love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live." As was the case in Deut 10:16, the immediate context of 30:6 clarifies the meaning of the spiritual cardiac surgery. Specifically, the complimentary Hebrew infinitive לְאַהֲבָה ("to love") with its modifiers shows that "heart circumcision" refers to whole-hearted devotion to the LORD.⁵⁰ In contrast to 10:16, the Hebrew of 30:6 leaves out the noun "foreskin." But in the pattern of its rendering in 10:16, *Targum Onqelos* includes the parallel form and reads, "The LORD your God will remove (וַיִּעְרֵי) the obduracy of

49. I recognize that in recent years some have called into question the identification of the "fathers" with the patriarchs in Deuteronomy's earliest form (e.g., Thomas Römer, *Israels Väter: Untersuchungen zur Väterthematik im Deuteronomium und in der deuteronomistischen Tradition* [OBO 99; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990]; idem, "Deuteronomy in Search of Origins," in *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* [ed. Gary N. Knoppers and J. Gordon McConville; SBTS 8; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000], 112–38; but cf. Norbert Lohfink's response in *Die Väter Israels im Deuteronomium* [OBO 111; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991]). In the shape of the Pentateuch as we have it, however, there is no question that אבות "fathers" in Deuteronomy usually refers to the patriarchs. Compare Deut 10:11, 15, 22 with 1:8; 6:10; 9:5; 29:12[13]; 30:20; cf. 34:4.

50. Compare with the close parallel in Lev 26:41.

your heart (טַפְּשׁוֹת לִיבְךָ) and the *obduracy* of the heart of your children (לִיבָא דְבָנְךָ טַפְּשׁוֹת)."

Jeremiah 4:4. In an apparent echo of Deut 10:16, the LORD declares through his prophet in Jer 4:4, "Circumcise yourselves (הַמְּלִי) to the LORD and remove the foreskins of your heart (וְהִסְרֵוּ עֲרֵלוֹת לְבַבְכֶם), men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, or else my wrath will go forth like fire and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds." Here the spiritual consecration demanded in Israel's oath of allegiance is masterfully linked with a reminder of the curse of covenant disobedience, which itself is represented symbolically in the self-maledictory covenant sign of physical circumcision.⁵¹ As noted, the context of Deut 10:16 clarified in positive terms what one looks like who has undergone "heart circumcision": he fears the LORD. Similarly, the preceding verses of Jer 4 portray what someone with a foreskinned heart looks like: he is one whose deeds are evil (v. 4) and who has gone astray from the LORD by attempting to unite the detestable with the holy (v. 1). Significantly, as was the case in Deut 10:16, the circumcision metaphor follows a reference in Jer 4:2 to the patriarchal promise traditions: "Then the nations will find blessing in him [i.e., the LORD]" (cf. Gen 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14).⁵² This patriarchal promise will be fulfilled only when Israel's hardness is removed, and they become loyal to God.⁵³

In accordance with what we have seen so far, *Targum Nebi'im* replaces the *Niphal* imperative הַמְּלִי ("Circumcise yourselves!") with the *Pael* imperative תּוּבוּ ("Return!"). Similarly, the translator rendered the Hebrew noun עֲרֵלוֹת ("foreskins") with the Aramaic noun רְשָׁע ("wickedness, guilt"). A significant Aramaic addition occurs with reference to the Hebrew prepositional phrase לַיהוָה ("to the LORD"), which operates in a relationship of advantage or specification with the verb הַמְּלִי. Probably following the targumic tendency to

51. By "self-maledictory" I mean that the covenant sign resembles the curse of the covenant that will be inflicted on the individual who fails to meet the covenant obligations.

52. The *Hithpael* of בָּרַךְ occurs seven times in the OT (Jer 4:4; Gen 22:18; 26:4; cf. Deut 29:18; Isa 65:16 [2x]; Ps 72:17), whereas the *Niphal* occurs only three times (Gen 12:3; 18:18; 28:14), though with apparently the same meaning. For our translation of the form as a middle ("find blessing"), see Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Dallas: Word, 1987), 275–76.

53. That Israel's reconciliation with God will be the channel for the blessing of the nations is suggested not only in the echo of the Genesis texts in which this agency is made explicit but also in the *waw*-consecutive perfect וְהִתְבָּרַכְתּוּ ("and they will find blessing"), which in hortatory contexts often bears a resultative sense: "If, O Israel, you return . . . remove and swear, then the nations will find blessing in him." Cf. Robert E. Longacre, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence—A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–48* (2nd ed.; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 121–22.

remove all divine-human interaction, the translator expands the phrase “to the Lord” into לְפִלְחָנָא דַּיְוִי (“to the worship of the LORD”; cf. *Tg. Neb. Jer* 4:1).

