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Choosing Tradition:
A South Asian Feminist Reading of the Circumcision of Timothy

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I argue that past interpretation of the circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:1-5 has been fundamentally shaped by a perception of circumcision as a “tradition.” A false binary has too often been constructed between Oriental Judaism and Occidental Hellenism, which incorrectly degrades the former as backwards, legalistic, irrational, authoritarian, and the site of tradition. Previous readers of Acts have rarely considered the possibility that Timothy could have willingly participated in his own circumcision, more often bypassing his character completely while speculating only about Paul’s motivations. Instead, I explore the possibility that Timothy’s circumcision was part of an expression of his own agency.

To support my argumentation, I bring in four major insights from South Asian feminist interlocutors. First, Orientalizing discourse represents Eastern practices as irrational, traditional, and forced. Second, it is necessary to critique liberal notions of autonomy in order to create new space for subjects who act while also being entangled in norms, relationships, and systems of meaning. Next, histories of South Asian entrance into coalition can help us to understand how Timothy and other followers of the Way could enter into a multi-ethnic, multi-religious community while simultaneously preserving their own ethno-religious identities. Finally, a gendered analysis of traditional practices must be wary of the Orientalist presumption that Eastern people groups are fundamentally underdeveloped, hierarchical, and therefore patriarchal; instead, feminists can carefully describe a gendered mode of social organization without assuming the presence of a monolithic, racialized sexism.

Analyzing modern global discourses about circumcision reveals the West’s bias against non-infant and/or religious circumcisions, in addition to a long history of Christian bias against Jewish circumcision. Instead, I propose that we view Timothy’s circumcision in the context of a Lukan construction of circumcision as a joyful, communal act. I argue that Timothy’s circumcision is depicted as the self-expression of a Jewish follower of the Way, who proclaims in his body and with his speech the implications of the Jerusalem council decision for Jews and gentiles alike. The validation of both circumcision and uncircumcision creates space for multiple legitimate ways of embodying sexual moderation and appropriate masculinity.

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Introduction

While my father-in-law was on a walk in a park in downtown Charleston, he saw a man holding up a sign reading, “Circumcision $\neq$ Choice.” In Western consciousness, the idea of circumcision is tied to a constellation of practices that are together imagined as non-agential: a procedure performed on screaming infants, a religion that you are born into rather than one you have chosen, a mutilation grounded in tradition and not in reason. This dissertation focuses not on circumcision itself but on the discourse that has accrued around circumcision, including that discourse’s anti-Jewish as well as anti-Muslim overtones, its Orientalist preference for logics of health over logics of culture, and its entanglement in liberal values of autonomy and agency. Circumcision appears frequently as a topic in the New Testament, whether referring to a literal practice, to a social group by metonymy, or to a related metaphorical meaning. As biblical interpreters, we need to be alert to ancient and modern discourse around circumcision that may be subconsciously influencing our readings of such passages.

In this dissertation, I analyze one such passage in this light: the narration of the circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16:1-5. Methodologically, my work emphasizes a literary approach rather than a historical-critical one. As such, I attend to the narrative world of Luke-Acts, the characterization, the plot, and the overall themes. When I refer to historical information about the ancient world, it is with the goal of understanding the context in which the narrative was created, not with the goal of reconstructing the history of early Christianity. When referencing other New Testament texts outside of the corpus of Luke-Acts, I do not have the goals of either harmonizing them into a singular historical account or synthesizing them into a

singular canonical message, but rather I aim at amplifying our understanding of the environment within which this particular passage appeared.

In addition to prioritizing a literary reading, my approach draws on South Asian feminist theoretical writings, lived experiences, and histories in order to create a framework for discussing issues of religion, tradition, agency, gendered embodiment, racism, and colonialism. I situate the specific danger of anti-Judaism within discussions of circumcision within the broader network of the racist, colonialist logics of Orientalism, which posits a fundamental dichotomy between East and West in order to subjugate colonized populations. I speak as a South Asian Christian woman who seeks to stand in solidarity as I listen to Jewish voices and deconstruct widely socialized Christian biases. Amy-Jill Levine points out the particularly troubling presence of anti-Judaism in “feminist-liberationist works” that rely on “unsupported and insupportable historical views of a misogynistic, essentialist, atavistic Judaism.”¹ The anti-Jewish presuppositions endemic to the modern field of biblical studies need to be specifically recognized and challenged for a truly liberationist mode of reading to take place. Katharina von Kellenbach describes four layers of nuance that are required of Christian scholars when opposing anti-Judaism: this oppressive force must neither be “trivialized” nor “particularize[d],” and neither “spiritualiz[ed]” nor “universalized.”² My work here attempts to avoid each of these potential pitfalls, respectively, by taking seriously the force of anti-Judaism in the history of interpretation and in the world, by understanding anti-Jewish oppression as interwoven with additional mutually reinforcing modes of oppression, by linking forms of anti-Judaism directed

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, “Lilies of the Field and Wandering Jews: Biblical Scholarship, Women’s Roles, and Social Location,” in *Transformative Encounters: Jesus and Women Re-Viewed*, ed. Ingrid Rosa Kitzberger (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 331, 343.

² Katharina von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 135–36.

towards antiquity with those forms oriented towards the present day, and by consistently attending to the particulars of anti-Judaism even as it is brought into these wider conversations.

In chapter 1, I begin thinking through the identity of the character of Timothy, the son of a Jewish mother and a Greek father, by taking a step back and examining how the very categories of Judaism and Hellenism have been constructed in the field of biblical studies. Drawing on the work of recent scholars of Second Temple Judaism, I highlight how Judaism and Hellenism should not be viewed as two discrete, hierarchically organized categories; rather, first century Judaism was diverse, interacted culturally with Hellenism in multidimensional ways, and contained multiple possible ways of manifesting one's Jewish identity. Furthermore, I argue that prior views of Hellenism as superior to Judaism are in fact influenced by Orientalism, which falsely degrades Jewish and other Eastern/Oriental civilizations as primitive, traditional, irrational, authoritarian, and insular. I interrogate how the category of agency is warped by these harmful stereotypes, obscuring our ability to see the purposeful activity of many Jews in antiquity.

Next, chapter 2 zooms in on the question of Timothy's agency in Acts 16:1-5, which narrates his circumcision. Because interpreters' view of Timothy's ethnic and religious identity dramatically shapes how they regard his circumcision, whether as a Jew or as a gentile or as someone else entirely, I first explain my own positions. I argue that Luke's narrative represents Timothy as ethnically Jewish to the extent that his circumcision does not contradict the Jerusalem council decision, although not necessarily to the exclusion of other coexisting ethnic identities. Further, I contend that Timothy's mixed parentage and uncircumcised status are not necessary markers that he was an "apostate," and I propose that the event of his circumcision needs to be incorporated into an overall assessment of his religious practice. At last, I turn to the

specific question of agency, pointing out the problem that prior scholarship has focused on investigating Paul's motivations while giving little thought to Timothy's. Taking seriously the grave picture of a Paul who is imagined as physically manipulating Timothy's body for evangelistic reasons, I consider instead the alternative that Paul encourages respect for law adherence but does not require it, a stance that also invites consideration of Timothy's decision-making process.

Chapter 3 introduces the South Asian feminist interlocutors who offer me a theoretical framework for exploring the possibility of Timothy's agency. After establishing the sense in which I am thinking about the category of "South Asian" methodologically, I explain how Orientalism impacts South Asian populations and Jewish populations differently but with uniting logics that enact these multiple types of violence. South Asian writers help me to make sense of Timothy, a first-century Jewish character, in four major ways. First, Orientalizing discourse represents Eastern practices—whether circumcision or arranged marriage—as irrational, traditional, and forced. Second, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Saba Mahmood propose that to view customs as either obligatory or chosen is already to step into a false dichotomy that presupposes liberal notions of autonomy, and these two theorists create new space for subjects who act while also being entangled in norms, relationships, and systems of meaning. Next, I draw on histories of South Asian entrance into coalition as a way to better understand how Timothy and other followers of the Way could enter into a multi-ethnic, multi-religious community while simultaneously preserving their own ethno-religious identities. Finally, a gendered analysis of traditional practices must be wary of the Orientalist presumption that Eastern people groups are fundamentally underdeveloped, hierarchical, and therefore patriarchal; instead, Chandra Talpade Mohanty urges feminists to carefully and specifically describe each

gendered mode of social organization, without assuming the presence of a monolithic, racialized sexism. These four key ideas structure the remaining four chapters of the dissertation.

Taking up the topic of Orientalist discourse on traditional practices, chapter 4 lays out how the West has viewed circumcision: with a medical standard of evaluation that discounts cultural reasons for the practice and that especially condemns the practice when it is religious and/or performed on a non-infant. My discussion addresses the specific Jewish, Muslim, and African contexts of this discourse. I connect these modern debates on circumcision to Christian discussions of ancient Jewish circumcision, highlighting that this practice has been viewed as legalistic, ethnocentric, and painful. It has seemed impossible for most past interpreters of Acts 16:1-5 to consider that Timothy may have chosen his circumcision, influenced as readers have been by Christian supremacist disavowals of Jewish circumcision and furthermore by modern suspicion about an adult, religious circumcision like Timothy's.

Having established that Orientalist stereotypes about circumcision pose a barrier to our ability to see agency being exercised with respect to circumcision, in chapter 5 I seek to understand why first-century Jews participated in circumcision and how Luke in particular represents the meanings of circumcision in his literary work. First, I engage the work of Robert G. Hall, Susan Elliot, and Nina E. Livesey as they explain the range of meanings of Jewish circumcision in antiquity, highlighting their strengths in depicting this practice with nuance, but also noting places where their accounts of agency have room for growth. Next, I establish my own goal to draw up a discursive analysis of agency surrounding circumcision, heeding Saba Mahmood's call to understand how "one *inhabits* norms."³ To create new ways of thinking about the agency involved in circumcision, I develop key insights based on two case studies of South

³ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 14, 15.

Asian diaspora life concerning the practices of veiling and of wearing a turban. With these points in mind, I examine passages that mention circumcision throughout all of Luke-Acts, concluding that the author views circumcision as a site of joy, community, diversity, and ethical decision-making when encountering the other. Importantly for understanding Acts 16:1-5, Luke represents it as normal for circumcision to involve multiple parties, not only for infants but also for adults.

With a better framework proposed for how it is possible that Timothy could have decided in favor of circumcision, chapter 6 closely reads the narrative of Acts to unpack why at this precise moment Timothy is represented as becoming motivated to become circumcised, and how a Jewish act of circumcision fits in with the Lukan narrative about the Way. I begin by assessing three existing models for how Acts proposes that the Way is related to Judaism, reconstructing what each model would imply about Timothy's circumcision. I also echo the concern that models for the Way must work to avoid replicating an Orientalist view of Judaism as particularistic in contrast to Christianity's universalism. Drawing on race and ethnic studies is a promising way forward for generating a more accurate and just model of the Way in Acts, and I introduce material from South Asian histories of coalition in diaspora. I propose that in Acts the Way is a coalition between many ethno-religious individuals, all of whom retain their own ethno-religious identity even as they enter a space of alliance that centers the ethno-religious tradition of Judaism. Finally, I read Timothy's choice for circumcision as an action within coalition: he practices circumcision specifically as a Jew within Christ-following alliance, investing value in his ethno-religious community's customs that continue to be centered in the Way, at very moment that he participates in proclaiming the Jerusalem council's decision that those centered customs are not mandated for all members of the community.

Finally, acknowledging that I have drawn a fairly positive portrait of circumcision according to Luke's views, I consider in chapter 7 the potential question of whether a feminist perspective must necessarily condemn circumcision. In conversation with both South Asian feminists and Jewish feminists, I establish the importance of avoiding both Orientalist anti-Judaism and sexism when addressing the gendered dimensions of circumcision. My exposition of circumcision in the first century explores the reality that different observers understood the practice as either cultivating the appropriately masculine value of sexual self-control or expressing the opposite vice of excessive desire. Furthermore, I note the participation of uncircumcised Jewish women in the practice's networks of meaning via the domains of marriage as well as motherhood. Turning at last to Timothy's circumcision, I argue that Paul's role in Timothy's circumcision is that of an ambiguously gendered parent, and that the Jerusalem council decision creates space for multiple ways of embodying sexual moderation, whether in the manifestation of the circumcised Timothy or in that of uncircumcised gentiles who receive the message that Timothy and Paul proclaim.

I hope that the fruits of this research will extend in several directions. Exegetically, the circumcision of Timothy has struck many readers as narratively bewildering and theologically concerning, and I have aimed at providing a reading that satisfies the logic of the plot of Acts while also cohering with the values of the early church as depicted by Luke. Methodologically, it is significant that this dissertation takes South Asian texts as a serious interdisciplinary dialogue partner, since many of these theories and histories are underutilized or unknown in the study of the New Testament. Ethically, because anti-Jewish stereotypes regrettably abound in biblical studies classrooms as well as in the world, it is essential for instructors and public speakers to be

equipped with more ethical modes of reading the New Testament, including our ability to see the meaningful agency of Jewish figures in many forms.

Chapter 1: Problematizing the Binary of Hellenism and Judaism

Introduction

For much of the history of New Testament studies, it has been an axiom of the field that Hellenism and Judaism are separate, opposing, and hierarchical categories.⁴ Further, when it came to Second Temple Jews, there were two groups of people: Jews who assimilated to Hellenism and Jews who stubbornly retained their traditions from Judaism. But recent scholars have been pushing back against these foundational assumptions. In this review of prior literature, I first briefly present and critique scholarship that has relied on these flawed, binary assumptions. Next, I explore key proposals for how to nuance and transform our understandings of cultural interaction in Second Temple Judaism. Finally, I introduce the concept of Orientalism in order to recognize and dismantle the anti-Jewish and racist assumptions that undergird the

⁴ In this text, “Judaism” is used with a variety of meanings. When spoken about in comparison to Hellenism, as here, it refers to Second Temple Judaism. When discussing contemporary issues, it can refer to modern Judaism. When referring more broadly to ideological issues including anti-Jewish bias, a broad definition would be in mind from preexilic Israelite religion to the present day. I use the term Jew rather than Judean here because I am intentionally discussing the connections between the discourses on ancient and modern topics. I am also sensitive to Amy-Jill Levine’s caution that if we exclusively use the term Judean, “we eliminate Jews from the Bible and thus create a *judenrein* text, a text purified of Jews (yes, the German is overdetermined)”: “Reflections on Reflections: Jesus, Judaism, and Jewish-Christian Relations,” *SCJR* 8.1 (2013): 11.

I do not here take a stance in the debate on when Judaism proper began historically. For the view that preexilic and postexilic forms of religion are more in continuity than discontinuity, see for example Marc Zvi Brettler, “Judaism in the Hebrew Bible?: The Transition from Ancient Israelite Religion to Judaism,” *CBQ* 61.3 (1999): 429–47. For the view that its origins are rooted in the Persian period of the fifth century BCE, see for example Klaus Koch, “Ezra and the Origins of Judaism,” *JSS* 19.2 (1974): 173–97; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). For the view that Jews/Judeans began to be redefined from ethnic terms to religious terms in the Hellenistic period of the second century BCE, see for example Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, S. Mark Taper Foundation Imprint in Jewish Studies (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), chap. 3. For view that Judaism as an abstract religious system became conceptualized within Christian discourse by the fourth century CE, see for example the two different articulations of Steve Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History,” *JSJ* 38.4–5 (2007): 457–512; Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

On issues of periodization and terminology more broadly, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). For further discussion of the differences between these stances, see Cynthia Baker, “A ‘Jew’ by Any Other Name?,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 2.2 (2011): 153–80.

Hellenism/Judaism binary. To reimagine the circumcision of Timothy, I will reevaluate how this field has viewed his formative cultural contexts.

As I will discuss below, despite the substantial differences between the scholarly projects of Martin Hengel and Louis H. Feldman, they have both operated under the paradigm that Hellenism and Judaism are discrete categories that cannot coexist without compromising one another. They also introduce exclusionary hierarchies into their accounts, with Hengel's original work engaging in Christian supercessionism and with Feldman discounting more "assimilated" Jews from being truly Jewish. John M. G. Barclay transforms the Hellenism/Judaism binary into a multi-part spectrum, but still does not sufficiently account for the diversity of ancient Judaism in various sectors of life.

Improvements are being made in scholarship that rethinks the interaction of Hellenism and Judaism as well as the internal diversity of Second Temple Judaism. Lee I. Levine, Erich S. Gruen, and Philip S. Alexander argue that these two cultures could coexist and that the boundaries between them were not clear-cut. Neither Gruen nor Michael Tuval explain features of diaspora Judaism with reference to Hellenism, but instead explore the internal dialogues and differences inherent to a complex, heterogeneous Jewish population. I embrace the perspectives of these scholars, but also push one step further to interrogate the ideological foundations that enabled the binary to persist for so long.

I propose that the concept of Orientalism offers strong explanatory value for the way that this binary expresses anti-Judaism alongside colonialist racism. Wayne Meeks has started by deconstructing the binary and has explained its ideological dimensions. Shawn Kelley, R. S. Sugirtharajah, and Kwok Pui-lan have started by critiquing the racist, colonialist foundations of biblical studies and have observed the presence of Orientalist discourse more broadly in biblical

studies. I introduce my approach to continuing this scholarly conversation, drawing on the insights of South Asian feminist scholarship around the topic of agency. Hellenism has been figured as the cultural sphere that offers opportunities for action and choice, while Judaism has been depicted as a restrictive environment that offers antiquated customs as the only legitimate ones. In this project, I explore models for the agency of Jews in the Second Temple period that seek to evade binary thinking and essentialism. Equipped with these new frameworks, I analyze the type of agency displayed by Timothy in Acts 16:1-5 throughout this dissertation.

The Binary of Hellenism and Judaism

Before the late 20th century, the study of Second Temple Judaism often worked to synthesize and understand evidence from the ancient world by categorizing it on the basis of either assimilation to Hellenism or retention of Judaism. Even as scholars disagreed with one another in their conclusions, they shared this scholarly binary. Here, I review the presence of the binary and the problems with it in such foundational thinkers as Martin Hengel, Louis H. Feldman, and John M. G. Barclay. Their careful and systematic work nevertheless falters when it relies on faulty, essentialist understandings of Hellenism and Judaism that struggle to account for diversity and cultural interaction.

The geographical difference between diaspora Judaism and Palestinian Judaism often historically served as a placeholder for the cultural difference between Hellenized Judaism and traditional Judaism. But Martin Hengel's 1969 publication *Judentum und Hellenismus* (*Judaism and Hellenism*) ushered in a new phase of scholarly consensus. As Hengel has been received, his lasting contribution has been to trouble the easy differentiation between the Judaism of the

homeland and the Judaism of the diaspora along the lines of the degree of assimilation to Hellenism.⁵

One fundamental presupposition of historical work on the New Testament which seems to be taken for granted is the differentiation, in terms of tradition, between “Judaism” on the one hand and “Hellenism” on the other... This unavoidable distinction does, of course, pass too lightly over the fact that by the time of Jesus, Palestine had already been under “Hellenistic” rule and its resultant cultural influence for some 360 years.⁶

His monumental work reviews elements of Hellenistic culture that affected Palestinian Judaism, from the “secular” spheres of war and artificial irrigation, to the philosophical and literary realm as represented especially by the “critical individuality” and “universalism” present in Qoheleth.⁷ Although his work specifically argues only for the presence of Hellenism in Palestine, the breakdown of the broader paradigm also implies that we should not be surprised to find the continuation of Jewish tradition in diaspora.

Louis H. Feldman was an early critic of Hengel’s conclusions and has continued to question them for decades. As he succinctly summarizes his own stance, “In the period from Alexander’s conquest to the Maccabean revolt and even thereafter the influence of Greek culture upon the Jews of the Land of Israel was not profound.”⁸ His disagreement with Hengel is often based on a difference in the weighting of the same historical evidence. For example, Feldman is not convinced by inscriptions that “reveal an *elementary* acquaintance with Greek but hardly a

⁵ For Hengel’s lasting reception, see John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE - 117 CE)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 6; John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling, “Introduction,” in *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*, ed. John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 13 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 2–3; Jörg Frey, “‘Judaism’ and ‘Hellenism’: Martin Hengel’s Work in Perspective,” in *Jewish Cultural Encounters in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern World*, ed. Mladen Popović, Myles Schoonover, and Marijn Vandenberghe, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 178 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 105–8.

⁶ Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in Their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 1.

⁷ Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 55, 116–17.

⁸ Louis H. Feldman, “How Much Hellenism in Jewish Palestine?,” *HUCA* 57 (1986): 83.

mastery of style” (emphasis original).⁹ He diminishes the significance of positive relations with foreign government on the basis that they were “purely pragmatic,” and he finds linguistic similarities to only “reflect *commercial* contacts” (emphasis original).¹⁰ Feldman discounts the salience of material culture and everyday life, while placing primacy upon “*ideas*” and intermarriage, which is “[t]he ultimate, and by far the most important, test.”¹¹ Our assessments of the presence of Hellenism and Judaism in a piece of historical evidence will necessarily depend on the way that we define the core and essential elements of each.

Although Hengel and Feldman disagree dramatically when it comes to their conclusions about the culture of Palestine, they both introduce value judgments into their discussions of Hellenism and Judaism. A little recognized component of Hengel’s publication is that, in the final pages of his volume, he speaks in a supercessionist way about the future of Judaism after the Maccabean revolt, which marks the *terminus* of his book. Although Hellenistic Judaism was “an expression of the incomparable *vitality and dynamism* of the Jewish people,”

Jesus of Nazareth, Stephen, Paul came to grief among their own people because the Jews were no longer in a position to bring about a creative, self-critical transformation of the piety of the law with its strongly national and political colouring... ‘this dynamism’ developed most strongly in the religious sphere. This happened in a world-wide mission which was likewise without analogy, and then in the new force which burst the framework of a nationalistic legalism which had grown too narrow with its prophetic and eschatological appeal: the primitive Christianity which grew out of Judaism.¹²

Although this is a brief observation at the end of his argumentation, it is an extremely damaging, anti-Jewish conclusion that one fears may have colored Hengel’s analysis elsewhere, and it has too rarely been acknowledged or substantively critiqued by his supporters. Feldman was highly

⁹ Louis H. Feldman, “Hengel’s Judaism and Hellenism in Retrospect,” *JBL* 96.3 (1977): 377.

¹⁰ Feldman, “Hengel’s Judaism and Hellenism in Retrospect,” 376, 377.

¹¹ Louis H. Feldman, “Introduction: The Influence of Hellenism on Jews in Palestine in the Hellenistic Period,” in *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 5, 29.

¹² Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, 309.

attuned to these elements of Hengel's work, and he wrote soon after its publication that "Hengel reveals his theological bias" in the words quoted above.¹³ More recently, in a review of an edited volume in honor of Hengel's work, Feldman reminds us of Fergus Millar's more unfavorable summary of Hengel: "his thesis is that of a Christian theologian: that the early Hellenistic period saw a significant process of mutual assimilation and comprehension between Judaism and Paganism, which was brought to a halt by the nationalistic reaction under the Maccabees, and was only resumed and brought to fruition in the preaching of Christianity to the Gentiles."¹⁴ In that very edited volume, Hengel in fact offers a different synthesis of history in the concluding words of his contribution.

My conclusion is: The predominant Hellenistic civilization gave the Near East a new face up to the Arab conquest and renewed and continued its influence upon Jewish Palestine again after the miscarried "Hellenistic Reform" in 175 BCE, but could not further threaten the religious and ethnic identity of the Jews, but rather strengthened it and made it more creative and fruitful. It produced unique consequences for world history: it created Rabbinism and Christianity.¹⁵

In Hengel's revised viewpoint, the future of Judaism past 175 BCE is "more creative and fruitful" rather than "too narrow," and it leads not only to Christianity but also to Rabbinic Judaism. This is a crucial correction to his previous formulation of the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, and it would benefit the field for this improvement to be flagged more explicitly so that fellow scholars can correct against the possibility of anti-Judaism in their own work.

Feldman's values likewise structure the picture that he draws of Second Temple Judaism. For Feldman, Hellenism impinges upon Judaism, such that he can write about Hellenized Jews as

¹³ Feldman, "Hengel's Judaism and Hellenism in Retrospect," 382.

¹⁴ Fergus Millar, "The Background to the Maccabean Revolution: Reflections on Martin Hengel's 'Judaism and Hellenism,'" *JJS* 29.1 (1978): 1; Louis H. Feldman, "How Much Hellenism in the Land of Israel?," *JSJ* 33.3 (2002): 290.

¹⁵ Martin Hengel, "Judaism and Hellenism Revisited," in *Hellenism in the Land of Israel*, ed. John J. Collins and Gregory E. Sterling, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity 13 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 29.

being those who “deviated from [Judaism] through apostasy and intermarriage.”¹⁶ Feldman’s stark and long-standing denial of the Hellenization of Palestinian Jews can be read through the higher stakes that he creates for himself, transforming the debate into a question of their existence, since, for Feldman, to be a Hellenized Jew is to cease in some ways to be a Jew at all. He compares the posited non-assimilation of ancient Palestinian Jews to that of modern Eastern European Jews, both groups having accomplished the feat of “liv[ing] in a sea of foreign culture without being enveloped in it.”¹⁷ He celebrates what he sees as the enduring power of Judaism: “what was the power of Judaism that enabled it to remain strong despite the challenge of Hellenism and later of Christianity? The answer may lie in its paradoxical self-confidence and defensiveness, its unity and diversity, its stubbornness and flexibility.”¹⁸ While Feldman is admirable to speak forthrightly in favor of Judaism within a field so strongly influenced by Christianity and legacies of antisemitism, he excludes a vast majority of Jews throughout history who have found the adoption of elements of surrounding culture to be compatible with their Jewish identities.

The binary of Hellenism and Judaism affects not only the study of Palestinian Judaism, but also the study of diaspora Judaism, which has typically been associated with Hellenism. The lasting effects of this binary are present even for scholars who rely on the model of a spectrum. In John M. G. Barclay’s detailed volume on diaspora Judaism, he accepts Hengel’s basis thesis of the presence of Hellenism in Palestine and therefore the denial of a sharp differentiation between diaspora and Palestinian Judaism. His goal is to categorize diaspora Jews who are documented in ancient evidence based on their level of assimilation.¹⁹ A major weakness of this

¹⁶ Feldman, “How Much Hellenism in Jewish Palestine?,” 85, cf. 105.

¹⁷ Feldman, “How Much Hellenism in Jewish Palestine?,” 110.

¹⁸ Feldman, “How Much Hellenism in Jewish Palestine?,” 110.

¹⁹ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 92–101.

paradigm is its reliance on two opposing poles, even though the evidence for assimilation is “so often fragmentary, obscure or ambiguous” that it can be read in multiple ways, and even though “most authors combined elements of both” convergence and antagonism (i.e., both connection to the surrounding community and distance from it).²⁰ L. V. Rutgers has pressed this critique of Barclay: “the suggested continuum is too static and does not permit us to do justice to the complex choices available to Jews in the Diaspora.”²¹ Furthermore, as we have seen in Feldman above, it is debatable how we should evaluate the significance of different categories of life when it comes to assessing the whole. Rutgers asks, “why should ‘scholarly expertise’ score higher on a scale of acculturation than ‘acquaintance with common moral values’ when we are describing a world in which the great majority of Jews never had a chance to acquire such scholarly expertise in the first place?”²² Barclay recognizes that these categories are heuristic and insufficiently precise to capture all the nuance of the historical evidence, but they still structure his detailed analysis.

In the work of Barclay, Feldman, and Hengel, despite their differences in methods and findings, we have continually come back to the insufficiency of the binary between Hellenism and Judaism. Valorizing one over the other is liable to perpetuate either the elevation of Christianity over Judaism or the exclusion of minoritarian Jews. Furthermore, the categorization of a given individual or text as either Hellenistic or Jewish faces the problem of how to rank the importance of different spheres of life, and standardized criteria are rarely laid out for such calculations. The projects reviewed above end up in such straits because they continue to assume that Hellenism and Judaism are mutually incompatible, such that the presence of one eats away

²⁰ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 100, 101.

²¹ Leonard Victor Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism* (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1998), 36.

²² Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism*, 37.

at the presence of the other. But if Hellenism and Judaism are not in fact opposites, it is essential to theorize the way in which this is so.

Non-Zero-Sum Hellenization and Diverse Judaism

Both sides of the Hellenism/Judaism binary need to be rethought. Regarding the former category, scholars have recently begun to talk about Hellenization in non-zero-sum terms, so that Hellenism and Judaism can be imagined to flourish at the same times. Furthermore, the edges between the two cultural categories have been blurred, in recognition of the fact that they are not discrete entities at all. Regarding the latter category, there has been a push to recognize the diversity of Judaism in more terms than with reference to Hellenization, instead turning inwards to reflect on the multi-faceted dialogues and differences within Jewish communities. I explore these promising models as represented by the work of Lee I. Levine, Erich S. Gruen, Philip S. Alexander, and Michael Tuval.

Lee I. Levine disrupts the classic model by distinguishing between the negative disappearance of Jewish culture in favor of Hellenistic culture, which he calls “assimilation,” and the positive incorporation of Hellenistic culture, which he calls “acculturation.”²³

A conceptual mistake made frequently in the past equates Hellenization and assimilation. To assume a degree of Hellenization has often been construed as the Jews’ loss of national or religious identity in favor of something else... There are very few cases of Jews abandoning their ethnic and religious identity in order to integrate into the larger Greco-Roman society... we will be dealing with various forms of acculturation, i.e., the adoption of foreign ideas, mores, and institutions and their adaptation in one form or another to a Jewish setting. As noted, this process affected practically all circles of Jewish society—sometimes more, sometimes less.²⁴

²³ Lee I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 28.

²⁴ Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity*, 27–28.

Levine's proposal is both for clearer terminology and for a perspective on Hellenization that sees it as adding cultural possibilities without necessarily taking existing cultural elements away. In Erich S. Gruen's work published in the same year, he takes a similar starting point as Levine: "'Judaism' and 'Hellenism' were neither competing systems nor incompatible concepts. It would be erroneous to assume that Hellenization entailed encroachment upon Jewish traditions and erosion of Jewish beliefs. Jews did not face a choice of either assimilation or resistance to Greek culture."²⁵ Gruen highlights that it was not only possible but actually common for a person to simultaneously embrace multiple cultures to varying degrees.

Both Levine and Gruen propose a model of Hellenization that is increasingly gaining traction and that can be understood as "non-zero-sum," in which Hellenism and Judaism do not necessarily encroach on one another. To use a numerical example, if we could theoretically quantify the degree of Hellenism and Judaism in a given person in antiquity on a scale of 1 to 10, we might find that a person was a 7 on Hellenism and a 7 on Judaism, or a 2 on Hellenism and a 5 on Judaism, or a 10 on Hellenism and a 9 on Judaism. Any level of Judaism may occur with any level of Hellenism, and there is no objective answer to the question of who is "most" Jewish among this set. If we want to discuss Hellenization, it is more beneficial to look for features of Hellenistic culture without assuming that their presence negates other features of Jewish culture that we may find.

Philip S. Alexander further complexifies our scholarly paradigms by blurring the edges of the categories of Hellenism and Judaism themselves. Both Judaism and Hellenism were "fluid,"

²⁵ Erich S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xiv.

having “permeable” boundaries relative to other cultures.²⁶ Alexander disrupts the notion of cultures as pure and fixed. To return to the numerical analogy above, instead of imagining a given person’s Hellenism and Judaism as two values on a bar chart, we might imagine them as a Venn diagram, with one circle holding their Hellenistic qualities and another circle holding their Jewish qualities, but the overlapping portions holding their qualities that were shared across both cultures. Furthermore, Alexander argues that when we find cultural expressions in the Mediterranean that are similar to each other, it is not always the case that they are specifically Hellenistic elements that have spread to other groups, but they may be “a cultural pattern generic to the whole region that has been specified in each subculture in slightly different ways.”²⁷ This subverts the assumption of the priority of Hellenistic culture in influencing surrounding communities. Rather than taking the active concept of Hellenization as accurate in all cases, we may sometimes find it more appropriate to talk about the diffusion of a particular idea without a cultural origin that can be pinpointed.

Rather than being stymied by a version of Judaism that is not clearly demarcated from Hellenism, we can embrace the recognition that Judaism was not only one thing (nor has it ever been or continued to be). Scholars in recent decades have paid increasing attention to the diversity of Second Temple Judaism and the reality that there were dialogues internal to Judaism that were not defined by Hellenism at all. This idea has precedents in the work of Victor Tcherikover, such as his 1956 article where he argues that Jewish writings from Alexandria were not in fact “apologetics” addressed to outsiders, but rather this literature “was directed inwards” and “g[a]ve expression to the intricate problems that developed within the Alexandrian

²⁶ Philip S. Alexander, “Hellenism and Hellenization as Problematic Historiographical Categories,” in *Paul Beyond the Judaism Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pederson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 70.

²⁷ Alexander, “Hellenism and Hellenization,” 71.

community in which these ideas had their roots.”²⁸ Gruen has developed Tcherikover’s situationally specific conclusion into a broader approach to reading Greek-language Jewish literature, focusing on humor and self-expression.

The texts have too often been labeled as apologia or propaganda, an inadequate and seriously misleading characterization. These were not simply reactive pamphlets, the product of a defensive rear-guard action by a beleaguered minority in an alien world. They reflect the creative energies, imagination, and even whimsical caprice of their authors. Hellenistic Jews wrote for their compatriots, for their self-esteem, for their sense of identity and superiority, and for their amusement, in terms congenial to the cultural atmosphere in which they thrived. By selectively appropriating Hellenic media to recreate their past and redefine themselves, Jews made more vivid the spiritual and intellectual precedence that they accorded to their own traditions.²⁹

Gruen’s approach has the strength of examining Judaism from its own vantage point instead of taking the non-Jewish world as the default priority.

Michael Tuval similarly begins by displacing the question of Hellenization from our focus. Although he does explore how Jews in diaspora experienced life distinctively from Jews in Palestine, he frames that distinction with a view inward, not through comparison to dominant Hellenistic culture. He proposes that Palestinian Judaism was defined by the temple, whereas diaspora Judaism was not centered on the temple because of the distance from it, and the role of the temple was replaced in diaspora by a number of alternatives, especially Torah study.³⁰ Embracing the internal differences among Jewish people in the Second Temple period, he does not explain diaspora Judaism’s difference from Palestinian Judaism on the basis of Hellenistic

²⁸ Victor Tcherikover, “Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered,” *Eos* 48 (1956): 169, 182, 193. Tcherikover’s larger 1959 work on this topic, however, falls into many of the missteps associated with the binary discussed in the previous section: Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. S. Applebaum (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1959).

²⁹ Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism*, xx. Tcherikover restricted his analysis and conclusion here to Alexandrian literature, while Gruen’s findings apply to an expanded selection of writings.

³⁰ Michael Tuval, *From Jerusalem Priest to Roman Jew: On Josephus and the Paradigms of Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 6–7.

influence. Rather, the variety already present within “Judaisms” allows for different manifestations of religious life in different locales.³¹

The scholarship of Levine, Gruen, Alexander, and Tuval offers stronger paradigms for discussing how Jews in the Second Temple period navigated their relationships across differences, both with non-Jews and with other Jews. They resist binaries and essentialism, and they push towards a recognition of multiplicity, fluidity, and self-expression. Nevertheless, these formulations at times risk side-stepping the issues of hierarchy and exclusion that have been highlighted above in Hengel and Feldman. Because the study of Second Temple Judaism has been and continues to be associated with power inequalities and structures of oppression, these legacies need to be directly addressed and dismantled.

Anti-Jewish, Orientalist Paradigms

Not only does the binary of Hellenism and Judaism fail to capture the accuracy of Jewish life in antiquity, although this is true. This binary also communicates assumptions and stereotypes that are informed by and that perpetuate anti-Judaism and Orientalism. After briefly defining and explaining these exclusionary paradigms, I outline the critiques by Wayne Meeks, Shawn Kelley, R. S. Sugirtharajah, and Kwok Pui-lan. I note that the social locations of each of these scholars influence the elaboration of each of their critiques, and that my project will bring in my own social location as a South Asian woman in diaspora. The particular issue that I foreground is agency, particularly, how to conceptualize the agency of an Orientalized subject.

Anti-Judaism was formative for Christianity for two millennia, and post-Holocaust efforts at dismantling this harmful theological bias continue to be worked out today. Jeremy F.

³¹ Tuval, *From Jerusalem Priest to Roman Jew*, 6.

Worthen points out that, while most Christians can agree in their abstract opposition to anti-Judaism, we are still learning and discussing what this should look like concretely.³² Katharina von Kellenbach outlines multiple insidious ways that even progressive thinkers can perpetuate anti-Judaism.

Anti-Judaism is *trivialized* by comparing it to seemingly more urgent problems, such as racism, poverty, genocide or the environment... Another strategy of avoidance is to *particularize* anti-Judaism, reducing it to somebody else's problem... A third avoidance strategy is the *spiritualization* of the problem. Jews are condemned, so the argument goes, on religious groups only and theological statements about the Pharisees or ancient Israelites have nothing to do with attitudes toward contemporary Jews... Lastly, anti-Judaism can be *universalized*. A universal concern for injustice, inhumanity and cruelty can be a strategy to deflect attention from antisemitism.³³

As noted in the introduction, the present study responds to these urgent critiques and aims to describe and correct a specific manifestation of anti-Judaism in biblical studies: namely, a perception of Judaism as traditional, stagnant, and compulsory, a depiction that additionally plagues other cultures regarded as Oriental.

Orientalism is a paradigm that includes at once the destructive forces of anti-Judaism, racism, and colonialism. Orientalizing discourse posits that the East and West are fundamentally distinct: “[t]he Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’”³⁴ This hierarchical difference is based on the assumption that progress and development are universal and linear, such that analyzing Western vs. Eastern peoples creates binary categories: “maturity/immaturity, civilization/barbarism, developed/developing, progressive/primitive.”³⁵ The relationship enabled by Orientalism is one

³² Jeremy F. Worthen, *The Internal Foe: Judaism and Anti-Judaism in the Shaping of Christian Theology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 3.

³³ von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 135–36.

³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 40.

³⁵ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 32.

of power, justifying the colonial dominance of West over East; Oriental peoples are understood to be incapable of self-governance, and only the involvement of the West in the East has the potential to help the East improve. In the history of biblical studies, Hellenism has been treated as a Western civilization, defined by rationality, individualism, and universalism, while Judaism has been treated as an Oriental civilization, defined by the opposite values of tradition, authoritarianism, and particularism.³⁶

Wayne Meeks has directly addressed how Orientalism is a major problem when it comes to the binary between Hellenism and Judaism.³⁷ Christian scholars have not historically treated these two cultural groups as equal, but have assessed them in a hierarchical fashion, with Hellenism embodying the author's and audience's preferred values. Speaking about the scholarly framework used by Baur, Meeks writes:

The ingenuity of the scheme is apparent. "Judaism" and "Hellenism" here are obviously code words for complex sets of ideas masquerading as historical entities. On the one side is the particularity of national or ethnic religion; on the other side resides the universal religion for all humankind. On the one hand are the limited and conditioned facts of historical circumstance; on the other, the universal truths of reason. On the one hand flesh; on the other spirit. On the one hand "legalism"; on the other freedom.³⁸

The "direct anti-Semitism" present in this schema is interconnected with multiple modes of dominance: of "Protestant scholasticism" over "Catholic ritualism and institutional authoritarianism," and of "Western" over "Oriental" society.³⁹

³⁶ For an alternate view of Orientalism and anti-Judaism as parallel but ultimately separate phenomena, see Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 19–22.

³⁷ Wayne Meeks, "Judaism, Hellenism, and the Birth of Christianity," in *Paul Beyond the Judaism Hellenism Divide*, ed. Troels Engberg-Pederson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 17–27. For additional recent examples of such analysis, see Frey, "'Judaism' and 'Hellenism,'" 103–4; David G. Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion: Religion, Race, and Whiteness in Constructions of Jewish and Christian Identities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 27–28.

³⁸ Meeks, "Judaism, Hellenism, and the Birth of Christianity," 19. For Kelley's similar critique of Baur, see Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship*, *Biblical Limits* (London: Routledge, 2002), 77.

³⁹ Meeks, "Judaism, Hellenism, and the Birth of Christianity," 19, 20.

Shawn Kelley explicitly connects the Orientalist paradigm to racism as he traces racialized discourse in the foundations of New Testament scholarship: “While racial blueprints varied from intellectual to intellectual, there was agreement on the general contours of the racial caste system... Europeans were fully civilized, the adults of the racial hierarchy; Orientals and/or Semites (including the Jews) were semi-civilized, the teenagers of the caste system; while the savages were incapable of civilization and were the children of the hierarchy.”⁴⁰ The violent project of white supremacy, as it impacts “Orientals” who may be Jewish, Asian, or Middle Eastern, as well as Black and Indigenous “savages.” The hierarchical classification of global cultures is an element of racist ideology that has a long legacy in biblical studies.

Postcolonial biblical scholars have approached this topic from the other direction, not beginning with the Hellenism/Judaism binary and linking it to Orientalism, but rather beginning from Orientalism and observing the presence of colonial discourse in biblical scholarship. R. S. Sugirtharajah describes the most common Orientalist tropes that appear in the guild today, including the following:

Orientalism’s conventional habit of caricaturing and ideologically silencing the “other” continues to appear. One habit is to perpetuate the Orientalist conception of the “other” as lazy, passive, fatalistic and incapable of taking any initiative on their own... The other mark of Orientalism is the contrastive way of thinking which places so much emphasis on the characteristics which differentiate the East and the West... The inferior values of the Orient are pitted against the superior values of the West.⁴¹

Orientalism in biblical studies not only manifests in blatant cultural stereotypes, but also in representations of the ancient, foreign “other” as non-agential in a way that implicitly contrasts with liberal values of autonomy.

⁴⁰ Kelley, *Racializing Jesus*, 30.

⁴¹ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 106, 108.

Kwok Pui-lan speaks to the way that postcolonialism offers a theoretical resource for addressing and correcting such erroneous statements. In her contribution to a roundtable on anti-Judaism and postcolonial biblical interpretation, she expresses “that postcolonial theory will illuminate the multilayered nature of the problems” at the intersection of anti-Judaism, colonialism, and sexism, as described by Amy-Jill Levine.⁴² Kwok observes that it was Western missionaries who introduced ideas that aligned Judaism with native cultures, denigrating them both, in order to present Western Christianity as the superior option that would purportedly offer them liberation. With a postcolonial lens, we can enter any narrower body of literature in the study of the Bible, early Christianity, and Second Temple Judaism, and past discourse can be nuanced by work that sees and critiques such limiting presuppositions.

When discussing Hellenism and Judaism, our personal identities and backgrounds inevitably influence how we have been socialized to regard various cultures and what questions we bring to the table about cultural interaction. For instance, Barclay is one scholar who is aware of and forthcoming about how current social concerns shape his project. His central concern from the present day is “the need to foster respect and tolerance for minority ethnic groups, in the face of the complex problems created by modern social pluralism.”⁴³ While this is an admirable goal in some respects, it is a majoritarian concern, addressing the behavior of the dominant group: an assumed we, from the majority ethnic group, need to have “respect and tolerance for minority ethnic groups.” It is also a perspective that views “pluralism” as the cause of today’s “problems,” rather than power imbalances that have accrued between different groups. I am interested in balancing out the scholarly conversation on Hellenism and Judaism by recognizing

⁴² Amy-Jill Levine et al., “Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,” *JFSR* 20.1 (2004): 102.

⁴³ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 14.

and starting from my own experience as a woman of a minoritized ethnic background (a biracial, South Asian, Canadian-American woman). I aim to consider the internal experiences of minoritized people within an empire and especially in diaspora, and to explore their strategies of living alongside both majoritarian subjects and other minoritized subjects.

The specific focus that I take as I discuss the need to deconstruct the Hellenism/Judaism binary is the matter of agency. Throughout the scholarship reviewed above, the question of agency is hinted at, though not stated directly or analyzed as such. Where are we capable of seeing the agency of Second Temple Jews? Do we see it when they are acting in ways that are “Jewish,” or do we see it when they are acting in ways that are “Hellenized”? If Hellenization is a process of a culture becoming more associated with Hellenism, why do we lack a similarly common word to refer to the process of a culture becoming more associated with Judaism?⁴⁴ Where do we understand the impetus of agency to be located when ancient people carried out different cultural practices?

As an example of how assumptions about agency implicitly shape biblical interpretation, Sugirtharajah critiques biblical scholars who depict Jews as “lazy, passive, fatalistic and incapable of taking any initiative on their own,” falling into the stereotype of Judaism as not being a site of agency.⁴⁵ He goes into more detail with an example from a commentary on Acts that quotes from William Ramsay to explain that, in Acts 16:13-40, the prisoners do not escape because “the ‘excitable Oriental people’ lacked ‘the northern self-centred tenacity of purpose and

⁴⁴ The term “Judaizer” is common when discussing the New Testament and especially the Pauline epistles, but it is a loaded and negative term which is not at all comparable to “Hellenization” and if anything demonstrates the problem. For the separate argument that the idea of Judaizing is central to the conception of Judaism in early Christian discourse, see Mason, “Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History.”

⁴⁵ Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 106, 108.

presence of mind.”⁴⁶ This is an unusually frank expression of a more widespread assumption that rational, intentional action is not readily found in Oriental societies.

As I investigate agency in my project, I aim to eliminate binary thinking, not merely turn binaries upside down. This process requires several levels of revising and rethinking. According to colonial discourse, the colonized are only able to exert rational choice when they imbibe the culture of the colonizers, and they are otherwise powerless when mired in their traditional culture. When we oppose this discourse, we might start with condemnation: imperial power is the actual source of the powerlessness of the colonized, and this violence should not have been enacted. But this simple condemnation would accept the untruth that the colonized are passive. In fact, the agency of the colonized has never been completely eliminated, though power imbalances have attempted to impinge upon that agency. In Edward Said’s book *Culture and Imperialism*, he clarifies his past argumentation and focuses on describing the reality that the overwhelming force of colonialism has not meant that the colonized remained passive: “Yet it was the case nearly everywhere in the non-European world that the coming of the white man brought forth some sort of resistance. What I left out of *Orientalism* was that response to Western domination which culminated in the great movement of decolonization all across the Third World.”⁴⁷ Said’s rearticulation is critical to making visible anti-colonial activity. Nevertheless, it would still be reductive to see agency on the part of the colonized only when they directly resist colonization, as there are many other motives for behavior. Furthermore, the

⁴⁶ Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism*, 106; E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Historical Commentary*, TNTC (London: Tyndale, 1959), 127; William Mitchell Ramsay, *St. Paul: The Traveler and Roman Citizen*, 8th ed. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904), 221. The original from Blaiklock is, “Ramsay speaks of the northern ‘self-centered tenacity of purpose and presence of mind’ absent in an excitable Oriental people.” The original from Ramsay is, “Why did not the prisoners run away when their fetters were loosed? The question is natural to those who are familiar with the northern races, and their self-centred tenacity of purpose and presence of mind. An earthquake strikes panic into the semi-oriental mob in the Aegean lands; and it seems to me quite natural that the prisoners made no dash for safety when the opportunity was afforded them.”

⁴⁷ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), xii.

culture and tradition of the colonized is not automatically pure or morally correct, as every society has its own hierarchies and power imbalances. Indeed, Said himself opposes the “reactions...that require Arabs to read Arab books, use Arab methods, and the like.”⁴⁸ Current postcolonial theory subverts binaries instead of essentializing either colonizing or colonized cultures. Instead, the agency of the colonized needs a method for being seen, without either the primacy of colonial culture or a reactionary, essentialist nationalism.

Conclusion

As I analyze Acts 16:1-5 throughout the remainder of this text, my assumptions and goals are be informed by the scholarship I have reviewed above. Learning from the efforts of Hengel and Feldman, I seek to avoid perpetuating legacies of Christian domination and aim at being inclusive towards the manifold ways that Jews have identified and expressed themselves. Furthermore, I do not categorize the characters in the biblical text as assimilated or non-assimilated based on only particular qualities, but attend to the ways that they embody Hellenistic, Jewish, and Hellenistic Jewish attributes in various facets of their lives. The non-zero-sum models articulated by Levine, Gruen, and Alexander inform the ways that I visualize all these attributes coexisting with one another. The pictures of diverse Judaism drawn by Gruen and Tuval help me to attend to the manifold ways that Second Temple Jews behaved and spoke in regard to issues that arise in Acts 16:1-5, like intermarriage and circumcision. My attention to Orientalist ideology is in the same vein as that of Meeks, Kelley, Sugirtharajah, and Kwok, as I bring together how anti-Judaism, racism, and colonialism work together to form Orientalist

⁴⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxv.

assumptions in the interpretation of this passage. My focus is on the question of agency: who have previous scholars seen as expressing agency, and in what actions?

In the following chapter, we encounter Timothy, a diaspora Jew, who is initially described in ways conventionally coded as assimilated, but who experiences in this passage the traditional Jewish practice of circumcision. For many past readers, the binary of Hellenism and Judaism has locked Timothy into the category of Hellenized and has estranged him from the possibility of also being deeply Jewish. The impetus for his circumcision is therefore displaced onto Paul, making Timothy's agency almost invisible in the act. In addition, the practice of circumcision has been locked into the Judaism side of the binary, associating it with Oriental qualities and marking it as unable to be chosen. By introducing different ways of understanding Timothy's character and ancient Jewish circumcision, I uncover new exegetical options for this passage that have not been assumed to be possible.

Chapter 2: The Circumcision of Timothy Reconsidered

Introduction

The narrative of the circumcision of Timothy, told in Acts 16:1-5, is a contested topic in New Testament studies, with many commentators puzzling over the logic of the passage. Here, I cover three hotly debated issues: the ethnic identity of Timothy, the religion of Timothy, and the motives that Paul and/or Timothy had for Timothy's circumcision. As a multi-cultural character, Timothy has been variously categorized as either Greek or Jewish, the two ends of the binary or spectrum that was discussed in the previous chapter. As Margaret Aymer astutely observes, Timothy's circumcision has been viewed by some as "a political act of 'choosing sides' between his Greek father and his Jewish mother."⁴⁹ Later, in chapter 5, I will take a step back from these three important, narrow questions to analyze the broader narrative depictions of circumcision in general in Luke-Acts.

In this chapter, I first survey the positions on whether Timothy is a Jew, a gentile, or in another ethnic category. All three positions were offered by precritical commentators, an assessment that diverges slightly from previous reviews of the literature. The critical scholarship of F. C. Baur argued that Timothy is a gentile and used this as evidence against the passage's historicity. Mid-20th century commentary argued that Timothy is Jewish on the basis of rabbinic evidence, but Shaye J. D. Cohen challenged the relevance of this evidence. Some contemporary scholars argue that Timothy is a gentile and others that he is a Jew, and still others argue that Timothy is somewhere in the middle or outside these categories entirely. I conclude with my

⁴⁹ Margaret Aymer, "Acts of the Apostles," in *WBC*, ed. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 542.

own position that Timothy is depicted by the narrative as Jewish, i.e., not a gentile, regardless of what other ethnic identities he could have held in addition.

Second, I consider the language that commentators use to describe the attachment that Timothy and/or his mother have to Judaism. Many scholars have discussed Timothy's family in the negative terms of religious apostasy, personal unfaithfulness, and social illegitimacy. More infrequently, the earnest Jewish faith of Timothy's family is noted, although even then it is not typically connected at any length with the activity taking place in this pericope. I come to the same conclusion as Willie James Jennings, who sees Timothy's circumcision as part of his broader Jewish practice.

Finally, I offer an overview of the explanations that are offered for Timothy's circumcision. The overwhelming majority of scholars bypass Timothy completely and offer rationales only from Paul's perspective. The most common rationale by far is the idea that Paul gave in to the social pressure of Jews so that they would listen to his evangelism. Responding to this suggested solution, I listen to Mitzi Smith's critique of a Paul who would compel Timothy to modify his body based on pressure from the dominant culture. I add the critique that this depiction runs the danger of depicting Jews as "obstinate" (as Erasmus phrased it) and depicting Jewish tradition as forced. Instead, I pursue deeper exploration of the idea that Paul and the Jerusalem council are encouraging, although not requiring, Jewish Christians to continue practicing the Jewish traditions present in their cultural context. Timothy's agency can be located in dialogue with these members of his religious community, rather than in submission to them.

The Ethnic Identity of Timothy

When scholars discuss Timothy in detail, it is usually because they are wrestling with the question of whether he is a Jew or a gentile.⁵⁰ While most interpreters ultimately categorize Timothy as either one or the other, a substantial number regard him as being in an ambiguous or indeterminate state. While I regard Timothy as being Jewish based on the narrative logic of the passage, my stance does not ignore Timothy's Greek heritage, and I am informed by (critical) mixed race studies as I discuss how Timothy's Jewish identity is the one that is salient in this particular context.

In the fourth and fifth centuries, Ambrosiaster, Jerome, and John Chrysostom all came to different conclusions about the identity of Timothy.⁵¹ In Ambrosiaster's commentary on Galatians, he discusses the difference between the circumcision of Timothy and the non-circumcision of Titus.

Timotheus enim erat matre Iudaea, patre autem Graeco. hic cum secundum legem circumcisis infans non esset... explorabant enim si filium Iudaeae incircumcisum susciperet... quia si de Graecis contradicebat non esse circumcidendos, vel filios Istrahel circumcidi non vetaret... de gentilibus autem scandalum non habebant, unde Titus non est compulsus circumcidi.

For Timothy was from a Jewish mother but a Greek father. In this case, although he was not circumcised as an infant in accordance with the law, [Paul wanted to ordain him]... For [the Jews] were investigating whether he would take an uncircumcised son of a Jewish woman... because if he replied that those from the Greeks should not be circumcised, he should not forbid that the sons of Israel be circumcised... But they did

⁵⁰ An exception to this framework is found in the work of Bruce J. Malina. For Malina, the relevant dichotomies in the first century were Gentile/Israelite and Judean/Greek. A Judean Israelite was non-Hellenized and a Greek Israelite was Hellenized. Timothy's mother was thus a non-Hellenized Israelite and Timothy's father was a Hellenized Israelite. The former would have accepted circumcision and the latter would have rejected it. Furthermore, according to Malina, first-century circumcision did not consist of removing the foreskin, but simply of cutting it slightly. See, Bruce J. Malina, *Timothy: Paul's Closest Associate* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 95–109; Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 113–14.

⁵¹ These pre-critical commentators are discussed in Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Was Timothy Jewish (Acts 16:1-3)? Patristic Exegesis, Rabbinic Law, and Matrilineal Descent," *JBL* 105.2 (1986): 19.

not have a scandal concerning gentiles, therefore Titus was not compelled to be circumcised.⁵²

Ambrosiaster understands the Jerusalem council to have clearly decided against the circumcision of gentiles like Titus, but not to have taken a stance on the circumcision of Jewish “sons of Israel” like Timothy. In his reading of the narrative, Timothy is a test case of whether Paul will forbid the practice of Jewish custom. Timothy has reason enough to be circumcised because of his Jewishness through his mother, and Paul’s role is either to allow or to impede the circumcision, but not to unnecessarily prompt it.

Jerome, however, bases his assessment of Timothy on his circumcision status, not on his parentage. Discussing with Augustine the issue of how to rationalize the behavior of Paul, he writes that Timothy was “the son of a gentile person certainly and a gentile himself – for he was not Jewish, he who had not been circumcised” (*filium hominis gentilis utique et ipsum gentilem – neque enim Iudaeus erat, qui non fuerat circumcisis*).⁵³ In Jerome’s view, Paul circumcises Timothy as a purely social way of faking Jewish piety before Jewish observers.⁵⁴

John Chrysostom focuses again on parentage to define Timothy’s ethnic identity, which he understands as a mixture. In his homily on Acts, he states that Timothy was circumcised, “although he was made up of halves; for he was from a Greek father and a believing mother” (*καίτοι ἐξ ἡμισείας ἦν· ἀπὸ πατρὸς Ἕλληνας γὰρ ἦν, καὶ πιστῆς μητρός*).⁵⁵ He states similarly in his homily on 2 Timothy that Timothy’s circumcision takes place in a situation of “these

⁵² *Ad Galatas* 2.5.5-6 (CSEL 81/3). The text varies in between two editions, and only the common text has been quoted here.

⁵³ Augustine, *Epist.* 75.9 (CSEL 34/2) = Jerome, *Epist.* 112.9 (CSEL 55).

⁵⁴ For an extended discussion of the argument between Jerome and Augustine, see Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 256–58.

⁵⁵ *Hom. Act.* 34.4 (PG 60). Where I have translated “was made up of halves,” Cohen infers “was half-gentile” and NPNF 1/11 infers “was but half (a Jew by birth)”: Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 255; Saint Chrysostom, “Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans,” in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. Walker, J. Sheppard, and H. Browne, 1 (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1889), 216.

becoming mixed” (τῶν ἐπιμιζιῶν τούτων γινομένων).⁵⁶ What belief does Timothy’s mother express? Is Timothy’s Greekness mixed with Judaism or with Christianity? For Cohen, πιστῆς refers to the mother’s Christianity, and “Chrysostom omits her Jewishness.”⁵⁷ But elsewhere in the homily, Chrysostom does quote the text of Acts that notes her Jewishness (34.5). Furthermore, in this passage, Chrysostom refers to Timothy’s uncircumcision at birth as a situation of “the law already being relaxed” (ἤδη τὸν νόμον λυόμενον, 34.4), implying that Timothy should have been circumcised at birth. This evidence points strongly towards the interpretation that Chrysostom viewed Timothy as a mixed product of his Greek and Jewish halves.

These three precritical authors present three options for understanding Timothy: as Jewish, as a gentile, or as both Greek and Jewish. In my overview, I have come to a different conclusion about the history of early interpretation than that offered by Shaye J. D. Cohen: “the vast majority of exegetes, from the second century to the eighteenth, did not explain Paul’s conduct by appeal to Timothy’s Jewishness. As the son of a Gentile father, Timothy was a Gentile.”⁵⁸ While I concur that most interpreters did not claim that Timothy was Jewish, neither did most interpreters claim that Timothy was a gentile.⁵⁹ They simply rarely spoke either way.⁶⁰ Cohen argues that their silence implies Timothy’s non-Jewishness, because they “had great

⁵⁶ *Hom. 2 Tim. 1.*

⁵⁷ Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 255.

⁵⁸ Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 263.

⁵⁹ In Cohen’s understanding, John Chrysostom and Augustine claim that Timothy was a gentile. However, Cohen’s translation of Chrysostom resolves an ambiguity in the text in a way that I have contested. The silence in Augustine is tenuously taken as an agreement with Jerome’s passing comment about Timothy’s identity in an otherwise lengthy conversation. Furthermore, Augustine does in fact place in parallel Paul’s circumcision of Timothy and Jewish people’s circumcision of their children (*Epist.* 82.16), and we may instead read the evidence in favor of Timothy’s Jewishness.

⁶⁰ Martin Meiser, “Timothy in Acts: Patristic Reception,” *ASE* 32.2 (2015): 327.

incentive to emphasize Timothy's Jewishness...which would have made his circumcision licit."⁶¹

Instead, I propose that these early church commentators did not pay as much attention to Timothy as the recipient of circumcision as they did to Paul as the circumciser. It was Paul's Jewish behavior that troubled them, and that would have troubled them regardless of Timothy's identity. In the same breath, Tertullian explained away both Paul's circumcision of Timothy and Paul's leadership of purification rites at the temple (Acts 21:23-26).⁶² Origen and Augustine put these two actions in parallel as well, and Origen attributed them to Paul's outward expression of his Judaism in both word and deed.⁶³ These interpreters viewed Paul as more directly involved in Timothy's circumcision than the NRSVue translation's elliptical rendering would suggest ("had him circumcised" for περιέτεμεν αὐτόν, literally, "circumcised him"). John Chrysostom emphasizes that Paul "himself circumcised him" (αὐτὸς αὐτόν περιέτεμεν).⁶⁴ Precritical biblical interpreters dwelled very little on Timothy's identity because it paled in importance compared to Paul's Jewish behavior, which troubled them as they operated in a supersessionist theological mode.

A major change took place in the interpretation of this passage when commentators began critiquing the text instead of justifying it. In his 1845 work on Paul, F. C. Baur viewed the Paul who circumcised Timothy as irreconcilable with the Paul who refused to circumcise Titus, and he believed Paul's own word in Galatians over the less trustworthy author of Acts. Baur understood Timothy's ethnic identity as open to being chosen by Timothy through his circumcision status: "That Timothy had up to this time never been circumcised, although his

⁶¹ Cohen, "Was Timothy Jewish?," 258.

⁶² *Mon.* 14.1; *Marc.* 5.3.5.

⁶³ Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 1.42. See also, *Comm. Jo.* 10.30; *Comm. Matt.* 11.8. Augustine, *Epist.* 116.16.

⁶⁴ *Hom. Act.* 34 (NPNF¹ 11).

mother was a Jewess, would seem to indicate that he chose to be reckoned as a Gentile, like his father.”⁶⁵ Because Timothy is a gentile, his circumcision would contradict the Jerusalem council decision, adding to the circumcision’s ahistoricity in Baur’s opinion. Several commentators have agreed that the incident can only be explained as a mistaken tradition or memory, though with various positions on Timothy’s ethnic identity.⁶⁶

In the mid-20th century, commentators drew on rabbinic evidence to argue that Timothy was Jewish by the rule of matrilineal descent for mixed marriages. Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury’s 1933 volume in *The Beginnings of Christianity* was an early work that made this argument.⁶⁷ Such reasoning has been followed by a substantial number of interpreters.⁶⁸

But in the 1980s, the relevance of rabbinic law for the first century was challenged. David Daube argued in a lecture on ancient Jewish law, published in 1981, that the child of a Jewish woman and a gentile man would have been considered a gentile in the first century.⁶⁹ In his view, it was only in the second, third, and fourth centuries that mores began to change on the

⁶⁵ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Paul: The Apostle of Jesus Christ, His Life and Work, His Epistles and His Doctrine: A Contribution to a Critical History of Primitive Christianity*, trans. Eduard Zeller, 2nd ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1876), 1:129–30.

⁶⁶ Kirsopp Lake and Henry J. Cadbury, *The Acts of the Apostles: English Translation and Commentary*, ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, vol. 4 of *BegC* 1 (London: MacMillan and Co., 1933), 184; Ernst Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), 422; Hans Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, HNT 7 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1963), 88–89. For a review of argumentation against the historicity and for the historicity, see Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse Der Bibel Und Verwandter Texte* (Tübingen: Francke, 1998), 460–63. Blaschke comes down in favor of the historicity of the event.

⁶⁷ Lake and Cadbury, *Acts of the Apostles*, 184.

⁶⁸ Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 419; Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 88; Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ed. William F. Albright and C. S. Mann, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), 155; Walter Schmithals, *Die Apostelgeschichte Des Lukas* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1982), 146; David John Williams, *Acts: A Good News Commentary*, Good News Commentaries (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 265; Gerd Lüdemann, *Das Frühe Christentum Nach Den Traditionen Der Apostelgeschichte: Ein Kommentar* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 181–82; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised Edition*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 304; Justo L. González, *Hechos* (Miami: Editorial Caribe, 1992), 233; James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 216; Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, “Der Verzicht Auf Die Beschneidung Im Frühen Christentum,” *NTS* 42.4 (1996): 488; F. Scott Spencer, *Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 159; Jacob Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 412; Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *NIB* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 226.

⁶⁹ David Daube, *Ancient Jewish Law: Three Inaugural Lectures* (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 22–32.

basis of “the compassionateness of the Rabbis” for Jewish women who were raped in times of persecution; the child would be illegitimate but still Jewish and thus included within the community.⁷⁰ The first-century figure Timothy should therefore be viewed as a gentile.⁷¹ Shaye J. D. Cohen echoed Daube’s argument and popularized it in 1986. In addition to arguing that rabbinic law is too late to be relevant to Acts, Cohen believes that “[t]he plain meaning of Acts 16:3 is fairly clear. ‘Because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek’ implies that Timothy was a Gentile like his father.”⁷² For Cohen, the date of rabbinic law implies that Paul and the audience of Acts would have thought that Timothy was a gentile, and the text of Acts implies that Luke thought the same.⁷³ Cohen’s argumentation has been accepted by a handful of twenty-first century commentators.⁷⁴

In the wake of Cohen’s pivotal article, scholars began not taking Timothy’s Jewish identity for granted as a historical fact, and instead argued for it on a literary basis.⁷⁵ Writing in 1988 in direct response to Cohen, Christopher Bryan argues that we must conclude that Luke

⁷⁰ Daube, *Ancient Jewish Law*, 23, 27–29.

⁷¹ Daube, *Ancient Jewish Law*, 25.

⁷² Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 254.

⁷³ Cohen notes that under rabbinic reasoning, Timothy would technically be a *mamzēr*, i.e. “permanently barred from marrying another Jew” but otherwise “a Jew in all respects.” Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 264.

⁷⁴ C. K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 244; Benny Tat-siong Liew, “Acts,” in *Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Patte (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 422; Gary Gilbert, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 230; Joshua D. Garroway, “The Pharisee Heresy: Circumcision for Gentiles in the Acts of the Apostles,” *NTS* 60 (2014): 33–34; Mitzi J. Smith, “Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race: A Womanist Inter(Con)Textual Reading of Acts 16:1–5,” *Religions* 10.3.190 (2019): 6; Linda M. Maloney and Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, Wisdom Commentary (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2022), 209.

In Barrett’s 1998 edition, he agrees that Timothy is not Jewish by matrilineal descent, but still calls him a “half-Jew” rather than simply a gentile: C. K. Barrett, *Acts 15–28*, vol. 2 of *ICC* (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 761. Gilbert’s 2017 edition gives equal weight to the possibilities of Timothy being a gentile and being a Jew: Gary Gilbert, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 256.

⁷⁵ A few commentators recognize that matrilineal law dates to later than this period, but still regard Timothy as Jewish for reasons that they do not explicitly articulate: Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 146; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 574–75; Mikael C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 221.

saw some significance to Timothy's "Jewish connection" because he introduces Timothy's Jewish mother first.⁷⁶ In 1992, Luke Timothy Johnson acknowledged that matrilineal descent cannot be confidently assumed at this time, but he argued that since Paul is said in Acts 16:4 to proclaim that gentiles are not required to be circumcised, "[i]t goes beyond comprehension" for Timothy to have been circumcised as a gentile.⁷⁷ In 1996, Irina Levinskaya wrote in favor of Timothy's Jewish identity in Luke's eyes, responding to Cohen by arguing that Judaism in the diaspora was a likely locale for the development of mores on intermarriage that ultimately became rabbinic law.⁷⁸ According to these authors, understanding the character of Timothy as Jewish makes better sense of Luke's narrative logic regarding the Jerusalem council decision, and the foregrounded mention of Timothy's mother establishes his Jewishness, while the mention of Timothy's father is made twice to explain how the Jews in the region know that Timothy is uncircumcised.⁷⁹

A third position is taken by another group of scholars: Timothy cannot be categorized as either a Jew or a gentile. The precise articulations used to describe this situation abound. Several scholars use the terminology of the 'special case' to describe why Timothy is treated like neither a typical Jew nor a typical gentile.⁸⁰ Other commentators argue that Luke as an author viewed Timothy differently than the original community around Timothy.⁸¹ Timothy has also been

⁷⁶ Christopher Bryan, "A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3," *JBL* 107.2 (1988): 292–94.

⁷⁷ Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 284.

⁷⁸ Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, vol. 5 of *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 17.

⁷⁹ Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 14–15; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 474–76; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 232.

⁸⁰ William S. Kurz, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Collegeville Bible Commentary (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1983), 71; Horn, "Der Verzicht Auf Die Beschneidung," 488; Spencer, *Acts*, 159.

⁸¹ Lüdemann, *Das Frühe Christentum*, 180–83; Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 3:2318; Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 121; Maloney and Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 212. Note that multiple articulations of Timothy's identity are offered by Keener and by Maloney and Reimer, so they each have been cited multiple times in this discussion.

described as an ethnic outsider to all.⁸² The language of postcolonialism has also provided a framework for regarding Timothy in terms of hybridity.⁸³ Lastly, Timothy's identity has been viewed as theologically profound instead of problematic.⁸⁴

The position that I take on Timothy's identity is in agreement with scholars who argue for Timothy's Jewishness on a literary basis, including Luke Timothy Johnson, Irina Levinskaya, Ben Witherington, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa. First, the logic of the narrative is that Timothy is invited to participate in spreading the message (Acts 16:4) that gentile Christians are required to adhere to only a few practices, not including circumcision. For a newly circumcised gentile to share that information would be a shocking contradiction to the basic plot.⁸⁵ In addition, the mention of Timothy's Jewish mother would be superfluous if Timothy was considered to be a gentile. But the combination of mentioning Timothy's mother and father is effective if Timothy is Jewish, since it explains how a Jewish male might be uncircumcised until later in life.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the slightly later rabbinic ruling of matrilineal descent in cases of mixed marriage demonstrates the plausibility of Timothy's Jewish self-identity and identification by others. Beyond the narrow issue of formal authorized ethnic inclusion, the rabbinic evidence suggests that it would have been socially legitimate in at least some circles to treat Timothy as Jewish.⁸⁷

⁸² F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 322; Keener, *Acts*, 3:2318.

⁸³ Rubén Muñoz-Larrondo, *A Postcolonial Reading of the Acts of the Apostles*, StBibLit 147 (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 165; Keener, *Acts*, 3:2318; Maloney and Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 208–9.

⁸⁴ Eric D. Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations: The Function of Race and Ethnicity in Acts 16* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 115–17; Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 152–53.

⁸⁵ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 284; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 476. See also, Bryan, "A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3," 293; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 121.

⁸⁶ Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 15; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 474; Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 232. See also, Bryan, "A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3," 292–93; Barrett, *Acts* 15–28, 762.

⁸⁷ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 284; Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 16–17; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 475–76.

By stating that the narrative depicts Timothy as a Jewish person, I am not arguing that he could not have had other ethnic identities or ties as well. As I expressed in the previous chapter, Jewishness was not hermetically sealed off from other cultural or ethnic spheres. Timothy may have also seen himself as a Greek person like his father, and he may have identified with narrower local ethnicities in his family line. I am arguing simply that Timothy is not depicted as someone who identifies as a gentile, i.e., non-Jewish. I am also not arguing that Timothy must have always regarded himself as Jewish. Someone in his shoes may indeed have believed this confidently for his whole life or may have experienced multiple self-understandings that changed with age or setting. I argue only that, in the scene where Timothy is circumcised by Paul, Timothy and Paul act in accordance with viewing Timothy as a Jew, not a gentile, and the narrator does not counter this perception.

My reading of Timothy's ethnicity resists binaries between Judaism and Hellenism, seeing Timothy's Jewishness as compatible with other ethnic attachments on a non-zero-sum basis. This perspective is also influenced by critical mixed race studies (CMRS) and my own identity as a biracial person.⁸⁸ In 1996, Maria P. P. Root published her Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People, which affirms multiracial people's rights to self-identify without "fragment[ing] and fractionalize[ing]" themselves.⁸⁹

I have the right
 not to justify my existence in this world
 not to keep the races separate within me
 not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity
 not to justify my ethnic legitimacy
 I have the right
 to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify
 to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me

⁸⁸ The word "critical" is a recent addition in some scholarship. For an overview, see G. Reginald Daniel et al., "Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies," *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* 1.1 (2014): 6–65.

⁸⁹ Maria P. P. Root, "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," in *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier*, ed. Maria P. P. Root (London: Sage, 1996), 3.

to identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters
to identify myself differently in different situations
I have the right
to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial
to change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once
to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people
to freely choose whom I befriend and love⁹⁰

Regarding the right “to identify myself differently in different situations,” Root gives the example of a 1992 survey that asked groups of multiracial participants “about how they experienced their own identity in five different contexts”; 44-89% of participants, depending on the specific racial group, had a different identity in at least one context.⁹¹ When I speak about Timothy as Jewish in the context of his circumcision, I am not denying the existence of multiple ethnic belongings in his ancestry, but am arguing that the narrative of Acts depicts him acting out of a Jewish identity in this moment.

My articulation of Timothy’s identity through the language of CMRS differs slightly from a possible way of articulating it through the postcolonial lens of hybridity. Although Timothy has been referred to as a “hybrid” in passing, the richness of this theoretical term is not one that I see as being a concise description of his identity.⁹² Homi Bhabha introduced the concept of hybridity in 1985:

Hybridity...is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the “pure” and original identity of authority)... Those discriminated against may be instantly recognized, but they also force a re-cognition of the immediacy and articulacy of authority—a disturbing effect that is familiar in the repeated hesitancy afflicting the colonialist discourse when it contemplates its discriminated subjects: the *inscrutability* of the Chinese, the *unspeakable* rites of the Indians, the *indescribable* habits of the Hottentots. It is not that the voice of authority is at a loss for words. It is, rather, that the colonial

⁹⁰ Root, “A Bill of Rights,” 7.

⁹¹ Root, “A Bill of Rights,” 12. “Only 26% of people with mixed Japanese heritage, 11% of those with several different ethnic heritages in Hawaii, and 56% of people of mixed Hispanic heritage gave the same identification in each of the five situations posed.” Cookie White Stephan, “Mixed-Heritage Individuals: Ethnic Identity and Trait Characteristics,” in *Racially Mixed People in America*, ed. Maria P. P. Root (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992), 50–63.

⁹² Muñoz-Larrondo, *A Postcolonial Reading of the Acts of the Apostles*, 165; Keener, *Acts*, 3:2318.

discourse has reached that point when, faced with the hybridity of its objects, the *presence* of power is revealed as something other than what its rules of recognition assert.⁹³

Hybridity articulates the way that the lives of the colonized explode the limited categories that colonial discourse imposes upon them as a way to try to secure colonial power.⁹⁴ But individuals who are in between cultures, nations, races, ethnicities, religions, etc., or who have multiple such identities, are not inherently more hybrid than singularly-identifying individuals. By drawing on CMRS instead, I focus on how individuals at the intersection of multiple identity categories (here, Jewish and Greek) may express their identity differentially based on the situation. We do not need to create a single correct way of describing Timothy's ethnicity in order to understand him as acting as an ethnically Jewish person in this pericope.

The Judaism of Timothy

Jewishness/Judaism is both an ethnic and a religious identity, and scholars have usually focused on the former with regard to Timothy, but also frequently comment on the latter.⁹⁵ When

⁹³ The original may be found in Homi K. Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 154. The more commonly read version may be found in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge Classics, 1994), 159–60.

⁹⁴ In biblical studies, "hybridity" is sometimes deployed to refer to cultural mixing more generally. I read Bhabha differently; for further description of this reading, see Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 189–92. For works in biblical studies which discuss hybridity in terms of cultural mixing, see, for example, L. A. Jervis, "Reading Romans 7 in Conversation with Post-Colonial Theory: Paul's Struggle toward a Christian Identity of Hybridity," *Theoforum* 35.2 (2004): 173–79; Ronald Charles, "Hybridity and the Letter of Aristeas," *JSJ* 40.2 (2009): 242–59. For works in biblical studies which discuss hybridity in terms of dismantling false, colonial purity (the reading of Bhabha with which I agree), see, for example, John W. Marshall, "Hybridity and Reading Romans 13," *JSNT* 31.2 (2008): 157–78; Ulrike Sals, "The Hybrid Story of Balaam (Numbers 22–24): Theology for the Diaspora in the Torah," *Biblical Interpretation* 16.4 (2008): 315–35; Christopher D. Stanley, "Paul the Ethnic Hybrid?: Postcolonial Perspectives on Paul's Ethnic Categorizations," in *The Colonized Apostle: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes*, ed. Christopher D. Stanley, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 110–26; Eric D. Barreto, "Crafting Colonial Identities: Hybridity and the Roman Empire in Luke-Acts," in *An Introduction to Empire in the New Testament*, ed. Adam Winn, RBS 84 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 107–22.

⁹⁵ For the debate on whether first-century Judaism was ethnic, religious, or ethno-religious, see John J. Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

Timothy is regarded as Jewish, or even when he is regarded otherwise but his mother's Judaism is discussed, a common approach is to evaluate him and/or his mother as less Jewish than the norm because of apparently assimilated practices, namely, intermarriage and the absence of infant circumcision. It is uncommon for interpreters to see any personal expressions of Judaism in this pericope. Jennings is a rare author who understands Timothy to be expressing his devout Judaism, and my own stance will follow in his footsteps.

A number of commentators use the derogatory language of apostasy, imposing a rigid and exclusivist paradigm of religious expression on these characters. According to Bruce in his 1988 edition, "because [Timothy] was uncircumcised he was technically an apostate Jew," and for Paul to leave Timothy as he was would be "to countenance apostasy."⁹⁶ To Spencer, "[b]eing uncircumcised...brands him as a renegade or apostate in the eyes of the Jewish community."⁹⁷ Witherington understands Paul and Timothy to be warding off the perception that Christianity can lead people "into a further apostate state."⁹⁸ Jervell comments as a side note that it would be a missionary problem for Paul to be accompanied by "[e]in jüdischer Apostat."⁹⁹

Another popular framing is through notions of personal piety and practice. Barclay classifies Timothy and his mother as highly assimilated, commenting that their behavior is "to the detriment of Jewish observance" and that "customs of the family departed from Judaism."¹⁰⁰ Haenchen regards the intermarriage of Timothy's parents as indicating a home environment of "not a devout but rather a lax Judaism."¹⁰¹ Dunn considers the possibility that Timothy's "mother had ceased to practise as a Jew" as an explanation for Timothy's uncircumcision, and he

⁹⁶ Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised Edition*, 304.

⁹⁷ Spencer, *Acts*, 159.

⁹⁸ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 475.

⁹⁹ "A Jewish apostate." Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 412.

¹⁰⁰ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 324.

¹⁰¹ Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 478. Originally, "nicht ein frommes, sondern ein laxes Judentum": Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 419.

supposes that “Timothy presumably did not attend the synagogue,” although “conceivably his parents were wealthy enough for his mother to have some Torah scrolls of her own.”¹⁰²

Witherington characterizes Timothy’s mother as not being “a strict Jewess.”¹⁰³ In Gilbert’s 2011 edition of his annotations, he states that “because of [Timothy’s] mixed heritage he was not raised as a Jew.”¹⁰⁴ Wall communicates an ambivalent message about Timothy’s personal observance: on the one hand, “Moses was preached to him from his ‘earliest times’ every sabbath,” but on the other hand, “Timothy’s Jewish identity has not been cultivated at home.”¹⁰⁵

A final negative paradigm draws on the more social matter of legitimacy.¹⁰⁶ In Bruce’s 1955 edition of his commentary, he refers to Timothy’s circumcision as a change that “in Jewish eyes, legitimized him.”¹⁰⁷ For Barrett, the most likely purpose of Timothy’s circumcision (if not unhistorical) would be in colloquial terms “to ‘make an honest Jew of him.’”¹⁰⁸ Smith reads the circumcision of Timothy as a “burden of respectability” forced upon him by Paul.¹⁰⁹

Rarely, a commentator makes a positive remark about Timothy’s religiosity based on the testimony of 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:15.¹¹⁰ Schmithals refers to the environment of his upbringing as one of “jüdischer Frömmigkeit.”¹¹¹ Johnson speaks of Timothy’s mother’s “sincere faith” influencing his childhood.¹¹² Levinskaya reconstructs “that his mother brought

¹⁰² Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 216.

¹⁰³ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 474.

¹⁰⁴ Gilbert, “The Acts of the Apostles,” (ed. Levine and Brettler), 230.

¹⁰⁵ Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” 226.

¹⁰⁶ I do not mean illegitimacy in the sense of unauthorized progeny, for which, see Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 155.

¹⁰⁷ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 322.

¹⁰⁸ Barrett, *Acts 15-28*, 762; Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 245.

¹⁰⁹ Smith, “Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race,” 2.

¹¹⁰ It is very common for these verses to be cited generally, and in this paragraph I only specify when they are interpreted to make a comment on Timothy’s religiosity. Cohen is a rare dissenting voice who parenthetically argues that these verses do not imply either Timothy’s or his mother’s Jewishness: Cohen, “Was Timothy Jewish?,” 268.

¹¹¹ “Jewish devotion.” Schmithals, *Die Apostelgeschichte Des Lukas*, 146.

¹¹² Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 283.

him up as a Jew and did not break with the Jewish community after her marriage.”¹¹³ Keener supposes that Timothy’s mother “may have been very pious” and that her husband was the reason behind her “inability to have [Timothy] circumcised.”¹¹⁴ He speaks about Timothy being raised with “Jewish faith (or at least instruction).”¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, even in these cases, commentators do not develop how Timothy’s description in Acts could amplify his characterization in the epistles, rather than contradict it.

The interpreter whose approach I find the most fruitful is Willie James Jennings, who in 2017 wrote about Timothy as “the mulatto child,” drawing on the deliberate “anachronism of...interraciality.”¹¹⁶ He focuses acutely and positively on Timothy’s faith as a Jewish Christian and how his circumcision is a religious expression.

Commentators argue endlessly over Paul’s actions with Timothy here, but what if we read this text from the sight lines of Timothy? He is circumcised, his body made acceptable to Jews. It was indeed Paul’s design, but it was also Timothy’s choice. It was the choice of a disciple of Jesus who, with Paul, was following the Spirit. This is the way of in-between flesh, of mulatto existence. Timothy, through his flesh, pressed deeply into Jewish flesh not as an evangelistic ploy or as acquiescence to assimilation, but out of his commitment to his people, that is, one of his peoples.¹¹⁷

As Jennings points out, it is a peculiarity of the history of interpretation that Timothy’s circumcision has been seen as reflecting the Judaism of Paul, but not the Judaism of Timothy. Countering this history, Jennings regards Timothy’s circumcision as a voluntary expression of his Judaism. His mixed family and uncircumcised past are no impediment to his genuine Jewish spirituality.

¹¹³ Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 15.

¹¹⁴ Keener, *Acts*, 3:2316.

¹¹⁵ Keener, *Acts*, 3:2316, cf. 2321.

¹¹⁶ Jennings, *Acts*, 152.

¹¹⁷ Jennings, *Acts*, 154.

I understand Timothy as not only ethnically Jewish, but also as an active practitioner of Judaism in a way that is legible to his surrounding community as well. Timothy's action in this passage, becoming circumcised, should factor into how we understand his character. This is a bodily transformation that is semi-permanent (barring epispasm or infibulation) and that is a significant marker of his Judaism. Circumcision impacts how he is publicly perceived as well as how he perceives himself. Whereas his earlier life contains elements typically coded as assimilated, this passage contains an action that would be commonly regarded as traditional, and we need to account for both of these dimensions of his character.

There is narrative evidence that Timothy expressed his religiosity in a way that was acceptable to many others around him. Contrary to interpreters' claims that Timothy was an apostate who was assessed negatively by Jews, Acts specifically represents Timothy as being in good standing in his community. In Acts 16:2, we hear that Timothy "approved of by the testimony of the believers in Lystra and Iconium" (ἐμαρτυρεῖτο ὑπὸ τῶν ἐν Λύστροις καὶ Ἰκονίῳ ἀδελφῶν). From the previous narrative, we know that the Christian community in Iconium was composed of both Jews and Greeks, because Paul and Barnabas "as usual went into the synagogue of the Jews and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed" (κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ εἰσελθεῖν αὐτοὺς εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν τῶν Ἰουδαίων καὶ λαλῆσαι οὕτως ὥστε πιστεῦσαι Ἰουδαίων τε καὶ Ἑλλήνων πολὺ πλῆθος, 14:1). The subsequent upheaval against them in Iconium was started by Jews but carried out equally by Jews and gentiles (14:2, 5), leaving a remaining community of the Way in Iconium that presumably continued to be heterogenous as it developed. The audience would therefore understand Timothy as being in good standing with Jewish Christians, as well as gentile Christians. Among at least this local and

religiously specific set of Jews, there was no communal rejection of Timothy's mixed and uncircumcised presence among them.

Furthermore, the unqualified positive attestation to Timothy's faith and his family's faith in 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:15 suggest that early Christian memory conceived of Timothy in such terms. These verses describe Timothy, his mother, and his grandmother as all having a "genuine faith" (ἀνυποκρίτου πίστεως, 1:5), and Timothy as having "known the sacred writings from infancy" (ἀπὸ βρέφους [τὰ] ἱερὰ γράμματα οἶδας, 3:15). It is impossible for us to know whether the audience of Acts would have known 2 Timothy, or vice versa, and it is entirely possible that two separate memories of Timothy circulated that had very little to do with each other. However, it is also possible that the depiction of Timothy in Acts (as "assimilated," because he was born from a mixed marriage and because he was uncircumcised until adulthood) was perfectly coherent in the minds of ancient audiences with the depiction of Timothy in 2 Timothy (as "traditional," because he came from a line of believers and because he was knowledgeable of the scriptures). As an additional caveat, the emphasis in 2 Timothy is on Timothy's piety "for salvation through the faith that is in Christ Jesus" (εἰς σωτηρίαν διὰ πίστεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, 3:15). Nevertheless, the reference to "the sacred writings" reminds us that Judaism and Christianity were not two discrete religious phenomena at this time. The support of 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:15, rather than being any kind of firm literary or historical evidence, are reminders to us as modern readers that it may not be so unfathomable that the Timothy we see in Acts could be read as deeply Jewish.

Both within the narrative of Acts and within the broader corpus of New Testament writings, the importance of Timothy and his family are visible, although it is difficult to know for certain whether their prominence was due to a high-class background. Linda M. Maloney and

Ivoni Richter Reimer propose that it is possible to read Timothy's mother as "not just a random 'Jewish woman who was a believer,'" but also "the head of the household of the Way in Lystra, having assumed leadership there after Paul and Barnabas's departure."¹¹⁸ In light of the fact that in Acts Timothy is positively spoken of by local followers of the Way and Timothy's family is widely known in the regional diaspora, combined with the absence of Timothy's father, Maloney and Reimer propose that Timothy's mother had the economic means to house the community of the Way in her city, as well as corresponding social standing in the city. Maloney and Reimer also reconstruct the audience of Acts as already extremely familiar with the ministry of Timothy in association with Paul: "Timothy is probably the most prominent figure, next to Paul, in the genuine Pauline letters and is the supposed addressee of two pseudonymous ones."¹¹⁹ Although Timothy appears to many readers today as an ambiguous figure whose identity is challenging to parse, the evidence internal to Acts and external in broader early Christian literature suggests that Timothy and his family were highly respected, had social power and standing in their communities, and were able to present themselves and be perceived with sufficient legibility to be broadly accepted. It is possible either that Timothy's family's high status allowed them to take some liberties in terms of circumcision status and intermarriage while still being prominent and respected, or that diversity in circumcision and marriage was within the range of normal for the Jewish diaspora in Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium.

Outside of the New Testament, there is some contextual, historical evidence that intermarriage and uncircumcision would not necessarily be disqualifications from faithful Judaism. I disagree with those who assume one variety of Judaism as the standard for all others, and who see deviations from that norm as repudiations of Jewish identity. There were some Jews

¹¹⁸ Maloney and Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 211.

¹¹⁹ Maloney and Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 208.

in the Second Temple period who saw intermarriage and uncircumcision as compatible with their faith. First, although it was in this period that a blanket ban on intermarriage developed in dominant discourse, we hear some opponents of intermarriage repeating the arguments of the practice's supporters. Second, there were active debates about the possibility of some forms of intermarriage, just as there were such debates about the possibility of some forms of gentile conversion.

Both Josephus and Philo advocate against intermarriage, but they nevertheless provide insight into the thought processes of Jewish people who nevertheless did proceed with marriages with non-Jewish spouses.¹²⁰ Josephus dramatizes the narrative of Numbers 25 by including a speech by Zambrias (Zimri) in defense of intermarriage:

πολὺ δ' ἂν δικαιότερον αὐτὸς τιμωρίαν ὑπομένοις τὰ παρ' ἐκάστοις ὁμολογούμενα καλῶς ἔχειν ἀφανίσαι προηρημένος καὶ κατὰ τῆς ἀπάντων δόξης ἰσχυρὰν τὴν σεαυτοῦ κατεσκευακὼς ἀτοπίαν· ... γύναιόν τε ξενικόν, ὡς φῆς, ἦγμαι· παρ' ἑμαυτοῦ γὰρ ἀκούσῃ τὰς ἐμὰς πράξεις ὡς παρὰ ἐλευθέρου, καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲ λαθεῖν προεθέμην· ... χαρεῖν τ' ἂν οὐδεὶς κυριώτερον αὐτὸν περὶ ὧν πράττοιμι γνώμης τῆς ἐμῆς ἀποφαινόμενος.

But you yourself would endure punishment much more justly, having chosen to erase the things that all have agreed to be good... And I have taken for myself, as you say, a “foreign” wife. For you will hear my deeds told by me as by a free person, and I did not intend to hide them... And may anyone regret it who claims himself to have more power over what I may do than my own judgement (*Ant.* 4.147-49)

Although Josephus does not agree with this character's speech, Zambrias represents a view that intermarriage can be openly practiced, is common throughout the broader society, and can be the result of rational choice rather than a lapse in self-control. He is critical of the dominant view, which stigmatizes foreignness and aims to control others' actions. Similarly, Philo vividly describes the worry felt by Jewish parents that their children may intermarry and therefore neglect the customs that their families have worked so hard to instill in them (*Spec. Laws* 3.5.29).

¹²⁰ Shaye J. D. Cohen, “From the Bible to the Talmud: The Prohibition of Intermarriage,” *HAR* 7 (1983): 23.

Harry Austryn Wolfson comments regarding this passage that intermarriage was not a legally more serious matter than the breach of other commandments, but nevertheless the anxiety that arose in Alexandrian Judaism about intermarriage likely reflects a communal concern that intermarriage would be “the beginning of the breaking away of the social barriers between Jew and non-Jew which ultimately led to a complete abandonment of Judaism.”¹²¹ That is to say, in Philo’s context, it seems that intermarriage did not cause a member of the community to be excluded, but rather sparked fear that the newly wedded individual would ultimately drift away in their practices and their social attachments.

In another set of arguments about intermarriage, some communities concluded that marriage with a proselyte was permissible because conversion brought a person fully into the community. As Matthew Thiessen has demonstrated, an important minority of texts defined Jewish identity as genealogically determined and unable to be adopted, even though most Jewish sources allowed for the possibility of conversion through rites like circumcision and changes of behavior, some texts.¹²² Not all groups that accepted conversion, however, also accepted intermarriage, and William Loader has categorized which texts in the Second Temple period nevertheless opposed all intermarriage and which texts accepted it on the condition of conversion.¹²³ The mixed marriage of Joseph and Aseneth is a prominent example of a widely accepted union; Aseneth’s conversion was the focus in *Joseph and Aseneth*, and their sons Ephraim and Manasseh were positively allegorized by Philo as symbols of memory and even as

¹²¹ Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, 4th ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 1:74.

¹²² For Thiessen, sources for the latter view include *Jubilees*, the *Animal Apocalypse*, 1 Esdras, attitudes towards the Herods as Idumeans, and even Luke-Acts itself. Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*.

¹²³ William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 81–91.

connected to commemorative Passover sacrifices.¹²⁴ Although Timothy's positionality is different because his father does not appear to have been a proselyte, there was room for a high regard for mixed offspring even within otherwise strict preferences for endogamy.

We see similar types of evidence concerning circumcision. Philo disagrees with those who allegorically interpret the laws concerning the Sabbath, feasts, and circumcision and who thus do not adhere to them literally, but he does characterize them as using defined hermeneutical principles.

Εἰσὶ γάρ τινες οἱ τοὺς ῥητοὺς νόμους σύμβολα νοητῶν πραγμάτων ὑπολαμβάνοντες τὰ μὲν ἄγαν ἡκρίβωσαν, τῶν δὲ ῥαθύμως ὀλιγόρησαν· ... μηδ' ὅτι τὸ περιτέμνεσθαι ἡδονῆς καὶ παθῶν πάντων ἐκτομὴν καὶ δόξης ἀναίρεσιν ἀσεβοῦς ἐμφαίνει, καθ' ἣν ὑπέλαβεν ὁ νοῦς ἰκανὸς εἶναι γεννᾶν δι' ἑαυτοῦ, ἀνέλωμεν τὸν ἐπὶ τῇ περιτομῇ τεθέντα νόμον·

For there are some who, when interpreting the literal laws as symbols of matters perceptible to the mind, are too exacting about some things, but indifferently think little of others... But just because becoming circumcised manifests the excision of pleasure and of all passions and the destruction of ungodly glory, according to which the mind supposed itself sufficient for procreating by itself, let us not abolish the law established for circumcising. (*Migration* 89, 92)

Although Philo represents these individuals as mistaken, he still depicts them as approaching the commandment for circumcision seriousness and care and as understanding themselves to be acting appropriately. In addition to not circumcising at all, some Jews reversed their circumcision through epispasm, or temporarily hid it through infibulation.¹²⁵ When Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:18 urges his listeners not to perform epispasm upon themselves, it is not because of the necessity of circumcised status, but because one should remain in one's called state when it comes to such indifferent matters. Although certainly some Jewish people may have intermarried and not circumcised out of a sense of a fading attachment to their ethno-religious

¹²⁴ Philo, *Sobriety* 28; *Alleg. Interp.* 3.94. Michael Gabizon, "Mixed Offspring in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Period" (McMaster University, PhD, 2022), 241–43.

¹²⁵ Robert G. Hall, "Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writings," *JSP* 2 (1988): 71–86; Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 139–44.

identity, others had legible reasons for engaging in these practices while being strongly Jewish practitioners of their faith.

The Motives for Timothy's Circumcision

When Acts narrates the circumcision of Timothy, the subject of the verb is implicitly Paul, carried over from the previous phrase: λαβὼν περιέτεμεν αὐτὸν (“taking him, he circumcised him,” 16:3). With no explicit narration of an action by Timothy, and with interpreters not typically regarding Timothy as religiously shaped by his circumcision, Timothy is therefore rarely attributed motives for becoming circumcised. Occasionally, a commentator claims that Timothy voluntarily followed Paul’s idea for him to be circumcised, or alternatively that Timothy was coerced into going along with it. But more often, the major topic discussed in interpretation of the passage is what Paul’s motives were for circumcising Timothy.

By far the most common explanation of Paul’s behavior today is that he accommodated Jewish sensibilities so that they would be more receptive to the gospel. This interpretation goes back to the patristic and medieval periods. As noted above, Jerome believes Paul to have been “compelled to circumcise [Timothy] against [his] own opinion” (*contra sententiam tuam circumcidere cogeris*), just as Peter was made “by fear” (*propter metum*) to do when he withdrew from eating with gentiles.¹²⁶ In the 16th century, Erasmus argued that Paul’s accommodation was only necessary because of “how obstinate they were,” i.e., all Jews.¹²⁷ Both Jerome and Erasmus speak frankly and make clear the danger of anti-Judaism in this reading. Commentators do not deploy such offensive language today—of compulsion, fear, and obstinacy—but the basic

¹²⁶ Augustine, *Epist.* 75.9 (CSEL 34/2) = Jerome, *Epist.* 112.9 (CSEL 55).

¹²⁷ Robert D. Sider, ed., *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. John J. Bateman (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 50:101; Esther Chung-Kim and Todd R Hains, eds., *Acts*, vol. 6 of *Reformation Commentary on Scripture: New Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 223.

argument remains the same. This explanation is offered by dozens of modern interpreters.¹²⁸

Commentators sometimes soften the implications of Paul's action by claiming that it was not a religious accommodation, but only for "expediency" and "prudential considerations."¹²⁹

Commentators also explain that Paul was following his missionary principle of "becoming like a Jew to Jews" (cf. 1 Cor 9:20).¹³⁰ In this explanation, Paul's behavior is distanced from being a genuine expression of Judaism and is made to adhere to evangelistic, Christian goals.