Jeremiah 9:24–25[25–26]. Nowhere is the overlap between physical circumcision and metaphorical circumcision emphasized more strongly than in *Jer* 9:24–25[25–26], a passage that we have already briefly examined. God’s people had failed to understand (and practice) God’s ways of covenant loyalty, justice, and righteousness (*Jer* 9:23[24]) and were thus identifying themselves more with the pagans than with the LORD. As such, Judah is included among the nations who are said to be מוֹל בְּעָרְלָה (“circumcised with a foreskin”), and then Israel is declared to be עָרְלֵי־לֵב (“foreskinned of heart”).

Jeremiah 9:25[26] is the only instance in the circumcision word-group where the targum translator rendered an obvious figure of speech with a *literal* equivalent. Where the Hebrew declares that all Israel was עָרְלֵי־לֵב (“foreskinned of heart”) the targum states that they were עָרְלִין בְּלִיבָהוֹן (“foreskinned *in their* heart”), paralleling the previous statement that the nations were עָרְלִין בְּבִסְרָהוֹן (“foreskinned *in their* flesh”). One may assume that what motivated the translator to retain the figure of speech was the passage’s highly rhetorical use of the circumcision terminology. Clearly, something would have been lost if a concrete image had replaced the abstract metaphor.

Ezekiel 44:7, 9. *Ezekiel* 44:7 and 9 is the only passage that explicitly refers to foreigners’ having “foreskinned hearts” (but cf. 28:10; 31:18; 32:18–32). Here the LORD rebukes rebellious Israel for the abominable act of allowing into his sanctuary foreigners who were “uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh” (עָרְלֵי־לֵב וְעָרְלֵי בָשָׂר). The ordinance of the Passover found in *Exod* 12:43–49 stressed that physical circumcision and a heart consecrated to the LORD were prerequisites for participating in Israelite worship. The familiar contrast between the holy and the “foreskinned” is here given greater emphasis through designating Israel’s acts by the verb חָלַל (“to profane”) and the noun תּוֹעֵבָה (“abomination”). As in *Ezek* 28:10, *Targum Nebi'im* renders the Hebrew adjective עָרַל with the Aramaic noun רְשִׁיעָא (“a wicked person”), so that both 44:7 and 9 describe the foreigners as “wicked ones of heart and uncircumcised of flesh.”

(Un)circumcised Fruit

The final passage under examination is unique in the way it applies circumcision terminology to fruit. Including the nominal, verbal, and adjectival forms of the root עָרַל, *Lev* 19:23–25 states:

When you enter the land and plant all kinds of trees for food (כָּל־עֵץ לְמַאֲכָל), you shall treat as uncircumcised its foreskin with its fruit

(וְעֵרְלָתָם עִרְלָתוֹ אֶת־פְּרִיֹו). For three years it will be to you uncircumcised (עִרְלָיִם); it shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit will be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. In the fifth year you are to eat of its fruit, that its yield may increase for you. I am the LORD your God.

The clause וְעֵרְלָתָם עִרְלָתוֹ אֶת־פְּרִיֹו (“you shall treat as uncircumcised its foreskin with its fruit”) in v. 23 has been difficult for interpreters. The 3rd m.s. pronominal suffix on the noun עִרְלָה (“foreskin”) most likely refers back to כָּל (“all”) in the previous clause.⁵⁴ But less clear is how the particle אֶת־ is functioning and how the noun פְּרִיֹו (“its fruit”) relates to the rest of the clause.

I follow Jacob Milgrom, who suggests that אֶת־ is *not* the accusative marker but the preposition “with” and that the “foreskin” of the tree (עִרְלָתוֹ) is the unopened bud that encloses the fruit.⁵⁵ Following *Keter Torah*, Milgrom interprets the text as follows: “Don’t let the fruit ripen (open) but pluck it while it is closed.”⁵⁶ During the first three years the fruit is considered עִרְלָה, which when contrasted with the “holy” appears to move beyond a physical reality to represent what is unacceptable to God (cf. Lev 26:41; Isa 52:1).⁵⁷ In contrast to the

54. So Keil and Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, 1/2:422.

55. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22* (AB 3A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1679. Part of the challenge in the clause arises from the fact that the verb עָרַל occurs only two times in the Hebrew Bible, here in the *Qal* and in Hab 2:16 in the *Niphal*, where the sense is “reveal one’s foreskin”—that is, “one’s nakedness.” Most translators render וְעֵרְלָתָם עִרְלָתוֹ as a single *verbal* unit, with the cognate accusative עִרְלָתוֹ (“its foreskin”) operating as an “absolute object” (like an infinitive absolute), strengthening or intensifying the verbal idea (cf. GKC §117p–q), and פְּרִיֹו (“its fruit”) standing as the primary direct object of the clause (cf. NASB, RSV: “you shall count their fruit as forbidden”; NJB: “you will regard its fruit as uncircumcised”). But this approach fails to observe that the “intensifying” aspect of a cognate accusative only occurs with *indeterminate/ indefinite* nouns (so GKC §117q; e.g., Ps 14:5; Lam 1:8). Gerstenberger has suggested a different option—namely that אֶת־ may be operating as an accusative marker of apposition, with פְּרִיֹו providing clarification of עִרְלָתוֹ (*Leviticus*, 260). While possible, this view is also improbable, for an object noun in apposition only rarely retains the *nota accusativi* and when it does it repeats the accusative marker already present on the first substantive (cf. GKC §131h). Milgrom proposes the best option.

56. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1679. He continues, “The closed bud, then, is the foreskin that should be plucked before the fruit (i.e., the penis) emerges.” Milgrom further notes that his interpretation accords with modern horticultural practice: with juvenile trees, the branches are *not* pruned, but the buds are removed. This view stands in contrast to the view proposed by Baruch A. Levine, who views v. 23 as implying the removal of certain growths (i.e., the trimming of the plant or tree), translating the clause: “You shall trim its foreskin as foreskin” (*Leviticus* [JPS Torah; Philadelphia: JPS, 1989], 131–32).

57. In view of the frequency with which the adjective עָרַל is used degradingly of non-Israelites, René Pétér-Contesse and John Ellington note that the use of עָרַל here is “a strong way of emphasizing that the fruit is to be completely avoided by the people of God for a period of three years” (*A Handbook on Leviticus* [UBS Handbook Series; New York: United Bible Societies, 1990], 295).

firstfruits of produce from mature crops (Num 18:12–13), the tithe (Lev 27:30), and the firstborn from the flock (Lev 27:26; Exod 13:2, 12; Num 18:17), the firstfruits on juvenile trees are impure, unworthy for offering or consumption, and must be destroyed (v. 24).⁵⁸

Targum Onqelos renders Lev 19:23: “and (when) you plant all kinds of trees for food, *you shall surely loathe* its fruit (וּתְרַחֵקוּן רַחֵקָא יְתַּ אִיבִיָּה). For three years *it should be loathed* (יְהִי לְכוּן מְרַחֵק) to be destroyed.” Perhaps due to the challenging Hebrew syntax, like most contemporary translators the targum translator rendered the difficult clause of v. 23 as a single *verbal* thought, substituting the noun עֲרָלְתוֹ with the *Pael* infinitive construct of רַחֵק (“to loathe, reject”), as if the latter were a Hebrew infinitive absolute. Because the relationship between “foreskin” and “fruit” was unnatural, the translator probably felt obligated for the sake of clarity to provide a nonliteral substitution. The use of the root רַחֵק as a rendering for all three forms of עֲרָל clearly shows that the translator understood the “foreskin” terminology to point to what is in opposition to the LORD.

CONCLUSION

Though limited in scope, this study suggests the following translational tendencies in *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Nebi'im*: First, when dealing with terms that in context clearly point to concrete realities (such as physical circumcision), the targum translators tended to use literal equivalents, replacing a Hebrew word with its corresponding Aramaic word. Second, with words that in a given context may perform a double role, expressing one reality while also pointing to another (such as עֲרָל, designating the “uncircumcised”), the translators of the targums used both literal and nonliteral equivalents. Third, regardless of the extent to which the immediate context clarifies the meaning of certain terms, translators were inclined to render blatant metaphorical Hebrew figures with nonliteral, more concrete equivalents.

Significantly, the targums' use of nonliteral equivalents often failed to relate the full significance of the meaning of the Hebrew figure of speech. The Hebrew author employed a given metaphor because it captured a comparison that was useful in his message. For example, Israel's “circumcision” terminology carried with it significant theological weight. The imagery emphasized the LORD's call to covenant fidelity, which meant separation from pagan practices and

58. So Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1680. Milgrom also observes that in Israel, “fruit trees reach maturity only after several years: an average of five years for date palms, five to seven years for figs and pomegranates, three to six years for grapes, and four to five years for almonds” (p. 1684). Cf. Philo, *Virt.*, 23 §§157–59.

loyalty to God and his ways. Circumcision also symbolized the covenant curse of excision if loyalty to the LORD was not lived out. By using nonliteral, less-abstract equivalents, the targums captured the general sense but often missed the full theological substance and cutting rhetoric of the Hebrew original (cf., e.g., Exod 6:12, 30; Jer 6:10).

Clearly the translators of the official targums did more than render the Bible into the language of the people. Because they were guided by the immediate context and by the theological significance of certain concrete realities, they generally retained the voice and perspective of the parent text. But the tendency in *Targum Onqelos* and *Targum Nebi'im* to replace Hebrew metaphors with concrete images often stunted the communicative effect captured in the biblical wording.