A second approach is to understand Paul as transforming Timothy's identity so that he would become Jewish. Baur presents this conclusion about the character Paul, but he therefore regards the narrative as unhistorical because it conflicts so strongly with Paul's convictions as expressed in his letters, and therefore because such an action would open up Paul to charges of "want of principle, and inconsequence of reasoning."¹³¹ Barrett similarly doubts the historicity of this event, but if pressed to accept it, suggests that Paul was resolving Timothy's ambiguous

¹²⁸ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 322; Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised Edition*, 304; Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 419–23; Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 155; Schmithals, *Die Apostelgeschichte Des Lukas*, 146; Kurz, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 71; Williams, *Acts*, 265; Cohen, "Was Timothy Jewish?," 254; Lüdemann, *Das Frühe Christentum*, 183; William H. Willimon, *Acts*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 133; González, *Hechos*, 233; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 284; Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 216; Horn, "Der Verzicht Auf Die Beschneidung," 488; Spencer, *Acts*, 158–59; Talbert, *Reading Acts*, 146; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 476–77; Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 576; Rosemary M. Dowsett, "Acts of the Apostles," in *The IVP Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Catherine Clark Kroeger and Mary J. Evans (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 620; Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 232; Paul Mumo Kisau, "Acts of the Apostles," in *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 1354; Barreto, *Ethnic Negotiations*, 116; Garroway, "Pharisee Heresey," 32–33; Keener, *Acts*, 3:2320; Craig S. Keener, *Acts*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 377, 379; Amy-Jill Levine, "Luke and the Jewish Religion," *Int* 68.4 (2014): 396; Michal Beth Dinkler, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament*, ed. Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sánchez (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 351; Babu Immanuel Venkataraman, "Acts," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. Brian Wintle (Rajasthan: Open Door Publications, 2015), 1491; Babu Immanuel, *Acts of the Apostles: An Exegetical and Contextual Commentary*, India Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 173–74; Smith, "Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race," 7; Jennings, *Acts*, 155; Schmithals, *Die Apostelgeschichte Des Lukas*.

¹²⁹ For example, see Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 322; Williams, *Acts*, 265; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 284.

¹³⁰ For example, see Kurz, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 71; Lüdemann, *Das Frühe Christentum*, 183.

¹³¹ Baur, *Paul*, 1:130.

half-status so that he became completely Jewish.¹³² Daube views Timothy as a “proselyte,” because “if his mission was to have any chance with [the Jews of the region], he had to be incorporated by circumcision.”¹³³ For another set of thinkers, it is essential to Luke’s literary structure that Timothy be Jewish.¹³⁴ As Conzelmann explains it, “Timothy’s circumcision is required because of the schematic portrayal of Paul’s mission in Acts, which requires that Paul always go first to the synagogue. For that reason he must be accompanied by Jewish associates.”¹³⁵ Liew observes that gentile Christians have a “glass ceiling” in Acts that prevents them from full engagement in Christian ministry, hence the need for Timothy to be circumcised.¹³⁶ Whether it was Paul or Luke providing the impetus, in these readings Timothy becomes Jewish because someone else wants him to be.

Finally, another popular explanation is that Paul wanted to convey the message that it was still appropriate or necessary for Jewish Christians like Timothy to follow Jewish law. In the patristic period, Augustine argued that for Jews to observe the law was neither good nor bad but “indifferent” (*indifferens*), although only in the transitional apostolic age and not in Augustine’s own time.¹³⁷ Therefore, Paul circumcised Timothy so that “Jews and especially [Timothy’s] maternal relatives” (*Iudaeis et maxime cognationi maternae*) would not think that Paul was encouraging “gentile believers in Christ to scorn circumcision just as idolatry was scorned” (*qui ex gentibus in Christum crediderent, detestari circumcisionem, sicut idolatria detestanda est*).¹³⁸

¹³² Barrett, *Acts 15-28*, 762; Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 245.

¹³³ Daube, *Ancient Jewish Law*, 25.

¹³⁴ Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 89; Lüdemann, *Das Frühe Christentum*, 180; Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 412–13.

¹³⁵ Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp and Christopher R. Matthews, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 125; Conzelmann, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 89.

¹³⁶ Liew, “Acts,” 422.

¹³⁷ Augustine, *Epist.* 82. 13 (CSEL 3412) = Jerome, *Epist.* 116, 13 (CSEL 55).

¹³⁸ Augustine, *Epist.* 82. 12 (CSEL 3412) = Jerome, *Epist.* 116, 12 (CSEL 55).

Calvin echoes this sentiment, “that [circumcision] was left neutral and in the freedom of the godly, in so far as it was not contrary to the gospel,” but that circumcision does not any longer “have a place among the Jews.”¹³⁹ This perspective is pointedly derogatory towards contemporary Jews, representing their practices as outmoded and superseded. The temporal components of this argument would not be accepted today; however, several modern commentators take the similar view that carrying out Jewish law is permissible and accepted in the context of Acts.¹⁴⁰ The way that Wall expresses this position is that Paul is “keeping the Jewish heritage of Christian faith alive and well.”¹⁴¹ This perspective views Paul’s role as encouraging the maintenance of Jewish practices that are important to Jewish Christians. Alternatively, a less common position today is that Paul in fact required circumcision.¹⁴² As Bryan articulates it, this perspective states that “Paul...himself [did] require circumcision...*if there were the slightest evidence of Jewish connection.*”¹⁴³ According to these interpreters, Paul’s own faithfulness to Jewish law results in him enforcing others’ adherence to Jewish law.

As I assess each of these readings of Paul’s behavior, I am attentive to what each communicates about the Judaism of the surrounding community, of Paul, and of Timothy, and what each communicates about the power dynamics present in the relationships described. In the first explanation of Paul’s behavior, Timothy’s bodily integrity and his enactment of Jewish mores are subsumed underneath Paul’s goal of evangelistic success and the community’s judgment of his embodiment. Smith gives this reading of the passage only to critique the

¹³⁹ D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance, eds., *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 7:63–64; Chung-Kim and Hains, *Acts*, 223.

¹⁴⁰ Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in Its Diaspora Setting*, 15; Horn, “Der Verzicht Auf Die Beschneidung,” 487–88; Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” 224–26.

¹⁴¹ Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” 226.

¹⁴² Lake and Cadbury, *Acts of the Apostles*, 184; Bryan, “A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3,” 294; Spencer, *Acts*, 159; Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 121; Carl R. Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 315; Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 412.

¹⁴³ Bryan, “A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3,” 294. Emphasis original.

message that the passage therefore conveys, and I agree wholeheartedly with her warnings of the danger of valorizing a Paul who acts in this way: “Paul...succumbs to and imposes the burden of respectability on Timothy when he has him circumcised after the Jerusalem Council had ruled...that the burden of circumcision should not be hoisted on the backs of Gentile believers.”¹⁴⁴ If we adhere to this first explanation, I concur with Smith that we would be obliged to negatively assess the dynamics narrated here. But I am interested in exploring other readings that have the potential for a more nuanced understanding of the event. The second explanation is unconvincing to me for the simple reason that I understand Timothy as already being Jewish, as described above. In the third explanation, it is Paul’s own respect for Jewish law that motivates his action towards Timothy. The angle that Paul requires others to adhere to Jewish law carries problematic power dynamics as described above, but the angle that Paul encourages it does not necessitate coercion. If we open ourselves to the idea that Jewish law could be actively desired, we can nuance the decision-making that takes place in this pericope.

By reading this passage as depicting Paul’s openness towards the continuation of Jewish practices, there is new space for the notion that Timothy also felt and expressed his own perspective on participating in this rite. While Timothy is not given those motives explicitly in Acts, neither is Paul. But Acts does open the pericope with an extended statement of Timothy’s family, ethno-religious background, and present spiritual community. After Paul invites Timothy to mission, neither of them is explicitly named, even as Paul is the subject of the verb for the circumcision; after all, Timothy would have been unlikely to circumcise himself. The literary presentation of the text encourages the audience to pay attention to Timothy at least as much as

¹⁴⁴ Smith, “Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race,” 2. My citation of Smith elides her description of Paul as “a member of the dominant race,” a characterization that I am uneasy with. It is outside the scope of the present project to comment at greater length on this issue.

the audience pays attention to Paul. Although the majority of commentators do not speak either way on Timothy's viewpoint, eliding him from view, there are a handful of commentators who explicitly speak to this issue. As I survey the options they propose, I move along a spectrum from Timothy being completely unwilling to completely willing, with many shades of variation in between.

Smith argues most strongly that Timothy has been compelled to be circumcised. It is not that she proposes that Paul forcibly circumcised Timothy with physical violence, but rather that Timothy was offered conditional access to greater power if he acquiesced to circumcision:

it had not occurred to Timothy's believing mother or to Timothy himself that he should submit to circumcision. One can be compelled to do something one would not ordinarily do in order to fit in or to obtain the benefits, privileges, or position that others enjoy... Circumcision becomes an option when Timothy is offered the opportunity and privilege of becoming one of Paul's co-laborers.¹⁴⁵

Smith makes the important point that something has changed for Timothy, since until this moment he had not chosen to be circumcised. Further below, in chapter 6, I consider what narrative factors are present that might have prompted this change, other than Paul's inferred coercion. There are additional commentators who imply that Timothy was not interested in becoming circumcised until Paul made him be circumcised, but do not discuss their opinion at any length. Willimon speaks offhand about Paul "insisting on the circumcision of Timothy," but he moves on quickly from the point.¹⁴⁶

Among more intermediate views, Haenchen posits a narratively passive Timothy: "It makes no difference to Luke how Timothy himself felt about the matter. Luke is only concerned about the acts of Paul. To be sure he will have assumed that Timothy did not oppose Paul's

¹⁴⁵ Smith, "Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race," 4.

¹⁴⁶ Willimon, *Acts*, 133.

will.”¹⁴⁷ Fitzmyer echoes, but does not agree with, an argument being circulated about Timothy’s voluntary circumcision: the argument is that Titus in Galatians 2:3 “was not compelled” to be circumcised, potentially meaning “that Titus voluntarily agreed to be circumcised.”¹⁴⁸ Although Fitzmyer does not find this convincing and sees it as a harmonization of Paul and Acts, one might pick up this logic to see a pattern of Paul interacting with people who consented to be circumcised.

Lastly, as has been discussed already, Jennings is an advocate of the idea that Timothy chose his circumcision: “It was indeed Paul’s design, but it was also Timothy’s choice.”¹⁴⁹ Jennings does not hold Timothy’s agency to the standard of being completely uninfluenced by people around him. Another perspective is offered by Kisau, who tweaks the standard missionary explanation of this pericope: “Timothy himself demonstrates his commitment to mission by his willingness to submit to this ritual in order to reach others.”¹⁵⁰ Instead of Paul being driven by evangelistic reasons, it is Timothy who has this reasoning. Witherington similarly modifies the conventional use of 1 Corinthians 9:20. Instead of stating that Paul was following this principle, he speaks of Paul “encourag[ing] other Christians with some Jewish heritage to do the same, as a missionary tactic.”¹⁵¹ Again, we hear the evangelistic motive coming from Timothy instead of from Paul. As will be demonstrated in the remainder of this dissertation, I find myself among Jennings, Kisau, and Witherington in terms of seeing Timothy as a joyfully consenting participant in circumcision, after analyzing how Luke depicts the agency of people who are

¹⁴⁷ Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles*, 479; Haenchen, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 419.

¹⁴⁸ Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 575.

¹⁴⁹ Jennings, *Acts*, 154.

¹⁵⁰ Kisau, “Acts of the Apostles,” 1354.

¹⁵¹ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 476–77.

circumcised in chapter 5, and after proposing a narratively salient reason for Timothy to come to such a decision in chapter 6.

As a final note, seeing Timothy's agency in this passage is not necessarily a moral judgment of the act. We may approve of or disagree with Timothy's decision-making, just as much as we may make such assessments of Paul, but either result would bring the character of Timothy more clearly into view as we read the text.

Conclusion

In my discussion of past biblical scholarship on Acts 16:1-5, I both locate myself within long-standing debates and push the guild to consider topics that have been underexplored. First, I situate Timothy as Jewish, an ethnic identity that can coexist with other ethnic identities at the same time. Second, I also situate Timothy as Jewish in the sense of being an active religious participant within Judaism. Most scholars have assumed that, because of the intermarriage in Timothy's family and the uncircumcision in Timothy's past, Timothy and his mother must be assimilated and thus non-normative in their Jewish practice. I push back against this assumption, viewing intermarriage and lack of circumcision as no disqualifiers to authentic Judaism, and I propose instead that Timothy expressed his Judaism in ways that were acceptable to his community even prior to his circumcision. Timothy's circumcision can be an expression of his Judaism without his uncircumcision having been a disavowal of it. Third, I view Paul's actions in this passage as dialogical rather than coercive. I open up space for Timothy to also have had reasons for pursuing circumcision and to have navigated this choice as an embedded person within his relationships with Paul, his mother, his neighbors, his local community of both Jews and gentiles following the Way, wider Christian leadership, and the broader world as he begins

his journey around the Mediterranean. In the chapters that follow, I dive more deeply into why it has so often been unthinkable that Timothy could have chosen circumcision, and I propose a paradigm for discussing the ways that traditions are chosen.

Chapter 3: South Asian Feminist Perspectives on Agency

Introduction

Why is the issue of choice so charged? How can we create an account of someone choosing a tradition, while avoiding the pitfalls of hegemonic ideology? Where do distinctive cultural practices fit within a diverse community? How can we better understand highly stigmatized customs embedded within power dynamics? I wrestle with these large questions as I seek to answer: if Timothy did choose his circumcision, why?

To provide the methodology for this project, I draw on histories, autobiographical writings, sociological studies, and postcolonial theory from South Asian authors.¹⁵² In particular, I focus on South Asian feminist writings that express the profound realities, critiques, and alternatives that emerge at the intersection of the issues of colonialism, race, gender, sexuality, class, and globalization. Because contemporary issues are shaping the heuristic categories that scholars bring to bear on ancient Judaism, this contemporary material from South Asia and the South Asian diaspora forces us to reconsider colonial, Orientalizing misconceptions. In addition, because our evidence for Second Temple Judaism is so fragmentary and requires reconstruction in order to be viewed as a whole, the diversity of the South Asia population helps us see the historical possibilities for the diversity of the ancient Jewish population.

First, I describe the sense in which the category “South Asian” is important for my interpretation of this passage. I intentionally carry out an analysis that draws from experiences across the whole region of South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, across nationalities and religions especially, rather than only focusing on India and on Hinduism, which are dominant in

¹⁵² I engage only with English-language writing, as I do not have native or academic proficiency in any languages of South Asian origin.

the global imagination of South Asia. I join biblical interpreters including Ranjini Rebera and Yousaf Sadiq by using this coalitional naming and analysis in my work.

Next, I offer a rationale for using material from South Asia to inform our study of Second Temple Judaism. First, the uniting framework of Orientalism has discursively controlled Western views of both South Asia and Judaism, with slight differences in the precise articulations of the stereotypes of each group. Second, some biblical scholars have begun to draw upon the concept of Orientalism and on South Asian theory to better understand and describe ancient Jewish realities.

Finally, I lay out in detail which specific ideas from South Asian feminist theory I am applying to my reading of the circumcision of Timothy. (1) South Asian feminists have critiqued the way that Orientalism depicts South Asian practices as inherently more forced and antiquated. As an example, I describe South Asian feminist responses to the Western denunciation of arranged marriage. This South Asian critique of Orientalist perspectives inform chapter 4, where I analyze and critique the modern Western Orientalist discourse on ancient and modern circumcision. (2) When we are discussing cultural practices that are inevitably entangled with multiple modes of structural inequities, we require a robust framework for agency. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critiques the imperialist mode of agency and the nativist mode of agency, and Saba Mahmood critiques the liberal feminist mode of agency. While Spivak does not believe that an abstract formula for discovering agency can exist, Mahmood proposes a discursive mode for understanding agency, a promising paradigm within which I am able to describe the agency around circumcision within Luke-Acts in chapter 5. (3) White and South Asian are not the only two categories that bear upon South Asians in diaspora; being part of a coalitional group with other people of color is also an option. Likewise, Timothy's circumcision takes place not only

between Hellenism and Judaism, but also within the multi-ethnic coalition of the Way. In chapter 6, I propose that Timothy's circumcision is most legible within a reading of the Lukan Way as a culturally specific coalition that centers Judaism and holds alliance between multiple ethno-religious groups. (4) Both Jewish feminism and South Asian feminism contest internal patriarchy and external ethnocentric Orientalism simultaneously. These thinkers caution us not to assume that the gender dynamics surrounding ancient Jewish circumcision were static and conservative, but instead urge us to investigate them with attention to changing contingent factors, and by extension not to import anti-Jewish essentialism into our readings. In chapter 7, I place Timothy's circumcision in the first-century context of competing visions of the self-controlled male body, and I propose that the Way legitimizes multiple cultural modes of embodiment as compatible with sexual propriety. Furthermore, when Paul circumcises Timothy, I see Paul playing a gender-neutral role in this joyful, communal event.

South Asian Biblical Interpretation

The region of South Asia is the home of nearly two billion people, and tens of millions of South Asians live in diaspora. The South Asian population is extraordinarily diverse in languages, religions, and political structures. The exact boundaries of the region are debated, but the term typically includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.¹⁵³ India is by far the largest country and the best-known in the West, and the coalitional term South Asian has made an effort since the late 1980s to displace the political and discursive hegemony of India.¹⁵⁴ As Sheela Bhatt, a South Asian woman in diaspora, explains:

¹⁵³ This is the definition held by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). For more, see, Karen Isaksen Leonard, *The South Asian Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 1–2, 4.

¹⁵⁴ Monisha Das Gupta, "What Is Indian About You?": A Gendered, Transnational Approach to Ethnicity," *Gender & Society* 11.5 (1997): 590.

Many of the women that I am closest to now have, like me, spent very little time with South Asian Americans—the most visible of whom are part of the conservative Indian American community. (Because my women friends were not just from India, I began to realize the exclusionary qualities of the term “Indian American.” This compelled me to consciously redefine myself and my community as South Asian.¹⁵⁵

Bhatt’s relationships with women of a variety of nationalities prompts her to define her own identity in terms that include them all within the broader label of South Asian. Prema Kurien has found that the South Asian identity in the U.S. diaspora signals a “secular, multi-religious, and multi-cultural” vision of belonging, in contrast to Indic or Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) identities.¹⁵⁶ However, the term South Asian can also perpetuate those very exclusions if it merely gestures towards the plurality of South Asia while in fact replicating only the centrality of India. Naheed Islam is also a South Asian woman in diaspora, but Bangladeshi rather than Indian, and she contests her own erasure under this umbrella:

South Asian is a category fast catching on in academic and literary arenas. However, some of us have remained invisible in the new name, devoured by the multicultural zeal... why would I be South Asian when I could be Bangladeshi?... who is making this new box for me in the governmental mis-interest in my racial and ethnic naming? Who does it make visible and who does it negate?... If Indian Americans want to speak of India they should do so, rather than presenting themselves as legitimately speaking for our collective interests and experiences.¹⁵⁷

Islam’s comments highlight the need for language to be specific when appropriate, and she importantly cautions against replicating preexisting power dynamics in efforts to be more coalitional. As I incorporate South Asian histories, experiences, and theories into my analysis, I aim to robustly represent not only Indians and Hindus, but also Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, and Muslims, not as incidental to my project but as central to it.

¹⁵⁵ Sheela Bhatt, “To Motiba and Grandma,” in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), 318.

¹⁵⁶ Prema Kurien, “To Be or Not to Be South Asian: Contemporary Indian American Politics,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.3 (2003): 263.

¹⁵⁷ Naheed Islam, “In The Belly Of The Multicultural Beast I Am Named South Asian,” in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), 242–43.

In biblical interpretation, it is relatively rare for scholars to use the coalitional term “South Asian” to describe their hermeneutics. Many biblical interpreters organize their work within the category of postcolonial instead. R. S. Sugirtharajah refers to his work as postcolonial, befitting the situation in which he was one of the originators of postcolonial methodology in religion. Raj Nadella also typically speaks of his scholarship as postcolonial, although in one recent chapter he identifies as “Asian American,” “South Asian,” and most repeatedly “Indian American.”¹⁵⁸ Similarly, Simon Samuel primarily describes his analysis as postcolonial, but acknowledges how his Indian background shapes his perspective.¹⁵⁹ Hemchand Gossai and D. N. Premnath predominantly use social scientific and postcolonial methods of criticism. Another set of biblical interpreters, especially women, refer to their identities as Indians and sometimes as Dalits and as postcolonial feminists. Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon writes as an Indian Dalit woman; in a chapter where she does discuss the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible by South Asian women more broadly, she speaks about the lived contexts of women across South Asia, but acknowledges that her sources are “primarily from India” because “[t]here is no published material of women’s readings available from Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, and Afghanistan.”¹⁶⁰ Sharon Jacob typically refers to her work as “Indian” and “Indo-Western,” though she has also spoken of herself as “one of the few South Asian women biblical scholars in the field.”¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ Raj Nadella, “Privilege and Solidarity in Asian American Context (Lk. 14:15-24),” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 361–70.

¹⁵⁹ For example, “As a short-timer in the west and before coming to the west as a south 'Indian' Keralite living in different parts of north India where I am often branded as a *Videshi* (foreigner) and of low caste origin because of being a Christian”: Simon Samuel, *A Postcolonial Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, LNTS 340 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 21.

¹⁶⁰ Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon, “Engaging Women’s Experiences in the Struggle for Justice, Dignity, and Humanity: Hebrew Bible Readings by South Asian Women,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Retrospect: Social Locations*, ed. Susanne Scholz (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 51.

¹⁶¹ Kecia Ali et al., “Living It Out: Manthologies,” *JFSR* 36.1 (2020): 148. For the framing “Indian,” see Sharon Jacob and Jennifer T. Kaalund, “Flowing from Breast to Breast: An Examination of Dis/Placed Motherhood in African American and Indian Wet Nurses,” in *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, ed. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, SemeiaSt 85 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 209–38; Sharon Jacob, “Neither

Surekha Nelavala writes as an Indian Dalit feminist.¹⁶² Lastly, the India Commentary on the New Testament series focuses on the Indian context, although holding hopes for its relevance to other countries in the subcontinent including Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.¹⁶³ For these various biblical scholars, it is more salient to their work to use such labels as postcolonial, Dalit, and/or Indian.

There are a small number of authors who are indeed using the coalitional language of South Asian to describe their biblical interpretation. Ranjini Rebera, in her 1997 article in *Semeia* and her 2001 contribution to *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, speaks as a South Asian feminist, and her analysis is shaped by the experiences of Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Indian, and Bangladeshi women who are Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist.¹⁶⁴ Yousaf Sadiq, in a 2018 article in *Missiology*, “focuses on marginalized South Asian women in both Hindu and the Islamic contexts” in India and Pakistan, noting that in the past “most of the work on biblical contextualization in a South Asian context [has been] concentrated on marginalized women in Hindu society” alone.¹⁶⁵ The 2015 one-volume commentary, *South Asia Bible Commentary*, was

Here nor There! A Hermeneutics of Shuttling: Reflections of an Indian Postcolonial Feminist Biblical Critic,” in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion: Embodying Knowledge*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan, Asian Christianity in the Diaspora (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 123–36. For the framing “Indo-Western,” see Sharon Jacob, “Jezebel and Indo-Western Women: Nation, Nationalism, and the Ecologies of Sexual Violence in Revelation 2:20-25,” in *Ecological Solidarities: Mobilizing Faith and Justice for an Entangled World*, ed. Krista E Hughes, Dawn B. Martin, and Elaine Padilla (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019), 48–60; Sharon Jacob, “Imagined Nations, Real Women: Politics of Culture and Women’s Bodies, A Postcolonial, Feminist, and Indo-Western Interpretation of 1 Tim. 2:8-15,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 407–16.

¹⁶² Surekha Nelavala, “A Contextual Reading of the Parable of the Persisting Widow: An Indian Perspective,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 14.1 (2011): 1–10; Surekha Nelavala, “‘My Story’ in Intersection with Gal. 3: 26-28: An Indian-Dalit Feminist Interpretation,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 395–406.

¹⁶³ See, for example, Immanuel, *Acts of the Apostles*.

¹⁶⁴ Ranjini Rebera, “Polarity or Partnership?: Retelling the Story of Martha and Mary from Asian Women’s Perspective,” *Semeia* 78 (1997): 93–107; Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, “The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Perspective,” in *A Feminist Companion to Mark*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff, *Feminist Companion to the New Testament and Early Christian Writings* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 101–10.

¹⁶⁵ Yousaf Sadiq, “Jesus’ Encounter with a Woman at the Well: A South Asian Perspective,” *Missiology* 46.4 (2018): 364. In a footnote, Sadiq notes that South Asia can have the expansive definition that I have noted

inspired by the *Africa Bible Commentary*, and it was intended to be written “from within [the authors’] own contexts for the people of South Asia.”¹⁶⁶ Contributions were sought from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, and Maldives, or at least for these national contexts to be discussed; therefore, the volume did not include “expatriates.”¹⁶⁷ In each of these publications, the South Asian label reflects an effort to address underrepresented contexts in the South Asian landscape more equitably.

I urge South Asian scholars in biblical studies to think more proactively about where we see ourselves and our work. Is our analysis truly and intentionally specific to one national context, or could it be expanded or corrected to speak about the South Asian context more broadly? Are we listening to a wide range of voices across religion, gender, and caste? How are we attentive to interlocking power dynamics, between for example race, colonialism, nationalism, and sexuality? It may be that “South Asian” is not always the appropriate name for our work, but by asking these questions, we can attend more closely to how we represent ourselves and others. I have defined my project as South Asian in deliberate response to such questions.

The methodology of my project draws significantly on Tat-siong Benny Liew’s notion of citation. Liew asks, “What, then, is ‘Asian American’ about Asian American biblical hermeneutics...?”¹⁶⁸ He does not define it as “biblical hermeneutics done by Asian-raced persons from the United States,” because this understanding has exclusionary potential and essentialist

above, or it can be synonymous with the Indian subcontinent, including only India, Pakistan and Bangladesh; Sadiq uses the term to refer to the Indian subcontinent: Sadiq, “Jesus’ Encounter,” 371. While his definition of “South Asian” is narrower than either Rebera’s or mine, it is still broad and intentionally subverts the priority of India and Hinduism, as noted in the main text.

¹⁶⁶ Brian Wintle, ed., *South Asia Bible Commentary* (Rajasthan: Open Door Publications, 2015), vi.

¹⁶⁷ Wintle, *South Asia Bible Commentary*, vi.

¹⁶⁸ Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?: Reading the New Testament* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 3.

implications.¹⁶⁹ He also declines to define it as “biblical hermeneutics done with the explicitly political goal of helping to address issues confronting Asian American communities,” because Asian Americans are diverse and Asian American interests cannot be determined in advance.¹⁷⁰ Instead, Liew proposes that Asian American biblical interpretation be defined by the significant presence of “references to contemporary Asian American scholarship,” that is, a citational understanding.¹⁷¹ As he further explains,

understanding originality in terms of citationality helps to downplay identity and bypass authenticity or referentiality... As one references other Asian American (Bible) scholars in agreement and/or dis-agreement, one further demonstrates the diversity of interpretations and ideologies among Asian Americans (and hence the differences within a culture as well as between cultures). ...citing effects a “speaking alongside” rather than a “speaking for” or “speaking on” others in one’s racial/ethnic minority group. It therefore points to the impossibility of any single authentic or representative “voice.” The Asian American biblical hermeneutics that I envision has no individual center; instead, the sub-discipline is built upon the interaction, or the in-between-ness of multiple and mutual references or engagements.¹⁷²

Rather than specifying the content of Asian American biblical scholarship beforehand, Liew points to a methodology that will naturally account for a wide variety of voices and that will allow the content to change and grow over time. My South Asian feminist interpretation here is not primarily a result of my own self-identity as a South Asian feminist, nor a result of my claim to address issues of importance to South Asian people of multiple genders, but rather is defined by the citational genealogy in my work that centers around South Asian feminist writings among other streams of thought.

¹⁶⁹ Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 3.

¹⁷⁰ Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 3.

¹⁷¹ Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 7.

¹⁷² Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 8.

As I discuss South Asian populations, I speak both of South Asia and of the South Asian diaspora. There is no easy divide between the person living in diaspora and the person living in the homeland. As Musa Dube has described, in dialogue with Avtar Brah,

[Brah] proposes the diaspora space as ‘the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.’ In short, we are all in the diaspora space, scattered; home is at the border where we encounter all sorts of cultures, where there is no settlement and where we are invited to look beyond our immediate homes and cultures to other realities that challenge and stretch our constructed realities.¹⁷³

The identity of living in diaspora is not monolithic, and it does not necessarily result in a specific type of consciousness. Brah, speaking as a South Asian in diaspora herself, points out the heterogeneity of South Asians in diaspora depending on the countries in which they live: “For example, South Asians in Britain have a different, albeit related, history to South Asians in Africa, the Caribbean, Fiji, South East Asia or the USA. Given these differences, can we speak of a ‘South Asian diaspora’ other than as a mode of description of a particular cluster of migrations?”¹⁷⁴ Furthermore, “diasporic or border positionality does not in itself assure a vantage point of privileged insight into and understanding of relations of power.”¹⁷⁵

Although there is therefore no easy way to characterize the South Asian diaspora as distinct from South Asia, this does not mean that there is “an undifferentiated relativism” between these two categories.¹⁷⁶ Diaspora does make a difference. Most relevant to the present

¹⁷³ Musa W. Dube, “Boundaries and Bridges: Journeys of a Postcolonial Feminist in Biblical Studies,” in *Reading Other People’s Texts: Social Identity and the Reception of Authoritative Traditions*, ed. Ken Brown, Alison L. Joseph, and Brennan Breed (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 36; Avtar Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 632. Throughout, I cite the version of this essay with which Dube is in dialogue; the original version of the essay is Avtar Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 178–210.

¹⁷⁴ Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” (ed. Lewis and Mills), 617. Brah grew up as a Punjabi immigrant in Uganda, then lived in the U.S. and in Britain, and was impacted by Ugandan president Idi Amin’s expulsion of Asians from the country in 1972: Les Back and Avtar Brah, “Activism, Imagination and Writing: Avtar Brah Reflects on Her Life and Work with Les Back,” *Feminist Review* 100 (2012): 39–51.

¹⁷⁵ Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” (ed. Lewis and Mills), 631.

¹⁷⁶ Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” (ed. Lewis and Mills), 632.

study is the idea that, in diaspora, one's South Asian identity cannot be taken for granted. In the homeland, one is surrounded by other South Asian people; in diaspora, one is set apart from others by virtue of being South Asian.¹⁷⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes how being South Asian became more salient once she immigrated:

...what does it really mean to be "South Asian" in the USA? Obviously I was not South Asian in India—I was Indian. What else could one be but "Indian" at a time when a successful national independence struggle had given birth to a socialist democratic nation-state? ... However, in North America, identification as South Asian (in addition to Indian, in my case) takes on its own logic. ... Identifying as South Asian rather than Indian adds numbers and hence power within the U.S. ... Besides, regional differences among those from different South Asian countries are often less relevant than the commonalities based on our experiences and histories of immigration, treatment and location in the U.S.¹⁷⁸

Mohanty's majoritarian national identity shifted to include a minoritarian racial/ethnic identity within a diaspora location. As Sharon Jacob has articulated, specifically in reference to Indian Christian women, the person in diaspora often feels out of place both in one's new home country and in one's ancestral homeland: a "double ejection."¹⁷⁹ Similarly, Fernando F. Segovia defines his hermeneutics of the diaspora (which is both "a hermeneutics of otherness" and "a hermeneutics of engagement") as grounded in the experience of diaspora Hispanic Americans: "We are thus always strangers or aliens, the permanent 'others,' both where we came from and where we find ourselves."¹⁸⁰ Therefore, while I draw on material that discusses both South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, I put an emphasis on diaspora writings. As I turn to my

¹⁷⁷ In each location, the proportion of South Asians in the general population varies. For example, Malaysia and Trinidad both contain a large portion of the world's diaspora South Asians, but South Asians are a minority in Malaysia while they have recently been the largest ethnic group in Trinidad. Judith M. Brown, *Global South Asians: Introducing the Modern Diaspora* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

¹⁷⁸ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America," in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), 352.

¹⁷⁹ Jacob, "Neither Here nor There!," 128.

¹⁸⁰ Fernando F. Segovia, "Towards a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement," in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 73, 64.

interpretation of the character of Timothy, it is important to note that he is someone located in diaspora, where his Jewishness cannot be taken for granted and where Jewish practices are not the norm. Nevertheless, there is a continuum of discourses, practices, and experiences for both South Asia and the South Asian diaspora and for Palestine and the Jewish diaspora, and I will consistently speak about both diaspora and the homeland.

South Asian and Jewish Orientalisms

When South Asia is discursively represented in the West, there are two modes of Orientalism that become activated. First, South Asians are Asian, and as such are categorized within Orientalism linked to the Far East. In the United States, South Asian Americans are represented by “the tropes of inferiority and cultural and racial backwardness...particularly as they are linked to newly-arrived labour working in low-status occupations,” as well as by tropes of economic threat in the more recent construction of the model minority myth.¹⁸¹ Second, South Asians are sometimes Muslim, as well as often mistaken for being Muslim, due to tropes about what a Muslim person supposedly looks like. In this sense, South Asians are also categorized within Orientalism linked to the Middle East. South Asians are viewed through the binary of “tradition and modernity,” and “Islam is often depicted...as a major, if not the principal, contemporary force threatening democracy and individual freedom.”¹⁸² Under the Western gaze, South Asians are viewed as both the perpetual foreigner/the model minority (Asian) and the fundamentalist terrorist (Muslim, Sikh, and/or phenotypically similar to Arabs).¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Venkat R Ramaprasad, “Terror, Suspicion and Neo-Liberal Logics: ‘Expanding Orientalisms’ and South Asians in the United States,” *South Asia* 41.1 (2018): 94.

¹⁸² Charles Ramsey, “Orientalist: Friend or Foe?,” in *Literary and Non-Literary Responses towards 9/11: South Asia and Beyond*, ed. Nukhbah Taj Langah (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 40, 42.

¹⁸³ Vinay Harpalani, “DesiCrit: Theorizing the Racial Ambiguity of South Asian Americans,” *NYU Annual Survey of American Law* 69 (2013): 137–47, 157–62. Note that these predominant modes of racialization do not

The discourse of Orientalism is applied to so many cultural groups that it appears differently for each group. The type of Orientalism that appears for Jews has similarities with the type for South Asians but also differences. After the Enlightenment, “‘Judaism’ stood for a religion of fanaticism (stubborn refusal to convert), materialism (flesh/money versus spirit/love), and blind obedience to the letter of the law.”¹⁸⁴ Charlotte Klein documented a persistent anti-Jewish interpretation in Christian theology, especially German, including misconceptions about Jewish attitudes towards the law; as one author erroneously stated, “external actions like the observance of the Sabbath and circumcision acquired ‘the status of confessional acts’ and consequently ‘the danger of degeneration into purely external piety was a growing menace. And this danger has gone along with Judaism ever since.’”¹⁸⁵ Jeffrey S. Librett argues that anti-Judaism is actually the foundation of modern Orientalism, a situation that Said failed to sufficiently observe due to his lack of substantive engagement with German Orientalism among European Orientalisms.¹⁸⁶ Librett explains the way that Western Christian supremacy accuses Judaism of being always “too much,” never the “just right” that marks the hegemonic norm.

According to this pattern, the Jewish “dead letter” is always too material, too concretely specific (ceremonial, etc.), but also too abstract (empty monotheism, rootlessness, etc.), whereas the Christian “spirit” is always just concrete enough (God embodied as human in Christ), yet abstract enough to be truly spiritual (merciful rather than caught up in legal trivialities, etc.). The Jewish principle lacks any mediation between particular and general, whereas the Christian principle establishes a mediation. Christian supersessionism sometimes accuses the Jewish tradition of just one or the other extreme, but the accusation as a whole is that of having failed to achieve a wholeness through the mediation of the extremes. This structure is demonstrably applied to the Orient by the Occident.¹⁸⁷

exhaust the possibilities for South Asians, whose ambiguity has also been viewed through the lenses of whiteness and Blackness, and who have also been racialized as Hindu.

¹⁸⁴ Lourens Minnema, “Different Types of Orientalism and Corresponding Views of Jews and Judaism: A Historical Overview of Shifting Perceptions and Stereotypes,” *Antisemitism Studies* 4.2 (2020): 291.

¹⁸⁵ Werner Förster, *Palestinian Judaism in New Testament Times* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), 5–6; Charlotte Klein, *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology*, trans. Edward Quinn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 48.

¹⁸⁶ Jeffrey S. Librett, *Orientalism and the Figure of the Jew* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 19, 22.

¹⁸⁷ Librett, *Orientalism and the Figure of the Jew*, 24–25.

The stereotypes that Librett describes both are specific to Judaism and participate in patterns recognizable in similar types of Orientalism. By positioning anti-Jewish Orientalism in conversation with other forms of Orientalism, we see a clearer picture of how these modes of violence mutually sustain each other.

Scholars of religion have so far only infrequently drawn together the contemporary issues facing South Asian people and the ancient issues facing Second Temple Jews. Brigitte Kahl has interpreted the concept of justification by faith in Galatians in light of Orientalism, as it has manifested against both Jews and Muslims.¹⁸⁸ Kahl surveys the overt Orientalism, both anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim, in William M. Ramsay's work on the historical context of the letter to the Galatians; she contrasts this textual source with the visual source of the ancient sculpture known as the *Dying Gaul*, or rather, *Dying Galatian*, which emotively emblemizes the Occident's discourse of conquest over the Orient. She turns now to Paul's picture of the crucified Christ, an inversion that communicates the critical message of "faith-justification as an act of irreverent noncompliance with the established imperial and colonial rules for dying Gauls, dying Galatians, dying Jews, and dying Others in general."¹⁸⁹ In Kahl's reading, the message of Galatians is not anti-Jewish, as it has often been read, with justification by faith standing in opposition to works-righteousness, and by extension it is not anti-Eastern. Her analysis importantly links the discursive connections that see "anti-Judaism morphing into anti-Islamism, anti-communism into anti-terrorism."¹⁹⁰ My project follows in these footsteps by naming the

¹⁸⁸ Brigitte Kahl, "Galatians and the 'Orientalism' of Justification by Faith: Paul among Jews and Muslims," in *The Colonized Apostle: Paul through Postcolonial Eyes*, ed. Christopher D. Stanley, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 206–22.

¹⁸⁹ Kahl, "Galatians and the 'Orientalism' of Justification by Faith," 217.

¹⁹⁰ Kahl, "Galatians and the 'Orientalism' of Justification by Faith," 206.

paradigm of Orientalism as a key source of discursive unity, and by placing discourses regarding South Asia, including Islam, in parallel with discourses regarding Judaism.

Benjamin G. Wright has also recently drawn on the history of South Asia to shed light on Second Temple Judaism. To better describe the nationalist and colonialist dynamics at play in Ben Sira, he turns to “a modern example of emerging nationalist discourse...: India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”¹⁹¹ As Wright explains his methodology,

Although the establishment of the modern nation-state of India differs substantially from what we might understand as a nation in antiquity, the Indian situation offers a set of historical circumstances to think with. Here Spivak’s concept of the “nation thing” helps to bridge at least partially the wide gap between ancient Palestine and modern India. Certainly the nation-state is a project of modernity, but as Spivak observes, “I say nation thing rather than nationalism because something like nations, collectivities bound by birth, that allowed strangers in gingerly, have been in existence long before nationalism came around.” As was the case in the emerging nation of India, Ben Sira crafted a discourse by which such a collectivity—Spivak’s “nation thing”—called Israel could be constructed, and Hebrew played a critical role in his efforts.¹⁹²

Wright draws on the dynamics present in modern India at the intersection of not only nationalism and colonialism, but also class, language, and resistance. Turning to the question of “how positive or negative Ben Sira’s attitude toward Hellenism was,” Wright points out that this typical framework “mak[e]s the issue one primarily of culture” when in reality “that culture was a tool or even at times a weapon of imperialism and colonialism.”¹⁹³ Although the two situations are far from identical, there are sufficient commonalities between them that thinking through the theories and frameworks generated to discuss South Asia can help us to better

¹⁹¹ Benjamin G. Wright, “What Does India Have to Do with Jerusalem?: Ben Sira, Language, and Colonialism,” in *Jewish Cultural Encounters in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern World*, ed. Mladen Popović, Myles Schoonover, and Marijn Vandenberghe, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 178 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 141. Wright is a white scholar, and, as described in a footnote on p. 141, his interest in this topic was generated by dialogue with his institutional colleagues and was strengthened by a campus visit by Spivak.

¹⁹² Wright, “What Does India Have to Do with Jerusalem?,” 141–42; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 279.

¹⁹³ Wright, “What Does India Have to Do with Jerusalem?,” 155.

understand Second Temple Judaism. In this project, I work in this same vein by deploying South Asian feminist theory to help read Acts 16:1-5 with more nuance.

The South Asian comparative texts that I draw on therefore have two functions. First, Jewish populations and South Asian populations have both been discursively treated in Orientalizing ways, with similar constructions of “irrationality,” “backwardness,” and “tradition.” By taking specific examples to address misconceptions that are held about non-Western populations, I demonstrate how contemporary paradigms are inadvertently negatively affecting scholarly readings of ancient Judaism, and how these paradigms can potentially be changed. Second, when looking back at Second Temple Judaism, there is the problem of how to reconstruct the population as a whole on the basis of very fragmentary evidence. A wealth of information is available about South Asia and the South Asian diaspora, and the diversity of this group enables a better sketch of the possibilities that should be considered when reconstructing the Second Temple Jewish population.

South Asian Feminism

The writings of South Asian feminists in particular provide me with powerful insights and tools to generate a new reading of the circumcision of Timothy. South Asian feminist theory helps me ask, how has tradition been represented in dominant discourse? When people engage with tradition, how is their agency negotiated and expressed? How might positive, coalitional interactions with other groups actually strengthen people’s connections with their own group, rather than cutting them off from it? How can we describe the social role of gender in traditional practices without reifying the colonialist notion that a population is sexist and less advanced? Considering South Asian parallels can awaken and make real for us the possibilities for Second

Temple Judaism. The remainder of this discussion of my methodology is structured according to these four topics: (1) Orientalism, (2) agency, (3) coalition, and (4) gender.

Orientalism

As has been discussed above, Orientalism is a paradigm that creates a hierarchical relationship between the Orient and the Occident that justifies colonial involvement. Orientalism creates a narrative in which the Occident is an actor, more advanced and leading the globe by progressing through history, whereas the Orient is passive, not only underdeveloped but lacking development or change at all.

From the viewpoint of colonizing Western powers, an important “difference” between “Western culture” and various colonized cultures was the alleged singular openness of “Western culture” to historical change—cast, not surprisingly, as “progress.” Colonized cultures were conversely often represented as victims of a static past of unchanging custom and tradition, virtually immune to history. Thus, even history-intoxicated philosophers like Hegel and Marx could complacently place entire colonized regions of the world “outside” of history, at least until the advent of colonialism. Hegel proclaims that Africa “is no historical part of the World. . . . What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature.” Marx confers the same distinction on India when he pronounces that “Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history,” making it an “unresisting and unchanging society.”¹⁹⁴

This framework affects the way that cultural interaction is understood. When an Eastern person acts in accordance with Western culture, that act is imagined in terms of development, choice, and self-expression. But when such a person acts in accordance with Eastern culture, that act is imagined to be irrational, forced, and conservative.

¹⁹⁴ Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16; G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover, 1956), 99; Karl Marx, “On Imperialism in India,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 1972), 578–79.

An example from popular culture can illustrate the dominance of the Orientalist assessment of Eastern and Western cultures, even internally to material created by South Asians. The second-generation young adult in diaspora is a classic embodiment of cultural interaction between East and West in the media, as the young adult is torn between their South Asian parents and their white Western love interest. In the 2002 film *Bend It Like Beckham*, the central question is whether the Indian main character will pursue soccer and date a white Irish boy, or whether she will attend her sister's wedding and reject a sports scholarship to an American school to stay near home. Similarly, in the 2017 film *The Big Sick*, viewers ask whether the Pakistani main character will date the white American girl, or whether he will agree to an arranged marriage and pretend that he still practices Islam. In both cases, the choice is difficult for the character, but not for the audience. The assimilated choice is represented as obviously correct, and indeed the happy ending of the movie is the character's apparently independent, rational, and liberal decision; the parents' viewpoint is not afforded conceptual legitimacy.¹⁹⁵ It is only more recently that South Asian diaspora media is playing with forms of arranged marriage that can be reconciled with Western norms of love marriage.¹⁹⁶

In reality, interracial dating and marriage is complex. We see a range of perspectives expressed in a 2001 study of second-generation Indian-American women.¹⁹⁷ Some had been happily involved with white Americans and African Americans, some had found these relationships challenging because their partners could not adequately appreciate elements of Indian culture, and some had both positive and negative experiences. Some would prefer to be

¹⁹⁵ For further explicated analysis, see Gamal Abdel-Shehid and Nathan Kalman-Lamb, "Multiculturalism, Gender and Bend It Like Beckham," *Social Inclusion* 3.3 (2015): 147–48.

¹⁹⁶ See, for example, *Indian Matchmaking* (2020–present); *Never Have I Ever*, episode 9, "... had to be on my best behavior" (2020); *Wedding Season* (2022).

¹⁹⁷ Meera Rastogi, "The Indian American Woman Experience: The Process of Defining Herself" (The Ohio State University, PhD, 2001), 146–51, 156–58.

with an Indian partner because of their shared cultural knowledge, and some disliked that Indian men expressed excessively sexist attitudes. Some had little to no experience with romantic relationships at all. Almost all of the women's parents expressed strong preferences about their romantic partner—but not only that the partner be Indian, but also that he be from a suitable geographic region, be of a suitable caste, practice a suitable religion, and/or have a suitable education and occupation. These women make practical choices as they navigate power dynamics based on age, gender, and race and ethnicity.¹⁹⁸

The Western dislike of arranged marriage is not actually based on an imperative for interethnic or interracial marriage, which is not demanded of white protagonists in romantic comedies, but rather is based on “the assumption that arranged marriages always suppress women's agency and choice.”¹⁹⁹ However, there is in fact a difference between “arranged marriage” and “forced marriage,” since the proposed marital partners can and often do have a say in the match.²⁰⁰ One second-generation South Asian American woman observed in an interview “that the ‘thirtypoint matches’ many of the dating services advertised on television for nonethnic Americans was a mirror image of what went on in her community. According to her, the impersonality of the dating service versus the personal time investment of her parents and family members was the only difference between these ‘love’ and ‘arranged’ marriages.”²⁰¹ Furthermore, volition does not exhaust the internal South Asian critiques of arranged marriage, which take account of trafficking, heteronormativity, caste endogamy, and Hindu nationalism,

¹⁹⁸ This is an extension of the observation in Das Gupta, “What Is Indian About You?,” 587.

¹⁹⁹ Raksha Pande, “‘I Arranged My Own Marriage’: Arranged Marriages and Post-Colonial Feminism,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 22.2 (2015): 172.

²⁰⁰ Pande, “‘I Arranged My Own Marriage’,” 173; Asha Bhandary, “Arranged Marriage: Could It Contribute To Justice?,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26.2 (2018): 197–98; Marian Aguiar, *Arranging Marriage: Conjugal Agency in the South Asian Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 69–71.

²⁰¹ Bandana Purkayastha, *Negotiating Ethnicity: Second-Generation South Asians Traverse a Transnational World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 106.

for instance.²⁰² Orientalist depictions of arranged marriage rely on the flat, stereotypical idea that the practice is illogical, obligatory, antiquated, and sexist. In fact, arranged marriage requires extensive calculation and planning, usually involves the input of the potential partners, continues to change in response to modern social, economic, and political forces across the globe, and does in fact perpetuate power inequalities but in far more complex and nuanced ways.

From the South Asian experience of Orientalizing discourse being applied to its customs, illustrated briefly here through the example of arranged marriage, we learn to be attentive to how Eastern practices are excluded from having rational legitimacy or agential capacity. In chapter 4, I turn to the Orientalizing discourse that shapes modern Western views of circumcision (here, male circumcision only). First, I speak broadly about how the West determines which modes of circumcision are appropriate according to paradigms of health and science, and which modes of circumcision are socially condemned or legally banned. Second, I address the more specific issue of how Western biblical scholars have treated Jewish circumcision, associating it with legalism and ethnocentrism. Orientalist views have exoticized and stigmatized the practice of circumcision in Jewish, Muslim, and African contexts, and within biblical studies they have perpetuated Christian supremacy.

Agency

Because Orientalist models for agency are insufficient, precluding the possibility of a person expressing agency through the enactment of tradition, more nuanced models must be developed for agency. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is an important theorist for many South Asian biblical scholars, as she speaks powerfully to interconnected issues of colonialism, gender, class,

²⁰² Aguiar, *Arranging Marriage*, 21–22, 55–61.

the subaltern, globalization, language, and historical method.²⁰³ Spivak describes the inadequacies of both the imperialist and the nativist models of agency.²⁰⁴ In the imperialist, colonialist, Orientalist mode of agency, the Oriental person does not truly choose to enact their own native traditions but is socially coerced to accept them as the default; true choice only emerges when the Oriental person rationally enacts Western behavior. But a twin danger is posed by the nativist, nationalist, essentialist mode of agency, according to which the Oriental person does not truly choose Western behavior but is indoctrinated and brainwashed by colonial power; true choice only emerges when the Oriental person resistantly enacts anti-colonialism by holding fast to their tradition. In the nativist model, the moral value of tradition is simply inverted: where imperialism condemned the traditions of the colonized, nativism valorizes it uncritically. Neither view of either agency or tradition is complex enough to capture the everyday decision-making of subaltern subjects.

Spivak offers the example of sati, in which “[t]he Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice.”²⁰⁵ This practice was never widespread throughout India, but emerged only in specific castes, classes, regions, and time periods; nevertheless, its ban by the colonial British government in 1829 has made it infamous and almost emblematic of Indian patriarchy.²⁰⁶ As Spivak summarizes the imperial perspective,

²⁰³ See, for example, R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Postcolonial Theory and Biblical Studies,” in *Fair Play: Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity: Essays in Honour of Heikki Räisänen*, ed. Ismo Dunderberg, Christopher Tuckett, and Kari Syreeni (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 541–52; Sharon Jacob, *Reading Mary alongside Indian Surrogate Mothers: Violent Love, Oppressive Liberation, and Infancy Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Raj Nadella, “The Motif of Hybridity in the Story of the Canaanite Woman: Its Relevance for Multi-Faith Relations,” in *Many Yet One?: Multiple Religious Belonging*, ed. Peniel Jesudason Rufus Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2016), 111–20.

²⁰⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 296–97; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “History,” in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 284–87. Below, I will cite only the former essay, which is earlier and better known, although much of the material repeats and is developed in the latter.

²⁰⁵ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 297.

²⁰⁶ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 297; Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*., 46–59.

famously, “White men are saving brown women from brown men.”²⁰⁷ That is, (patriarchal) imperial power beats back the violence of native tradition so as to liberate (colonized) women (from patriarchy, not from colonialism). The corresponding nativist perspective is, “The women actually wanted to die.”²⁰⁸ That is, colonized women beat back the violence of imperial occupation when they enact (patriarchal) tradition. As Spivak analyzes these two perspectives, she makes sure to note, “Obviously I am not advocating the killing of widows.”²⁰⁹ Her focus instead is getting beyond the moral question on the surface in order to describe and critique “the two contending versions of freedom,” neither of which paves the way for subaltern women’s freedom at all.²¹⁰ As the imperialist narrative and the nativist narrative fight against each other, the subaltern women themselves cannot be heard: “Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization.”²¹¹ In answer to the question which her essay title asks, Spivak answers, “The subaltern cannot speak... The female intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.”²¹²

Saba Mahmood provides a different answer to this question, and she does indeed attempt to describe a mode of agency that escapes both the imperial bind and the nativist bind. She even works to evade the feminist bind. Many feminists have sought to look for how women choose to deploy tradition, but for resistant purposes. As an example of such efforts, Mahmood cites Janice Boddy’s work on an Islamic women’s healing cult in northern Sudan.

²⁰⁷ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 296.

²⁰⁸ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 297.

²⁰⁹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 301.

²¹⁰ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 301.

²¹¹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 206.

²¹² Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 308.

[The women] use perhaps unconsciously, perhaps strategically, what we in the West might prefer to consider instruments of their oppression as means to assert their value both collectively, through the ceremonies they organize and stage, and individually, in the context of their marriages, so insisting on their dynamic complementarity with men. This in itself is a means of resisting and setting limits to domination.²¹³

The benefit of a feminist approach like Boddy's is that the racialized female subject is not subsumed within the discourses of either imperialism or patriarchy—at least on the surface. She expresses both her cultural traditions and her feminism—even if “unconsciously.” But Mahmood critiques the way that this approach sees agency only in one particular form, namely, in “the rationalist, self-authorizing, transcendental subject.”²¹⁴ Even more narrowly, it only sees women's agency where those actions may be judged as morally sound according to dominant feminist mores, and it assumes “that there is something intrinsic to women that *should* predispose them to oppose” patriarchy.²¹⁵ Mahmood asks, “does the category of resistance impose a teleology of progressive politics on the analytics of power—a teleology that makes it hard for us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of norms?”²¹⁶ Although feminism centers the perspective of the woman who is fought over and therefore discounted by both imperialism and nativism, it falters when it makes invisible the forms of women's agency that it cannot judge positively. This feminist solution does not in fact escape imperialism or patriarchy at all, because it is shaped by the norms of liberal subjectivity that take the white man as the standard.

Mahmood presents a fourth option. She urges us to detach agency and “self-realization from [the notion] of the autonomous will,” instead finding “agentival capacity...not only in those

²¹³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 7; Janice Patricia Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits: Women, Men, and the Zār Cult in Northern Sudan* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 345.

²¹⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 13.

²¹⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2.

²¹⁶ Boddy, *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, 345; Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 9.

acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms.”²¹⁷ Her proposal draws upon the noted theorists of gender and sexuality, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. Both Butler and Mahmood agree with a central contention from Foucault.

Power, according to Foucault, cannot be understood solely on the model of domination as something possessed and deployed by individuals or sovereign agents over others... Rather, power is to be understood as a strategic relation of force that permeates life and is productive of new forms of desires, objects, relations, and discourses... Secondly, the subject, argues Foucault, does not precede power relations, in the form of an individuated consciousness, but is produced through these relations, which form the necessary conditions of its possibility... Stated otherwise, one may argue that the set of capacities inhering in a subject—that is, the abilities that define her modes of agency—are not the residue of an undominated self that existed prior to the operations of power but are themselves the products of those operations.²¹⁸

In the Foucauldian formulation, there is therefore no pure, autonomous subject who can achieve liberation by extricating itself from being entangled with others. Instead, it is those very entanglements that allow the self to exist as a subject at all. One cannot discard them without discarding the materials that provide the foundations for the self, and therefore there is no easy path to freedom through resistance to power. Butler accepts this notion of the inevitability of entanglement, and her notion of gender performativity relies on the idea that every expression of gender is in dialogue with currently existing norms for gender. This is not a defeatist conclusion because there remains the hope “in the essential openness of each iteration and the possibility that it may fail or be reappropriated or resignified for purposes other than the consolidation of norms... Butler locates the possibility of agency within structures of power (rather than outside

²¹⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14, 15.

²¹⁸ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17. Here Mahmood is summarizing the argumentation present in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. and trans. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 109–33; Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 208–26.

of it).”²¹⁹ Nevertheless, Mahmood contends that Butler still falters, because in Butler’s formulation agency is present only when norms are subverted, i.e. in resistance, and therefore “remains grounded in an agonistic framework.”²²⁰

Mahmood’s proposal instead is to prevent the automatic valorization of agency so that we can see more forms of agency. She foregrounds that “norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted...but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways.”²²¹ If “all forms of desire are discursively organized,” then we can “interrogate the practical and conceptual conditions under which different forms of desire emerge, including desire for submission to recognized authority.”²²² For example, when scholars investigate the sources of desire for “modern” Muslim women to wear the veil, they should not only attend to reasons such as “avoid[ing] sexual harassment on public transportation, lower[ing] the cost of attire for working women...resist[ing] the commodification of women’s bodies in the media,” all of which are paradigms of resistance to patriarchy and capitalism, but also to reasons such as “female modesty or piety” that do not fit in as easily into liberal feminist norms.²²³ The goal is not to recuperate, but to understand: “neither to justify that tradition, nor to argue for some irreducible essentialism or cultural relativism. It is, instead, to take a necessary step toward explaining the force that a discourse commands.”²²⁴

South Asian feminist thinkers like Spivak and Mahmood can help us generate understandings of agency when people engage with their cultural traditions. In chapter 5, I apply

²¹⁹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 19, 20. Here Mahmood is summarizing the argumentation present in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, Judith, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Butler, Judith, “Further Reflections on Conversations of Our Time,” *Diacritics* 27.1 (1997): 13–15.

²²⁰ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 22.

²²¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 22.

²²² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

²²³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 16.

²²⁴ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17.

these insights to first-century Jewish circumcision. I bring into dialogue the many meanings that accrued around circumcision and the many meanings of the South Asian hijab and turban. Next, I conduct a discursive analysis of how Luke represents the meanings and affective dimensions of circumcision and how the practice of circumcision is embedded within communities.

Coalition

Among the many significances of circumcision, I focus on how the narrative of Acts suggests that Timothy has been motivated to participate in circumcision as part of his belonging as a Jewish member of the Way. Conventionally, Timothy and other Second Temple Jews have been regarded as torn between two ethnic groups: Greek and Jewish. Too often, our imagination has not been capacious enough to conceive of the way that Jews in the first century were equally tied to a variety of groups centered around philosophy, occupation, and governance, for example. These groups could be dominant, majoritarian, and offer social capital, or they could be minoritized within the broader community. Timothy was not only Greek and Jewish, but was a member of the Way, a minoritized group at the time, which included Greeks and Jews among other ethnic groups. How are these multiple groups represented as relating to each other in Luke-Acts?

I explore the group structure of the Way by drawing from the experience of South Asians in diaspora, who relate not only to the majoritarian population of the region, but also to other minoritized groups. Each South Asian person in diaspora has multiple options for group membership and self-identification, some of which overlap and some of which are subsets or umbrellas for one another.²²⁵ For example, what could it mean to be a Punjabi American? One

²²⁵ For more, see Leonard, *The South Asian Americans*, 93–101.

could identify ethnically or linguistically (i.e., Punjabi), but one could also identify along national lines (e.g., Indian, Pakistani) or along religious lines (e.g., Sikh, Hindu). One could identify as South Asian (along with Sri Lankans and Afghans, e.g.) or as Asian (along with Koreans and Indonesians, e.g.). In the United States one could identify as a person of color, and in Canada or Britain one could identify as Black.²²⁶ In the 20th century, many Punjabi immigrants to California married into Mexican-American communities.²²⁷ Each mode of belonging would communicate something slightly different about how the person views and situates themselves as well as how they are perceived by other people in their communities. As Avtar Brah articulates it, “border crossings do not occur only across the dominant/dominated dichotomy, but...equally, there is traffic within cultural formations of the subordinated groups and...these journeys are not always mediated through the dominant culture(s).”²²⁸

In the United States, South Asian Americans have made different decisions about the extent to which they wish to align themselves with the dominant white power structure, to valorize their Asian identity, or to stand in solidarity with all people of color. Among the first group of individuals, there are South Asians who view themselves as sufficiently Aryan or Caucasian that they should be included as white. In the 1923 court case *United States v. Thind*, the Supreme Court rejected Bhagat Singh Thind’s claim that he was white, arguing even his status as “a high caste Hindu of full Indian blood” did not negate that “the average man knows perfectly well” what the difference is between white people and “brown” people.²²⁹ Thind’s claim was an unsuccessful effort for him to be naturalized as an American citizen. More recently,

²²⁶ Kamala Visweswaran, “Predicaments of the Hyphen,” in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), 304–5.

²²⁷ Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

²²⁸ Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities,” (ed. Lewis and Mills), 632.

²²⁹ *United States v. Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923); Harpalani, “DesiCrit,” 130.

it was publicized in 2011 that Nikki Haley, who is Indian-American and who was the governor of South Carolina at the time, had listed her race as “white” on her 2001 voter registration.²³⁰ Haley did not comment herself on the situation, but Vinay Harpalani observes, “Haley’s racial characterization illustrates the transient position of South Asian Americans as honorary whites... racial identity has become more malleable and context-dependent, but it can still be very salient and can be exploited for political gains or attacks.”²³¹

Other South Asians have identified themselves with other Asians but not with other people of color, embracing the “positive” stereotype of the “model minority.”²³² In fact, the model minority myth is both untrue and harmful for at least three reasons, as outlined succinctly by Frank H. Wu:

First, the myth is a gross simplification that is not accurate enough to be seriously used for understanding 10 million people. Second, it conceals within it an invidious statement about African Americans along the lines of the inflammatory taunt: “They made it; why can’t you?” Third, the myth is abused both to deny that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat.²³³

Nevertheless, there are still some Asian Americans and South Asian Americans specifically who embrace the model minority myth precisely because it can offer them a false sense of security and superiority compared to other people of color. Vijay Prashad describes the personal

²³⁰ Harpalani, “DesiCrit,” 154.

²³¹ Harpalani, “DesiCrit,” 154.

²³² Asian American biblical scholars have extensively discussed the model minority myth and applied it to their interpretation. For biblical scholars who critique the myth, see, for example, Gale A. Yee, “‘She Stood in Tears Amid the Alien Corn’: Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority,” in *They Were All Together in One Place?: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, SemeiaSt 57 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 124–26; Sze-kar Wan, “Asian American Perspectives: Ambivalence of the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters: Contemporary Perspectives and Methods*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 176–81; Julius-Kei Kato, “Toward an Asian North American Liberationist Hermeneutics,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 177–78; Janette H. Ok, “Always Ethnic, Never ‘American’: Reading 1 Peter through the Lens of the ‘Perpetual Foreigner’ Stereotype,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 419–20; Nadella, “Privilege and Solidarity in Asian American Context (Lk. 14:15-24).”

²³³ Frank H. Wu, *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 49.

investments and misinformation of South Asians (“desis”) who have accepted the model minority myth.

This stereotype was a godsend for desis. It provided them with an avenue toward advancement, despite its negative impact on blacks and its strengthening of white supremacy... Most had little idea of the Jim Crow atmosphere: Since they migrated mostly to northern cities after the enactment of the 1964-65 Civil Rights Acts, they did not experience the worst of the overt racism felt by the small number of desis who migrated to the United States before the mid-1960s. Further, that many did not participate in the Civil Rights movement meant that they did not cherish the rights won by those who could not really benefit from them. Most desis, too, had not participated in the freedom struggle against the British, so they did not feel the fist of white supremacy, nor had they experienced the vitality of freedom through struggle.²³⁴

Many South Asians have failed to grapple with the active colorism and anti-Blackness present in their own communities. Kamala Visweswaran laments, “We find it easier to condemn the racism that is sometimes directed against us, than the hypocrisy and racism in South Asian communities directed against other American people of color.”²³⁵

Sometimes, however, South Asians in diaspora have indeed dedicated themselves to coalition with other people of color. One important avenue for solidarity among South Asian women in diaspora has been women-of-color feminist organizing, which unites struggles against both racism and sexism, challenging the insufficiencies of white feminism and male-dominated liberation movements. Women-of-color feminism embraces ethnic distinctions, not subsuming all individuals into one homogenized generality. Shireen Roshanravan advocates for Asian Americans to embrace a women-of-color feminist approach to activism, according to which they would reject the model minority myth that makes them legible to the state but that isolates them from other people of color, and would instead challenge anti-Black racism and collaborate in coalition. She offers the positive example of the Queer South Asian National Network

²³⁴ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 170, 171.

²³⁵ Visweswaran, “Predicaments of the Hyphen,” 304–5.

(QSANN), a group that enables connection without forced homogeneity, “lay[ing] bare the state violence that structures communication from Asian America to Black America without reducing them to sameness.”²³⁶ QSANN expresses their own particularities as South Asian Americans in how they construct coalitional anti-racism: “We are committed to drawing connections between Islamophobia, caste-based oppression, privilege and complicity, xenophobia and profiling, and anti-Blackness in ourselves, our communities, and the imperial US.”²³⁷ It also circularly transforms their own self-identity to engage in this work: “Part of challenging anti-Blackness in ourselves and our communities is crafting a new narrative of what it means to be South Asian in the US.”²³⁸ Multiracial activism gives South Asian Americans an alternative to either insularity or assimilation to whiteness, providing justice-oriented community across races while speaking out about issues specific to South Asians.

Coalitions and alliances like women-of-color feminism offer a model for thinking through how Timothy’s participation in the Way could remain distinctly ethno-religious even as the Way was a multi-ethnic and multi-religious group. Through coalitional organizing, South Asians in diaspora have in fact strengthened their personal ethnic attachments through togetherness with fellow minoritized people, who sharpen their sense of the particular racial dynamics in their nation of residence. The goals and priorities of coalition are contingent, and coalition responsively centers some issues and groups as the need arises.

The Way may be regarded similarly, offering a context where Jews like Timothy can be in relationship with gentiles of various ethnicities while also expressing their own modes of

²³⁶ Shireen Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility: Asian American Feminist Ruptures of the Model-Minority Optic,” in *Asian American Feminisms and Women of Color Politics*, ed. Shireen Roshanravan and Lynn Fujiwara (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 275.

²³⁷ Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility,” 275.

²³⁸ Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility,” 278.

religiosity. At the same time, Judaism is not merely one identity among many, according to Luke-Acts, but is centered. In chapter 6, I construct an argument from the literary evidence in Acts to argue that this motivation is represented as primary for Timothy when he becomes circumcised. I also dialogue with other biblical scholars who have sought to offer a model for the Way that is accurate to the depiction in Acts and that is not anti-Jewish.

Gender

The account of the circumcision of Timothy is located alongside several narratives that feature girls and women centrally, and as such the latter portion of Acts 16 has attracted significant attention from feminist interpreters. However, the overwhelming majority of commentators overlook the gendered dimensions of Acts 16:1-5, even though the practice of Jewish circumcision was deeply gendered. Because men are the dominant and unmarked category, Timothy's circumcision has not often been interpreted in a gender-critical fashion. But as Aymer rightly points out, chapters 10-11 and 16 of Acts are concerned "with a gendered question: whether uncircumcised men may join The Way."²³⁹ In chapter 7, I analyze how Luke-Acts depicts circumcision intersecting with ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, how the narrative values a distinctively Jewish mode of masculine embodiment through circumcision, and how Timothy's mother and Paul both inhabit the gender-neutral role of potential or actual circumciser. As I carry out this analysis, I am informed by Jewish feminists and South Asian postcolonial feminists.

²³⁹ Aymer, "Acts of the Apostles," 542.

Christians in the last two millennia have made the anti-Jewish argument that the exclusion of women from being circumcised is evidence of religious inferiority.²⁴⁰ Today's Christian readers, both lay and academic, have made the flawed argument that Jesus demonstrates a feminist attitude in contrast to the supposedly thoroughgoing patriarchy of first-century Judaism.²⁴¹ Katharina von Kellenbach disapprovingly points to Catholic author Elizabeth Carroll's assertion, "So changed was Jesus' attitude towards women from what was approved for Jews, that Christian practice, unlike the Jewish law which allowed God's Covenant to be represented only in the male through circumcision, admitted woman as her own person to baptism"; von Kellenbach offers the correction that in fact "women converts to Judaism were baptized at the time of Jesus."²⁴² Amy-Jill Levine highlights the erroneous claim that in Judaism "women were 'not circumcised and hence could not be part of God's covenant,'" exposing an anti-Judaism that is especially disconcerting to see even in postcolonial and liberationist exegesis.²⁴³ In an otherwise careful analysis of gender in the Pauline epistles, Jorunn Økland comes to the concerning conclusion that Paul's dismissal of circumcision has the effect (unintended to patriarchal Paul) of theoretically "plac[ing] women on a more level playing field symbolically."²⁴⁴ Such comments do not take into consideration the multiple roles available for differently gendered people to participate in the rite, or the various meanings that circumcision

²⁴⁰ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?: Gender and Covenant In Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 73.

²⁴¹ Judith Plaskow, *The Coming of Lilith: Essays on Feminism, Judaism, and Sexual Ethics, 1972-2003*, ed. Donna Berman (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 89–93.

²⁴² Elizabeth Carroll, "Can Male Domination Be Overcome?," in *Women in a Men's Church*, ed. Virgil Elizondo and Norbert Greinacher, Concilium: Religion in the Eighties 134 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 48; von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 60.

²⁴³ Levine et al., "Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation," 93.

²⁴⁴ Jorunn Økland, "Pauline Letters," in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Benjamin H. Dunning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 321. He continues, "While they could not remove any foreskin, they could have a special relationship with God. Thus, whereas in Paul's context gender hierarchy was grounded in the physical difference between male and female genitalia and the male given priority, attention, and care, when Paul seeks to abolish circumcision for Christians, by the same token, he also removes the physical grounding for male religious prerogative."

held for first-century Jews. Furthermore, they do not equally grapple with the deeply ingrained sexism that has been manifested in Christian communities from their very inception.

When we analyze the role of gender in the practices of populations who have been labeled Oriental, we must do so with caution that we do not essentialize populations as inherently more hierarchical and unjust by virtue of their supposedly less developed position in world history. The cultures of people of color have been assumed *a priori* to be more sexist since these cultures are constructed as backwards and regressive according to the colonialist paradigm in which the West is at the apex of development and progress. A book by the white feminist Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, has been highlighted as an example of this flawed, colonialist approach. Uma Narayan critiques Daly for how she reduces Indian women to sati, without attending to historical particulars or other structural inequities.²⁴⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that, by depicting South Asian women and other women of color as a homogenous oppressed mass:

Western feminists alone become the true “subjects” of this counter-history. Third world women, on the other hand, never rise above their generality and their “object” status... third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read “not progressive”), family-oriented (read “traditional”), legal minors (read “they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights”), illiterate (read “ignorant”), domestic (read “backward”) and sometimes revolutionary (read “their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they must-fight!”).²⁴⁶

Feminist analysis falls into a trap when it essentializes colonized and formerly colonized societies as regressive foils to the purportedly progressing Western world. Mohanty urges a mode of feminist analysis that instead takes careful notice of “a certain historically and culturally specific mode of patriarchal organization,” rather than assuming a universal patriarchy that only

²⁴⁵ Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*:, 46–59. See also, Audre Lorde, “An Open Letter to Mary Daly,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: The Crossing Press, 1984), 66–71.

²⁴⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Boundary 2* 12.3 (1984): 351, 352.

differs in degree around the world and that is stronger in “third world” regions.²⁴⁷ South Asian people who want to critique the sexism in their communities face the challenge of addressing it without inviting or perpetuating colonialist and racist stereotypes.

South Asian gender relations, like gender relations all across the globe, are immensely complex, and must be investigated with careful attention to local contexts, multiple axes of oppression, and how colonial intervention has shaped traditions. Like women of many ethnicities, South Asian women face gendered constraints and violence including parental control over dating and marriage, domestic abuse, and steep expectations for household labor.²⁴⁸ What is different from Western communities, however, is the ideological investment of the future of the postcolonial nation in female South Asian bodies.²⁴⁹ Women and girls are imagined to keep tradition alive in their bodies against the dangerous incursion of colonial, liberal Western influence.²⁵⁰ As we have seen, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cuttingly summarizes the colonial project of white saviorism as, “White men are saving brown women from brown men.”²⁵¹ Colonizing men and colonized men are engaged in “a struggle between competing masculinities,” and colonial masculine power not only exerts itself over women, but also feminizes conquered land and men so as to discursively overpower them as well.²⁵² Thomas Macaulay, a notorious British colonizer, wrote about the Indian man, “The physical organization

²⁴⁷ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 345.

²⁴⁸ Das Gupta, “What Is Indian About You?,” 582–86; Rastogi, “The Indian American Woman Experience,” 37–40; Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 124–25.

²⁴⁹ Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 96; Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 120–21.

²⁵⁰ Lata Mani, “Gender, Class, and Cultural Conflict: Indu Krishnan’s Knowing Her Place,” in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), 34–35; Shamita Das Dasgupta, “Introduction,” in *A Patchwork Shawl: Chronicles of South Asian Women in America*, ed. Shamita Das Dasgupta (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 5–6.

²⁵¹ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 296.

²⁵² Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 98.

of the Bengalee is feeble even to effeminacy... His pursuits are sedentary, his limbs delicate, his movements languid. During many ages he has been trampled upon by men of bolder and hardy breeds. Courage, independence, veracity, are qualities to which his constitution and his situation are equally unfavorable.”²⁵³ Many Indian anti-colonial nationalists reasoned that although the West had triumphed in its deployment of colonial power by virtue of its “material” strength, the East continued to have autonomy through its greater “spiritual” strength, which manifested in the home and was preserved by women.²⁵⁴ The patriarchy expressed by South Asians must be understood—though not excused—through consideration of the dual functions of this resistant response to colonialism: the policing of South Asian women’s behavior to safeguard the spiritual and domestic legacy that is believed to be the best resource against Western power, and the shoring up of the masculinity of South Asian men whose gender has been impugned in comparison to Western men.

Jewish feminism and South Asian feminism remind us that as we conduct our analysis of the gendering of circumcision, we need to pay attention to the gendering of both men and women, to account for how this gendered practice responds to interactions with the dominant culture, and to refrain from approaching first-century Jewish practices as negative foils to first-century Christian ones. In chapter 7, I discuss how it can shape our reading of this passage to know the competing discourses about circumcision circulating in the period, and the ways that uncircumcised Jewish women could nevertheless carry out circumcision. Dialoguing with Christopher Stroup’s gender-critical reading of this pericope, I arrive at a different conclusion:

²⁵³ Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Warren Hastings,” in *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, 5th ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1848), 345. Cited with a slightly different text in Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 99.

²⁵⁴ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 121, 126.

that Timothy's circumcision marks a joyful, coalitional embrace of multiple possible modes of embodying sexual self-control.

Conclusion

As I reinterpret Acts 16:1-5, South Asian feminists who speak from a range of national and religious contexts will help me to unravel the Orientalism that has shaped past interpretation of this passage. Hegemonic Western discourse views Oriental cultural practices, like South Asian arranged marriage and Jewish circumcision, as irrational, antiquated, and forced. Such discourse leaves no room for a subject who chooses to participate in such customs. South Asian feminists have proposed models for questioning Orientalist, imperialist discourse, while also rejecting essentialist, nativist discourse that accepts these customs uncritically despite the ways that they can participate in structural inequality, and simultaneously rejecting liberal feminist discourse that finds agency only in resistance. We can instead observe the ways that people make choices in community and within norms, refraining from jumping to a moralization of their actions or a valorization of a hypothetical and unattainable vision of autonomy. The practice of tradition, especially in diaspora, is located not only within interactions between one's own cultural group and the dominant cultural group, but also within interactions with other minoritized communities. It is possible both to deeply express one's specific identity and to be in strong alliance with differently identified groups, as for instance in women-of-color feminism. The gendering of tradition is crucial to analyze not only for women, but for people of all genders. As we conduct such analysis, we must be careful and detailed in describing the precise forms of gender relations that manifest around a particular practice, and we must be vigilant against the

Orientalist assumption that Eastern 'tradition' is inherently more regressive and patriarchal than Western 'modernity.'

Chapter 4: Orientalism: Western Discourse on Circumcision

Introduction

Non-Western practices are often exoticized, stigmatized, and understood as being a relic of a bygone era, mandated into existence by the power of tradition upon subjugated individuals. One such non-Western practice is circumcision, specifically, religious and non-infant circumcision. (By circumcision, I refer here only to male circumcision/genital cutting, not to female circumcision/genital cutting.) In academic writing, we hear Westerners speak of “[t]he antediluvian tribal ritual of male circumcision,” which originated in “[b]arbarism” and “began as a sacrificial religious ritual and painful rite of passage.”²⁵⁵ In contrast, we also know that “[t]o those who practice it, infant male circumcision has been a powerful sign of group identity...which is in the ‘best interest of the child.’”²⁵⁶ The vast majority of Western New Testament scholars are not personally familiar with religious and/or non-infant circumcision, and their biases against Jewish circumcision in particular are visible. Against this backdrop, there is a clearer reason for the reluctance of past interpreters to see Timothy willingly engaging in a religious circumcision as an adult.

In this chapter, I first explain the modern context of how the West views circumcision and enacts policies around it. The majority of Western countries do not practice circumcision, with the United States being a significant exception. Furthermore, medically-defined health and wellness is the standard by which Western authorities determine whether to approve or

²⁵⁵ Stephen J. Waszak, “The Historic Significance of Circumcision,” *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 51.4 (1978): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006250-197804000-00023>; J. Steven Svoboda, Peter W. Adler, and Robert S. Van Howe, “Circumcision Is Unethical and Unlawful,” *The Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics* 44.2 (2016): 264, 265.

²⁵⁶ Sander L. Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define the Relationship among the Abrahamic Religions in the Age of Diaspora,” in *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Sander L. Gilman, Collaboration and Conflict in the Age of Diaspora (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2014), 57, 66.

disapprove of circumcision. Regulation and legislation in the West have pushed the circumcisions that do occur to adhere to the standards of medicalized circumcision, devaluing the significances of circumcision as a ritual act.

Next, I turn to three specific examples of how the West applies racialized, colonial discourse to circumcision practices that are carried out in a religious context and/or on individuals past infancy. First, I highlight how the religious, infant circumcisions within Judaism are coded as painful, sexualized assault through commentary on the use or non-use of anesthetics and on the practice of metzitzah (oral suction of the circumcision wound). Second, I analyze how Muslim circumcisions, which may be performed on infants, children, and adolescents, are critiqued for violating the physical integrity of the child and compromising the child's religious future. Third, I contrast the two major types of (male) circumcision practiced in Africa today: indigenous rites, which range in age from infancy to adolescence and which are condemned as hazardous and unhygienic; and medical surgery pushed by the West as a purportedly easy solution to HIV/AIDS in Africa. Each of these three modern contexts differs slightly from the others, but all are subject to Orientalizing discourse that represents the non-Western other as violent, hierarchical, sexual, regressive, and self-destructive.²⁵⁷

Finally, I turn to the views of ancient Jewish circumcision that are present in biblical scholarship of the past and present. Although the Western discourse on modern circumcision is

²⁵⁷ My discussion of global circumcision practices is tailored to the issue of Orientalism and to matters related to the circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16. For further reading on both male and female circumcision, especially on broader anthropological perspectives, see for example, David L. Gollaher, *Circumcision: A History of the World's Most Controversial Surgery* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Ellen Gruenbaum, *The Female Circumcision Controversy: An Anthropological Perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); Eric K. Silverman, "Anthropology and Circumcision," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 419–45; Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America*, *Marked in Your Flesh : Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Rogaia Mustafa Abusharaf, ed., *Female Circumcision: Multicultural Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

couched in secular language, it is deeply shaped by Christian modes of religious thought and by Christian legacies of anti-Judaism. Jewish circumcision, especially of adult men, has been framed as legalistic, ethnocentric, and painful. The circumcision of Timothy has been read in the context of these stereotypes about Judaism and about religious, adult circumcision, and circumcision has been assumed impossible for Timothy to desire. The brief commentary of Kenyan biblical scholar Paul Mumo Kisau opens up ways for us to conceptualize Timothy's agency in his own circumcision, and the following chapter brings in South Asian feminist theory to flesh out these possibilities in more detail.

As I discuss circumcision in this chapter, I need to make a caveat similar to the one expressed by Spivak: "Obviously I am not advocating the killing of widows."²⁵⁸ In this writing, I am not advocating circumcision, whether routine infant circumcision or other types of circumcision, but I am also not making an argument against circumcision. Rather, I am analyzing the discourse that makes certain varieties of circumcision more objectionable, politicized, and fundamentally "undesirable." My methodology for discussing circumcision within these parameters is drawn from the South Asian feminist theory that I discussed in the previous chapter. Orientalist discourse controls the qualities that are attributed to South Asian "traditional" practices, such as arranged marriage. The West assumes arranged marriage to be fundamentally sexist, irrational, and forced, a misconception that bars us from viewing the reasons for which people do in fact choose to participate in the practice. Arranged marriage is not exempt from criticism, and South Asian feminists have in fact subjected it to rigorous and oppositional analysis. However, in order to see with any clarity the agency of people who participate in customs such as arranged marriage and circumcision, we need to first clear away

²⁵⁸ Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 301.

the Orientalist dust that obscures our path of sight. Having accomplished this task, I will then be on firmer footing in the next chapter as I explore circumcision more broadly in Luke-Acts.

Modern Circumcision

In most of the Western world, circumcision is a minority cultural practice. Where there are higher rates of circumcision in the West, this is most often due to the prevalence of routine infant circumcision (RIC), which is a non-religious procedure performed for generalized health, hygiene, and wellness reasons, not because of acute medical need. Circumcision takes many forms, holds many meanings, has been prevalent in communities across the globe, and dates back several thousands of years, but in the Western consciousness, the most controversial debates over circumcision concern its religious roles in Judaism and Islam within Western countries.²⁵⁹

Today, in the majority of the West, a minority of infants are circumcised, and the numbers only continue to go down. In Canada, male circumcision is on the decline, from half of infants in 1970 to less than a third of infants in 2009, ranging from a low of 9% to a high of 44% depending on province.²⁶⁰ In Australia, it has declined sharply from a peak of 85% in the 1950s to a low 10-20% by the end of the century.²⁶¹ In a substantial but less dramatic drop, rates of circumcision in New Zealand decreased from 26% in 1977 to 7% in 1991.²⁶² In the United Kingdom, circumcision rates have been low historically and only continue to get lower; about a quarter of males were circumcised in the 1940s, and rates were below 12% for males born in the

²⁵⁹ Gilman, "How Health and Disease Define," 57.

²⁶⁰ Public Health Agency of Canada, *What Mothers Say: The Canadian Maternity Experiences Survey* (Ottawa, 2009), 222; World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision: Global Trends and Determinants of Prevalence, Safety and Acceptability*, 2007, 12.

²⁶¹ Kirby R. Qin et al., "Early Childhood Circumcision in Australia: Trends over 20 Years and Interrupted Time Series Analysis," *ANZ Journal of Surgery* 91.7-8 (2021): 1491.

²⁶² Qin et al., "Early Childhood Circumcision in Australia," 1494.

early 1980s.²⁶³ Across the rest of Europe, circumcision is generally very rare.²⁶⁴ European countries with fewer than 1% circumcised include Iceland, Finland, Poland, Hungary, Portugal, and Ireland. Those with rates around 5% include Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Austria, and Spain. Those with rates between 10-15% include Bulgaria, Georgia, France, and Germany. The major exception to these trends in Western countries is the United States. Slightly over half of male infants are routinely circumcised in the United States, with regional variation creating a range from only a quarter to up to three-quarters of infants.²⁶⁵ In Southeastern Europe, there are a small handful of countries with high rates of circumcision: Bosnia & Herzegovina (42%), Albania (48%), and Kosovo (92%).

An even more uniting factor in Western communities, both in the United States and outside of it, is the reasoning that is used when determining public and medical views on circumcision. The most important quality when determining whether or not to recommend circumcision is “health.”²⁶⁶ Historically, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, circumcision was seen to provide health benefits including preventing masturbation, syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections, and epilepsy.²⁶⁷ Since the late 20th century, advocates of RIC have pointed to its ability to reduce the risk of penile cancer, of uterine cancer in female sexual partners, of urinary tract infections, and of sexually transmitted infections including HIV.²⁶⁸ Alternatively, when Western medical professional organizations recommend against RIC, they do so on the

²⁶³ World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 12.

²⁶⁴ The rates of circumcision reported below are drawn from Brian J. Morris et al., “Estimation of Country-Specific and Global Prevalence of Male Circumcision,” *Population Health Metrics* 14.4 (2016): 4–5.

²⁶⁵ Jared Lane Maeda, Ramya Chari, and Anne Elixhauser, *Circumcisions Performed in U.S. Community Hospitals, 2009*, Statistical Brief (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2012), 4; World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 11.

²⁶⁶ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define.”

²⁶⁷ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 63–64; Sana Loue, “Body Modification of Minors,” in *Case Studies in Society, Religion, and Bioethics* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 44.

²⁶⁸ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 65; Loue, “Body Modification of Minors,” 44.

basis that there is not sufficient evidence for health benefits that outweigh the health risks, and they sometimes add that there is in fact sufficient evidence for active harm to the infant's health.²⁶⁹ Health becomes the most important way of evaluating circumcision, even though it also carries substantial social, religious, and sexual meanings; "health trumps group identity unless the group identity can draw on a health rationale."²⁷⁰

Multiple Western countries have enacted legislation that requires circumcision to adhere to certain medical standards.²⁷¹ In 2001, Sweden mandated that circumcision always be carried out with anesthesia administered by a doctor or nurse; before two months of age, the circumcision itself may be carried out by any person recognized by the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare, but after two months of age, only a doctor may perform it.²⁷² In 2012, there were active debates in Germany over whether to ban religious circumcisions entirely, and the German parliament ultimately decided to only create similar types of restrictions as Sweden, though with six months of age providing the turning point.²⁷³ Opponents of such laws worry that families will be forced to rely on often unwilling doctors to perform the increasingly uncommon procedure, and that the very meaning of the cultural and religious ceremony changes by being medicalized. Also in 2012, the New York City Board of Health in the United States passed a new regulation in direct response to the techniques used in circumcision in ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities; parents were required to be warned that metzitzah (i.e., "direct oral suction," "drawing the blood

²⁶⁹ Gilman, "How Health and Disease Define," 56, 68.

²⁷⁰ Gilman, "How Health and Disease Define," 67.

²⁷¹ For a summary of the recommendations and laws concerning circumcision, laid out next to those concerning female genital cutting and other body modifications such as tattoos, piercings, and immunizations, in selected countries, see Loue, "Body Modification of Minors," 54–58.

²⁷² Yngve Hofvander, "New Law on Male Circumcision in Sweden," *The Lancet* 359.9306 (2002): 630; Johanna Schiratzki, "Banning God's Law in the Name of the Holy Body: The Nordic Position on Ritual Male Circumcision," *The Family in Law* 5.35 (2011): 37. The above sources correct the slight errors found in the details reported in Gilman, "How Health and Disease Define," 65; Loue, "Body Modification of Minors," 57.

²⁷³ Gilman, "How Health and Disease Define," 70.

from the circumcision wound through sucking”) had a risk of transmitting herpes to the infant.²⁷⁴

In the ensuing debate, the importance of the rite for personal and social identity was held in tension with the (real or theoretical) risk to the health of the child.

In the Western world, it is therefore not only the norm that males remain uncircumcised, but that, when they are circumcised, the procedure occurs in a medicalized setting as an infant. Even in the United States, only certain types of circumcisions are acceptable to the dominant white, Christian population. Circumcision “separate[es] an ‘us’ from a ‘them.’”²⁷⁵ The non-white and non-Christian mores of circumcision are starkly differentiated from the white, Christian boundaries of acceptable circumcision. Amongst the vast array of circumcision practices around the globe, the Western mind is consistently troubled by circumcisions that are religious and/or that are performed on non-infants, i.e., children, adolescents, or adults. I focus here on the internal practices and external perceptions of Jews, Muslims, and Africans when it comes to circumcision.²⁷⁶ In particular, I focus on the Orientalizing discourse around anesthetics, metzitzah, harm to children, religious freedom of children, hygiene, and HIV/AIDS. Although many of these topics intertwine and appear across all three types of circumcision, I highlight the specific manifestations of Orientalism that are most common for each type.

Jewish Circumcision

²⁷⁴ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 62, 67.

²⁷⁵ James A. Boon, “Circumscribing Circumcision/Uncircumcision: An Essay amidst the History of Difficult Description,” in *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters Between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 556.

²⁷⁶ Religious circumcision is also practiced in a very small number of Christian denominations, and other ethnic groups that practice circumcision include some Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and Indigenous communities.

Jewish circumcisions are normally performed at 8 days of age. Since the rabbinic period, circumcision has involved the complete removal of the tissue covering the glans; earlier in history, less tissue would have been removed, facilitating the ancient practices of infibulation and epispasm.²⁷⁷ Circumcisions may also occur at older ages in the case of conversion; in stricter varieties of Judaism, converts of any age are required to be circumcised or, if already circumcised, to have a ritual drop of blood drawn. The circumcision is part of a larger ceremony (brit milah), and the person who circumcises (mohel) is usually a trained community leader.²⁷⁸ Circumcision is an occasion for celebration, and it is witnessed and attended by parents, family members, friends, and community members, with men clustered closer to the infant than women based on tradition since the medieval period.²⁷⁹ Some Jewish parents choose a hospital circumcision over a brit milah, and some choose an alternative brit ceremony that either decenters circumcision or eliminates it completely.²⁸⁰ In the United States and during earlier periods in Europe, Jewish circumcision has been the type of religious circumcision most in the public consciousness.²⁸¹

²⁷⁷ Nissan Rubin, "Brit Milah: A Study of Change in Custom," in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 87–97. Infibulation is the practice of using a fibula or pin to secure the end of the foreskin so that the glans is covered. Infibulation could be practiced by a circumcised person who wanted to temporarily stretch the shortened foreskin and therefore hide his circumcision, but it could also be practiced by an uncircumcised person who wanted to prevent the foreskin from moving and accidentally uncovering the glans, for example, while exercising. Epispasm is the practice of surgically stretching a foreskin so that it covers the glans. Epispasm could be practiced by a circumcised person who wanted to permanently become uncircumcised in appearance, but it could also be practiced by an uncircumcised person who had been born with a short foreskin and who wanted to improve the appearance of the penis to align it with dominant cultural standards of uncircumcision. For more, see Hall, "Epispasm"; Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 139–44.

²⁷⁸ For detailed description of the ceremony, see Lawrence A. Hoffmann, "How Ritual Means: Ritual Circumcision in Rabbinic Culture and Today," *Studia Liturgica* 23.1 (1993): 84–85; Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 24–27.

²⁷⁹ Hoffmann, "How Ritual Means," 95; Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 26–27; Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 4, 46–47.

²⁸⁰ Hoffmann, "How Ritual Means," 96–97.

²⁸¹ Gilman, "How Health and Disease Define," 55, 60.

Certain features of Jewish circumcision have been especially denigrated and exoticized. First, as noted above, some countries have legally banned circumcision that lacks an anesthetic administered by a medical professional. When we consider such criticism, we should remember that it was not until 1987 that Western medicine recognized the need for anesthetics for any medical procedures for newborns, and not until 1994 that researchers realized that the standard administration of acetaminophen did not relieve the pain of infant circumcision at all.²⁸² In comparison, Jewish circumcision practices have long included offering the child a small amount of wine, or more recently offering a pacifier with sugar water, which sometimes was the pair to acetaminophen in hospital settings in the past, and which has been found to be equally efficacious as the EMLA (a topical anesthetic) that continues to be used in hospital settings today.²⁸³ Some Jewish circumcisions involve medical anesthesia, and some mohelim are doctors themselves. When it comes to the experience of pain during circumcision, the gap between medical circumcision and religious circumcision is much narrower than has been perceived.

Metzitzah has been extraordinarily controversial in the public eye. Some mohelim have switched to using a swab, sponge, or tube instead of the mouth.²⁸⁴ The original purpose of metzitzah was to improve the hygiene and safety of the ritual, as it was believed that it “stopped bleeding and cleansed the wound.”²⁸⁵ In the wake of the New York regulation discussed above,

²⁸² Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 136–37.

²⁸³ Edward Reichman and Fred Rosner, “The Use of Anesthesia in Circumcision: A Re-Evaluation of the Halakic Sources,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 34.3 (2000): 9–10; Michael Rosen, “Anesthesia for Ritual Circumcision in Neonates,” *Pediatric Anesthesia* 20.12 (2010): 1125–26. Much more effective forms of pain relief for medical circumcision are a dorsal penile nerve block or a ring block (the most effective): Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 138.

²⁸⁴ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 62; Loue, “Body Modification of Minors,” 39; Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 29.

²⁸⁵ Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 29.

one local pediatric doctor commented, “It’s crazy that we allow this to go on.”²⁸⁶ A local pediatric urologist countered, “They feel that if their child doesn’t have the metzitzah, he is not Jewish, so this, to them, is the most important act that they can do for their son in life...Medically, I don’t approve of it...but if you’re asking me, ‘Does it cause harm?’ I haven’t seen enough proof that it causes harm.”²⁸⁷ This controversy has centered on illnesses that are conventionally identified as sexually transmitted: herpes, syphilis, HIV.²⁸⁸ The matter is therefore not simply one of health, since circumcision inherently carries risks; about 1 in 4,000 cases of metzitzah result in herpes transmission, and about 15 in 4,000 hospital circumcisions result in wound infections that are treated with antibiotics.²⁸⁹ Rather, although rarely stated overtly, the critique carries an uneasiness with a perceived sexual overtone to metzitzah. One academic critic writes, “one has the spectacle of a man taking into his mouth the genitals of a baby, with no legal consequence.”²⁹⁰ In this comment, metzitzah has been implicitly framed as sexual assault, more so than other types of manipulation of a child’s genitals that must necessarily accompany circumcision.

Compared to medical circumcision, Jewish religious circumcision is depicted in the public eye as more painful and more violating. Robin Judd has documented how European criticism of circumcision in recent centuries has “invoked radical antisemitic discourses

²⁸⁶ Sharon Otterman, “Board Votes to Regulate Circumcision, Citing Risks,” *The New York Times*, 13 September 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/14/nyregion/health-board-votes-to-regulate-jewish-circumcision-ritual.html>; Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 67.

²⁸⁷ Otterman, “Board Votes to Regulate Circumcision, Citing Risks”; Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 67.

²⁸⁸ Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 28–30; Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 67.

²⁸⁹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Neonatal Herpes Simplex Virus Infection Following Jewish Ritual Circumcisions That Included Direct Orogenital Suction - New York City, 2000-2011,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 61.22 (2012): 407; William F. Gee and Julian S. Ansell, “Neonatal Circumcision: A Ten-Year Overview: With Comparison of the Gomco Clamp and the Plastibell Device,” *Pediatrics* 58.6 (1976): 825.

²⁹⁰ Dena S. Davis, “Ancient Rites and New Laws: How Should We Regulate Religious Circumcision of Minors?,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 39.7 (2013): 457.

concerning the Jews' alleged deviant sexuality and blood thirst."²⁹¹ The infant is constructed as the victim of harmful tradition, which refuses to change to accommodate the supposedly modern, rational sensibilities of health and medicine.

Muslim Circumcision

In Islam, male circumcision (khitan) may be performed at any age after birth, but it is important for a child to be circumcised by the time of puberty in order to fully participate in Muslim worship.²⁹² Circumcision is a fitrah, "a measure of personal cleanliness that reflects a man's mental and moral health," alongside "shaving the pubic hair, moustache trimming, paring the nails, and plucking hair under the armpits."²⁹³ Unlike Jewish circumcision and Western medical circumcision, according to which the foreskin is separated from the glans and completely removed, classic Muslim circumcision only shortens the foreskin so that the glans is exposed.²⁹⁴ However, there is considerable variation in practice, and circumcision may also be much more extensive, such as subincision of the penis or removal of skin farther up on the penis and beyond.²⁹⁵ Again unlike Jewish circumcision and Western medical circumcision, circumcision in Muslim communities can include the circumcision of women, particularly in Africa and Southeast Asia, which similarly can vary greatly in degree of cutting.²⁹⁶ Increasingly in Europe, it is Muslim circumcision that is first thought of when it comes to religious

²⁹¹ Robin Judd, *Contested Rituals: Circumcision, Kosher Butchering, and Jewish Political Life in Germany in Germany, 1843-1933* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 7.

²⁹² Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 46–47.

²⁹³ Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 45.

²⁹⁴ Gollaher, *Circumcision*, 47–48.

²⁹⁵ Loue, "Body Modification of Minors," 40.

²⁹⁶ S. A. H. Rizvi et al., "Religious Circumcision: A Muslim View," *BJU International* 83.S1 (1999): 13–

circumcision.²⁹⁷ In South Asia, circumcision is often a distinguishing marker between Muslims and Hindus, between whom there has been longstanding tension and violence.²⁹⁸

Muslim circumcision faces particular scrutiny for being regularly performed on older children. It is not uncommon to hear it argued that as a person's age increases, the rate of complications and the difficulty of healing after a circumcision also increases.²⁹⁹ In the 2012 German legislation noted above, circumcision could be performed by a traditional practitioner only before the age of 6 months.

Although the legislation was framed in general terms, it created, *de facto*, a significant disparity between Jews and Muslims: Jews could continue to practise their tradition (of circumcision on the eighth day by a community circumciser), whereas Muslims (who in Germany commonly circumcise at a later age) would be required to rely on a medical professional.³⁰⁰

The circumcision of Muslim children and adolescents has been critiqued not only on medical grounds, but also on the grounds that Islam does not specify a set time for all circumcisions, creating a loophole in a government's legal obligations to respect the practice of religion. Furthermore, deeply anti-Muslim sentiment can be infused into discussions of Muslim circumcision, as revealed for instance in an academic exchange related by James A. Boon. After a feminist scholar questioned a presenter on the grounds that he had not critiqued the sexism in the material he had covered on genitalia in Christian art, the presenter justified himself

by adducing a case of what he called “even worse misogyny”—Islam. During Islamic circumcision rites, he assured his accuser, dominant male Muslims reduce passive males to utter subjugation. This assertion—well beyond either interlocutor's realm of expertise—received for him her first nod of approbation. *Pace*... At a moment of internecine hostility among Europeanists..., an “even worse” *other* is invoked, against which both sides can join forces. Islam—as usual, poorly “covered,” and perhaps most so

²⁹⁷ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 66, 67.

²⁹⁸ Nomita Chandhiok and R. R. Gangakhedkar, “The New Evidence on Male Circumcision: An Indian Perspective,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 15.29 (2007): 54.

²⁹⁹ Iddo Porat, “The Starting at Home Principle: On Ritual Animal Slaughter, Male Circumcision and Proportionality,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 41.1 (2021): 39, 41, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojls/gqaa027>.

³⁰⁰ Lena Salaymeh and Shai Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition: Jewish and Muslim Circumcisions in Germany,” *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies* 41.2 (2021): 441.

when circumcising—had leapt to mind as a transparent case of politics pure and simple: the unfettered dominance of senior males over novice boys or youths and women alike.³⁰¹

The circumcision of the non-infant child has been received as an expression of violent power inequality based on age, rooted in the hierarchical culture that is supposedly inherent to Islam.

Furthermore, the autonomy of the child is invoked by Western discourse in a tacit expression of the hope that the child would grow up to reject Islam. In many Western contexts including in Germany, Islam itself is construed as “a threat to public order.”³⁰² The German legislation was sparked by a court case that concerned a Muslim doctor circumcising a four-year-old Muslim child, who experienced a minor complication.³⁰³ The court ruled that “circumcision constitutes unjustifiable bodily harm,” which cannot be justified either by “social adequacy” or by religious participation, and furthermore that circumcision is a violation of a child’s right to religious freedom.³⁰⁴ The court viewed childhood religious circumcision as unnecessarily forced, since the parents could simply, in the court’s view, “wait until their son is able to make the decision himself whether to have a circumcision as a visible sign of his affiliation to Islam.”³⁰⁵ Yet, although the state claims to be invested in personal freedom and decision-making, it in fact incentivizes the construction of circumcision as an obligatory practice, because only rites that are documented as obligatory are worthy of protection under a subject’s right to practice their religion.³⁰⁶ Moreover, the state represents non-circumcision as religiously neutral in contrast to

³⁰¹ Boon, “Circumscribing Circumcision/Uncircumcision,” 584.

³⁰² Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 451.

³⁰³ In 2010, a doctor circumcised a four-year-old Muslim boy in a hospital, and when he experienced excessive bleeding, “not caused by the operation itself but by the fact that the boy’s mother had taken off the bandage too early,” the emergency room doctor alerted the authorities, and the original doctor was charged with battery: Schirin Amir-Moazami, “Investigating the Secular Body: The Politics of the Male Circumcision Debate in Germany,” *ReOrient* 1.2 (2016): 150; Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 440.

³⁰⁴ Jens Greve, “The German Debate on Male Circumcision and Habermas’ Model of Post-secularity,” *Bioethics* 33.4 (2019): 460–61.

³⁰⁵ Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 447.

³⁰⁶ Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 457. For more on the textual history of circumcision in Islam and the extent to which it is considered obligatory, see Kathryn Kueny, “Abraham’s Test:

the circumcised body as a religious statement, treating the uncircumcised Christian or irreligious body as the unmarked norm.

The threat of Muslim circumcision in the Western eye is heightened by contemporary Islamophobia in combination with the visual of the child in a liminal, indeterminate space. Schirin Amir-Moazami points out that “[c]hildren are not just any category within the population; they are the main subjects of regulation, education, and discipline and therefore hard-fought about... the child’s well-being is [assumed to be] threatened by a religious upbringing and ultimately to be decided upon by the state.”³⁰⁷ Muslim circumcision is discursively constructed as a physically violent manifestation of a religion that has been narrowly coded as defined by “terrorism” and threat to the secular public.

African Circumcision

In addition to Muslim circumcision, there are two major types of male circumcision that take place in Africa. The first type is circumcision that is indigenous to the region and performed for local, cultural reasons. In North Africa and West Africa, over 80% of men are circumcised.³⁰⁸ In sub-Saharan Africa, the incidence varies based on country; for example, rates are very high in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Somalia, while they are very low in Rwanda, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.³⁰⁹ Within countries, the incidence also varies based on ethnicity.³¹⁰ Although some groups

Islamic Male Circumcision as Anti/Ante-Covenantal Practice,” in *Bible and Qur’ān: Essays in Scriptural Intertextuality*, ed. John C. Reeves (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 161–82.

³⁰⁷ Amir-Moazami, “Investigating the Secular Body,” 155.

³⁰⁸ World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 9; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, *Neonatal and Child Male Circumcision: A Global Review*, 2010, 8.

³⁰⁹ Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, *Neonatal and Child Male Circumcision*, 8.

³¹⁰ World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 4.

circumcise infants, it is more common for circumcision to be “a rite of passage to manhood” and therefore to be performed on older children or teenagers.³¹¹

Circumcision in Africa and among Africans in diaspora has been stigmatized as dirty and dangerously unhygienic. The World Health Organization has formulated the goal that African circumcisions need to be changed by being performed within aseptic conditions.³¹² The authors of one WHO report make only passing reference to the fact that the local meaning of circumcision is not necessarily as surgery but as rite, where the aim is not medical correction but often to enact “bravery and endurance.”³¹³ The standards by which indigenous circumcision are measured are inappropriate for their meaning. As Sander L. Gilman comments, “Certainly one of the major points of confusion in the history of circumcision is the elision (and now the assumption) that the meaning of this practice within religion is coterminous with that in medicine.”³¹⁴ This perception also recurs in diaspora. For several years after the event, critical commentators in Ireland have scathingly referred to the 2005 trial of a Nigerian traditional circumciser.³¹⁵ The practitioner had carried out a home circumcision on a Nigerian infant, who died of bleeding complications.³¹⁶ The legal charge was “of intentionally or recklessly engaging in conduct, by performing a circumcision with a razor blade.”³¹⁷ In the words of a controversial Irish journalist, the “rusty, trusty razor blade” looms large in the Western eye as the image of the

³¹¹ World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 4–5, 10.

³¹² World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 19–21.

³¹³ World Health Organization, *Male Circumcision*, 21.

³¹⁴ Gilman, “How Health and Disease Define,” 55.

³¹⁵ Kevin Myers, “An Irishman’s Diary,” *The Irish Times*, 11 January 2006, § Opinion; John Peters, “Circumcision,” *British Journal of General Practice* 60.572 (2010): 215.

³¹⁶ Claire Hogan, “The Accommodation of Islam in the Irish Workplace, Classroom and Hospital,” in *Minority Religions under Irish Law: Islam in National and International Context*, ed. Kathryn O’Sullivan (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 100.

³¹⁷ “Man Cleared over Circumcision Death,” *The Irish Times*, 7 October 2005, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/man-cleared-over-circumcision-death-1.1183296>.

“antiquated barbarism” of “freelance butchers on house-calls.”³¹⁸ The judge in the case, recognizing the existence of such stereotypes in the broader public, asked the jury “not to bring their ‘white Western values’ to bear when deciding the case.”³¹⁹

The second type of African circumcision is the mirror image of the first. After scientific trials in the mid-2000s, voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) has been proposed as a medical procedure preventing against the contraction of HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. The two adjectives used to describe this type of circumcision implicitly contrast it with other possible types; it is voluntary rather than forced, and it is medical rather than traditional. VMMC has been proposed as a “cost effective intervention” when compared to “vaccines or therapeutics.”³²⁰ Nancy Bedford is a rare voice in biblical studies who has brought VMMC into conversation with first-century circumcision, suggesting that it could be in keeping with the spirit of Paul’s message in Galatians “to promote infant male circumcision...and lead Gentile Christians to readopt male circumcision as part of a wider commitment to the sexual health of the churches.”³²¹

On the level of medical and scientific validity, critics of VMMC have pointed out that condoms are even more inexpensive and effective, and that investing in circumcision takes away funding from the provision of condoms, and also risks sending the message that circumcision offers immunity to HIV/AIDS and therefore protects against high-risk sexual practices.³²² In fact, sex during the period of healing from circumcision dramatically increases the risk of HIV

³¹⁸ Myers, “An Irishman’s Diary.”

³¹⁹ Hogan, “Minority Religions under Irish Law,” 100.

³²⁰ Marie Fox and Michael Thomson, “The New Politics of Male Circumcision: HIV/AIDS, Health Law and Social Justice,” *Legal Studies* 32.2 (2012): 257, 260–61.

³²¹ Nancy Elizabeth Bedford, *Galatians*, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 156–57.

³²² Fox and Thomson, “The New Politics of Male Circumcision,” 265.

transmission.³²³ Moreover, a 2009 study found that while circumcision marginally reduces the risk of HIV transmission from female to male, it equally increases the risk of HIV transmission from male to female.³²⁴ Despite these weaknesses in the scientific evidence, there is discussion about extrapolating to implement such policies in other parts of the world like India.³²⁵ Temba T. Rugwiji has referred to the efficacy of VMMC as a “myth” on par with other harmful and unfounded myths about HIV/AIDS.³²⁶

In addition to the evidentiary concerns, there are also significant social concerns related to the advocacy of VMMC in the African context. When proposing circumcision as an easy solution to the complex issue of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Western drivers of change infringe upon the bodily autonomy of African men:

it is problematic simply to presume the presence of autonomy and consent where circumcision forms part of a clinical research programme and subsequent mass public health policy which is sponsored and heavily promoted by international organisations motivated by an urgent search for an effective response to the pandemic. In such a context, scant attention has been devoted to the bodily risks of the procedure, the autonomy interests of men subject to it, and the social justice implications of targeting procedures solely at men.³²⁷

As a concrete example of such broader social justice concerns, financial incentives were used in the research that underlies the public health strategy of circumcision for HIV prevention, compromising the ethical integrity of the studies.

As most participants were unemployed, the fact that they were paid and provided with two years of free medical care amounted to a substantial inducement... Do institutional

³²³ Fox and Thomson, “The New Politics of Male Circumcision,” 266.

³²⁴ Gregory J. Boyle and George Hill, “Sub-Saharan African Randomised Clinical Trials into Male Circumcision and HIV Transmission: Methodological, Ethical and Legal Concerns,” *Journal of Law and Medicine* 19.2 (2011): 317.

³²⁵ Chandhiok and Gangakhedkar, “The New Evidence on Male Circumcision: An Indian Perspective.” The WHO is not pursuing implementation in countries like India at this time. They recommend VMMC only for locales where there is a low circumcision rate and high HIV/AIDS rate in the general population.

³²⁶ Temba T. Rugwiji, “Circumcision and Prevention of HIV and AIDS in Zimbabwe: Male Genital Cutting as a Religio-Cultural Rite,” *HTS* 74.1.4848 (2018): 5. Such other myths include the idea that if an HIV-positive man penetrates a female virgin, he will be cured.

³²⁷ Fox and Thomson, “The New Politics of Male Circumcision,” 271.

review boards have lower standards when considering experiments in African countries than they have in the United States?... Does the United States medical establishment regard poor, black African men as an expendable resource to be exploited?³²⁸

Advocating for adult circumcision in other countries, Western organizations push their own internal political and social anxieties onto other populations. The United States has been funding much of the research into this strategy.³²⁹ The funding under President George W. Bush in particular was invested in moving away from the existing ABC model (abstinence until marriage; be faithful to one or few partners; and using condoms) to an abstinence-only model that did not have to discuss condom use.³³⁰ Western models of HIV/AIDS incorrectly position it as solely sexually transmitted, and furthermore racialize HIV/AIDS such that it is “is no longer represented as a gay plague but an African one.”³³¹ Furthermore, Western advocacy for VMMC stands in tension with the regulation of religious and non-infant circumcision within Western borders. While European legislation restricts what circumcisions can take place above a few months of age on the grounds that older circumcision is more dangerous, VMMC embraces circumcision at any age and into adulthood. Medical meanings of circumcision are able to completely subsume and erase the social meanings of circumcision, as adult circumcision is praised as health savior under Western directive but is demonized as deadly barbarism within indigenous practice.

The racialized, colonial power dynamics between the West and Africa result in significant contradictions and hypocrisies. Western agencies trumpet medical meanings of circumcision as the only legible ones, repudiating local cultural meanings of circumcision and

³²⁸ Boyle and Hill, “Sub-Saharan African Randomised Clinical Trials into Male Circumcision and HIV Transmission,” 328–29.

³²⁹ Fox and Thomson, “The New Politics of Male Circumcision,” 258.

³³⁰ Sander L. Gilman, “Review,” *Global Discourse* 3.2 (2013): 376.

³³¹ Jonathan Montgomery, “Medicalizing Crime—Criminalizing Health? The Role of Law,” in *The Criminal Justice System and Health Care*, ed. Charles A. Erin and Suzanne Ost (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 267; Fox and Thomson, “The New Politics of Male Circumcision,” 260.

proposing VMMC even in non-circumcising cultures. The advocacy of VMMC is unethically embroiled in longstanding misrepresentations of African populations as backwards, hypersexual, violent, and dirty. The discursive representations of Jewish, Muslim, and African circumcision reviewed above have showed significant variation but also consistent similarity rooted in racist Orientalism: religious and/or adult circumcision is emblematic of a people group's irrational traditionalism, which is forcibly passed down to the next generation through the physical act of circumcision.

Ancient Jewish Circumcision

In my survey above of the Western critique of modern circumcisions that are religious and/or performed on non-infants, predominantly among Jewish, Muslim, and African populations, I have focused on the secular, medicalized discourse at the surface of the Orientalizing worldview. However, Christian reasoning undergirds it by taking Christian modes of religiosity as the default, as well as because of the legacy of anti-Judaism that Christian hegemony has given power to. Circumcision comes to stand for the parts of Judaism that Christianity marks as “undesirable,” i.e., unable to be desired. It is framed as legalistic, exclusivist, and painful as a way of demonizing Judaism compared to Christianity. All three of these notions of circumcision are present in past interpretation of the circumcision of Timothy.

When religious circumcision is critiqued as an imposition on the will of the child, a very particular understanding of religion, tradition, and autonomy is assumed, and that understanding is informed by Christian standards. Commenting on the juridical ruling and legislation in Germany in particular, James White explains that “non-religious meanings, labeled in this article

as ‘secular’ to reflect the approach taken by the Cologne court, are actually, often Christianoform in nature.”³³²

Lena Salaymeh and Shai Lavi point out that “[t]he secular (Christian-mediated) understanding of religiosity is based on a notion of autonomous choice.”³³³ That is, religion in the West is something that the self chooses (e.g., by faith), not one’s parents or community. However, other cultures have understood religion as something that “one is born into,” such that circumcision marks one’s inherited identity as Jewish or Muslim, not one’s choice to identify as such.³³⁴ Moreover, the court also contradicts itself when it fights for the child’s freedom to choose their own religion, because it fails to “explain why being circumcised would prevent someone from changing his religion.”³³⁵ Salaymeh and Lavi observe that infants are permitted to be baptized in Germany, but “[p]resumably, for the German Court, baptism did not raise a similar concern to that of circumcision because it does not leave a mark on the body.”³³⁶ When the ideal religion is framed around the Christian notion of the disembodied will’s adherence to the divine, embodied manifestations of religion are scorned as less developed and less worthy of social protection.

Christianity also has a long history of essentializing and rejecting Judaism. Christians fail to visualize the vibrancy of the Judaism that continues to exist before their eyes, instead freezing Judaism as the narrow slices of Judaism found within the Old and New Testaments, relegating it to the past. New Testament scholars in recent decades have begun taking to heart the powerful critiques of Jewish scholars and of sympathetic Christian scholars who have endeavored to be

³³² James White, “Excising the Foreign: Islamophobia and the 2012 Circumcision Ban in Cologne, Germany,” *Past Imperfect* 21.2 (2019): 110.

³³³ Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 443.

³³⁴ Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 443.

³³⁵ Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 442.

³³⁶ Salaymeh and Lavi, “Religion Is Secularised Tradition,” 443.

allies. E. P. Sanders famously argued that it is a misperception that Judaism taught law while Paul preached grace, and he instead offered the term “covenantal nomism” to describe Palestinian Judaism in the Second Temple Period while “participationist eschatology” described the writings of Paul.³³⁷ By reconceptualizing the categories that scholars bring to the material, Sanders helped put these two “patterns of religion” on more equal footing, after Christians have for so long had the power to unfavorably define the content of Judaism. In her many publications, Amy-Jill Levine has exhorted the guild of “both traditional historical-critical and now multicultural reader-response” scholars to ensure that their New Testament exegesis is not informed by stereotypes of “Judaism as legalistic, obsessed with ritual purity, elitist, money-loving, militaristic,” “as ossified, xenophobic, misogynistic, and lifeless.”³³⁸ These powerful and harmful anti-Jewish stereotypes continue to circulate in public and academic discussions of the New Testament.

Throughout the history of Christian interpretation and until today, the Jewish circumcision described in the Bible has been regarded in a polemically negative fashion. Circumcision has been viewed as the reverse of what theologians and biblical exegetes “consider salvific...represent[ing] an unacceptable lifestyle or religion, religion itself, or a sense of exclusiveness.”³³⁹ Jewish circumcision has served as a foil to Christian baptism: a legalistic, exclusionary, painful rite in contrast to a grace-filled, inclusive, spiritual sacrament. There is a continuity between how the West views Jewish, Muslim, and African circumcision and how

³³⁷ E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1977).

³³⁸ Amy-Jill Levine, “Multiculturalism, Women’s Studies, Anti-Judaism,” *JFSR* 19.1 (2003): 121, 122; Amy-Jill Levine, “When the Bible Becomes Weaponized: Detecting and Disarming Jew-Hatred,” *ST* 75.2 (2021): 182. See also, for example, Levine, “Lilies of the Field and Wandering Jews”; Levine et al., “Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation”; Levine, “Reflections on Reflections: Jesus, Judaism, and Jewish-Christian Relations.”

³³⁹ Nina E. Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 143.

Christianity views ancient Jewish circumcision. Ancient Jewish circumcision is iconically religious, and it stands as an image of the caricature of Judaism as a religion trapped under the weight of the law and secluded within its own ethnic, male-dominated system. The pain of Jewish circumcision is invoked especially when it comes to the adult man who is circumcised or who is threatened with circumcision, exemplified by Timothy as well as the recipients of the letter to the Galatians.

Both ancient and modern Christian commentators have represented Jewish circumcision as religiously substandard because it works within a system of “law” instead of “grace,” as Nina E. Livesey has documented. Justin Martyr “associates physical circumcision with those who perform unlawful deeds, displease God and are hardhearted,” in contrast to the “spiritual [circumcision] associated with the heart” that takes place for Christians.³⁴⁰ Augustine viewed “the circumcised Jew...[as] a negative example, a Pelagian, someone who tries to save himself without the help of God’s grace.”³⁴¹ Aquinas argued “that circumcision was less efficacious than baptism” when it came to conferring grace, though he did acknowledge circumcision’s spiritual power.³⁴² Luther placed greater emphasis than previous theologians on circumcision’s role in marking the “distinctiveness for a people from whom Christ was to be born.”³⁴³ But once Christ had come, the need for circumcision had ended, and henceforth people who become circumcised “not only deny Christ, the only basis of salvation, but they set themselves in the place of God and thereby break the First Commandment.”³⁴⁴ More recently, Rudolf Bultmann saw circumcision as an expression of the flesh, and a circumcised person “led a life in opposition to God’s true

³⁴⁰ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 125.

³⁴¹ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 131.

³⁴² Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 137.

³⁴³ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 141.

³⁴⁴ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 143.

demands, an inauthentic existence.”³⁴⁵ Ernst Käsemann characterized circumcision, as part of the law, “as worldly and contingent, making it incompatible with integration into a person’s essential being.”³⁴⁶ Henceforth, modern commentators have continued to position “circumcision as a work of law that does not bring about salvation...as an indication of achievement and boasting...as a badge of distinction...[and] as representative of an ineffectual religion or lifestyle.”³⁴⁷ By positioning circumcision as emblematic of Jewish “law,” Christian interpreters have represented it as a rite that is antiquated, worthless, contrary to true spirituality, and a relic of hollow tradition.

Circumcision has also been regarded “as the sign of a Jew.”³⁴⁸ In Livesey’s estimation, this is an improved and more “neutral” framework because it allows Paul’s denunciation of circumcision to be read as a specific disapproval of gentiles taking on the customs of Jews, not a unilateral disavowal of Jewish practices.³⁴⁹ Although it is certainly possible to positively discuss circumcision as an expression of Jewish belonging, it must be cautioned that there is a long history of representing Jewishness not as a rich identity with vibrant cultural traditions, but as an insular, ethnocentric religion that was hostile to outsiders. This picture of Judaism has been a convenient inverse for defining Christianity as a universal, non-ethnic, inclusive mode of spirituality. Denise Kimber Buell, Caroline Johnson Hodge, Love L. Sechrest, and David G. Horrell have critiqued this anti-Jewish picture, pointing out the active presence of ethnic/racial discourse and practices in Christianity.³⁵⁰ The dangers of representing circumcision as

³⁴⁵ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 145.

³⁴⁶ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 146.

³⁴⁷ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 146–49.

³⁴⁸ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 150.

³⁴⁹ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 151.

³⁵⁰ Denise Kimber Buell, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia, 2005); Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Love L. Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, LNTS 410 (London: T&T Clark International, 2009); Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*.

identitarian are that it evokes the myth of the unique particularism of Judaism and that it suggests a comprehensiveness that blocks out other meanings of circumcision. J. Cornelis de Vos recently sought to explain why the Galatians wanted to become circumcised and therefore become Jewish Christians. Although he offers four types of rationales, they ultimately come down to only two: (1) that circumcision offered legalistic assurance (“ethical...the feeling that this safeguarded a morally flawless life”; “psychological...clear moral instructions rather than, in my words, some indication of grace, freedom, and neighbourly love”; or “performative...the feeling they can apply to God’s mercy and thus steer their own fate in some way”) or (2) that circumcision offered particularistic belonging (“ethnical,” ensuring that they were not “void of ethnicity”).³⁵¹ Along with being viewed as ethnically particular, circumcision has been regarded as exclusive to men and therefore emblematic of Jewish patriarchy. In chapter 7, I discuss in further detail how circumcision has been interpreted in the context of the myth that Judaism is more sexist than Christianity.

Finally, in addition to being regarded as legalistic and particularistic, circumcision has been regarded as painful. On the very first page of her monograph, Nina E. Livesey writes that, “As one might imagine, [circumcision] is a delicate and no doubt painful procedure requiring a certain amount of surgical finesse.”³⁵² This theme appears particularly when the circumcision of adult men is discussed, as we see not only in the circumcision of Timothy but also the decried circumcision of the recipients of Paul’s letter to the Galatians. Several readers of the

³⁵¹ J. Cornelis de Vos, “‘I Wish Those Who Unsettle You Would Mutilate Themselves!’ (Gal 5:12): Circumcision and Emasculation in the Letter to the Galatians,” in *Jewish Cultural Encounters in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern World*, ed. Mladen Popović, Myles Schoonover, and Marijn Vandenberghe, Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 178 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 215–16. For a more nuanced reading of the motivations of the Galatians, see Susan M. Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul’s Letter to the Galatians in Its Anatolian Cultic Context* (London: T&T Clark International, 2003), 248–53.

³⁵² Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 1.

circumcision of Timothy have commented on how excruciating this event would have been for him. Mitzi Smith stresses this point at some length.

Paul's desire that a circumcised Timothy labor with him in the Diaspora is more important than the physical impact on Timothy as an adult. Jewish males are normally circumcised on the eighth day of their birth, as was Paul (Phil 3:5); adult circumcision can be debilitating or fatal and perhaps more so if the circumcised male adult is required to travel immediately after the procedure... It is likely that the recovery time in the first century CE was greater than in modern times with advanced medicine and health care—an adult circumcision now takes about an hour to perform (compared with 2–3 minutes for an infant) and recovery time is 2–3 weeks... The circumcision of Timothy was no microaggression. I don't know how old Timothy was but he was far from being an eight-day-old baby.³⁵³

In briefer remarks, Craig Keener contrasts Timothy's circumcision with the usual circumcision of a Jewish infant: "For a grown man, however, circumcision would always be painful."³⁵⁴

Christopher Stroup even speaks about Timothy's circumcision as "violent."³⁵⁵ A minority opinion is offered by F. F. Bruce, who refers to the event as "a minor surgical operation" as part of his argumentation that it was a small, practical concession for greater evangelical purposes.³⁵⁶

Furthermore, while it would be outside the scope of this research to delve too deeply into the topic of the reception of the letter to the Galatians, it is important to note that this perception reappears here in New Testament scholarship when it comes to the circumcision of adult men. The very topic of the letter is consonant with the anti-circumcision mores of the West, as Joseph A. Marchal makes clear when he writes the section heading, "The Paul against Galatian Genital

³⁵³ Smith, "Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race," 7, 8, 10. Smith's time period of 2-3 weeks, an estimate that she does not provide a citation for, is cited as authoritative in a later commentary: Maloney and Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 212.

³⁵⁴ Keener, *Acts*, 3:2320.

³⁵⁵ Christopher Stroup, "Making Jewish Men in a Greco-Roman World: Masculinity and the Circumcision of Timothy in Acts 16.1-5," in *Reading Acts in the Discourses of Masculinity and Politics*, ed. Eric D. Barreto, Matthew L. Skinner, and Steve Walton (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 71. Stroup is not referring to social or interpersonal violence, e.g. Paul forcing Timothy to be circumcised, but is speaking to resonate with the theme of masculinity that he discusses.

³⁵⁶ Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 322; Bruce, *The Book of Acts: Revised Edition*, 304.

Cutting.”³⁵⁷ Ambrosiaster reproved the Galatians because, “therefore they were said to be foolish and without reason, because they were not able have regard for the pain of their own flesh” (ideo hi stulti et sine intellectu esse dicuntur, quia nec dolori carnis suae consulere valuerunt) when becoming circumcised.³⁵⁸ Marion L. Soards and Darrell J. Pursiful speak of circumcision as “a procedure that produced painful and shameful (from a Hellenistic or pagan point of view) results.”³⁵⁹ De Vos refers to the potential circumcision of the Galatians as “painful and irreversible.”³⁶⁰ Susan M. Elliot imagines the theoretical question of a reader of Galatians, “Why would any adult male in Anatolia want to endure circumcision?” (Elliot herself offers a thoughtful, nuanced consideration of the potential motivations for circumcision as well as castration.) The pain of adult circumcision is at the forefront of interpreters’ minds much more than that of infant circumcision.

Having called attention to the anti-Jewish stereotypes that too often circulate regarding circumcision, I can better situate the results of the analysis in chapter 2. In the third section, concerning the motives for Timothy’s circumcision, I highlighted that commentators typically dwell only on Paul’s motives, rarely considering the possibility that Timothy had his own motives for the action. The extraordinary prevalence of this view is more understandable when we realize that the modern, Western view of Jewish circumcision is as a practice that is not autonomously chosen, but that is mandated by Jewish tradition, or rather, Jewish “law.”

³⁵⁷ Joseph A Marchal, “Bodies Bound for Circumcision and Baptism: An Intersex Critique and the Interpretation of Galatians,” *Theology & Sexuality* 16.2 (2010): 167. Marchal is specifically speaking about the type of genital cutting that takes place in medical surgeries on intersex infants and children, but “genital cutting” is the more neutral scholarly term for both male and female varieties rather than male/female “circumcision” or male/female “genital mutilation.” Marchal observes that Paul’s rationale is radically different than modern activists against genital cutting, since he is not “concerned with bodily integrity, sensation, or safety” like they are (174).

³⁵⁸ *Ad Galatas* 3.3.1 (CSEL 81/3). Todd S. Berzon, “‘O, Foolish Galatians’: Imagining Pauline Community in Late Antiquity,” *Church History* 85.3 (2016): 444.

³⁵⁹ Marion L. Soards and Darrell J. Pursiful, *Galatians*, SHBC (Macon: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2015), 23.

³⁶⁰ de Vos, “I Wish Those Who Unsettle You Would Mutilate Themselves!,” 216.

Furthermore, the circumcised individual is viewed as a passive recipient of violence and pain, who endures his circumcision, and therefore the motivations for circumcision are sought in the “parent” of the circumcised, rather than in the circumcised “child.” There is resistance to the idea of Paul, the image of salvation by grace through faith, carrying out a religious circumcision, which is the corresponding image of legalism. It is therefore much more often that commentators explain Paul’s action with a utilitarian reading (i.e., a Christian evangelistic one) rather than a religious reading (i.e., a Jewish one).

There are only a small handful of biblical scholars who have given consideration to the idea that Timothy could have been an active participant in his circumcision. Willie James Jennings, Paul Mumo Kisau, and Ben Witherington each articulate their explanation slightly differently. Here I want to highlight the brief comment of Kisau, with a particular focus on his exact phrasing: “Timothy himself demonstrates his commitment to mission by his willingness to submit to this ritual in order to reach others.”³⁶¹ Unlike Bruce, above, Kisau does not view circumcision in medical terms, as a “surgical operation,” but in cultural terms as a “ritual.” Timothy’s subjectivity here is neither completely autonomous nor completely subjugated; he is both willing and submitting. This reflects an embedded model of agency that is in dialogue with others and with tradition. It should be noted that Kisau is a Kenyan scholar.³⁶² In Kenya, over 80% of men are circumcised according to local customs, and while circumcision is performed during younger childhood in some regions, in other regions it is performed as a teenager or young adult.³⁶³ While Kisau would have to comment on his own knowledge about circumcision

³⁶¹ Kisau, “Acts of the Apostles,” 1354.

³⁶² Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), xv.

³⁶³ Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, *Neonatal and Child Male Circumcision*, 28. Specifically, “the age at circumcision is typically younger (2 to 12 years) in coastal regions and older (14 to 20 years) in the Rift Valley and Nyanza provinces and southern regions.”

in Kenya and on whether this has influenced his remark, it is notable that his interpretation, emerging from a non-Western social context and published in the *Africa Bible Commentary*, offers a view of Timothy's circumcision that avoids many of the problems that have been associated with Christian and Western views of religious and adult circumcision.

Conclusion

When we read about the circumcision of Timothy, we are reading about a circumcision that was religious and was performed on an adult. This event thus strikes the contemporary Western reader of a dominant religious and ethnic background as unfamiliar and threatening. In today's world, religious circumcisions and non-infant circumcisions are marked as other, associated with Judaism, Islam, and Africa, in contrast to the non-circumcision or the RIC that are the Western norms. Furthermore, Timothy's circumcision presents an image to the reader of negative stereotypes about Judaism, appearing to be a painful event that was legislated by narrow-minded tradition. In prior interpretation of Acts 16:1-5, Timothy is almost never attributed any motivation for becoming circumcised. Commentators do not even speak of him as motivated by "legalism." Instead, it is almost unfathomable that he could desire circumcision. It is Paul's motivations that are dwelled upon, and it is Paul who is absolved of participating in circumcision. Moreover, commentators frequently attribute social concerns to Paul and completely deny the theological import of the act, framing it as more similar to medical, utilitarian circumcision for purposes of "health" rather than religious and cultural circumcision. Paul is understood as the guardian who makes decisions for the younger Timothy, as a parent would make decisions for their infant. Beneath the power of the "law" and the parental authority of Paul, Timothy's desire for circumcision is unfathomable to many modern readers, and his

agency in the pericope disappears almost entirely. In the following chapter, I consider frameworks for seeing Timothy's subjectivity in this pericope, aiming at dismantling the colonial, racist, and anti-Jewish logics of past interpretation by bringing in South Asian feminist theories of agency.

Chapter 5: Choice: Affirming and Problematizing Agency

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I explored the ideological dimensions that contribute to biblical scholars lacking an appropriate framework within which to understand circumcision as something other than a tradition that is forced upon passive individuals by authoritative members of their community. Circumcision is perceived as an irrational practice because of being “undesirable” physically (i.e., painful), socially (i.e., exclusivist), and intellectually (i.e., traditional), and therefore is perceived as incapable of being desired by a rational and autonomous subject. In this chapter, I seek a more nuanced understanding of the decision-making involved in circumcision during the Second Temple period and in Luke-Acts specifically. As I conduct this analysis, I aim to renounce Orientalist views of circumcision, but without replicating Orientalist views of agency, will, and the self.

First, I discuss the range of answers to the question of why a Jewish person in antiquity might participate in circumcision. Multiple authors have catalogued the significances of circumcision, and I summarize the presentations of Robert G. Hall, Susan Elliot, and Nina E. Livesey.³⁶⁴ All three authors offer careful descriptions of this multivalent practice, opposing the

³⁶⁴ I do not discuss the treatment of circumcision in TDNT: Rudolf Meyer, “περιτέμνω, περιτομή, ἀπερίτμητος,” TDNT 6:72-84. Although there is much important information in this entry, Meyer also refers to circumcision as “barbaric” (78) and “atavistic” (79) and even speaks about how “Paul...transcends the limits of Ἰουδαϊσμός in principle” (82-83), without sufficient clarification of these problematic descriptions.

I also do not discuss the treatment in TRE: Otto Betz, “II. Altes Testament, Frühjudentum und Neues Testament,” TRE 5:716-722. This is not because of a fault of the entry, but for the sake of succinctness. As Hall also does, Betz uses a chronological organization. In his discussion of early Judaism, he focuses more on the rabbinic period than the Second Temple period when he offers a discussion of the meanings of circumcision. The *NIDB* entry on circumcision also offers a chronological presentation, but with a narrower canonical focus for the early Christian period. For these reasons, I have featured Hall’s presentation as an example of a chronological organization instead.

Similarly, I do not discuss the treatment in Blaschke, *Beschneidung*, 6–18. Again, this is for succinctness. As Livesey also does, Blaschke uses a thematic organization as he discusses the meanings of circumcision around the globe: religious, sexual, social, and medical. But he discusses Jewish circumcision alongside circumcision in other cultures, and he puts much more emphasis on meanings that are documented in the Hebrew Bible, rather than meanings in the Second Temple period.

superficial meanings that are too often ascribed to circumcision in other treatments. Their syntheses offer important background information that helps us to understand the ways in which circumcision affected the self-understandings of Jews in the first century CE. I will note strengths and weaknesses in their organizational schemas in terms of the degree to which each model allows us to see the agency of Second Temple Jews in regard to circumcision.

A treatment of circumcision can become even more robust by incorporating theories of agency that account for colonialism and gender dynamics. The theories of Spivak and Mahmood offer me the methodological approach of looking for a discursive understanding of agency. In this model, I seek to understand how “one *inhabits* norms,” including how one intentionally brings oneself into constellations of relationship with practices and with other individuals in order to shape one’s self.³⁶⁵ I demonstrate my methodology by drawing on two case studies from South Asian diaspora life: a set of interviews with Muslim Canadian teenage girls regarding their choice to veil; and a portion of Valarie Kaur’s documentary *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath* regarding Sikh Americans’ choice to wear the turban. I call attention to several issues that are important in these case studies and that are also relevant to interpreting Acts: disproportionate attention to certain cultural artifacts, argumentation in the context of power dynamics, theological and social meanings of practices, linguistically embedded norms, non-agonistic frameworks, and communal embodiment.

Lastly, the multi-authored discussion of circumcision in the *EBR* is difficult to read as a discursive unit because its organization is the result of editorial decision-making while its contents are the compositions of individual scholars. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the organization is broadly chronological in the sense that it moves temporally through the three major Abrahamic religions (“Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, Judaism, New Testament, Christianity, Islam”), which is the order followed by the encyclopedia in many of its entries. The entry finishes a discussion of fields of reception, again standard in the encyclopedia (“Literature, Visual Arts, Music, Film”). It is significant on a discursive level that this entry reaches the modern period and grapples with the impacts of antisemitism. Dennis T. Olson et al., “Circumcision,” *EBR* 5:324–44.

³⁶⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 14, 15.

Having established my methodology, I offer my own analysis of passages in Luke-Acts that discuss circumcision. Since I take a literary approach to reading the circumcision of Timothy, it will help us better understand this passage by exploring how the author (“Luke”) views circumcision in other texts in his corpus that are less contested. Circumcision is a relatively frequent topic in Luke-Acts compared to the other three narrative texts in the New Testament, and Luke’s perspective highlights circumcision as a joyful, communal event, multifaceted in social and theological significance, and a topic on which Jewish leaders in the early church ultimately make both gracious and ethical decisions. He represents it as normal for circumcision to involve multiple parties, and this groundwork will provide us context for understanding that Paul could perform a circumcision upon Timothy, but Timothy could still have chosen to participate in the act.

Circumcision in the Second Temple Period

As has been reviewed in the last chapter, it is common to encounter anti-Jewish stereotypes about circumcision when the topic is treated only in passing. Countering such stereotypes, Livesey describes how

the situation within the scholarship on circumcision belies this fundamental diversity in the meaning of circumcision. While several [of] the general reference works acknowledge the differences in understandings of circumcision, rarely is that same degree of variety reflected in the analytical discussions (i.e., lectures, commentaries, and specialized studies) on circumcision in the ancient world. When the diversity in the meaning of circumcision is absent, distortions occur not only in the understanding of circumcision itself, but also in the ancient author’s interpretation of Jews and Judaism... Interpreters from ancient to modern times rarely consider the full breath of his treatments of circumcision. In doing so, they formulate understandings of this rite and of first-century Jews and Judaism that are both limited and false.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁶ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 1–2, 3–4.

Importantly, Livesey encourages scholars to make use of preexisting knowledge in the field about the richness of circumcision in the ancient world rather than falling back on harmful stereotypes about the practice.

Here, I give an overview of these diverse meanings of circumcision. Attending to existing nuanced and detailed descriptions of circumcision, I summarize the descriptions by Hall, Elliot, and Livesey, each of whom organizes the ancient evidence into different categories. Next, I open up discussion about how each synthesis of the material enhances or detracts from an appreciation of the agency and decision-making involved in circumcision. In Hall, we see many areas of life impacted by circumcision and a variety of views on the practice—when it comes to Old Testament Judaism and early Christianity, but the representation of Second Temple Judaism is flatter. Elliot fruitfully resists binaries and developmental logics, but she prioritizes identitarian meaning over social meanings. Livesey narrows in on the significance of circumcision for different texts, accomplishing a rich presentation that is specific and multi-faceted, and I propose extending and deepening her approach, especially with more attention to ideology in scholarship.

In Hall's 1992 entry on circumcision in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, he divides up the meanings of the practice into three categories based on groups in three time periods: ancient Hebrews, Jews during the Greco-Roman periods, and early Christians. First, Hall describes the multiple types of meanings that lie implicitly in the background of the Hebrew narrative texts: "a fertility rite to ensure a goodly number of offspring," "an apotropaic rite...to ward off evil," "a knife rite to ratify a covenant," "a sense of national identity," and the metaphorical meaning of "suitability for participation in what God is doing."³⁶⁷ He connects three specific texts to these various meanings. In Exodus 4:24-26, "circumcision incorporates Moses' son into Israel...wards

³⁶⁷ Robert G. Hall, "Circumcision," *ABD* 1:1026.

off death from him as an apotropaic, sacrificial rite...[and] fits him to partake in what God is doing.”³⁶⁸ In the circumcision of Abraham, circumcision moves from the older notion of having a “magical” ability to create fertility to the refigured idea of being “a mnemonic sign of the covenant with God.”³⁶⁹ In its similarities to and differences from the stories of “Phoenician El... Genesis no longer assumes that circumcision completes the sacrifice of an only son.”³⁷⁰ Lastly, Joshua 5:2-9 “connects circumcision with entering the land... because only the circumcised can participate in what God is doing.”³⁷¹ Hall’s account of this time period has the strength of demonstrating the multiple, interconnected significances of this rite even in a single story.

In the next time period, Jewish encounters with Greek and Roman political power led to their reckoning with “strong cultural pressure against circumcision.”³⁷² Hall therefore organizes his next set of meanings by the degree to which circumcision as a literal, physical practice was retained. On one end of the spectrum, there were texts and authors who “consolidated the traditional emphasis on circumcision so that circumcision became even more important than before,” as represented by *Jubilees*, the Qumran community, Judith, Esther, and the Hasmoneans.³⁷³ In *Jubilees* and at Qumran, the combination of physical and spiritual circumcision places one in the appropriate sphere with God. For Judith and Esther, circumcision was part of being a proselyte, while for the Hasmoneans, circumcision was required in order to remain within conquered land. Josephus, Philo, and Artapanos occupy the middle, “want[ing] to participate in Greek culture as fully as possible” and therefore defending circumcision against the critiques of onlookers.³⁷⁴ These authors presented Jewish circumcision as comparable to

³⁶⁸ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1027.

³⁶⁹ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1027.

³⁷⁰ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1027.

³⁷¹ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1027.

³⁷² Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1027.

³⁷³ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1028.

³⁷⁴ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1028.

customs held by Arabs, Egyptians, and Ethiopians, and Philo offered reasons for circumcision on universal grounds such as health, fertility, and self-control. At the other extreme, “many Jews quietly bowed out and joined the dominant culture, ceasing to practice circumcision,” attested to by Greek and Jewish references to infibulation, epispasm, and uncircumcision among Jews.³⁷⁵ Hall explicitly specifies that he will not refer to these individuals as “apostate,” because it is possible that “some Jews created a Jewish theology capable of offering a rationale for neglecting the practice of circumcision.”³⁷⁶ Hall helpfully challenges the misconception that circumcision was always a marker of Jewish identity, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, can mistakenly imply that circumcision is particularistic and exclusivist.

Lastly, Hall describes the degree of approval or disapproval among Christians for the practice of circumcision. In Acts and some Pauline letters, we hear about groups who strongly advocated that circumcision be required for all Christians. According to the Pauline corpus, Paul argued that “not circumcision but faith in Christ assures acceptance before God,” so that circumcision “condemns anyone who trusts it”; only spiritual, metaphorical circumcision now matters, and incidental, physical conditions of circumcision or uncircumcision are “irrelevant.”³⁷⁷ According to the narrative of Acts, early Christian leaders viewed Jews as obligated to circumcise, but not gentiles: “the newly revealed plan of God includes Jews as Jews and Gentiles as Gentiles.”³⁷⁸ The deutero-Pauline epistles represent circumcision as a barrier between Jews and gentiles, such that eliminating circumcision can provide for full belonging for gentile Christians. The *Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Gospel of Thomas* deny literal circumcision but uphold allegorical, spiritual circumcision. John represents circumcision as a good that is

³⁷⁵ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1029.

³⁷⁶ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1029.

³⁷⁷ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1030.

³⁷⁸ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1030.

nevertheless lesser than the good of Jesus, and *Odes of Solomon* and the *Gospel of Philip* use circumcision as a positive metaphor for salvation and revelation. Hall concludes his entry with a ringing reminder that the practice of circumcision “is rich with diversity.”³⁷⁹ When treating this category, Hall reminds us importantly that ethno-religious identity did not predetermine a person’s view on circumcision. Rather, there was active debate and conversation within communities navigating this topic.

Despite these positive qualities, Hall’s treatment may also be critiqued at some points. First, the diversity of meanings present in the Hebrew Bible are discussed within an evolutionary schema of religious development, moving from schematically lower stages of meaning (magical protection, worldly procreation, syncretism) to higher stages of meaning (spiritual connection with God, monotheism). Second, Hall uses a simplified, linear model to categorize Second Temple Jewish stances on circumcision, defined by the degree to which it was practiced literally in the face of cultural pressure otherwise. Everything is said to change “with the arrival of the Greeks,” and circumcision becomes locked into an oppositional model.³⁸⁰ In contrast, early Christians are portrayed in a diffuse, decentralized paradigm, which is not reduced to any one metric and is therefore implied to be more complex and nuanced. As an alternative, we can think about Second Temple Jewish attitudes to circumcision outside of an agonistic model.

The next scholar in my survey is Elliot, who covers the topic of circumcision in a section of her 2003 book, which interprets Galatians by explaining the historical contexts of both Jewish circumcision and Anatolian castration.³⁸¹ Rather than Hall’s chronological model, she uses a thematic model, organized as follows. (1) “The foremost meaning” of circumcision in Elliot’s

³⁷⁹ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1031.

³⁸⁰ Hall, “Circumcision,” 1:1027.

³⁸¹ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 236–44.

view is “as an identity marker for the Jewish people...as a sign of God’s covenant with their ancestor Abraham.”³⁸² Under this umbrella, she includes circumcision as a mark of Jewish identity in the resistance to Antiochus Epiphanes IV, in the conquest of Idumeans and Itureans, in the final days described in *Jubilees*, in Jewish matchmaking, and in the eyes of outsiders. (2) Converts to Judaism were required to be circumcised in some milieus, and the rite could be “perceived as an initiation ritual similar in some aspects to the mystery initiations” and “as a means toward some form of experiential knowledge of God,” as Philo and Josephus attest.³⁸³ (3) “Jewish apologists” would argue that circumcision was beneficial on “universalizing” grounds; Philo’s discussion in *On the Special Laws* 1 best represents this category of meaning.³⁸⁴ (4) The *yetzer* (“the evil inclination as opposed to the Law”) could be imagined to be circumcised as a way of controlling such human evil (1QS 5.5).³⁸⁵ (5) For those Jews who declined to practice physical circumcision, the meaning of the practice itself was inferior to its symbolic or allegorical meanings of “devoted adherence” to Judaism.³⁸⁶ (6) Lastly, “sacrificial and apotropaic meanings” are suggested in the early Exodus 4:24-26 narrative.³⁸⁷ Elliott’s thematic strategy is excellent at warding against the misconception that circumcision was more diverse in practice and meaning during some time periods than during others. There is no developmental narrative in her discussion, and conflict does not form the basis for her organizing categories. She includes all Jewish circumcision from Exodus up to the first century CE under the same umbrella, not treating Hellenistic influence as a matter that requires its own category. In this

³⁸² Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 236.

³⁸³ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 238, 240.

³⁸⁴ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 240.

³⁸⁵ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 241. “Instead he should circumcise in the Community the foreskin of his tendency [יצר] and of his stiff neck in order to lay a foundation of truth for Israel, for the Community of the eternal covenant” (1QS5.5b-6a); Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1997).

³⁸⁶ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 243.

³⁸⁷ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 243.

regard, Elliot's treatment resists the binary of Hellenism and Judaism that was discussed in chapter 1.

However, Elliot's presentation may be faulted for its first and largest category of meaning for circumcision: as an identity marker for the inclusion of Jews in God's covenant. This category groups together examples that are arguably more different than similar, including political, apocalyptic, and matrimonial meanings. It also does not grapple with the recognition that circumcision was practiced in many cultures in the ancient world.³⁸⁸ Furthermore, the choice to make this the largest and most encompassing category may unintentionally reinforce the popular misconception that Jewish circumcision was uniquely particularistic in comparison to other practices and other cultural groups.

Finally, in 2010 Livesey devoted a full monograph to elaborating the significance of Second Temple Jewish circumcision. She treats every author and even every text separately, seeing distinct meanings for circumcision in each one. Contrary to popular expectation, Livesey does not discover that circumcision most often carried the "significance as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham," a meaning that in fact only "rarely surfaces within the ancient texts."³⁸⁹ Livesey counters Elliot's claim for the primacy of circumcision as a marker of belonging in the covenant begun with Abraham, which she sees only infrequently in the textual evidence. Instead, she represents the political, legal, theological, philosophical, physical, and mental spheres of meaning alongside one another, irreducible to only an identitarian meaning. In 1 Maccabees, circumcision is a political statement that signals "allegiance to Hasmonean rule," which is "faithful to the traditions of the nation."³⁹⁰ *Jubilees* stresses the legal meaning of

³⁸⁸ An example of a treatment of circumcision that does recognize its widespread practice in the ancient world is Marion L. Soards, "Circumcision," *NIDB* 1:668.

³⁸⁹ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 1.

³⁹⁰ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 10, 14.

circumcision as a rite that must follow strict guidelines and that “identifies the male so marked as a ‘son of the covenant,’” who is “reserved for election and salvation.”³⁹¹ 2 Maccabees emphasizes that practicing circumcision is an expression of piety even to the point of martyrdom, with a particular focus on the mothers of circumcised infant boys, and the text points not to “the military might of the Maccabees” as the means to “save the nation,” but instead points to God.³⁹² 4 Maccabees takes a philosophical turn and represents circumcision as “a mark of the use of pious reason over the passions,” since “the practice of self-mastery by means of the law” is how “one can overcome the tyrant.”³⁹³

According to Livesey, Josephus is aware of a handful of meanings of circumcision, which he discusses only briefly (i.e., the covenant with Abraham, not mixing with other nations, political loyalty to the nation, physical benefits), but the most important meaning emerges in the context of his discussion of the conversion of King Izates, where “circumcision is a decisive mark of commitment to Judaism.”³⁹⁴ For Philo, the multiple meanings of circumcision carry more equal weight as represented in his different writings. In *On the Special Laws* 1, circumcision is primarily “a physical rite with benefits for overall health and fertility,” and its less important symbolic meanings concern how it enhances “mental well-being.”³⁹⁵ *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3 has a much more allegorical focus: “circumcision serves to ‘strip’ away mental impediments to draw the mind closer to God.”³⁹⁶ *On the Migration of Abraham* takes a literal and social turn: practicing physical circumcision “gains the respect of other Jews within the community.”³⁹⁷

³⁹¹ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 16, 19.

³⁹² Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 26.

³⁹³ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 27, 28.

³⁹⁴ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 36.

³⁹⁵ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 47, 53.

³⁹⁶ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 59.

³⁹⁷ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 70.

Paul is the final author whom Livesey considers, and she identifies distinct perspectives in his various letters. In Galatians, circumcision is a shorthand specifically for circumcision that is forced upon gentiles, and such a situation is represented as enslavement for the gentile Galatians. In Philippians, circumcision has a radically different meaning and refers not to the literal practice, but is a positive metonym for those “who worship in the spirit and boast in the Anointed Jesus and place no confidence in the flesh.”³⁹⁸ In 1 Corinthians, circumcision and uncircumcision are both “rejected indifferents; a person cannot progress morally in pursuing these states.”³⁹⁹ In Romans, circumcision is referenced often and in many ways (“literally... as a metaphor... allegorically... and as a metonym”), but the most meaningful references are a metaphorical discussion of circumcision “as a matter of the heart” and an allegorical discussion of circumcision “as a seal of the righteousness of faithfulness.”⁴⁰⁰ Contrary to Hall’s assertion that Paul’s stance on circumcision can be summarized consistently across his corpus, Livesey draws out a range of significances for Paul on circumcision in each letter. For Paul, circumcision could be understood literally, metaphorically, allegorically, and metonymically; positively, neutrally, and negatively; in reference to Jews and to gentiles; as an expression of the flesh and as a denial of the flesh.

There is much that I agree with and appreciate about Livesey’s approach, and I see space for furthering her work. First, Livesey necessarily treats only a selection of texts, and here I expand the scope by analyzing Luke-Acts. Second, although Livesey does not see the identitarian meaning of circumcision as the most common or most important one, she does not specifically critique the ideological implications of such a framework.⁴⁰¹ I will work to combat

³⁹⁸ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 99–100.

³⁹⁹ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 104.

⁴⁰⁰ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 106.

⁴⁰¹ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 150–53.

anti-Jewish and Orientalist modes of discourse in my analysis. Finally, Livesey's focus on the intellectually articulated meanings of circumcision can be complemented by attending to the social relations and power dimensions within which such meanings are embedded.

As I go forward, there are many aspects of the work of Hall, Elliot, and Livesey that I will take with me. These three authors have demonstrated that circumcision does not only signify ethno-religious belonging, adherence to God's law, and obedience to social norms, as has been most commonly assumed. In addition to these valid significances of circumcision, the practice has also been meaningful in the spheres of health, fertility, marriage, apotropaic protection, sacrifice, religious conversion, political belonging, philosophical self-control, masculinity, and personal piety, and even has been viewed as irrelevant and insignificant compared to other goods. To sort this dizzying array of meanings, each author offers a different mode of organization (based on chronology, theme, and work), reminding us that there are no natural, neat boundaries between these meanings, which often overlap.

I also seek to contribute to the conversation on this topic by improving upon places where I see weaknesses in their treatments. I prioritize a lens that critiques anti-Judaism and Orientalism and that intentionally seeks to avoid representing circumcision as always forced or exclusivist.⁴⁰² I decenter Hellenism as an explanatory force, and I dwell on diversity within Judaism itself. While taking literary evidence as the basis for my discussion, I attend to the representation of social relationships between family members, local communities, religious networks, and political authorities, as well as the power dynamics present within these relationships. When I think about the meanings of circumcision, I reflect on how circumcision is

⁴⁰² For an example of a discussion of circumcision that does critique anti-Judaism, although not in terms of Orientalism, see Olson et al., "Circumcision."

regarded as influencing the self in community with others. My name for the theme at the forefront of this set of questions is “agency.”

Agency in South Asian Diaspora Life

I am taking up the topic of agency because of the way that circumcision has been regarded as forced and thus a non-agential practice. When South Asian feminist scholars Spivak and Mahmood speak about the question of agency, they do so in a particular sociohistorical context: the denial of the agency of South Asian women in dominant discourse. As I summarized in chapter 3, Spivak observes that imperialist, Orientalist speakers and nativist, essentialist speakers each claim to be able to speak on behalf of the subaltern third-world woman. But their competing claims to speech actually have the effect of erasing space to hear her voice at all. Mahmood responds to a similar problem, noting a third party that erroneously claims the ability to represent, specifically, Islamic women. When liberal feminists assume that women’s agency is only to be found in their resistance to tradition, they lock such women into an agonistic framework that renders their action invisible when it takes place in conversation with that tradition.

These three frameworks (Orientalist, nativist, and liberal resistant) fail to adequately describe South Asian women, and they also fail to adequately describe Second Temple Jews when it comes to circumcision, as documented by Hall, Elliot, and Livesey. First, we see plentiful evidence that circumcision was not a forced practice unique to Judaism. Circumcision was practiced in many ways by many cultures in the ancient world, including Egyptians and

Ethiopians.⁴⁰³ Proselytes like King Izates could discuss the benefits and drawbacks to circumcision and could declare their desires for circumcision.⁴⁰⁴ Being strongly committed to the practice of circumcision was not simply the inevitable result of a conservative mindset, but was a stance that could coexist with a wide variety of beliefs, some of which may have been less standard within Judaism.⁴⁰⁵ There is not adequate historical support for an Orientalizing view of circumcision as a product of authoritarian Jewish tradition, in addition to this being a harmful conception.

Second, a nativist reading, which reifies the requirement for circumcision as the mark of Judaism, also fails to account for the historical evidence. Some Jewish parents chose not to circumcise their children, and some Jewish adults chose to temporarily hide or permanently reverse their circumcisions with infibulation or epispasm.⁴⁰⁶ Furthermore, such a nativist reading would face the moral problem of having to justify even violently imposed circumcisions, as took place under the Hasmoneans.⁴⁰⁷ These dimensions are cautions away from both descriptive and prescriptive understandings of circumcision as essential to a homogeneous Jewish identity.

Third, a liberal resistant reading would uplift only the agency of certain groups of Jews who articulated the meaning of circumcision as resistance, for example, including the martyrs

⁴⁰³ Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1028–29; Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Gendering, Engendering, and Educating the Growing Child," in *Growing Up in Ancient Israel: Children in Material Culture and Biblical Texts* (Atlanta: SBL, 2018), 141–52.

⁴⁰⁴ Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 35–40.

⁴⁰⁵ Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1030; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 69–74.

⁴⁰⁶ Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1029; Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 243.

⁴⁰⁷ Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1028. There is also evidence of the practice of circumcision among Arabs, Colchians, Phoenicians, Syrians, and Samaritans in the hundreds of years before and after the writing of the New Testament: Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 44–46; Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974), vol. 1, n. 1; Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1980), vol. 2, n. 511. We do not have any positive evidence for circumcision in the tri-city area of Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium where Timothy lived. We do know that circumcision was practiced in the northern parts of Asia Minor and in the southeast corner near the Levant: Herodotus 2.104.2–3; Jack M. Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *JBL* 85.4 (1966): 475–76.

described in the books of Maccabees.⁴⁰⁸ But this reading cannot capture the agency of other Jews, even such important authors as Philo and Josephus, who situated circumcision within Greco-Roman mores as a way of justifying its benefits.⁴⁰⁹ Such a reading also pushes us to focus on only certain elements of an author's speech, such as their resistant "content" even when set within a borrowed, complicit "form."⁴¹⁰ In order to account for the wide diversity of Jewish engagements with the practice of circumcision, we need a better model for agency.

Mahmood offers us this alternative with her discursive model for agency. She urges us to accept Foucault's notion that "the very processes and conditions that secure a subject's subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent," and to seek to understand the "practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth," especially with regard to embodiment.⁴¹¹ To help the reader understand how it is possible that agency may be found within power relations instead of outside of them, Mahmood gives

the example of a virtuoso pianist who submits herself to the often painful regime of disciplinary practice, as well as to the hierarchical structures of apprenticeship, in order to acquire the ability—the requisite agency—to play the instrument with mastery. Importantly, her agency is predicated upon her ability to be taught, a condition classically referred to as "docility." Although we have come to associate docility with the abandonment of agency, the term literally implies the malleability required of someone in order for her to be instructed in a particular skill or knowledge—a meaning that carries less a sense of passivity than one of struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement.⁴¹²

In other words, interpersonal connection including hierarchical forms can both potentially hinder one's self-actualization and potentially provide the necessary conditions for that growth. When

⁴⁰⁸ Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 237; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 10–16.

⁴⁰⁹ Hall, "Circumcision," 1:1028–29; Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 240; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 41–76.

⁴¹⁰ Marshall, "Hybridity and Reading Romans 13," 169–70.

⁴¹¹ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 17, 28.

⁴¹² Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 29.

agency is understood to be always necessarily constructed within social norms, the false dichotomy of rational choice vs. tradition is weakened, and there is theoretical grounding for the phenomenon that people may volitionally engage in traditional practices.

Thinking about interpersonal connection is also particularly essential in the case of circumcision because newborn babies are fully incapable of actively choosing circumcision. Although older youths and adults could and did become circumcised, this was rare in Second Temple Judaism, and therefore the norms of agency around circumcision were shaped by the model of the newborn. The idea that the newborn both acts and does not act was wrestled with in Philo's commentary on Genesis 17:14 in *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 3.52. He responds to the concern that this biblical text calls for the death of a male infant who has not been circumcised on the eighth day, weighing different readers' perspectives on the literal meaning of the text before offering his own allegorical reading.

Why does He prescribe a sentence of death for the infant, saying, "The uncircumcised male who shall not circumcise the flesh of his uncircumcision on the eighth day, that soul shall be destroyed from its kind"?

The law does not declare (anyone) guilty of any involuntary (crime) since it pardons even him who commits involuntary homicide, specifying the cities to which he may flee to find safety... But if the child is not circumcised on the eighth day after birth, what sin has he committed that he should be judged deserving of suffering death? Accordingly, some say that the law of interpretation has in view the parents, for it believes that they show contempt for the commandment of the law. Others, however, say that it has imposed a very excessive penalty on infants, it seems, and that those adults who disregard and violate the law are deserving of punishment without regret or remission. This is the literal meaning.⁴¹³

At least two features of this discussion stand out in terms of how the newborn's agency is navigated. First, this Armenian preservation of Genesis 17:14 both amplifies and downplays the

⁴¹³ The translation from the preserved Armenian is taken from Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953). For fragments of Greek and Latin of portions of this passage, see J. Rendel Harris, *Fragments of Philo Judaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1886), 33.

agency of the male child: “The uncircumcised male *who shall not circumcise* the flesh of his uncircumcision *on the eighth day*, that soul shall be destroyed from its kind.” In contrast, the Hebrew MT and the Greek LXX speak of a male who shall not *be circumcised*, and the Hebrew MT leaves out a reference to any specific temporal marker.⁴¹⁴ Philo’s citation also does not include the final clause in the verse, which states that the uncircumcised male has broken God’s covenant. As it appears in Philo’s text, this verse depicts a child who is theoretically capable of a high degree of agency (self-circumcision), who is extremely young, and yet who is not a deliberate law-breaker. It is the puzzle of the agency of the helpless baby that hearers of this text, as remembered by Philo, struggle to respond to. The second important feature of this passage is its resolution, that the involuntary evil embodied in the child is understood as ultimately caused by either the parents or adults more broadly who are responsible for the child’s circumcision.⁴¹⁵ Although interpersonal, communal expressions of agency are common beyond simply the example of the newborn child, the practice of infant circumcision sharpens the importance of thinking about self-actualization within social norms and hierarchical structures.

The cases that I take up below to demonstrate this issue both come from the context of the South Asian diaspora. Because South Asian culture is minoritized in the diaspora, there is a particular onus on diaspora South Asians to explicate why they continue traditional practices rather than “assimilating” to the surrounding culture. In the classic model of assimilation, it is “problematically presume[d] that all immigrants will, given enough time and the ability to adopt

⁴¹⁴ MT (BHS): וְעָרְלוּ יָכָר אִשְׁרָאֵל לֹא־יִמּוֹלֶת אֶת־בָּשָׂר עַרְלָתוֹ וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַזֹּאת מֵעַמִּיּהָ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי הַכָּרָה: ס

LXX (Rahlfs): καὶ ἀπερίτμητος ἄρσεν, ὃς οὐ περιτμηθήσεται τὴν σάρκα τῆς ἀκροβυστίας αὐτοῦ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ὀγδόῃ, ἐξολεθρευθήσεται ἢ ψυχὴ ἐκείνη ἐκ τοῦ γένους αὐτῆς, ὅτι τὴν διαθήκην μου διεσκέδασεν.

NRSVue: “Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”

For a more detailed discussion of these and other textual variants, see Matthew Thiessen, “The Text of Genesis 17:14,” *JBL* 128.4 (2009): 625–42.

⁴¹⁵ The difference between the two readings offered by Philo is not entirely clear, and the phrasing allows multiple possibilities.

mainstream attitudes, lose their ethnic particularity in order to blend into the national culture.”⁴¹⁶ But in reality, diaspora life involves “a process in which there is always some aspect of volition, adaptation to the country combined with the maintenance of ethnic or other identifications predating immigration, and inevitable ambivalence about transformations that are engendered by migration.”⁴¹⁷

A further complexity for Asians more broadly is that they are both demanded to assimilate and are viewed as perpetual foreigners, “deemed ultimately unassimilable” and viewed as “exotic and inscrutable.”⁴¹⁸ Asian tradition is falsely perceived as permanent and unchanging, but tradition in fact morphs in diaspora. First-generation South Asians frequently “attempt to preserve the culture by rigidly holding to the values that were prevalent at the time of their departure” from the homeland.⁴¹⁹ For example, when Indians migrated to the U.S. in significant numbers after the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, U.S. immigration policy allowed in a socioeconomically narrow slice of Indian society, disproportionately high in education and professionalism.⁴²⁰ This group cultivated an idealized vision of India based on “glorif[y]ing a Vedic past” and used it as a foil against “degenerate” American culture.⁴²¹ They enacted a “museumization of practices,” which was cut off from the dynamic homeland and which no longer reflected its diverse realities.⁴²² When they saw the

⁴¹⁶ anupama jain, *How to Be South Asian in America: Narratives of Ambivalence and Belonging* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 43.

⁴¹⁷ jain, *How to Be South Asian in America*, 20.

⁴¹⁸ jain, *How to Be South Asian in America*, 57.

⁴¹⁹ Dharini Rasiah, “Mississippi Masala and Khush: Redefining Community,” in *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. The Women of South Asian Descent Collective (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1993), 270.

⁴²⁰ For brief histories of the Indian diaspora with a focus on the U.S., see Das Gupta, “What Is Indian About You?,” 576–77; Jaisy A. Joseph and Khyati Y. Joshi, “One Long Labor: Toward an Indian American Interreligious Consciousness,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. Uriah Y. Kim and Seung Ai Yang (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 55–57; Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 69–83.

⁴²¹ Das Gupta, “What Is Indian About You?,” 578.

⁴²² Das Gupta, “What Is Indian About You?,” 580. See also, Rasiah, “Mississippi Masala and Khush: Redefining Community,” 270.

changes taking place in India, they did not alter their sense of tradition, but “[t]ook] pride in being more Indian than Indians in India” and were critical of Western influence on India as much as they were critical of American culture.⁴²³ What appears on the surface to be a perfect copy of tradition from the homeland rather is revealed to be just as much a product of diaspora as more conventionally assimilated practices.

My first case study concerns the practice of veiling by Muslim South Asians in diaspora. Veiling is a multi-faceted and diverse practice, the history of which varies based on nation, socio-economic class, and form (e.g., hijab, chador, niqab, burka).⁴²⁴ Within a rigid assimilation/tradition model, one would perceive it as assimilated, rational, and Western to choose not to wear a veil, and one would perceive it as traditional, forced, and Oriental to follow the requirement to wear a veil. In the language of Spivak, the imperialist view of veiling would be that it is forced upon all Muslim women, and the nativist view of veiling would be that it is rightly chosen by all Muslim women. According to Mahmood’s framework, a liberal feminist view would be that Muslim women who do not veil (or who use their veiling for resistant purposes) are uniquely agential and liberated, whereas Muslim women who veil (or who veil without resistance) “are pawns in a grand patriarchal plan.”⁴²⁵ The Iranian-Canadian anthropologist Homa Hoodfar has observed, “The assumption that *veil* equals *ignorance* and *oppression* means that young Muslim women have to invest a considerable amount of energy to establish themselves as thinking, rational, literate students/individuals, both in their classrooms

⁴²³ Das Gupta, “What Is Indian About You?,” 580, 581–82.

⁴²⁴ For further information, see, for example, Fadwa El Guindi, *Veil: Modesty, Privacy, and Resistance* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Falguni A. Sheth, “Unruly Muslim Women and Threats to Liberal Culture,” *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 18.4 (2006): 455–63; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Sahar Amer, *What Is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

⁴²⁵ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 1.

and outside.”⁴²⁶ In a 2003 study, Hoodfar interviewed Muslim-Canadian young women who did and did not veil.⁴²⁷ Here, I focus on the responses of the South Asian women among the participants. I discuss how their agency in dress is in dialogue with norms, traditions, and power relations.

To focus solely on the question of veiling is to miss other types of clothing. Among the Pakistani young women as well as their mothers, almost all habitually wore a shalwar kameez.⁴²⁸ In Western eyes, the shalwar kameez is a nameless, generic marker of foreign identity and lack of assimilation. But among South Asians, the shalwar kameez is an ambivalent dress marker, worn across religious identities by Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, but especially associated with Islam and with Pakistan.⁴²⁹ It is similarly remarkable that, for Jews in antiquity, scholars have so emphatically focused on circumcision more than other possible embodied practices, such as hairstyles, veils, tzitzit, and tefillin.⁴³⁰ As Cohen notes, none of these customs could definitively mark a Jewish person; there were uncircumcised Jews and circumcised non-Jews. Just so, neither veiling nor a shalwar kameez can definitively mark a South Asian, Muslim, and/or Pakistani person. But there do exist distinctive modes of dress and of bodily alteration that circulate as patterns and culturally significant options within these groups. Under the Western, Christian gaze, this variety of customs often gets reduced to one particularly objectionable feature, which becomes a stereotype and a heated topic of debate.

⁴²⁶ Homa Hoodfar, “The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women,” in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 249.

⁴²⁷ Homa Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy,” in *The Muslim Veil in North America: Issues and Debates*, ed. Sajida Sultana Alvi, Homa Hoodfar, and Sheila McDonough (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2003), 3–40.

⁴²⁸ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 14. A shalwar kameez is an outfit made up of loose pants and a long top that extends to the knees.

⁴²⁹ Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim: Fashion, Politics, Faith* (Oxford: Berg, 2010), 5.

⁴³⁰ Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 28–34, 39–49.

Next, the participants notably distinguished between culture and religion. This difference allows them “to reject those aspects of their parents’ culture, which they see as incompatible with their view of Islam, rather than appearing to deny their ethnic roots or their parents’ values.”⁴³¹ It is important to note that, contrary to prejudiced perceptions of Islam as an inherently repressive religion, these young women invoke practicing their religion faithfully as a way to articulate their own views. By appealing to their religious obligation, these daughters who veil are afforded authority in their communities and are allowed to disagree with more senior family members while still maintaining their social bonds and embeddedness in the community.

Nevertheless, distinguishing between culture and religion is not inherently liberative other individuals have used this argument to state the opposite: that veiling is culture rather than religion, and that veiling women do not have legitimate grounds for their practice. For example, in a 2006 court case, the judge Paul J. Paruk disallowed an African-American Muslim woman wearing a niqab from participating in the legal process and contended that “wearing a veil I don’t think is a religious thing... I think it’s a custom thing.”⁴³² Even the same argument (i.e., culture can be challenged more easily than religion) has vastly different results depending on the values and power relations held by the interlocutors. When we see the arguments presented by Second Temple Jews for the practice of circumcision, we need to keep in mind that the content of their appeal and the social success of it is dependent on the networks of meaning in which they and their audiences are embedded.

The reason why these women chose to veil is an issue with multiple levels, involving both seemingly unchanging principles and fluid social dynamics. When asked directly, the

⁴³¹ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 15.

⁴³² *Muhammad v. Enterprise Rent-A-Car*, No. 06–41896-GC (31st D. Mich. 2006). For further analysis, see Falguni A. Sheth, “The Veil, Transparency, and the Deceptive Conceit of Liberalism,” *PhiloSOPHIA* 9.1 (53-72): 2019.

reason for the majority was that “the veil was part of their religion and that they wanted to be good Muslim women,” while a small minority “claimed the veil to be part of their Arab or Muslim identity and not an Islamic requirement.”⁴³³ Hoodfar, however, noticed additional contextual and contingent factors that were part of the young women’s decision-making. One teenage Pakistani girl saw that, when a relative began wearing the veil, her parents trusted her more and gave her more freedom; the girl decided to emulate this strategy and had the same results, so that now she could see her female friends and could get a driver’s license and use the family car.⁴³⁴ Another Pakistani teenager hoped that her father would not insist on an arranged marriage because he would be reassured by her focus on her education and by her practice of veiling; when he did in fact insist, she researched and presented a detailed argument that forced marriage was incompatible with Islam, reasoning that was ultimately accepted and respected.⁴³⁵ Similarly, after an Indian-Syrian young woman began attending religious meetings and wearing the veil, she gave lectures on Islam to her family and urged them to pray at gatherings, and she was listened to and respected.⁴³⁶ The school environment rather than the home environment was of primary importance for one Pakistani teenager and her friend, who decided to veil after being bullied at school, because they wanted to choose for themselves the terms of their difference, and who found that they gradually received “even a little bit of respect” from their classmates and teachers.⁴³⁷ These women and girls adopted veiling as a tool that gave them leverage in situations where their age, gender, and ethnicity otherwise afforded them less authority. The interview respondents explained the meaning of the veil as fundamental and static (i.e., as part of their

⁴³³ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 17.

⁴³⁴ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 18–20.

⁴³⁵ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 22–24.

⁴³⁶ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 32–33.

⁴³⁷ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 28–29.

religious and/or ethnic identity), but they also gave accounts in which that meaning entered their lives in a particular social context. As one young woman reflected, “Perhaps the reasons I took the veil are not the same as the reasons I continue to wear it.”⁴³⁸ Identitarian meanings mingle with social meanings for the practice of veiling, an important observation that helps clarify how Jewish circumcision could also be both identitarian and social, both a matter of principle and a response to particular, contingent events.

The second case study that I take up here concerns Sikh Americans who wear the turban in a post-9/11 context. While Sikh people of any gender may choose to wear a turban, it is usually worn by men, and it wraps around the uncut hair on a person’s head.⁴³⁹ Sikhs have been persecuted in South Asia for hundreds of years but Sikh life in diaspora was fundamentally altered by the media broadcasts after 9/11 of Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda members, who, though not Sikh, also wore turbans and kept their beards long. Since then, many Americans regard the Sikh turban as not only a symbol of foreignness, but also a symbol of terrorism.

In the documentary *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath*, Valarie Kaur examines the racialized lives of Sikh Americans before and especially after 9/11. In one portion of the film, transcribed below, Kaur showcases the variety of reasons that Sikh Americans continue to participate in the practice of wearing a turban, despite the real threat of violence.

Daman Sodhi [5th grade boy, nephew of murdered Balbir Sodhi]: For this religion, you don’t cut your hair because God gave it to you for a reason, not for like, “Oh, make a style,” you know, “Get girls,” whatever.

Amardeep Singh Bhalla [legal director of The Sikh Coalition]: For me to take off my turban, when the Pilgrims came here seeking religion freedom, would destroy everything

⁴³⁸ Hoodfar, “More Than Clothing,” 30.

⁴³⁹ For further information, see, for example, Jasbir K Puar, “‘The Turban Is Not a Hat’: Queer Diaspora and Practices of Profiling,” *Sikh Formations* 4.1 (2008): 47–91; Dawinder S. Sidhu and Neha Singh Gohil, *Civil Rights in Wartime: The Post-9/11 Sikh Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Harjant S. Gill, “Transnational Hair (and Turban): Sikh Masculinity, Embodied Practices, and Politics of Representation in an Era of Global Travel,” *Ethnography* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138120923712>.

it means to be an American to me. Because every day, when I tie my turban, I'm thinking, "Be true to this article. Be a good person." I'm not only representing myself. I'm representing my whole community because we are so distinct.

Valarie Kaur [producer]: Okay, Sonny, what does your turban mean to you?

Sonny [Kaur's cousin]: I'm wearing it to piss everybody off.

Kaur: Alright, yes, great, Sonny, thank you. What does it mean?

Sonny: It's insulting to rationalize it in terms and tell it to others. Why do I need to do that?

K: Otherwise they won't know.

S: That's their fault.

K: Isn't it your fault if you can't articulate it to them?

S: I can articulate it, but I shouldn't be put on the spot and say, "What's the purpose of your life? Because if you don't tell us a good answer[...]" You know what I mean? If you have a better idea?

K: What your turban means to me?

S: Mhm.

K: It's you! (laughing) What a dumb question!

S: Okay. What does a turban in general mean to you?

K: I see somebody with a turban and I say, he's a sardar, he's a Sikh man. He's like my uncle, he's like my brother, he's like my grandfather. I know him. We come from the same place. He probably speaks Punjabi. He says the same prayers that I do.⁴⁴⁰

As we saw above, that focus on the veil can invisibilize other modes of dress, we see here that focus on the turban can invisibilize the hair that the turban is meant to cover. Among the five embodied symbols of Sikhism, there is both uncut hair (kesh) and a comb (kangha), combining the "holiness and strength" of leaving the body in its natural state with the "restraint and self-control" and "bodily and spiritual purity" of keeping one's body orderly.⁴⁴¹ Sodhi calls attention to the hair under his turban when he gives his explanation of its meaning. When we think about Second Temple Jewish discussions of circumcision, it is important to note that the biblical Greek and Hebrew terms differ from the standard English; in English, there are "circumcised" individuals and "uncircumcised" individuals, while in biblical Greek and Hebrew, there are "circumcised" individuals (περιτετμημένος; מִל) and most often "foreskinned" individuals

⁴⁴⁰ *Divided We Fall: Americans in the Aftermath*, Vimeo (New Moon Productions, 2006), pt. 1:07:19-1:09:02. "[...]" indicates a short phrase that is indistinct.

⁴⁴¹ Doris R Jakobsh, *Sikhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012), 59–60.

(ἀκρόβυστος or ἐν ἀκροβυστία; עָרֵל), only rarely called “uncircumcised” (ἀπερίτμητος).⁴⁴² The English terminology names circumcision as a practice but leaves the presence of the foreskin as an unmarked norm, and it is important to attend to what precise words are being used in original language texts.

In classic agonistic frameworks of agency, one either acts in accordance with dominant culture or resists it; however, the responses here give voice to the complexity of inhabiting norms and the inability to classify action so neatly. For Bhalla, it is precisely his refusal to adopt American norms by removing his turban that expresses his American identity, namely, through the value of religious freedom. Sonny’s response, on the surface, is simply oppositional in tone. He half-jokingly frames his turban as merely antagonistic, and he rejects the premise that majoritarian subjects are owed any explanation for the basis of his difference from them. Sonny’s response is rhetorically sharpened in this private conversation with his cousin as a critique of his marginalization. Elsewhere in the documentary he does in fact engage white passersby in dialogue and explain himself to them, and the documentary itself is an educational opportunity for the broader public. A practice can express resistance and connection simultaneously, or alternately at different moments as situationally safe and appropriate. The meaning of wearing a turban is intensely shaped by living in diaspora but is not reducible to being measured in terms of American culture; similarly, the meaning of circumcision in the first

⁴⁴² Non-biblical Greek did not use the term ἀκροβυστία but rather the term ἀκροποσθία: Gerhard Kittel, “Ἀκροβυστία,” *TDNT* 1:225.

The difference between these terms stands out especially in translations of Galatians: Brigitte Kahl, “Gender Trouble in Galatia?: Paul and the Rethinking of Difference,” in *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?*, ed. Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Collier, *Studies in Theology and Sexuality* 4 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 57.

Modern activists for the cessation of routine infant circumcision sometimes use the terms “whole” or “intact” to refer to the uncircumcised state. Currently, this terminology is not widely adopted, but it nevertheless reflects the power of language to communicate value judgements about circumcision status.

century is tremendously impacted by life under Roman imperial rule, but cannot be accurately simplified and measured in Hellenistic terms.

Finally, Sonny invites Kaur to reflect on the meaning of his own turban and other men's turbans; Kaur does not wear a turban herself, though she could. She declines to answer for Sonny's turban, but she meditates extensively on the meaning of other men's turbans. The turban is deeply significant for her, resonant with religious, familial, and ethnic meaning, giving her a sense of community. Kaur does not have to personally wear the turban to experience its importance. Similarly, we must think about how circumcision was meaningful not only for the circumcised individual, but also for his family and community members who participated in the decision-making and the ceremony after birth, for his later sexual partners, and for friends and neighbors who saw in him in nude or semi-nude public venues. Individually embodied practices ultimately still have meaning beyond the bounds of those bodies, which we may imagine as socially porous.

In the two case studies above, I have demonstrated the way that experiences in South Asian diaspora life can shape our analysis of Jewish circumcision during the Second Temple period. In my first case study, attending to Pakistani-Canadian young women, I have noticed how the veil receives outsized attention from white Western eyes, obscuring the significance of clothing like the shalwar kameez. Correspondingly, the disproportionate attention typically given to circumcision should be balanced out by noting practices that occur alongside it. Hearing the reasoning of Muslim Canadian young women and comparing it to the reasoning of a prejudiced judge, I observed that it is not particular intellectual arguments that afford individuals power, but the way they prepare their argumentation in conversation with the communities in which they are embedded. The qualities that could theoretically make circumcision liberating or restricting

should not be essentialized, but we should attend to the power structures in which circumcisions are embedded. Listening to the stated rationales of these Muslim Canadian women for veiling as well as their stories of when they decided to veil, both unchanging, fundamental principles and shifting, particular social events should be accounted for when it comes to circumcision. In my second case study, Daman Sodhi's discussion of his hair rather than of his turban strictly helps us to remember to pay attention to the norms and assumptions hidden in our language about circumcision. The statements of Amardeep Singh Bhalla and Sonny call attention to the falsity of agonistic frameworks for agency; for Second Temple Jews, Hellenism too often forms the backdrop against which resistance may be expressed, and imperialism and intercultural interaction should be accounted for without reducing the meaning of circumcision to responses to outsiders. Finally, Valarie Kaur reminds us that the importance of embodied practices does not end at the boundaries of the individual body, but extend out into the broader community. These principles shape my discussion below of passages from Luke-Acts. In the analysis above and in the coming interpretation below, I do not limit myself to looking for liberal markers of agency, such as rationality, autonomy, or resistance, but attend to normative discourses, communities in which people are embedded, and opportunities for self-actualization that are offered through traditional practices.

Agency in Circumcision in Luke-Acts

Compared to the other narrative texts of the New Testament, circumcision is an especially important topic in the Gospel of Luke and an even more important topic in Acts.⁴⁴³ The Gospel includes two accounts of circumcision: the circumcision of John the Baptist (1:59)

⁴⁴³ Neither Mark nor Matthew discuss circumcision. John discusses circumcision in only one passage (7:22-23).

and the circumcision of Jesus (2:21). In Acts, in addition to the circumcision of Timothy, circumcision and uncircumcision are mentioned eight times: at the beginning of Stephen's speech to describe the covenant of circumcision given to Abraham and the subsequent circumcision of Abraham's offspring (7:8); at the end of Stephen's speech, using the term "uncircumcised" as a negative metaphor (7:51); as a characterization of believers who are shocked that the Holy Spirit falls on gentile believers (10:45); as a characterization of believers (11:2) who criticize Peter for eating with uncircumcised people (11:3); when certain people from Judea teach that salvation requires circumcision (15:1); when Pharisee believers express their opinion that it is necessary to circumcise gentiles (15:5); and when Paul is alerted to the incorrect reports that he teaches diaspora Jews not to circumcise their children (21:21).⁴⁴⁴ I analyze these ten passages with an eye to how Luke represents Second Temple Jews experiencing the practice of circumcision as part of their agential self-formation, keeping in mind the insights summarized above from South Asian theory and life, and working to dislodge harmful anti-Jewish and Orientalist assumptions.

Since I am analyzing Luke-Acts from a literary perspective, it is important that I make a brief note about the question of the authorship of this work. Specifically, within the topic of circumcision, one may naturally wonder whether Luke was born Jewish or a gentile, and what kinds of attachments he formed to Judaism over the course of his life.⁴⁴⁵ Was Luke circumcised?

⁴⁴⁴ There is also a textual variant in 15:24 in the context of the letter that is composed to the gentile believers after the Jerusalem council, clarifying the content of what some people are teaching which troubles the gentile believers, that is, that they must be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. This is essentially a reminder of 15:5. Since this variant is broadly accepted as a later addition, I will not consider it further here. Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 385.

⁴⁴⁵ For the majority view that Luke was born a gentile, see for example, Adolf Harnack, *Luke the Physician: The Author of the Third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. W. D. Morrison, trans. J. R. Wilkinson (London: Williams & Norgate, 1907); G. B. Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, PNTC (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963), 15; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 1 of *AB* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981), 35–47; François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, ed. Helmut Koester, trans. James Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 8.

As much as we might be curious about this question, I do not believe we have sufficient internal or external evidence to make a decision. Rather than speculating about the author's personal identity, what I think is important to point out is that Luke displays a strong investment in Judaism, the Septuagint, and Jewish life especially throughout the diaspora, and that there is not conclusive evidence against him being Jewish.⁴⁴⁶ Therefore, it is not necessarily surprising that he pays careful and nuanced attention to the practice of circumcision in both volumes of his work.

In the early chapters of Luke, the audience learns about the circumcision of the two important characters John the Baptist and Jesus. As John is born first, he is also circumcised first.

⁵⁷ Τῇ δὲ Ἑλισάβετ ἐπλήσθη ὁ χρόνος τοῦ τεκεῖν αὐτὴν καὶ ἐγέννησεν υἱόν. ⁵⁸ καὶ ἤκουσαν οἱ περίοικοι καὶ οἱ συγγενεῖς αὐτῆς ὅτι ἐμεγάλυνεν κύριος τὸ ἔλεος αὐτοῦ μετ' αὐτῆς καὶ συνέχαιρον αὐτῇ. ⁵⁹ Καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ὀγδόῃ ἦλθον περιτεμεῖν τὸ παιδίον καὶ ἐκάλουν αὐτὸ ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτοῦ Ζαχαρίαν. (1:57-59)

⁵⁷ Then the time was fulfilled for Elizabeth to deliver, and she gave birth to a son. ⁵⁸ And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had extended his grace to her, and they rejoiced with her. ⁵⁹ And it happened on the eighth day that they came to circumcise the infant, and they started giving him the name of his father, Zechariah.

First, there is a communal nature to the circumcision ceremony. John's parents, his extended family, and his neighborhood all gather to participate in the act of circumcising the new child. Focus is not placed on any one individual (such as the mother or the mohel), but rather agency comes through a large group who together ensure the circumcision of the child. The circumcision

For the minority view that Luke was born Jewish, see for example, E. Earle Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 51–53; Marilyn Salmon, “Insider or Outsider?: Luke's Relationship with Judaism,” in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, ed. Joseph B. Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 76–82; Gregory E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992), 327–29; Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5.

⁴⁴⁶ For a similar perspective, see Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, xxix–xxxv; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 54.

of John overflows past the boundary of his body and is part of the community's expression of their own piety.

The circumcision of John is also associated with his naming, and it is this event that is the focus of the remainder of the pericope. The circumcision is as routine an event as the birth, and it is actually the naming that is the locus of disagreement and tension. While important, circumcision should not be accorded a disproportionate significance on principle, as in the analogy of the hijab compared to other practices like wearing the shalwar kameez.

Furthermore, contrary to the popular perception of circumcision as a distinctly gendered and more sexist practice than others, it is the naming of the child that at first is assumed to prioritize the father, both by giving the child the father's name (v. 59) and by turning to the father to override the mother's wishes (v. 62). As Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington point out, "[t]he mother's naming a child would not be unusual" in and of itself and has precedent in the stories of Eve, Rachel, and Leah.⁴⁴⁷ This passage does not depict any intrinsic patriarchal cultural tendencies, but rather a struggle for a community to make sense of a family departing from the norm of honoring ancestors through the new child's name.⁴⁴⁸

Lastly, the timing of the eighth day is specified.⁴⁴⁹ Circumcision occurred in multiple cultures in the ancient world with different levels of cuts, different distributions across gender and class, and different timings.⁴⁵⁰ It is not circumcision itself that was a distinctively Jewish practice, but eighth-day circumcision of all male infants regardless of socio-economic status or

⁴⁴⁷ Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 43.

⁴⁴⁸ Levine and Witherington, *The Gospel of Luke*, 43.

⁴⁴⁹ Matthew Thiessen argues that in Luke's estimation, circumcision that occurs at another time than the eighth day is just as non-adherent to the law as a lack of circumcision entirely: Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 114–23. Taking a different position, Caird states with reference to the circumcision of Jesus, "Luke can hardly have had a deep personal interest in the details of Jewish ceremonial": Caird, *The Gospel of St. Luke*, 63.

⁴⁵⁰ Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 44–46; Stern, *Authors*, vol. 1, n. 1; Stern, *Authors*, vol. 2, n. 511.

family occupation. The circumcision of John the Baptist is communal, routine, and follows norms specific to Judaism among other ancient circumcising cultures.

Shortly after, Luke tells of the circumcision of the infant Jesus.

²⁰ καὶ ὑπέστρεψαν οἱ ποιμένες δοξάζοντες καὶ αἰνοῦντες τὸν θεὸν ἐπὶ πᾶσιν οἷς ἤκουσαν καὶ εἶδον καθὼς ἐλαλήθη πρὸς αὐτούς. ²¹ Καὶ ὅτε ἐπλήσθησαν ἡμέραι ὀκτῶ τοῦ περιτεμεῖν αὐτὸν καὶ ἐκλήθη τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦς, τὸ κληθὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγγέλου πρὸ τοῦ συλλημφθῆναι αὐτὸν ἐν τῇ κοιλίᾳ. ²² Καὶ ὅτε ἐπλήσθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ καθαρισμοῦ αὐτῶν κατὰ τὸν νόμον Μωϋσέως, ἀνήγαγον αὐτὸν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα παραστῆσαι τῷ κυρίῳ, ²³ καθὼς γέγραπται ἐν νόμῳ κυρίου ὅτι πᾶν ἄρσεν διανοῖγον μήτραν ἅγιον τῷ κυρίῳ κληθήσεται, ²⁴ καὶ τοῦ δοῦναι θυσίαν κατὰ τὸ εἰρημένον ἐν τῷ νόμῳ κυρίου, ζευγὸς τρυγόνων ἢ δύο νοσσοῦς περιστερῶν. (2:20-24)

²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God concerning all that they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them. ²¹ And when the eight days for circumcising him had been fulfilled, he was also named Jesus, the name from the angel before his conception in the womb. ²² And when the days had been fulfilled for purifying them according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (just as it is written in the law of the Lord that every mother-opening [i.e. first-born] male will be called holy to the Lord) ²⁴ and to give a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of doves or two young pigeons.

In this next passage, Luke's authorial hand can now be seen creating a repeating pattern:

rejoicing, circumcision, and naming. Although the shepherds depart before Jesus's circumcision, their celebration resounds in the ears of the audience as we skip ahead to eight days after Jesus's birth.⁴⁵¹ Contrary to the derogatory perception of circumcision as a painful and violent rite, it is depicted in these passages as associated with positive affect.⁴⁵²

However, unlike in the first passage, the performance of the circumcision is not centered on a specific group, but is rendered in an infinitive construction that does not specify the subject

⁴⁵¹ The parallel of rejoicing has also been commented on in, for example, I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 88; Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 37.

⁴⁵² Ellis comments, "his first shedding of blood, like his last, identified him with his people," placing circumcision in parallel with brutal crucifixion and death: Ellis, *The Gospel of Luke*, 83.

(τοῦ περιτεμεῖν αὐτόν).⁴⁵³ Even Jesus's parents are not named anywhere specifically in this passage, though the reference to them in v. 27 implies that they participate in carrying out these acts for their newborn child. Instead of focusing on the social circle around Jesus, this passage focuses on the supernatural messenger who names Jesus, on the law of Moses and of the Lord, and on the God and Lord whom the shepherds praise and to whom the child is presented. In line with the characterization of Jesus as similar to but greater than John (cf. Luke 3:15-17), divine figures are emphasized as the ones who orchestrate the celebration of the child, the child's naming, and the offerings for the birth.

As we saw earlier, the circumcision itself is a routine event, with no detailed description; it is in a subordinate rather than a main clause, and it is not associated with either a specific divine figure or a particular scriptural obligation. Again, eighth-day circumcision is pointed out in particular, and the event fits in with the overall emphasis in the passage on obedience to what is required in the Jewish law. This passage continues the earlier themes that circumcision is celebratory, routine, and an expression of faithful devotion. It elevates the character of Jesus compared to John by ascribing greater divine agency to the events associated with Jesus's birth, although circumcision itself receives relatively less attention than rituals like naming and offering sacrifices.

For a number of previous commentators, the circumcisions of John and of Jesus mark their belonging to Israel, their participation in the covenant, and their obedience to Mosaic law.⁴⁵⁴ I do not disagree at all that the infancy narratives demonstrate that John and Jesus are

⁴⁵³ Carroll conveys the subject-less construction by translating, "When eight days had passed and [it was time] for him to receive circumcision": John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 73.

⁴⁵⁴ For views that the circumcisions mark such things, see Fitzmyer, *Luke (I-IX)*, 376, 420; David L. Tiede, *Luke*, ACNT (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 58; Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108; Bovon, *Luke 1*, 86; Carroll, *Luke*, 73.

raised in law-abiding Jewish families, but only that the circumcisions themselves are not as central to this representation as has been typically asserted in scholarship. Furthermore, I caution against associating circumcision so overtly with ethnic belonging, religious particularism, and legalism, when we may instead discuss it in terms that are more directly communicated by Luke's narrative, such as the communal welcome of a child, joyous celebration, and being receptive to divine instruction in multiple forms, both supernatural and scriptural.

In contrast to the Gospel's univocal representation of circumcision as routine, circumcision appears in some more contentious circumstances in the book of Acts. Over the course of the narrative, the role of circumcision in various situations is debated and ultimately resolved. The first mention of circumcision occurs at the beginning of Stephen's speech during his trial, as he discusses circumcision in the context of ancestral Jewish history.

καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ διαθήκην περιτομῆς· καὶ οὕτως ἐγέννησεν τὸν Ἰσαὰκ καὶ περιέτεμεν αὐτὸν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ ὀγδόῃ, καὶ Ἰσαὰκ τὸν Ἰακώβ, καὶ Ἰακώβ τοὺς δώδεκα πατριάρχας.
(7:8)

And he [i.e., God] gave to him [i.e., Abraham] a covenant of circumcision. And in the same way, he bore Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day, and Isaac did the same to Jacob, and Jacob did the same to the twelve patriarchs.

Right away, circumcision is explicitly connected to covenant. Unlike in the passages in the Gospel considered above, circumcision here is part of a bond with the divine. Stephen is speaking about God's particular revelation to Abraham through speech, instruction, promises, and lastly circumcision. Circumcision allows Abraham to participate in covenant and therefore actualizes new possibilities for him and his descendants.

Luke's composition also implicitly stresses the agency of God in Abraham's circumcision. God is not named as the circumciser, but God does initiate the practice that Abraham participates in. The narrative of Genesis does not specify who the circumciser was in

Abraham's circumcision, leaving it in the passive construction (Gen 17:24, 26), and later Jewish thinkers came to different conclusions about whether the circumciser was Abraham, both Abraham and God, or a third party, while the predominant view in Islam was that Abraham circumcised himself.⁴⁵⁵ Luke does not answer the question that Genesis leaves ambiguous, but he does construct the statement creatively so that God can still be an important actor in the circumcision.

Circumcision is the basis for a pattern that is repeated across generations in the same way (οὐτως). It is not only bearing sons that forms connections across time, as the NRSV translated before the update in the NRSVue, but circumcising.⁴⁵⁶ Yet again, the eighth day is highlighted, for the third time in a row in Luke's corpus. However, the eighth day is the time of circumcision starting only with Isaac. Abraham, in a deviation from this pattern, is circumcised as an adult, although his age is left implied rather than being stated overtly.⁴⁵⁷

The age of Abraham allows me to ask more questions about the representation of Abraham's agency in this circumcision. Although certainly newborn infants have the ability to express reactions and preferences, and although newborn circumcisions inaugurate important sets of benefits and modes of belonging, the adult who is presented with the option of circumcision has a wider range of possible responses. In Stephen's speech, circumcision is a gift given by God (ἔδωκεν). There is no explicit statement of whether Abraham voluntarily accepts the gift. However, we can infer from the framing that Abraham has indeed responded positively.

⁴⁵⁵ Göran Larsson, "Circumcision: V. Islam," *EBR* 5:339; Tamás Biró, "Who Circumcised Abraham?: A Cognitive Network Model for the Interpretations of Gen 17," *Annali Di Storia Dell'Esegesi* 39.1 (2022): 127–28, 132–36.

⁴⁵⁶ According to the NRSV, "And so Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day; and Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob of the twelve patriarchs." For translations similar to mine, see the NRSVue as well as Holladay, *Acts*, 163. For a translation that foregrounds circumcision even more, see Williams, *Acts*, 114.

⁴⁵⁷ Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*, 117.

After becoming circumcised, Abraham goes on to pass circumcision on to his son Isaac. There is also no suggestion of force on God's part. Although there is a great power differential between God and Abraham, as between John and his older family members or between Jesus and his parents, the passage represents circumcision as something that enhances Abraham's prospects rather than one that detracts from them. Like the pianist in Mahmood's example, who becomes a virtuoso through practices of hierarchical training, Abraham is offered the opportunity to grow materially and spiritually through God's invitation to the covenant of circumcision.

Circumcision appears again at the end of Stephen's speech. In order to compare his listeners to the oppositional ancestors who created the idol of the calf and who created a temple rather than a tent for God, Stephen accuses,

Σκληροτράχηλοι καὶ ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίαις καὶ τοῖς ὠσίν, ὑμεῖς ἀεὶ τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ ἀντιτίπτετε ὡς οἱ πατέρες ὑμῶν καὶ ὑμεῖς. (7:51)

Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in your hearts and your ears, you are always striving against the Holy Spirit, you too, just like your fathers.

This reference is very different from the preceding ones in several ways: it is a reference to a lack of circumcision rather than its presence, it is a reference to a status rather than an event, and it is metaphorical rather than literal. The rare term uses the alpha-privative construction, and it is therefore truly a reference to the antithesis of a metaphorical circumcision, rather than to the presence of a metaphorical foreskin.⁴⁵⁸ The sense of the metaphor is strongly negative, and only a few lines later, Stephen's listeners respond with fury and violence. Given the positive depiction of circumcision in the narrative thus far as well as the power of the insult in this passage, one might think at first that Luke is communicating a theological message about the impropriety of

⁴⁵⁸ Kisau vividly depicts this metaphor in a compelling way, although one that focuses on the presence of the foreskin rather than the absence of circumcision: "Their hearts cannot be touched by the gospel message because it is as if they are covered by a foreskin": Kisau, "Acts of the Apostles," 1338.

uncircumcision generally, including among gentiles. But the later stories of Cornelius and the Jerusalem council would of course contradict that message. Rather, the force of the metaphor can be understood through the last narrated line in Stephen's speech: οἵτινες ἐλάβετε τὸν νόμον εἰς διαταγὰς ἀγγέλων καὶ οὐκ ἐφυλάξατε ("you who received the law under the charge of angels and who did not keep it," 7:53). Although Stephen's Jewish listeners are presumably circumcised, Stephen accuses them of acting in a way that is not consonant with circumcision's significance as part of a covenant with God, because they are "striving against the Holy Spirit" by resisting the work of God taking place among the disciples of Jesus.⁴⁵⁹ It is not that uncircumcision is fundamentally offensive and ungodly, but that those who have been offered circumcision as a covenantal gift would surely accept it, just as surely as they would keep the law and follow the Spirit. To reject any of these covenantal gifts is represented as reprehensible and shocking.

The next three references to circumcision take place during the narratives about Cornelius in chapters 10 and 11. Differences of opinion regarding circumcision result in questions and surprise after the Holy Spirit falls upon the members of Cornelius's household.

καὶ ἐξέστησαν οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς πιστοὶ ὅσοι συνῆλθαν τῷ Πέτρῳ, ὅτι καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἔθνη ἡ δωρεὰ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ἐκκέχυται· (10:45)

And the faithful from the circumcision group who had come with Peter were shocked because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon even the gentiles.

In this passage, the curious expression ἐκ περιτομῆς occurs. The phrase may be a convoluted way of indicating circumcised people, or it may be a term for people who have a stricter view of the role of circumcision in the early Christian community.⁴⁶⁰ The phrase also occurs in 11:2 in

⁴⁵⁹ It goes too far to suggest that Stephen is accusing them of "not belonging to the people," which would problematically suggest a spiritually ontological change in their status as a result of the crucifixion of Jesus: Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 134.

⁴⁶⁰ For the more common, former view, see for example, Williams, *Acts*, 183–84; F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 264; Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 467; Holladay, *Acts*, 240.

the corpus of Luke-Acts, and we see it in the Pauline letters in Romans 4:12, Galatians 2:12, Colossians 4:11, and Titus 1:10. The evidence from the Pauline corpus can point in both directions, so I see it as more fruitful to focus on the context within Luke's composition to determine the meaning of the phrase.

There are at least three reasons that Luke's use of this phrase is better read as referring to a people who have a stricter view of the role of circumcision, not circumcised people broadly. First, the phrase ἐκ περιτομῆς truly is convoluted if it simply means circumcised people. If the purpose was to convey the social tension between circumcised and uncircumcised people or between Jewish and gentile people, Luke could just as easily have used a descriptor like περιτεμνόμενοι or Ἰουδαῖοι. Second, Luke notes that the group is ὅσοι συνῆλθαν τῷ Πέτρῳ, meaning those "who had come with Peter" or even more specifically "however many had come with Peter." The relative clause suggests that it is important to know that some members of the broader group are located elsewhere and that only a specific number have accompanied Peter. Lastly, there is a significant difference in meaning between these two translations. The former implies that Luke sees all circumcised people in the early Christian community as being inclined to think that gentiles would not receive the Holy Spirit. But the latter communicates that an important portion of people in the early Christian community held a stance on circumcision that led them to think that gentiles would not receive the Holy Spirit. The difference is between seeing all circumcised Jews as a monolith versus seeing a diversity of opinion among Jewish Christians. For the reasons above, I have translated ἐκ περιτομῆς as referring to a group with a certain opinion, not to circumcised people.

For the latter view, see for example, Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 92; James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 145.

Having established the basis for that translational choice, the representation of circumcision in the passage can now be analyzed. First, circumcision was not only something that created a divide between “us as Jews” and “them as gentiles” when interacting in Hellenistic communities. Rather, the import of circumcision was also internally contested among Jewish people. In addition, circumcision was not only something that was debated on the basis of adherence or non-adherence. Instead, this passage shows us a range of views on how circumcision status relates to the activity of God among individuals.

Next, this passage shows us that a group can be united and cohesive while still having a range of these views within it. Although this passage includes tensions, it cannot be understood neatly within an agonistic framework. Members of the circumcision group are part of Peter’s inner circle although Peter is not represented as one of their group, and these individuals experience the emotion of shock without yet expressing a value judgment.

Lastly, this group of people who have a stricter view of circumcision are specifically shocked by “the gift of the Holy Spirit” being extended to gentiles. The audience may be reminded of the most recent mention of circumcision in Acts, when Stephen accused his listeners of being “uncircumcised” metaphorically because they “are always striving against the Holy Spirit.” Luke’s narrative depicts circumcision as conventionally associated with the presence of the Holy Spirit, but it points to examples that complicate this expected link, as some circumcised people resist the Holy Spirit and some uncircumcised people are filled with the Holy Spirit.

Just a few verses later, news of the event at Cornelius’s house has spread to Judea, resulting in tense conversation.

² Ὅτε δὲ ἀνέβη Πέτρος εἰς Ἱερουσαλήμ, διεκρίνοντο πρὸς αὐτὸν οἱ ἐκ περιτομῆς

³ λέγοντες ὅτι εἰσῆλθες πρὸς ἄνδρας ἀκροβυστίαν ἔχοντας καὶ συνέφαγες αὐτοῖς. (11:2-3)

² And when Peter went up to Jerusalem, those from the circumcision group disputed with him, ³ saying, “You went inside to men who have foreskins and you ate with them.”

What began as shock (ἐξέστησαν, 10: 45) has transformed into the more serious matter of disputation (διεκρίνοντο). But Peter’s lengthy answer (11:4-17) ultimately resolves the concerns of even this group (11:18). Hearing about the decisive action of God through the Holy Spirit (11:15-16), this group finds resolution to their social concerns that Peter has eaten with gentiles. Highly specific language occurs here, not to “uncircumcised people” but to “men who have foreskins.” It is not just the absence of circumcision that so concerns this group, but the presence of the male foreskin in a situation of intimate company.

The issue of circumcision quiets down in the narrative until the events that spark the Jerusalem council in chapter 15.

Καί τινες κατελθόντες ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰουδαίας ἐδίδασκον τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς ὅτι, ἐὰν μὴ περιτμηθῇτε τῷ ἔθει τῷ Μωϋσέως, οὐ δύνασθε σωθῆναι. (15:1)
Ἐξανέστησαν δέ τινες τῶν ἀπὸ τῆς αἵρέσεως τῶν Φαρισαίων πεπιστευκότες λέγοντες ὅτι δεῖ περιτέμνειν αὐτοὺς παραγγέλλειν τε τηρεῖν τὸν νόμον Μωϋσέως. (15:5)

And some people, having come down from Judea, were teaching the siblings, “Unless you become circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you are not able to be saved.”

But some believers among those from the sect of the Pharisees stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.”

Two very similar statements are issued, but they differ significantly in speaker, audience, and ultimate point. No longer ἐκ περιτομῆς, one group is identified as people from Judea, while the other is made up of Pharisee believers. This suggests that we should not think of formal parties that were defined solely by their stance on circumcision, as if “pro” and “anti” factions, but rather should think of Christian Jews (as well as non-Christian Jews) as having a large number of perspectives on various issues. The statements are also addressed to different groups. The first group is speaking to uncircumcised men who are seeking salvation, while the second group is

addressing early Christian leaders. Rather than what is suggested by the passive construction used by the NRSVue (“It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses”), the Pharisee believers are placing the responsibility on Paul, Barnabas, and their companions to be the ones to circumcise Christian gentiles.⁴⁶¹ The presence of two audiences reminds us that the issue of gentile circumcision radiates both directions, impacting both the gentile men whose bodies are under discussion and the Christian leaders who would carry out the action in question. Furthermore, although both groups object to Paul and Barnabas’s position, it is ambiguous whether they agree or disagree with one another. Certainly, both groups express that uncircumcised individuals are not eligible for incorporation into the body of believers. But the second group affirms that they *can* be incorporated by becoming circumcised, whereas the first group leaves open the possibility that someone who has passed the eighth day of life should not be circumcised and cannot be incorporated at all.⁴⁶² Two superficially similar arguments may in fact have vastly different implications for a gentile seeking to follow Jesus.

In the broader passage, Luke reports that gentile Christians were troubled and shaken up by the teaching that they were required to be circumcised (15:24, ἐτάραξαν ὑμᾶς λόγοις ἀνασκευάζοντες τὰς ψυχὰς ὑμῶν). We do not hear this description directly in the narrative, but rather hear it indirectly and very late, embedded within a letter to the gentile believers. Luke does not dramatize negative gentile responses to circumcision such as resistance, fear, or disgust. His emphasis instead is on the accommodation that Jewish leaders in the early church community make to the needs of gentiles as an expression of the impartiality of God (15:7-11). Luke’s depiction of the conflict over circumcision does not center gentiles as ‘victims’ of the ‘barbarian’ rite of circumcision, but instead represents concerned Jewish apostles and elders working to

⁴⁶¹ Johnson notes “[t]he assumption of authority on their part”: Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 260.

⁴⁶² For debates on genealogical exclusion, see Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion*.

accommodate gentile culture while still holding to essential elements of morality (15:20, 28-29).⁴⁶³ Lastly, a new theme appears to which circumcision has been connected. In addition to covenant and the Holy Spirit, circumcision is connected in some people's minds to salvation, though this connection is ultimately dispelled by the narrator and the Jerusalem council.

The circumcision of Timothy occurs soon after in the narrative, and then the final pertinent passage is several chapters later, when it is reported that negative information is being promulgated about Paul.

¹⁹ καὶ ἀσπασάμενος αὐτοὺς ἐξηγεῖτο καθ' ἕνα ἕνα, ὃν ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν διὰ τῆς διακονίας αὐτοῦ. ²⁰ Οἱ δὲ ἀκούσαντες ἐδόξαζον τὸν θεὸν εἰπὼν τε αὐτῷ· θεωρεῖς, ἀδελφέ, πόσαι μυριάδες εἰσὶν ἐν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις τῶν πεπιστευκότων καὶ πάντες ζηλωταὶ τοῦ νόμου ὑπάρχουσιν. ²¹ κατηχήθησαν δὲ περὶ σοῦ ὅτι ἀποστασίαν διδάσκεις ἀπὸ Μωϋσέως τοὺς κατὰ τὰ ἔθνη πάντας Ἰουδαίους λέγων μὴ περιτέμνειν αὐτοὺς τὰ τέκνα μηδὲ τοῖς ἔθεσιν περιπατεῖν. ²² τί οὖν ἐστίν; πάντως ἀκούσονται ὅτι ἐλήλυθας. ²³ τοῦτο οὖν ποίησον ὃ σοι λέγομεν· εἰσὶν ἡμῖν ἄνδρες τέσσαρες εὐχὴν ἔχοντες ἐφ' ἑαυτῶν. ²⁴ τούτους παραλαβὼν ἀγνίσθητι σὺν αὐτοῖς καὶ δαπάνησον ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἵνα ξυρήσονται τὴν κεφαλὴν, καὶ γνώσονται πάντες ὅτι ὃν κατήχηται περὶ σοῦ οὐδὲν ἐστὶν ἀλλὰ στοιχεῖς καὶ αὐτὸς φυλάσσων τὸν νόμον. (21:19-24)

¹⁹ And after he [i.e., Paul] greeted them, he explained one by one what God had done among the gentiles through their ministry. ²⁰ And when they heard this, they praised God and said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands of believing ones there are among the Jews and all are zealous for the law. ²¹ But they were informed about you, that you teach apostasy from Moses to all the Jews among the gentiles, saying that they should not circumcise their children or follow the customs. ²² So what now? They will certainly hear that you have come. ²³ So do what we tell you. We have four men who have taken up a vow. ²⁴ Taking them along, be purified with them and pay for them so that they may shave their heads, and all will know that, of the things they were informed about regarding you, there is nothing there, but that you walk strictly, also keeping the law yourself.”

In this passage, which falls relatively late in the narrative, the status of gentiles is no longer being debated. All the leaders in Jerusalem are very glad to hear about Paul's work among the gentiles, and the other believers in Jerusalem have no qualms about this either. Instead, the concerns about

⁴⁶³ My reading therefore sees the narrative as pushing to elide from consideration Johnson's musing that “the Gentiles are to be (forcibly?) circumcised”: Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 260.

circumcision have moved to focus on Jewish Christians. Further, we hear that the concerns about circumcision have transferred one level away from Paul and other traveling Christian leaders. In chapter 15, certain Pharisees wanted these leaders to physically involve themselves in circumcising gentile men. Here, a significant number of people want these leaders to only encourage Jewish parents to have their children circumcised, but not necessarily for the leader to physically circumcise those children themselves. In this passage, we see a spectrum of involvement in law adherence. For circumcision, the most direct level is to be circumcised oneself; next, to circumcise another person; next, to arrange the circumcision of another person; lastly, to publicly encourage people to circumcise those for whom they are responsible.⁴⁶⁴

A similar spectrum of involvement is seen in the purification that Paul is urged to participate in. The four men only are under a vow and shave their heads; all five men including Paul will go on this journey and be purified; Paul alone will supply the money to enable this enterprise. As the speakers phrase it, Paul following the law himself (καὶ αὐτὸς φυλάσσων τὸν νόμον, v. 24) is distinguished slightly from but is also related to having a scrupulous attitude that encourages others to follow the law. The law observance during this journey occurs because of a blend of both principle and utility, both piety and social concern. Listening to the voices of veiling young women in Canada, these two need not be viewed as contradictions such that one or the other must be the true reason. Rather, religious conviction and responsiveness to one's community can amplify one another and be simultaneously authentic causes for a decision.

Lastly, this conversation differs from the Jerusalem Council's conversation in the size of the group advocating a stricter stance on circumcision. The concerns about circumcision in

⁴⁶⁴ As Johnson observes, "Paul is not himself accused of breaking Torah": Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 375.

It is also possible to circumcise oneself as an adult, as attested in bQid 29a, but this would be a rare occurrence.

chapter 15 were expressed by a minority who did not ultimately have their viewpoint institutionalized, but here in chapter 21 the concerns are held by a majority, including the apostles and elders. The speakers in this passage believe that Paul does not discourage the circumcision of Jewish children, and presumably they would reprimand Paul if he were in fact doing so. Luke does not explicitly endorse a requirement for Jewish people to be circumcised, but he also does not narrate any official instruction being given for Jewish people to stop the practice of circumcision.

Taking this material as a whole, I can now make a more general statement about how Luke depicts circumcision and agency, based on passages that are generally less contentious than Acts 16:1-5. In Luke-Acts, it is normal for circumcision to involve many parties, including the male child or adult being circumcised, the mother and the father, extended relatives, neighbors, religious leaders, Moses, and God. Circumcision is a communal act. Nowhere does Luke specify whether a particular individual wanted or did not want to be circumcised, because circumcision is taken for granted as a positive gift. Circumcision is a joyful and everyday occasion, and it is in contrast to its usual ordinariness that in the specific context of the early church circumcision raises surprise, concern, and debate. Socially, circumcision is similar to other practices such as naming, offering sacrifices, undergoing purification, and fulfilling a vow by shaving one's head. Theologically, circumcision may potentially be related to covenant, the presence of the Holy Spirit, salvation, and following Mosaic law or customs, but Luke's narrative confirms some of these relationships and denies others. He does view circumcision as an element of God's covenant with Abraham and as part of adherence to Mosaic practices; he sees metaphorical circumcision and uncircumcision as related to the Holy Spirit, but he does not see literal uncircumcision as a barrier to the Holy Spirit; and he denies that circumcision is necessary for

salvation. Luke represents that, in early Christianity, various ideological groups held more or less strict stances on the necessity of gentile circumcision, but it was generally accepted that Jewish circumcision of infants would continue. The diversity of opinions on gentile circumcision are not caused by the new presence of gentile Christians, in Luke's representation; rather, the opinions held by the party ἐκ περιτομῆς existed before they were confronted with Cornelius's household. We should understand this diversity as preexisting within Judaism of the period, not as sparked by a sudden infusion of gentile, Hellenistic Christianity. This diversity is also not synonymous with factionalism, because Luke depicts individuals coexisting who have different views on gentile circumcision, and he also names a wide range of groups as objecting to the inclusion of uncircumcised gentiles. Rather than focusing on gentiles and their potentially negative views of circumcision, Luke keeps a positive and edifying lens on the practice of circumcision, elaborately narrating the way that Jewish leaders accommodate gentiles when it comes to this topic while maintaining other essential ethical stances and while continuing circumcision among Jewish people.

Conclusion

In my survey of Lukan views on circumcision, I have intentionally opposed anti-Jewish frameworks for understanding circumcision, and I have drawn from South Asian discussions of tradition and agency. I have recognized places where Luke connects circumcision to specifically Jewish identity and religiosity, but I have also highlighted the practice's connections to life milestones, ethical behavior, community belonging, and spiritual destiny. Correspondingly, I have displaced circumcision from being synonymous with Jewish identity by paying attention to other practices that are given as much or even more attention in the same passage. I have

attended to complex Lukan depictions of agency that go beyond the stereotype of circumcision as forced by the weight of tradition and enforced by hierarchical power, while also avoiding liberal valorizations of autonomy. Circumcision is a practice that is depicted as embedded within communities, including structures of authority, both divine and human, which create norms and facilitate people's entrance into desirable states of being. For Jewish people in Luke's narratives, circumcision is a gift given by God and by one's family and community. In the case of gentiles, Jewish people are depicted accommodating their different situation and refraining from requiring circumcision. Avoiding agonistic frameworks, I have attended to how circumcision is depicted as a contentious issue but one that allows unity in the midst of difference, and as a source of diversity internal to Judaism rather than explained solely by Hellenistic factors.

The reading that I have employed is one that I view as discursive, following in the footsteps of Saba Mahmood. I have analyzed how the practice of circumcision is taken up as an avenue for inculcating certain desirable states of being, located within preexisting norms and structures. I have explicitly rejected an Orientalist reading of circumcision, according to which Jews do not choose circumcision, but have circumcision forced upon them by Jewish tradition. To the contrary, Luke depicts circumcision as a joyful occasion that is similar to other communal practices like as naming and purification rituals. I have also been careful to avoid the equally dangerous opposite, a nativist view, according to which Jews rightly choose circumcision and therefore embrace unchanging Jewish tradition.⁴⁶⁵ I have attended to cases when the "rules" of circumcision are not followed exactly (e.g., the non-eighth-day circumcision of Abraham, the diversity of opinions on gentile circumcision within Judaism) and yet that multiplicity is not

⁴⁶⁵ Willimon invokes tradition as he reflects on Acts 21:17-26 and in so doing rebukes "liberal" elements of his contemporary culture: Willimon, *Acts*, 163–64. A discursive approach to tradition would represent it as an equally legible choice as newer practices, but would not arrange it hierarchically above them.

condemned. Thirdly, I have avoided locating agency only in resistance, a view that would suggest that Jews genuinely choose circumcision only when they do so in opposition to illegitimate authority.⁴⁶⁶ Instead, I have noticed that circumcision can be carried out by figures such as parents and religious leaders as a way to enable the subject to actualize norms, but that this still offers desirable opportunities.

My discursive reading of circumcision in Luke-Acts offers support for seeing Timothy's agency in his circumcision. Even though the practice is not something that he carries out on himself, but rather that Paul performs for him, it is normal and typically not coercive for another party to carry out one's circumcision. Parents, community members, and religious leaders are all legibly depicted in Luke-Acts as proper individuals who can participate in a person's circumcision. Furthermore, the narrative of Luke-Acts depicts circumcision as a positive mode of embedding a person within a network of values, opportunities, and communities. Circumcision is not represented as a worthless relic of Jewish culture, but rather as a desirable way for Jewish people to manifest their covenantal relationship with God and their alignment with the Holy Spirit. The lack of requirement for gentiles to be circumcised does not take away from the value of circumcision for Jews. Timothy's circumcision is therefore not different from the other circumcisions recorded in Luke-Acts in many dimensions. The figure whom he most closely resembles is Abraham, who was also uncircumcised until adulthood and who became circumcised when God gave him the gift of the covenant of circumcision. In the next chapter, I explore what instigating event the narrative suggests was determinative for Timothy's decision to become circumcised.

⁴⁶⁶ Circumcision in Acts has been read as opposition to the dominant Hellenistic mores of masculinity enforced by the Roman empire: Aymer, "Acts of the Apostles," 542; Stroup, "Making Jewish Men."

Chapter 6: Coalition: The Way and South Asian Alliances

Introduction

Thus far, I have established that Timothy's circumcision prompts unease in many interpreters, influenced by the modern West's Orientalizing views of circumcision, especially adult and religious circumcision, which is viewed as forced and unchosen. However, circumcision is depicted positively in Luke-Acts as a communal act that cultivates the Jewish self in relationship with the divine, an act that continues to be valuable although gentiles are not to participate in circumcision even when they are in relationship with the divine. My reading of circumcision in Luke-Acts allows for an affirmation of the possibility of Timothy's desire for circumcision, countering Orientalizing stereotypes of adult religious circumcision. It also understands circumcision as an event that in Luke-Acts positively embeds the subject within one's community and its mores, therefore subverting a liberal resistant framework for agency. Having also demonstrated Luke's recognition that there are not unbreakable or undebatable rules for circumcision, I therefore problematize an essentialist valorization of circumcision too. Luke includes no explicit command for all Jews to be circumcised, although he rejects the idea of actively discouraging them from circumcision. The question that now remains to be answered is, why does the character of Timothy participate in circumcision here and now, when he had been uncircumcised until this point in his life? How does Luke prepare the audience to understand this decision? How does the circumcision of Timothy relate to the narrative plotline of exempting gentiles from circumcision? To respond to these problems, I take a step back to think more broadly about how Timothy's identity and act of circumcision relate to Luke's depiction of the identities and practices of Jews and gentiles within the Way more broadly.

First, I discuss three preexisting models that scholars of Acts have proposed for how Luke sees Jews and gentiles relating within early Christianity, and how he sees the Way relating to Judaism: that the Way is against Judaism, that the Way is within Judaism, and that the Way forms an identity that is more expansive than and more important than Judaism. Each of these dominant models offers a different framework for thinking about the place of Jewish circumcision among followers of Jesus. As I evaluate these possibilities, I take to heart David G. Horrell's recent call for scholars of early Christianity to be wary of the anti-Jewish dichotomy between universalism and particularism. I also lean into the insight of scholars including Caroline Johnson Hodge, Love L. Sechrest, and Aaron Kuecker, who draw on modern ethnic studies to better understand interethnic interaction in the biblical world. The model I propose in the subsequent section is informed by South Asian studies and offers the image of coalition.

My deployment of the term "coalition" comes from South Asian political alliances, especially women-of-color organizing. As described by activists and theorists including Shireen Roshanravan, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Angela Davis, coalition allows South Asians to define their identities through the goal of anti-racism and decolonizing for all people of color and third-world people, rather than through assimilation and aspiration to whiteness. Coalitional racial identities are applicable to people of many races, manifesting their shared goals and drawing generatively on their similar yet different racial histories. However, such identities do not represent their breadth as a reason for greater value than narrower racial identities, which securely retain their importance. While coalitions are diverse, they can also center particular histories, concerns, and groups. I offer case studies of the Berkeley Indian Students Association in 1975 and the terms BIPOC and BAME/BME in the early twenty-first century as examples of the dynamics of coalition in two recent but different social and political climates. Biblical studies

has thus far largely drawn on the idea of coalition in terms of defining optimal scholarly methodologies, but I suggest that coalition is also visible in the biblical text. The Way in Acts can be understood as a coalition that comprises multiple ethno-religious groups but centers Judaism. As I compare the Way to these modern coalitions, I am not suggesting that present-day Christianity should be a coalition, or that there are comparable power dynamics present in ancient and modern Christianity, but simply that Luke depicts the Way in the first century in such a way that we could describe the Lukan picture as a coalition.

Finally, I propose that Timothy becomes circumcised precisely because of the specific narrative event of Timothy's invitation into a ministry of proclaiming the Jerusalem council decision. In light of the idea that the Way as coalition is both particular and universal, I read Acts 15 and 16 as together demonstrating both the continued propriety of circumcision for Jewish Christians and an alliance between multiple ethno-religious groups with their own cultural practices. Timothy becomes circumcised precisely because of his joint identity as a Jewish Christian, as someone for whom circumcision is appropriate and as someone who is in community with the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem. The circumcision of Timothy both provides evidence for the coalitional model and can be better understood within this model.

Models for the Way in Acts

A hotly debated topic in the study of Acts is how the Way constructs identity boundaries and especially how it relates to Judaism. In a recent article, Jason F. Moraff reviews the options that scholars put forward during the period 2010-2020 for the relationship between the Way and Judaism in Acts.⁴⁶⁷ Moraff groups scholarship into two positions: (1) the Way is an identity

⁴⁶⁷ Jason F. Moraff, "Recent Trends in the Study of Jews and Judaism in Luke-Acts," *CurBR* 19.1 (2020): 64–87.

formed by othering Judaism, or (2) the Way is a subgroup within Judaism.⁴⁶⁸ In the first formulation, Luke's perspective is frequently represented as being anti-Jewish, while in the second formulation, Luke's perspective is instead typically seen as a voice that participates in internal, tense dialogue within a Jewish community. These two poles of scholarly perspectives are commonly found throughout New Testament studies, as the different literatures of the corpus are placed variously in regard to the parting of the ways. In the present day, these disagreeing scholars generally hold in common the shared value of critiquing anti-Judaism and increasing religious tolerance, equity, and justice.

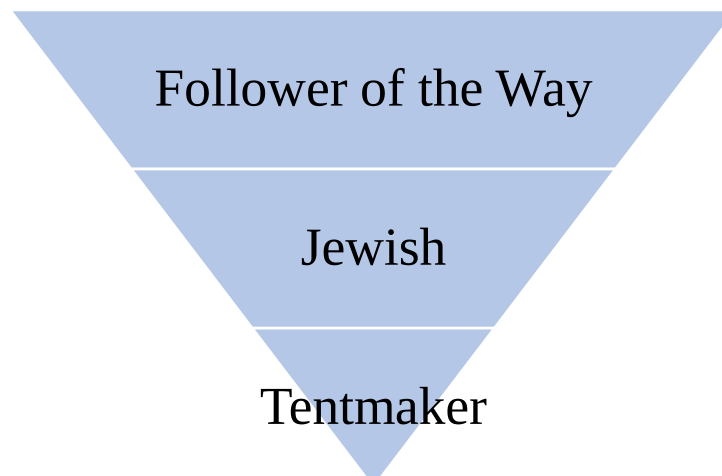
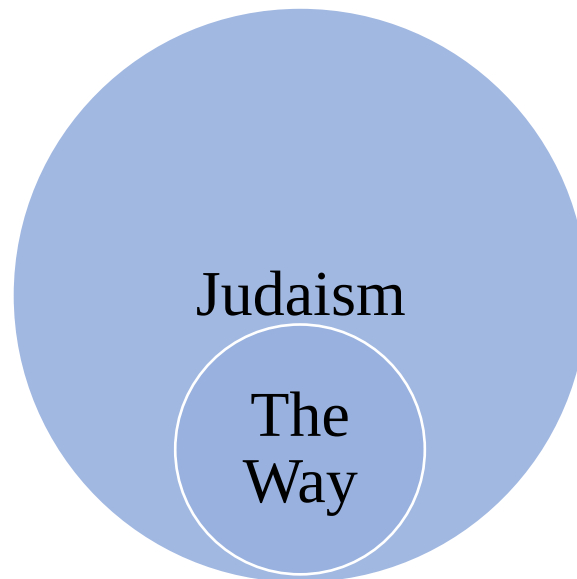
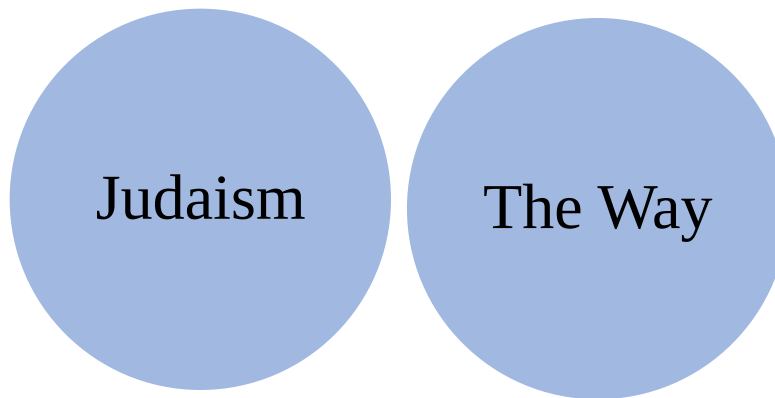
A third model for the Way draws on social-scientific ethnic approaches in order to argue that the Way is a “trans-ethnic identity created by being in Christ...[that] belongs in a completely different category than that represented by the ancestrally constituted and territorially labeled ‘Judean’ identity.”⁴⁶⁹ Christianity is understood as attempting to reconcile different ethnic groups (e.g., Judeans and Greeks) and is valorized for being “inclusive” because it “values and preserves ethnic identities encompassed within a common unity in Christ,” although this Christian identity is more important than any other individual ethnic identity.⁴⁷⁰ The achievement of early Christianity is upheld as an example for the modern world, where “Western societies—often experiencing immigration from former colonies—have grappled with how to preserve and integrate diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious identities under such ideological banners as multiculturalism.”⁴⁷¹ Below, I offer diagrams of each of these three models.

⁴⁶⁸ The first view is represented by a relatively smaller group of scholars: Mitzi Smith, Randall J. Hedlun, Amy-Jill Levine, and Shelly Matthews. The second view is represented by a larger group: Dulcinea L. Boesenberg, Christopher Stroup, Joshua W. Jipp, D. A. Smith, Isaac W. Oliver, Christoph Schaefer, Mark S. Kinzer, and Susan J. Wendel.

⁴⁶⁹ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 38–39.

⁴⁷⁰ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 42.

⁴⁷¹ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 45.



In the first model, the Way is differentiated from Judaism, such that it can experience itself as a superior alternative to it. We could imagine other circles sitting on the sides, marked with names such as “the cult of Artemis of Ephesus,” for example, representing other separate religious options in antiquity, over which the Way could also experience itself as superior. According to this framework, one would choose between Jewish mores on circumcision and the Way’s mores on circumcision. One’s circumcision status would be meaningful according to the symbolic, theological world of either Judaism or the Way. For Timothy, his circumcision would be explained by the values and goals of the Way alone.

In the second model, the Way is a smaller sect within the larger umbrella of Judaism. We could imagine other small circles next to the Way and even overlapping with it sometimes, such as “Pharisees” or “Essenes,” representing other sects within Judaism. A follower of the Way would therefore be a Jew or a convert to Judaism, and one would behave in a manner appropriate to that identity, including when it came to circumcision. The debates about convert circumcision in the Way would be seen as extensions of those conversations within Judaism more broadly. Timothy’s circumcision within the Way could have its standard range of meanings within Judaism, or it could develop a unique meaning as some Jewish sects developed their own perspectives on the practice.

The third model offers an example of how the trans-ethnic identity category of the Way would rank higher than other narrower identity categories. One individual’s self-understanding has been depicted here, and the second and third (and so on) levels of identity would change depending on the other characteristics of each early Christian individual. The Way’s rules and theological meanings for circumcision would trump the rules and meanings of any cultural

groups lower on the ladder. Timothy's circumcision would ultimately be Christian in determinative significance.

The work of David G. Horrell offers a further criterion by which models for early Christianity must be evaluated. Horrell has recently exhorted biblical scholars to beware of anti-Jewish Orientalism wherever it appears in New Testament studies, including in our models for early Christianity. He offers this warning even for proposals that purport to be less marked by Christian supercessionism. For instance, the “new perspective” approach aims at dismantling anti-Judaism by critiquing interpretation “which depict[s] Jews as legalistic hypocrites striving to earn their salvation by doing good works,” and it instead has the goal of situating New Testament authors within Judaism, positively conceived.⁴⁷² However, the new perspective approach has typically worked to accomplish this goal by imparting to certain strands of Judaism the classic, purported values of Christianity, namely, “openness, universality, or inclusion,” rather than “particularism or ethnocentrism.”⁴⁷³ Therefore, these proposals may unfortunately “reproduce a dichotomy” that it is attempting to dismantle.⁴⁷⁴ Furthermore, this approach praises formulations that are strikingly similar to the Western ideal of multiculturalism. This ideal falters both because it neglects power dynamics within heterogeneous communities and because it is a foil that is formed against the specter of ethnic particularism.

As an alternative to attempting to recuperate Judaism by making it identical to Christianity, Horrell proposes that both Judaism and Christianity engaged in ethnic practices in the first century. In this, he follows in the footsteps of scholars like Denise Kimber Buell, who explores the “ethnic reasoning” of Christianity in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.⁴⁷⁵ In the body of

⁴⁷² Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 33.

⁴⁷³ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 35.

⁴⁷⁴ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 34–35.

⁴⁷⁵ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 56–58; Buell, *Why This New Race*.

Horrell's study, he examines how shared descent, a common way of life, the homeland, self-consciousness as a people, and conversion all appear in Judaism and Christianity in antiquity. He argues therefore that "both Jewish and early Christian traditions deploy aspects of ethnic discourse" and that the emphasis on only Judaism as ethnically particular is the product of a historical context marked by European colonialism, white superiority, and Christian triumphalism.⁴⁷⁶ The norms of whiteness and Christianity must "be made strange," to use the language of critical whiteness scholar Richard Dyer, in order for them to be dislodged.⁴⁷⁷ It is the case both that early Christianity is less "open, inclusive, trans-ethnic, or universal" than it has been portrayed, and that the particular values of "universality and non-particularity" are not objectively superior.⁴⁷⁸ Rather, the idealized vision of early Christianity is one that mirrors "precisely the model of tolerant inclusion of difference that is so valorized in Western liberalism."⁴⁷⁹ Horrell's critiques and proposals are deeply insightful and important for this moment in biblical studies, and I take his cautions seriously as I take up his invitation to model early Christianity outside of the dominant multiculturalism model that is centered by the white, Western, liberal world.

I am informed by biblical scholarship that seeks to think outside of this dominant model by drawing on race and ethnic studies. More often, this scholarship has taken place in the context of reading Paul. I am not here making any argument about how Luke's and Paul's conceptions of early Christianity compare, but about models for early Christianity that we as scholars generate. First, Caroline Johnson Hodge has conducted a study of Paul's ethnic discourse that draws on

⁴⁷⁶ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 309.

⁴⁷⁷ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 316; Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 10.

⁴⁷⁸ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 323.

⁴⁷⁹ Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 329.

anthropological discussions of kinship.⁴⁸⁰ She proposes that, in Paul's discourse, the identity of being "in-Christ" is the most important of all possible multiple identities, and "being in-Christ is not ethnically neutral; rather, it falls under the umbrella of Jewishness" in a hybrid sense.⁴⁸¹ She blends the second and third models discussed above, representing being-in-Christ as both ethnically marked and of universal significance. Hodge reflects on the implications of her model for the present day, noting that she does not see Paul's formulation of Christianity as the normative formulation for Christians to adopt today, but instead as a conversation partner that may spark questions about how we see Christian identity as well.⁴⁸²

Love L. Sechrest also reads Paul's corpus, and her methodology draws on the history of defining race and ethnicity, focusing on narrative conceptions of identity.⁴⁸³ She argues that the "voluntary" identity of the Christian leads one to reject the "ascribed" identities that one was born with, such as being Jewish.⁴⁸⁴ Paul draws on elements of Jewish identity formation as he proposes a new identity for Christians, and therefore he depicts Christians as "an *emergent, newly formed, Jewish-like racial group*."⁴⁸⁵ Sechrest suggests a reformulation of the first model blended with the third model, in which the voluntary character of the Way lifts it so high above other identity categories that the others are ultimately rejected. Sechrest also reflects on the present day, in particular, "contemporary race relations," and she urges that "living life as if race were a matter of theology instead of skin color means that both whites and blacks would have to live life as blood traitors, who each consider the needs of the other over their own, and the needs of Christian kinfolk above all others—no matter what their skin color."⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁰ Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 16–17, 20–22.

⁴⁸¹ Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 125, 150.

⁴⁸² Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 153.

⁴⁸³ Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, 23–53.

⁴⁸⁴ Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, 159.

⁴⁸⁵ Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, 206.

⁴⁸⁶ Sechrest, *A Former Jew: Paul and the Dialectics of Race*, 227, 229.

Aaron Kuecker interprets the book of Acts, as I do, and he analyzes ethnicity through social identity theory.⁴⁸⁷ He sees the early Christianity described in the text as following the model of a “[s]uperordinate identity with retention of subgroup salience.”⁴⁸⁸ The Holy Spirit is therefore the center of a “new social identity that affirms yet chastens and transcends ethnic identity,” refiguring the primacy of Israel as “allocentric,” that is, only “privileged...for the sake of the ‘other.’”⁴⁸⁹ Kuecker offers a blend of all three models. Like in the first model, the ethnic identity of Judaism is “chastened,” and ethnicity itself is seen as a challenge. Like the second model, this approach sees Israel as nevertheless primary, however not on its own terms and only for the good of the other. Lastly and most evidently, like the third model, Kuecker’s model sees the Way as a trans-ethnic umbrella. The contemporary concerns shaping Kuecker’s project involve the “entrenchment of ethnic identities and...increasing volatility at interethnic boundaries” globally.⁴⁹⁰

Because Hodge and Sechrest are discussing the Pauline corpus, and because Kuecker limits his study of Luke-Acts to end at Acts 15, which he regards as the climax of Luke’s message on ethnicity, none of the three authors above bring their treatments of early Christianity to bear on their interpretations of the circumcision of Timothy. In addition to drawing on a new body of ethnic studies literature in the form of South Asian material, I am applying my findings to a passage not yet analyzed in these terms. From this South Asian thought, I will propose a model for the Way that matches the information in Acts and is better able to explain the circumcision of Timothy. I seek an understanding of the Way that simultaneously does not

⁴⁸⁷ Aaron J. Kuecker, *The Spirit and the “Other”: Social Identity, Ethnicity and Intergroup Reconciliation in Luke-Acts*, LNTS (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 24–40.

⁴⁸⁸ Kuecker, *The Spirit and the “Other,”* 33.

⁴⁸⁹ Kuecker, *The Spirit and the “Other,”* 216, 217.

⁴⁹⁰ Kuecker, *The Spirit and the “Other,”* 227.

reduce the importance of other group identities valued in Luke-Acts, acknowledges the centrality of Judaism for the Way, and allows space for uncircumcised and non-Jewish people in the movement.

To diversify our models of early Christianity and to balance against majoritarian ethnic perspectives, below I propose a model for the Way that emerges from the theories, experiences, and histories of South Asian organizing within coalition. Having laid out the underpinnings of coalitional identity, I then compare the coalitional paradigm to the existing three models by suggesting how it would view the place of circumcision within the Way.

South Asian Models of Coalition

As I surveyed in chapter 3, South Asians in diaspora construct their identity in multiple ways, sometimes aligning themselves with whiteness, sometimes leveraging the model minority myth as Asians, and at other times working in coalition as people of color. The activist group the Queer South Asian National Network (QSANN) is an example of South Asian Americans who elect to stand in coalition especially with Black Americans in the era of the Black Lives Matter movement, and they give specific examples of what such solidarity looks like: “We are committed to drawing connections between Islamophobia, caste-based oppression, privilege and complicity, xenophobia and profiling, and anti-Blackness in ourselves, our communities, and the imperial US.”⁴⁹¹ How is South Asian identity constructed when it takes place within coalition? What is the theoretical basis for forming such connections?

Racial coalitions offer a manner of self-identification that is simultaneously racially specific and multi-racial. The coalitions that South Asians join have been variously named:

⁴⁹¹ Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility,” 275.

people of color, women of color feminists, third-world women. As Roshanravan describes, Asian American activists Yuri Kochiyama and Grace Lee Boggs construct their identity as part of a larger coalition of people of color in the United States.⁴⁹² For Kochiyama and Boggs, a necessity for Asian Americans in coalition with Black Americans is “learning about, and identifying with, Black struggle without ever appropriating that struggle as their own.”⁴⁹³ In this model, Asian Americans are not defined by a narrow “root identity,” as Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant terms it, which would “reduce[] Asian American belonging to singular terms of linear descent from an originary mythic (geographic, familial, cultural) site of authentic and pure Asianness.”⁴⁹⁴ Rather, it involves “deep and expansive relationship with Black communities and struggles” that frames the very meaning of their Asian American identity as something “routed horizontally through people of color liberation rather than vertically toward model-minority assimilation.”⁴⁹⁵ The identity “person of color” is racial, but it invests itself in the flourishing of multiple racial groups and the tearing down of multiple manifestations of racism. As such, it is an identity that is held by people of many races and yet it does not erase an individual’s racial identity or represent itself as more important than that narrower identity.

Racial coalitions are articulated on a philosophical, political basis, but they are also responsive to shifting conditions and can center specific histories and social moments. Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains that third world feminists have “political rather than biological bases for alliance. Thus, it is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather it is the way we think about race, class and gender—the political links we choose to make among

⁴⁹² *When Mountains Take Wing: Angela Davis and Yuri Kochiyama—a Conversation on Life, Struggles, and Liberation*, Film (Quad Productions, 2010); Grace Lee Boggs, *Living for Change: An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

⁴⁹³ Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility,” 264–65.

⁴⁹⁴ Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility,” 265; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 11.

⁴⁹⁵ Roshanravan, “Weaponizing Our (In)Visibility,” 265, 266.

and between struggles.”⁴⁹⁶ As Angela Davis describes from her positionality as a Black feminist, “woman of color...is a provisional identity that allows the move beyond identity politics articulated in the traditional way.”⁴⁹⁷ Mohanty describes third world women as making up

an “imagined community” of third world oppositional struggles. “Imagined” not because it is not “real” but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries... while such imagined communities are historically and geographically concrete, their boundaries are necessarily fluid...since the operation of power is always fluid and changing.⁴⁹⁸

Neither the constituents nor the politics of such a coalition are fixed, since they respond to shifting social realities, but the coalition promises a longitudinal care for others in the coalition, and it is rooted in a set of enduring, shared values.

The concrete implications of these frameworks can be seen in recent South Asian participation in racial coalitions. Vijay Prashad describes the activity of an Indian Students Association (ISA) at the University of California at Berkeley, which in 1975 responded to the state of emergency in India by shifting its organizational goals to be more coalitional.

[The ISA] “decided to move away from the former almost entirely cultural and social priorities”... it took leadership in holding “critical discussions of important social, political, and economic issues of the day.” At the same time, it sponsored demonstrations against dictatorship in India as well as in solidarity with the Vietnamese and Palestinian freedom fighters and others. The Berkeley ISA struggled to “build solidarity among groups of like interests and objectives” through sponsorship of “progressive programs of socio-political concern to encourage a broad base of interest in humanitarian and social problems in India, South Asia, the Middle East, and the world in general.” The ISA considered the epitome of its work to be such things as “the working Indian community in Canada sending money back to progressive political movements in India in recent

⁴⁹⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Introduction: Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 4.

“Third world” people includes people of color in diaspora. “Geographically, the nation-states of Latin America, the Caribbean, sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, China, South Africa, and Oceania constitute the parameters of the non-European third world. In addition, black, Latino, Asian, and indigenous people in the U.S., Europe, and Australia, some of whom have historic links with the geographically defined third world, also refer to themselves as third world people”: Mohanty, “Introduction,” 5.

⁴⁹⁷ Lisa Lowe, “Angela Davis: Reflections on Race, Class, and Gender in the USA,” in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 309–10.

⁴⁹⁸ Mohanty, “Introduction,” 4, 5.

years, and the instrumental role of some Vietnamese in the US in strengthening the US anti-war movement.”⁴⁹⁹

The activity of the Berkeley ISA was racially marked in a way that coalition did not erase. Its political action focused on India and the Indian diaspora at the same time as it looked beyond its own narrower community. Its action crossed national boundaries into South Asia more broadly, ethnic boundaries into Asia and the Middle East, and even boundaries defined by racial injustice to include issues of dictatorship, economics, and war. Its identity as an ISA pivoted fundamentally and became defined by its coalitional involvement and leadership. The broadly progressive ideals of the ISA were concretely manifested towards the most pressing issues of its day, including the Vietnam War and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

More recently, debates have emerged about how to name non-white racial groups as a collective in mass media and in data collection. These conversations wrestle with speaking about such a vast and diverse group of communities without losing those communities’ specific histories. Especially in the US, the term people of color (POC) has been increasingly replaced by the term BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, (and other) people of color. For proponents of this term, it succeeds at being inclusive while simultaneously avoiding “flattening and erasing histories of racism rooted in African American slavery and genocide of Indigenous communities.”⁵⁰⁰ For its detractors, it can mistakenly convey a sense of an “Oppression Olympics” in which “the harms of one group are paramount while others are relatively less important.”⁵⁰¹ Furthermore, the term can linguistically signal centering that is not in fact happening. In my own life, a fellow South

⁴⁹⁹ Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk*, 191–92.

⁵⁰⁰ Radhika Gajjala et al., “Online (Indian/South Asian) Digital Protest Publics Negotiating #POC, #BIPOC, and #anticaste,” in *Networked Feminisms: Activist Assemblies and Digital Practices*, ed. Shana MacDonald et al. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2022), 146.

⁵⁰¹ Meera E. Deo, “Why BIPOC Fails,” *Virginia Law Review* 107 (2021): 129.

Asian person and I were once introduced as “two BIPOC women.”⁵⁰² In the context of the UK, the debate centers on the terms BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) and BAME (Black and Asian Minority Ethnic).⁵⁰³ At the heart of these difficult conversations is the tension of coalitional identity, which must be capacious enough to contain the whole coalition and must also orient itself towards particularly pressing realities when appropriate. Despite the terms’ weaknesses, they all speak to the desire of modern racial coalitions to be together without blending together and diluting.

New Testament scholars have begun drawing on the concept of coalition to define their hermeneutical principles, and I suggest that we can push even further to see the presence of coalition in the biblical text. Postcolonial feminist interpreter Musa Dube highlights coalition as one of three components of a reading strategy that she names “Rahab’s reading prism.” The goal of this prism is to enable “feminist biblical literary practitioners [to] read for liberation and difference without furthering imperialist agendas.”⁵⁰⁴ First and foremost, interpreters must notice that patriarchy and imperialism are two modes of oppression that can function simultaneously, resulting in double colonization, and therefore that one cannot prioritize one over the other but must form “political coalitions that go beyond one’s immediate identity interests to a space that is subject to much negotiation between feminist practitioners of different classes, races, cultures, religions, nations, ethnicities, sexualities, and worlds.”⁵⁰⁵ Asian-American interpreter Tat-siong Benny Liew expresses,

I would like to see Asian American biblical hermeneutics situated in an alliance with other minority communities and scholarships. As Asian and postcolonial studies help

⁵⁰² See also, Chrissie DaCosta, Steven Dixon-Smith, and Gurnam Singh, *Beyond BAME: Rethinking the Politics, Construction, Application, and Efficacy of Ethnic Categorization*, Stimulus Paper (Higher Education Research Action Group (HERAG), 2021), 15, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jb0k6kk1jv0jIC8ldePJatAcKNL1vrsU/view>.

⁵⁰³ DaCosta, Dixon-Smith, and Singh, *Beyond BAME*.

⁵⁰⁴ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 121.

⁵⁰⁵ Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 122.

challenge both nationalism and imperialism, one should come to realize rather quickly that one cannot afford to make Asian America one's entire world of concerns. Not only are there Asian-raced persons in diaspora in various other parts of the world, there are also other racial/ethnic minority groups within the United States.⁵⁰⁶

According to Liew, a coalitional type of Asian-American interpretation will be better equipped to contest racism, reflect the diversity internal to Asian America, draw on preexisting knowledge, understand different modes of racialization, and construct rich alternative methodologies to what is dominant.⁵⁰⁷ We see from scholars like Dube and Liew that coalition is already circulating as an important concept for defining what biblical scholarship can be, and I suggest that it can similarly be a helpful model for what we see occurring in the text of the New Testament, especially in the book of Acts.

I explain this model at further length by drawing on the two observations about South Asian coalitional organizing discussed above. First, a coalitional model of identity allows an individual to identify with different groups without cutting themselves off from their own group. Coalitional South Asians identify with people of other minoritized races and nationalities, but still remain South Asian as an equally important part of their self-definition. Following this quality of coalition, a Jewish member of the Way would approach circumcision with both aspects of their identities in mind. Second, a coalitional model is inclusive while also being responsive to specific identities, histories, and experiences. The particular is the starting point, and it never disappears, but it also does not exhaust the content of the movement. At the same time, coalition requires responsivity, centering timely issues like justice in Vietnam and Palestine in the 1970s, or the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2020s. It also requires remembering enduring events, such as the American history of slavery and genocide resulting in a particular

⁵⁰⁶ Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 14.

⁵⁰⁷ Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 14–15.

focus on Black and Indigenous people when it comes to BIPOC organizing. Likewise, the Way in Acts can ultimately include all ethno-religious groups without ever losing the distinctiveness of its Jewish context. In Luke's depiction of the early church, the concession that gentiles should not practice circumcision does not threaten the continuing importance of Jewish circumcision, and it also does not preclude gentiles making accommodation on other issues of importance of Jewish believers in Jesus.

In my coalitional model, pictured below, the Way is a space of alliance between multiple ethno-religious groups, all of which have their own native cultural and spiritual traditions, but which are brought together by a shared purpose. In this diagram, there are no unmarked followers of the Way who lack an ethno-religious identity; the ethno-religious groups included in the diagram (Greeks, Romans, Ethiopians) are representative rather than exhaustive. The story of a coalition shapes which groups are centered, and for the Way, Jews make up the ethno-religious group who is the focus of the coalition.



Timothy's Circumcision within Coalition

By viewing the Way as a coalition, I am both drawing on the Timothy narrative to inform my proposal, and I am interpreting the passage in light of my model. Timothy's circumcision demonstrates the coalition model because, as I argue below, he carries out circumcision not solely because of his Christian identity, and not solely because of his Jewish identity, but because of the way that his Jewish identity transforms when he stands in coalition with non-Jewish fellow believers. His act of circumcision validates the continued central importance of Judaism and Jewish practices within the coalition of the Way, while at the same time his ministry of proclaiming the Jerusalem council decision is an act of solidarity with the cultural particularities of other ethno-religious groups in this coalition.

As described in chapter 2, I take the position that the character of Timothy is represented as ethnically Jewish and religiously Jewish, and I argue that not only Paul but also Timothy should be understood as having motivations for Timothy to become circumcised. Among the interpreters who also see Timothy as motivated to become circumcised, two types of explanations are offered, but each has a weakness in explanatory power. By adding the concept of coalition, I seek to improve upon these reading options.

One explanation is offered by Witherington and Kisau, both of whom see Timothy as choosing circumcision in order to improve his evangelistic success among Jews.⁵⁰⁸ In their reading, there is a clear factor that causes Timothy to adopt a new circumcision status: Paul's

⁵⁰⁸ "Lastly, it should not be thought that the real Paul would never perform such an act. He says clearly enough that in order to win Jews to the Christian faith he was willing to be a Jew, indeed to become as one under the Law to do so (1 Cor. 9:20). There is no reason to assume he wouldn't encourage other Christians with some Jewish heritage to do the same, as a missionary tactic": Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 476–77.

"Timothy himself demonstrates his commitment to mission by his willingness to submit to this ritual in order to reach others": Kisau, "Acts of the Apostles," 1354.

invitation for Timothy to accompany him on traveling mission (16:3). Furthermore, they ground Timothy's rationale in the phrase "because of the Jews in those places" (16:3, διὰ τοῦς Ἰουδαίους τοὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις), which they see as a shorthand for, in essence, in order to evangelize the Jews in those places who would have objected to the presence of an uncircumcised Jew among them. This effort to ground the reading in the narrative arc of the text is a strength.

However, a weakness of the reading is that it regards Jewish circumcision as important only insofar as it furthers Christian expansion. When past readers have discussed Timothy's circumcision as a missionary tactic (whether Paul's tactic or Timothy's tactic), they have specifically denied its spiritual meaning and have contrasted it with dominant Christian types of spiritual meaning. For example, they have denied that circumcision is "soteriological" or "a condition for discipleship," and they have explained that Timothy's circumcision could only have taken place if "salvation by grace through faith" was already taught and understood.⁵⁰⁹ This evangelistic reading therefore empties circumcision of Jewish religious significance and infuses it with utilitarian Christian importance. This is out of step with the way in which Luke represents circumcision elsewhere in the corpus, where it is consistently a rite that is carried out for Jews as Jews, both as Christians and not as Christians (i.e., John the Baptist, Jesus, Abraham and his descendants, Jewish families in diaspora), and that is not carried out for gentiles as Christians (i.e., Cornelius's household, Peter's dining companions, the gentiles who are discussed and notified during the Jerusalem council). Nowhere in Luke-Acts does circumcision appear as a non-religious, cultural relic that may be adopted or discarded as one pleases. Rather, circumcision is proper for Jews and improper for gentiles.

⁵⁰⁹ Parsons, *Acts*, 222; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 284; Talbert, *Reading Acts*, 146.

A second explanation is offered by Jennings: “Timothy, through his flesh, pressed deeply into Jewish flesh not as an evangelistic ploy or as acquiescence to assimilation, but out of his commitment to his people, that is, one of his peoples.”⁵¹⁰ Jennings specifically contrasts his reading with a reading like that of Witherington and Kisau, differentiating an act of evangelism from an act of “commitment to his people.” A strength of Jennings’ account is that it views circumcision as important precisely as Jewish circumcision. He explains,

It would be confusing at this point to separate the cultic from the theological, to see in Timothy’s discipleship a cultural act devoid of theological content or a reversal of commitment to Jesus in order to reclaim faithfulness to Torah. Such ways of reading this have not followed the way of the Spirit registered by Luke. Through the Spirit nothing is lost, but other things are added.⁵¹¹

Jennings opposes the interpretive impulse to oppose Jewish cultic or cultural matters against Christian theological matters, affirming instead that Luke’s presentation is to preserve the former while also incorporating the latter. This is a powerful way of connecting Timothy’s circumcision to the overarching themes in Luke-Acts. The reading preserves the Lukan depiction of circumcision as ritually, theologically meaningful precisely as part of a connection to Torah. The Way does not detract from Jewish observance of circumcision.

Nevertheless, Jennings’ reading has its weakness in the lack of connection to a specific narrative event. Why does Timothy “press[] deeply into Jewish flesh” now rather than at another moment? Jennings implies that Timothy is now ministering to Jewish people (“Timothy is registering his love for the people to whom God is sending him”). But a close reading of Acts shows us that there is no change in the demographics of Timothy’s community. Prior to his new ministry with Paul, he was in community with Christian “siblings” in Lystra and Iconium (16:2). When Paul was most recently in Iconium, he persuaded both Jews and Greeks to become

⁵¹⁰ Jennings, *Acts*, 154.

⁵¹¹ Jennings, *Acts*, 154.

followers of the Way (14:1). Therefore, Timothy was in a mixed Christian community before his circumcision. After his circumcision and during his new ministry with Paul, he is in community with Jews (16:3) as well as with gentiles, the very people who needed to know that gentiles did not need to become circumcised based on the decisions in Jerusalem (16:4). Therefore, Timothy was also in a mixed Christian community after his circumcision. We cannot explain Timothy's circumcision as a result of new interaction with Jewish people, and therefore we need to seek another explanation that is more narratively salient.

I seek to combine the two strengths of each of these readings: tying Timothy's circumcision to a specific narrative event, and preserving the Jewish character of Timothy's circumcision. First, I propose that the specific narrative event that explains Timothy's circumcision is his invitation into a leadership role of spreading the news of the Jerusalem council decision (16:3-4). This decision explicitly gave instructions to gentile believers, but did not do the same to Jewish believers. The question therefore remains open as to whether Jewish believers must be circumcised, or even if they may be circumcised. Timothy's circumcision clarifies that the lack of requirement for gentile circumcision is not a dismissal of all Jewish circumcision. My explanation makes sense of several key narrative events.

First, it helps us understand why the circumcision of Timothy is narrated immediately after the Jerusalem council decision. Previously, Timothy's circumcision has been viewed by scholars as puzzlingly placed after the events of Acts 15, a seeming contradiction to them.⁵¹² But my reading demonstrates that Timothy's circumcision is actually a logical result of the Jerusalem council decision.⁵¹³ By narrating the circumcision of Timothy immediately afterwards, Luke balances the decision against circumcision for gentiles with a reaffirmation of the

⁵¹² For this view, see Willimon, *Acts*, 133; Liew, "Acts," 422; Garroay, "Pharisee Heresey," 31–33.

⁵¹³ See also, Bryan, "A Further Look at Acts 16:1-3," 293; Spencer, *Acts*, 159.

appropriateness and value of circumcision for Jews, in line with the perspective on circumcision that is present through the rest of Luke-Acts.

My reading also takes seriously the phrasing of 16:3, that Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him and therefore Paul circumcised Timothy. It is not that Timothy's circumcision was the result of a generic entrance into Christian mission, which would have included mission among Jews.⁵¹⁴ Rather, it is a result of his invitation to a specific task in which Paul was engaged.

Additionally, this perspective makes sense of the length at which 16:4 explains the activities of Paul and Timothy during their subsequent ministry, namely, proclaiming the Jerusalem council decision: Ὡς δὲ διεπορεύοντο τὰς πόλεις, παρεδίδοσαν αὐτοῖς φυλάσσειν τὰ δόγματα τὰ κεκριμένα ὑπὸ τῶν ἀποστόλων καὶ πρεσβυτέρων τῶν ἐν Ἱεροσολύμοις (And as they were journeying through the cities, they were delivering to them the decrees that had been decided by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem so that they would keep them). The circumcision of Timothy is narratively sandwiched and explained by the Jerusalem council decision.

Moreover, I suggest that we should understand the phrase τοὺς Ἰουδαίους τοὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς τόποις ἐκείνοις (“the Jews who were in those places”) as in fact being more meaningful than simply τοὺς Ἰουδαίους (“the Jews”), i.e., any Jews at all in the area by virtue of their ethno-religious identity and strict attitudes on circumcision.⁵¹⁵ Rather, in my reading, the Jews who were living in that particular region were the ones who knew Timothy, knew that his father was a Greek, and therefore knew that Timothy had been uncircumcised.⁵¹⁶ Timothy's lack of

⁵¹⁴ For this view, see Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 322–23; Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 284; Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 233.

⁵¹⁵ For the view that this is the group who Paul wants to appease and evangelize, see many commentators, including Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 576; Keener, *Acts*, 3:2320–22.

⁵¹⁶ For the view that Timothy's personal community is in mind, see Jervell, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 412.

circumcision was public knowledge among his community, and his new circumcision status would therefore also have been public knowledge. By making a publicized change to his body, Timothy demonstrates that the Jerusalem council decision is compatible with continued Jewish observances.

Finally, the circumcision of Timothy foreshadows the resolution of the concerns expressed in Acts 21:21-24, that Paul teaches Jewish parents in diaspora not to circumcise their children. Timothy is a Jewish child in diaspora whose parents in fact did not circumcise him, as the residents of Jerusalem fear. Nevertheless, Timothy's identity as a Jew was not lost despite the decision that was made at his birth. As an adult, he ultimately does participate in circumcision and continues to affirm the strength of his identification with Judaism within the context of the Way. Timothy's action assuages the concerns of Acts 21:21-24 in two ways: both by affirming the value of the practice of circumcision, and by demonstrating that the Jewish identities of children in diaspora can be resilient and adaptative.

My proposed reading takes seriously the logic of the narrative of Acts and roots Timothy's decision-making in both the overall plot and the specific narration of the event. Furthermore, this reading retains an understanding of Timothy's circumcision as a religiously Jewish action. By religiously Jewish, I mean to oppose a reading in which Timothy's circumcision is only culturally Jewish and instead is religiously Christian, i.e., religiously indifferent except for the good of promulgating Christianity. In fact, Timothy's circumcision is better understood as religiously Jewish and at the same time also religiously Christian. Timothy becomes circumcised both because he is Jewish and because he is a follower of the Way; it is both of these qualities together that spark his response to the Jerusalem council decision. Had he been non-Jewish, he would have been told that circumcision was not required. Had he been non-

Christian, he would not have been influenced by the Jerusalem council. It is his Jewish Christian identity together in this particular moment in time that prompts his circumcision. His identity in this moment is precisely coalitional, reflecting an understanding of himself as Jewish as seen through the coalitional prism of the Way, and as a follower of Jesus as seen through his Jewish heritage.

Conclusion

In dominant discourse, ethnic difference is a problem in and of itself, leading to disagreement, conflict, and even violence. When the Way is modeled according to this prevalent picture, we necessarily are led to ask whether the Way has separated from and is in conflict with Judaism, whether it is still part of and in agreement with Judaism, or whether it is different from and more important than Judaism. Coalitional racial identity, as seen in the lives of South Asians, show us a different way. In a coalition, one's identity can retain its specific racial aspects while also being fundamentally informed by community across races. A heterogenous coalition can be inclusive while at the same time responsively centering particular groups, issues, and histories.

When the Way is visualized as a coalition, it can be understood as an alliance of multiple ethno-religious groups that centers Judaism in its pursuit as followers of the Way of Jesus. The Way is not a locus of universalism, since it too emerges from a specific cultural alliance, but rather the Way is a locus of unity amidst difference. We see these elements expressed in how the text of Luke-Acts approaches circumcision. All cultures have specific attitudes towards what types of genital modifications are appropriate or not appropriate, and Luke values the specifically Jewish practices of genital modification even as he acknowledges that other ethno-religious groups in the Way do not practice eight-day circumcision of the foreskin, and that they should

not have to do so even when they are in coalition with Jews within the Way. The Way does center Judaism, and there are certain practices that are expected of gentiles according to the Jerusalem council, but circumcision is not one of them. The circumcisions that predate the Way, including John the Baptist's, Jesus's, and Abraham's and his descendants', are no less meaningful and important after the emergence of the Way. The Jerusalem council does not decree that Jews like Timothy are required to be circumcised, but Timothy's act of circumcision validates the continued importance of this practice even as gentiles are to be told that some of their own cultural practices are to be valued and continued as well.

Chapter 7: Gender: Jewish and South Asian Feminisms

Introduction

Thus far, I have situated the Lukan perspective on Jewish circumcision in the context of the history of anti-Jewish Orientalism and in a coalitional model drawing on the history of alliances like women-of-color feminism. Read in this way, Timothy's communally embedded choice for circumcision opens up space for the reader to repudiate harmful stereotypes about religion, narrow conceptualizations of agency, and universalist images of early Christianity. But the question may be asked, have I overlooked a possible feminist critique of circumcision as a gendered practice? Is the Lukan affirmation of Timothy's circumcision also an implicit Lukan expression of hostility towards women? In this final chapter, I wrestle with this question in conversation with Jewish feminists and South Asian postcolonial feminists, and I consider the gendered dimensions of Timothy's circumcision.

First, I outline how Christians in the past and present have wrongly cast circumcision as sexist in order to denigrate Judaism. Judaism has been scapegoated as the historical cause of patriarchy, Jesus the "feminist" has been distanced from his "sexist" Jewish environment, and the less liberative aspects of Paul's writings have been explained as due to his lingering Jewishness despite conversion. These harmful and incorrect ways of reading ancient texts are rooted in antisemitism as well as in Orientalism, which regards Eastern societies as backwards and more hierarchical. Taking as examples the work of Léonie J. Archer and Tal Ilan, I demonstrate how scholars of antiquity have either affirmed the unique sexism of circumcision or have offered a more balanced assessment of this gendered practice. Furthermore, the overall theological significance of Jewish circumcision for women must be counterbalanced by recognizing parallel sexist practices in Christianity and other contemporary cultures, as well as

by listening to today's Jewish communities who are dialoguing about how to best respond to circumcision while affirming egalitarian gender relations. In order to navigate the simultaneous demands to avoid perpetuating either anti-Jewish Orientalism or sexism, I follow a methodology from South Asian postcolonial feminists who urge scholars to describe specific gendered practices in contextual detail rather than following racially stereotyped forms of logic.

In carrying out this task, I outline the plural, radically different ways that Jewish and non-Jewish observers understood circumcision to affect the male body. As will be discussed below, in antiquity, the value of sexual self-control was shared in common, but either circumcised identity or foreskinned identity could be thought by different groups to cultivate that value. In non-Jewish Greco-Roman models of appropriate male embodiment, the foreskinned body expressed self-control by covering the glans, while excessive sexuality and improper masculinity was expressed by a glans that was publicly exposed for any reason, including circumcision, movement during exercise, or erection. Ethnic identity was also interwoven with gendered identity. For Greeks and Romans, foreign populations were regarded as either too feminine or too masculine in principle, and Jewish populations were likewise viewed as improperly gendered. In contrast, in a Jewish model of male embodiment elaborated by Philo, the circumcised penis in fact expressed moderation by facilitating procreation and symbolizing the removal of pleasure and of pride. For Jewish communities, circumcision was also a positive marker of internal ethnic identity and could facilitate marriage, even with non-Jewish partners. Lastly, Jewish women were impacted by circumcision not only in the domain of marriage, but also in the domain of motherhood, as they could participate directly in circumcision ceremonies, expressing their piety, their sound reason, and their resistance to external governance.

Finally, I bring this background to bear on the narrative of Acts 16:1-5. My work here joins feminist scholars of Acts who are focusing their attention on not only women in the text but gender more broadly, and who are seeking to situate Luke within his cultural norms rather than rendering a value judgment on Luke's discourse. I dialogue with a recent important gender-critical reading of the circumcision of Timothy made by Christopher Stroup.⁵¹⁷ While I agree with many of Stroup's findings, I generate a different conclusion about the role of this passage in Acts, drawing on my previous conclusions about agency and coalition. Rather than seeing the circumcised Timothy as constructing "Jewish men who believe in Jesus [as] more manly than Greco-Roman men," I propose that Acts 15-16 open up space for varied masculine embodiments to legitimately represent and actualize sexual self-control.

Circumcision and Accusations of Jewish Patriarchy

As introduced in chapter three, Christians have critiqued the alleged sexism of Jewish circumcision as a way to argue for Christianity's supremacy over Judaism. But it is not only circumcision that has been critiqued by prejudiced or misguided Christian interpreters. Susannah Heschel describes her experience as a Jewish woman encountering Christian feminist theology for the first time. While she "felt a tremendous sense of excitement" about explanations for the

⁵¹⁷ Although I do not engage this reading in detail, it is also important to note that Linda M. Maloney and Ivoni Richter Reimer have offered a queer interpretation of the circumcision of Timothy, but only in passing: Maloney and Reimer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 208–9. As they phrase it, "thanks to Paul, [Timothy] becomes queer." What they mean by this seems to be mostly metaphorical rather than specifically about gender or sexuality: "Timothy would be regarded as a gentile, and gentile proselytes or 'converts' who frequented the synagogue remained just that, which is what makes the reported attempts of some Jewish Jesus-believers to require circumcision of gentile male believers so bizarre; such a move amounted to queering the gentile men who became Jesus-believers, making them appear to be Jews in every sense while really they were Jewish proselytes who were followers of the Way." In their construction, Timothy and other circumcised gentile followers of the Way are queered because they are represented as religiously other than what they really were.

patriarchy that she had faced in her own religious communities, she was also disturbed by how these authors ultimately argued for “Jewish blame for patriarchy.”⁵¹⁸

At first I didn’t want to pay attention to the articles or book chapters that would set my heart racing with their explanations of patriarchy, passages that blamed the Old Testament, “Yahweh,” or Judaism and its law codes. Jesus, I read, fully intended to liberate women, but Paul the Pharisee was full of Jewish misogyny and squelched the feminist impulse. Once upon a time, I read elsewhere, we all worshiped a Goddess and lived in a world without violence. But then along came the ancient Israelites and their jealous, exclusive, monotheistic Father God. He killed the Goddess and introduced violence and war, patriarchy and exploitation.⁵¹⁹

According to Heschel, Christian feminists can fall into three major ways of perpetuating anti-Judaism: “scapegoating” Judaism as the cause of patriarchy, elevating Christianity as the “solution” to the problem of sexism, and depicting Jesus as feminist by presenting Judaism as a sexist foil.⁵²⁰ Heschel faces the dilemma of feeling like she lacks a “home” in either feminist circles or Jewish circles: “I have a sense of exclusion from both, and yet each represents, at least partially, the values for which I struggle.”⁵²¹ She advocates for the equal importance of calling out antisemitism within feminism and shaping Judaism to be more than its “male-authored definitions,” expressing also how she as a Jewish feminist is “deeply moved and exhilarated by Jewish ideas, stories, and history.”⁵²²

There are several ideas particular to New Testament studies that require attention and correction. Katharina von Kellenbach has critiqued German and American Christian feminism from within for the ways that it systemically perpetuates antisemitism in its theology. Sexist customs present in first-century Judaism are exaggerated and inadequately contextualized, while all of Jesus’s egalitarian words and deeds “are designated as un-Jewish. His feminism is not seen

⁵¹⁸ Susannah Heschel, “Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology,” *Tikkun* 5.3 (1990): 25, 26.

⁵¹⁹ Heschel, “Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology,” 25.

⁵²⁰ Heschel, “Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology,” 26.

⁵²¹ Heschel, “Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology,” 96–97.

⁵²² Heschel, “Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology,” 97.

as a result of his Jewishness but rather as a consequence of his disassociation and alienation from Judaism.”⁵²³ When it comes to Paul, the mixed evidence in his epistles regarding women’s roles in early Christianity is explained by categorizing his sexist views as remnants of his Jewish past while representing his liberative views as due to his new Christianity.⁵²⁴ Von Kellenbach further observes that Greco-Roman culture is depicted as more favorable to women; she quotes the explicitly Orientalist principle offered by Georg Oepke in an article in TDNT: “In general, the rule for the position of women is: the further West, the freer.”⁵²⁵ She situates this comment in the broader context that, “As an ‘Oriental’ religion, Judaism appears strange, backward and Other, and the position of women reflects an unenlightened and uncivilized condition.”⁵²⁶ Throughout the course of her analysis, von Kellenbach critically engages with otherwise rigorous and innovative scholarship, demonstrating how deeply these anti-Jewish ways of thinking are embedded in our disciplines.

When Jewish women’s lives in the first century are historically described, antisemitic Christian stereotypes can inform how circumcision is represented as affecting Jewish women.⁵²⁷ I contrast here the approaches taken by two scholars of ancient Jewish women, one Christian and one Jewish. First, in a monograph on the lives of Jewish women in the Hellenistic period, Léonie J. Archer opens her study by meditating extensively on uncircumcision.

The way in which a woman in a sense never attained full and individuated membership of the society in which she lived is most clearly reflected—and restated—in the rites and ceremonies which took place early on in the child’s life... [After circumcision], a boy was henceforth considered a full, public and potentially active member of society. The

⁵²³ von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 60–61.

⁵²⁴ von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 63–66.

⁵²⁵ Georg Oepke, “Τυνή,” *TDNT* 1:777; von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 69–70.

⁵²⁶ von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 70.

⁵²⁷ Carroll, “Can Male Domination Be Overcome?,” 48; von Kellenbach, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings*, 60; Levine et al., “Roundtable Discussion: Anti-Judaism and Postcolonial Biblical Interpretation,” 93; Økland, “Pauline Letters,” 321.

logical corollary of there being no initiation ceremony for the girl was that she would not be thus considered.⁵²⁸

Archer makes a radical statement about an allegedly inherent “logical” consequence of the uncircumcision of girls, namely, that it resulted in a thoroughly compromised place for women in Jewish society. Her argument makes a blanket statement about the apparently equally high statuses of all boys and men regardless of social background, and it implicitly suggests that a society that circumcises children of all genders would automatically be a more equitable one. Archer considers the circumcision narratives in Luke as part of her analysis. She argues that because a boy’s naming ceremony is connected to circumcision, according to the gospel author, a female newborn’s “name-giving could not have had the same significance in the eyes of society.”⁵²⁹ She also contends, from silence, that the type of communal festivities following birth that are recorded in the gospel would not have taken place for a girl: “Given the patriarchal tenor of Jewish society and the unfavorable attitude toward the birth of girls, it is unlikely that a daughter’s birth occasioned any particular celebration, let alone a village feast.”⁵³⁰ Again from silence, she assumes that the weaning of a boy child would have been celebrated, but not the weaning of a girl child.⁵³¹ In Archer’s historical reconstruction, the patriarchal nature of Jewish society in the first century is so thoroughgoing that it can be assumed to identically impact every area of a girl’s life, that is, by rendering her presence invisible and invalidating her as a positive member of the community.

⁵²⁸ Léonie J. Archer, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies: The Jewish Woman in Graeco-Roman Palestine*, JSOTSup 60 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 29, 32.

⁵²⁹ Archer, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies*, 32.

⁵³⁰ Archer, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies*, 43.

⁵³¹ Archer, *Her Price Is Beyond Rubies*, 43.

In contrast, the Israeli, secular Jewish scholar Tal Ilan provides evidence that we should not assume that Jewish circumcision was the cause of sexist attitudes towards Jewish girls.⁵³² Ilan's presentation of the ancient evidence is influenced by her incisive representation of the scholarly debate that has been taking place since the mid-19th century about the lives of ancient Jewish women.

Despite the scientific clothing in which Christian feminist works have been robed since the beginning of the 1970s, their basic purpose has been apologetic: Christianity grew up against the background of, and represented a feminist rebellion against, Jewish misogyny; Christianity's every positive or egalitarian attitude toward women is attributable to Jesus himself, and every hostile element has its source in Christianity's natural parent, Judaism.⁵³³

Ilan therefore works to present a more rigorous study that is "well-balanced and thorough," not apologetic, and that reads beyond the ideals and stereotypes of the male-authored literary sources to grasp at women's actual lives through "the discovery of dissident voices and slips of the pen which will reveal to us what our dominant authors preferred to silence."⁵³⁴ In the body of her study, Ilan acknowledges that newborn girls were viewed "as a disappointment," but she points out that "we hear of no practical instruction or theory recommending steps to reduce the numbers of daughters in family."⁵³⁵ She also suggests that girls and boys were both named with similar care: "boys were named after their fathers or grandfathers while daughters were named after their mother or grandmothers."⁵³⁶ The perspective raised by Ilan suggests both that Jewish society

⁵³² Ilan specifically comments on Archer's work, opining that the research in this monograph is "seriously deficient and flawed" (21). She critiques Archer's methodology, including her use of sources, and she also challenges Archer's conclusion: "The resulting picture is very difficult to accept: women were restricted in every area and situation, without exception. This picture in fact corresponds to Archer's view (see above [page 5]) that women's status deteriorated considerably from the biblical to the Second Temple periods" (21).

⁵³³ Tal Ilan, *Jewish Women in Greco-Roman Palestine: An Inquiry into Image and Status* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995), 11.

⁵³⁴ Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 21, 43.

⁵³⁵ Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 46–47.

⁵³⁶ Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 53. Ilan adds that some Jewish families adopted the Greco-Roman practice of giving daughters a feminized version of her father's name.

included some features that could make it just as conducive to the wellbeing of girls as surrounding non-Jewish societies.

In addition to the historical examination of circumcision in the time of the New Testament, some scholars have more carefully examined the role of circumcision in Christian theology and Jewish theology. Speaking to a New Testament audience, Judith M. Lieu considers the weighty question, “What is the relationship between circumcision and women, what between circumcision and salvation?”⁵³⁷ As far back in Christian history as Justin Martyr, we encounter this anti-Jewish argument: “that the female sex is unable to receive fleshly circumcision demonstrates that this circumcision was given as a sign and not as a work of righteousness.”⁵³⁸ Disagreeing with Justin Martyr, Lieu’s reading of ancient texts emphatically affirms that in fact in the first century “Jewish women were considered Jews, were obligated to observe many of the commandments, and frequently fulfilled roles within community life that the literary sources have led (and continue to lead) modern interpreters to deny them.”⁵³⁹ She furthermore argues that early Christianity was not clearly more liberating for women than Judaism of the period, calling to our attention a piece of Christian tradition that could sound equally constraining when it comes to women’s salvation: “1 Tim 2.15, ‘But she [a woman] will be saved by child-bearing if she continues in faith, and love, and holiness with self-control.’”⁵⁴⁰ Lieu reminds the field of New Testament scholarship that Jewish theology is not more sexist than Christian theology simply on the basis of their varying theologies of circumcision.

In Shaye J. D. Cohen’s monograph, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?*, he critically reveals the patriarchal assumptions common to ancient Judaism as well as its non-

⁵³⁷ Judith M. Lieu, “Circumcision, Women and Salvation,” *NTS* 40.3 (1994): 358.

⁵³⁸ Lieu, “Circumcision, Women and Salvation,” 359.

⁵³⁹ Lieu, “Circumcision, Women and Salvation,” 368.

⁵⁴⁰ Lieu, “Circumcision, Women and Salvation,” 370.

Jewish contemporaries, and he demonstrates the varied feminist theological responses that have emerged from within Judaism. On the first point, Cohen acknowledges that for “classical rabbinic Judaism...while women certainly were part of the Jewish people, their Jewishness was inferior to that of males, the real Jews. The explanation for the non-circumcision of women was so obvious, so inevitable, and so pedestrian, that it did not need to be articulated.”⁵⁴¹

Nevertheless, this devaluation of women did not take place because of Judaism specifically, but simply because of the overarching cultural assumptions that flourished in these time periods. On the second point, Cohen observes that more attention began to be paid to this issue by men and women alike starting in the medieval period in Western Europe, when women’s status began improving.⁵⁴² Beginning in the nineteenth century, Jewish discussions began to explicitly center women’s equality when determining the appropriate views on circumcision. The possibilities for the future of circumcision were numerous. In 1843, the Frankfurt Reform Association responded to proposed anti-circumcision legislation in Germany, arguing against the traditionalists that circumcision could not be determinative for Jewish identity if women were not circumcised, and that descent instead was the qualification.⁵⁴³ That same year, Joseph Johlson “sketched out a script for a gender-neutral ceremony that would celebrate the arrival of all newborn Jews,” an avenue that some families continue to choose to day.⁵⁴⁴ For other Jews in the modern day, the answer is not to eliminate circumcision but rather to create matching rituals for newborn girls. For example, Rabbi Laura Geller proposes that “the power of *Brit Milah* is not only physical”

⁵⁴¹ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 102.

⁵⁴² Below, I highlight feminist or proto-feminist responses. Briefly, the four (non-feminist) arguments that Cohen finds men offering in the medieval period are: (1) a woman is exempt from circumcision (among other commandments) because she is under the authority of a man; (2) circumcision is a corrective to the male vice of lust; (3) faith is at the core of Judaism, not circumcision (or any other single commandment); and (4) the correlate of male circumcision is female menstruation (in that one restricts and purifies oneself): Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, chaps. 5–8.

⁵⁴³ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 213.

⁵⁴⁴ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 214.

but more importantly is rooted in tradition and liturgy, which can be successfully replicated in a girl's ceremony, and that the ceremony need not be gender-neutral but could draw on the conventionally feminine image of the cycles of the moon, for example.⁵⁴⁵ Among the diversity of responses, we see clearly that the tradition of male circumcision within Judaism is not a necessary marker of sexism, but instead that people equally committed to gender liberation can come to different conclusions about what Jewish newborn rituals should look like.

The background laid out here sets the stage for a deeper analysis of the gendered dimensions of circumcision. It is false and harmful to posit that Jewish circumcision in and of itself led to sexist theology or to marginalization for Jewish women, or to posit that Judaism is intrinsically more sexist than Christianity. At the same time, sexist theological arguments have been made about circumcision throughout history, and some Jewish feminists have interrogated and challenged this practice or the theology surrounding it.

Placing these Jewish feminist conversations into dialogue with South Asian postcolonial conversations demonstrates that the simultaneous fights against patriarchy and Orientalism involve common dangers and strategies. As I argued in chapter 3 in conversation with Uma Narayan and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, anti-Orientalist feminists will rightly protest when Oriental cultures are judged more severely than Western cultures. The fallacy that Oriental cultures are more backwards and traditional can erroneously lead to the conclusion that they are more sexist. Nevertheless, because of the reality that every society can be improved and made

⁵⁴⁵ Laura Geller, "Brit Milah and Brit Banot," in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*, ed. Debra Orenstein (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 62. Cited in Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 217.

For further reflection and two additional proposals for rituals, see Judith Plaskow, "Bringing a Daughter into the Covenant," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 179–84; Debra Orenstein, ed., "Welcoming Children into Name and Covenant," in *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 53–82.

more equitable for people of all genders, anti-Orientalist feminists still offer critiques of the sexism, heterosexism, and cissexism that they find in their own communities. Mohanty urges such feminists to walk this careful balance by describing “a certain historically and culturally specific mode of patriarchal organization,” rather than a stereotypical one.⁵⁴⁶ This activity of specific description should attend not only to Oriental women, but to people of other genders in her community, and to intersecting dynamics including colonialism, sexuality, religion, and economics. In the following section, I offer a description of the gender dynamics around circumcision in the first century, with particular focus on how Jews and non-Jewish Greeks and Romans each perceived the impact of circumcision upon gender and sexuality, and how Jewish women participated in circumcision despite not being circumcised themselves.

Circumcision and Gender in the First Century

When a Jewish male was circumcised, this status not only impacted his sense of belonging as a Jewish person, but it also impacted the way that others would perceive his male gendering and sexuality. Depending on the observer, though, that gendered embodiment could be viewed radically differently. Cohen has observed, with reference to circumcision, “Sexual self-control is a quality that many cultures ascribe to themselves and deny to others.”⁵⁴⁷ In the first century, this was true both of foreskinned Greeks and Romans and of circumcised Jews. With different rationales, both groups understood their own cultural practices regarding genital modification as cultivating sexual self-control.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁶ Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 345.

⁵⁴⁷ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 158.

⁵⁴⁸ For similar attention to these topics, see Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 57–67.

The broad consensus about the masculine ideal of sexual self-control was part of a broader hegemonic norm for masculinity. According to the popular one-sex model, the sexes are not two binary modes of human embodiment (as is often commonly although incorrectly assumed today), but rather the sexes result from varying degrees of perfect attainment of the male body.⁵⁴⁹ The hierarchical one-sex model had demeaning implications not only for women but for men as well; as Colleen Conway summarizes, “If women were not different in kind, but simply a lesser, incomplete version of men, what was there to keep men from sliding down the axis into the female realm?”⁵⁵⁰ Masculinity could be signaled by physiognomy (even in non-sexual body parts), control of others, and virtuous action including moderation, self-control, stoic endurance, and bravery (note the Latin *vir* and *virtus*, and the Greek ἀνὴρ, ἀνδρός and ἀνδρεία).⁵⁵¹ When it came to sex, masculinity was tied both to being the active, penetrating partner (control of others) and to moderate rather than excessive pursuit of sexual pleasure (self-control); an effeminate person was one who was penetrated and/or one whose sexual desire led them to overindulgence.⁵⁵² The broadly agreed upon value of sexual self-control had direct implications for how practices of genital modification were viewed.

For non-Jewish Greeks and Romans in antiquity, it was conventional not to modify the male foreskin. Furthermore, the presence and prominence of the foreskin was aesthetically valued. As K. J. Dover has documented, with a particular focus on Greek culture in the eighth through second centuries CE, the ideal Greek penis was “thin...and short...terminating in a long pointed foreskin.”⁵⁵³ Rarely, medical treatments were offered to lengthen a foreskin that was

⁵⁴⁹ Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 16–18; Susanna Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men: Ideal Masculinities in the Synoptic Gospels*, BibInt 159 (Boston: Brill, 2018), 20–23.

⁵⁵⁰ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 18.

⁵⁵¹ Conway, *Behold the Man*, 16–30.

⁵⁵² Asikainen, *Jesus and Other Men*, 32–35.

⁵⁵³ K. J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 125.

inappropriately short, whether temporarily through infibulation or permanently through epispasm.⁵⁵⁴ The goal of these practices was ultimately to ensure that the glans of the penis was covered. As Pierre Cordier explains, the exposure of the glans for any reason was regarded as proximate to the exposure due to erection, thus signifying “une sexualité agressive et débridée.”⁵⁵⁵ Comedic authors do not tend to use the term *περιτέμνειν* to refer to circumcision but rather “the adjective *psōlos* or the participle *apepsōlēmnos* (‘with glans exposed’).”⁵⁵⁶ The classic indecorous figure depicted with the glans exposed was the satyr.⁵⁵⁷ In contrast, model Greco-Roman masculinity was marked by self-control, including sexual self-control, since this was a manifestation of the masculine virtue of power being exercised over the self.

As a result, we find evidence of a Greco-Roman disavowal of Jewish circumcision and a perception of Jews as sexually libertine. In the early second century, Tacitus writes about Jews that “their other practices are perverse and foul, and they became established because of their crookedness... although they are a people who are inclined towards desire, they abstain from lying with foreigners, and yet nothing is forbidden among themselves. They established the practice of circumcising the genitals so that they would be known for their deviation” (*Hist.* 5.5).⁵⁵⁸ In an epigram by Martial from the first century, a man who is covering his large penis with a correspondingly large fibula has the embarrassment of his fibula falling off and revealing himself to be circumcised (7:82). As Peter Schäfer explains, not only does this epigram connect “being circumcised and ‘well-endowed,’” it also uses an unusual Latin word for “circumcised” that communicates sexual excess.

⁵⁵⁴ Hall, “Epispasm,” 71–72.

⁵⁵⁵ “An aggressive and unbridled sexuality.” Pierre Cordier, “Les Romains et La Circoncision,” *REJ* 160.3–4 (2001): 349.

⁵⁵⁶ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 129.

⁵⁵⁷ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 128–29.

⁵⁵⁸ “cetera instituta, sinistra foeda, pravitate valere... proiectissima ad libidinem gens, alienarum concubitu abstinēt; inter se nihil inlicitum. Circumcidere genitalia instituerunt ut diversitate noscantur.”

Verpa (= Greek *psōlē*) is the penis “with foreskin drawn back as a result of an erection,” and is often used “when the performance of a sexual act is at issue,” especially aggressive homosexual acts. Consequently, the use of *verpus* for “circumcised” equates the retraction of the foreskin with the excessive lustfulness associated with the Jews and their constant readiness, so to speak, to perform the sexual act.⁵⁵⁹

Outside observers in a Hellenistic context associated the circumcised body with a constant state of erection, signifying an inappropriate amount of passion and a lack of self-control. The circumcised Jewish man was therefore open to the charge of being improperly masculine by virtue of failing to appear in control of his desires.

Jewish populations were not alone in having their gendered embodiment critiqued by Greeks and Romans, who frequently regarded foreign populations as either too feminine or too masculine.⁵⁶⁰ As Benjamin Isaac summarizes, “eastern peoples tend to be seen as clever and cunning, degenerate and effeminate.”⁵⁶¹ Although Jews were not always lumped in with eastern peoples or regarded as feminine, in regards to circumcision their allegedly unmanly, excessive sexually would have linked them to other eastern peoples.⁵⁶² On the other hand, northwestern peoples, especially the Germans, were regarded as slightly too masculine: “ungovernable... dangerous... They love fighting, sleeping, and feasting; they hate peace and serious work and so forth... the Germans represented the ultimate form of virility.”⁵⁶³ Despite their flaws, their manliness was also evident in their sexual propriety; summarizing Tacitus, Isaac observes that it was thought that “[t]hey maintain a strict marriage code... Adultery is very rare and heavily

⁵⁵⁹ Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 101.

⁵⁶⁰ Greeks and Romans had different perceptions of each other, of course; Romans critiqued Greeks while Greeks critiqued Romans. But these two groups shared in common many of their perceptions of other foreign cultures.

⁵⁶¹ Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 482.

⁵⁶² Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, chap. 13.

⁵⁶³ Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 499.

punished by the husband... They practice no birth control.”⁵⁶⁴ The ideal balance, the man who was neither feminine nor too masculine, was found in the Greeks or Romans when describing themselves.

Circumcised Jewish men themselves, however, had a radically different self-understanding.⁵⁶⁵ In common with the surrounding culture, they upheld the value of self-control, but they framed circumcision in such a way that it actually contributed to sexual moderation and appropriate masculinity. In Philo’s first century text, *On the Special Laws*, he construes circumcision as adhering to the demands of his community’s shared gender norms. Listing the four reasons that Jews practice circumcision, he argues that circumcision prevents genital infection; contributes to the cleanliness of the body, which is appropriate for a consecrated people; creates a physical similarity to the thought-begetting heart; and improves procreation (1.4-7). In the latter two reasons, Philo frames circumcision as geared towards community-enhancing procreation, rather than profligate sexuality: the circumcised penis and the heart “are both prepared for generation” (πρὸς...γένεσιν ἄμφω παρεσκεύασται, 1.6) and the final and most indispensable (ἀναγκαιότατον, 1.7) reason for circumcision is that it creates more offspring by improving the movement of semen. Next, Philo explains that circumcision is a symbol for two qualities, both of which cultivate the moderate, controlled person.

[Circumcision is a symbol] of, first, the excision of pleasures that bewitch thought. For since, among all the love-charms of pleasure, the intercourse of a man with a woman takes the prize, it seemed right to the lawgivers to amputate the organ that serves such kinds of things. The lawgivers were intimating that circumcision is the excision of excessive and disproportionate pleasure, not only of one pleasure, but through the one most violent pleasure, also all the other pleasures. It is additionally a symbol of someone

⁵⁶⁴ Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, 432.

⁵⁶⁵ For the ideal Jewish body as circumcised even in the resurrection or the afterlife, see Genesis Rabbah 48:8 and perhaps one of the bodies depicted in the Ezekiel cycle fresco of the Dura-Europos synagogue: Isaac Tsun-Yeung Soon, “A Visual Depiction of Jewish Circumcision at Dura-Europos,” *JSJ* 54 (2023): 129–36.

knowing oneself and of driving away from the soul the weighty sickness that is pride. For there are some...who cover up that the true cause of generation is God...⁵⁶⁶

For Philo, circumcision is a physical sign of eliminating both immoderate desire and hubris in oneself. In *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, Philo further explains that circumcision is only required of male Jews and not female Jews because men have more sexual desire than women, and because men are the active participants in procreation and therefore have more reason to be susceptible to pride in their own abilities (3.47). Not only does circumcision contribute to living out ideal masculinity, it also arises from alleged conditions that are peculiar to men rather than women. Although circumcision marked Jewish males in Greco-Roman social circles as laughably over-eroticized, Jewish thinkers themselves could reclaim circumcision as a gendered improvement that rendered them more in control of their sexuality so that they could direct it towards orderly reproduction, and more in control of their minds so that they could cultivate a clear-headed, well-balanced persona.

In addition, while circumcision was a marker of foreignness in the eyes of the outside non-Jewish observer, it had the opposite effect internal to the group because it could facilitate marriage. John M. G. Barclay considers this to be “one of the most important social functions of circumcision: by marking Jewish males, it limited the sexual relations and marriage-options of Jewish girls and thus discouraged exogamy.”⁵⁶⁷ Barclay points to the tradition established by the story in Genesis 34 of Dinah and the Shechemites, who (as a ruse) could have intermarried with Jacob’s family if they became circumcised.⁵⁶⁸ In the first-century, women in the Herodian family

⁵⁶⁶ ἐνὸς μὲν ἡδονῶν ἐκτομῆς, αἱ καταγοητεύουσι διάνοιαν· ἐπειδὴ γὰρ τὰ νικητήρια φέρεται τῶν ἐν ἡδοναῖς φίλτρων ἢ ἀνδρὸς πρὸς γυναῖκα συνουσία, τὸ ὑπηρετοῦν ταῖς τοιαύταις ὁμιλίαις ὄργανον ἀκρωτηριάζειν ἔδοξε τοῖς νομοθέταις, αἰνιττομένοις περιτομὴν περιττῆς ἐκτομῆς καὶ πλεοναζούσης ἡδονῆς, οὐ μιᾶς, ἀλλὰ διὰ μιᾶς τῆς βιαστικωτάτης καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀπασθῶν· ἐτέρου δὲ τοῦ γινῶναι τινα ἑαυτὸν καὶ τὴν βαρεῖαν νόσον, οἷησιν, ψυχῆς ἀπώσασθαι· ἔνιοι γὰρ...τὸν ὡς ἀληθῶς αἴτιον γενέσεως ὄντα θεὸν παρακαλυγόμενοι...

⁵⁶⁷ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 439.

⁵⁶⁸ Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 411.

married men from other regions who became circumcised, according to Josephus (*Ant.* 20.139-140, 145-147). A Jewish girl or woman would have been encouraged to seek a circumcised male partner, whether he was born into a Jewish family and was circumcised on the eighth day, or whether he came from another ethnic group and chose to integrate into her community by becoming circumcised. Again, we see that gender and sexuality are intertwined with one's own ethnic identity and with one's perception of the ethnic identities of others. In the example of marriage, we can already begin to see the way that Jewish circumcision of males not only affected the self-identification and understanding of Jewish boys and men, but Jewish girls and women as well.

Furthermore, Jewish women participated in circumcision and were social actors in its networks of meaning, even if they did not undergo it themselves. First, Jewish mothers were sometimes the individuals who carried out the physical act of circumcision on their sons. 1 Maccabees 1:60-61 foregrounds the agency of mothers who circumcised their children (τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς περιτεμηκυῖας τὰ τέκνα αὐτῶν), listing them first before the rest of the family units and outside male circumcisers (τοὺς περιτεμηκότας αὐτοὺς).⁵⁶⁹ 2 Maccabees 6:10 and 4 Maccabees 4:25 give sole agency to the women for performing circumcisions (δύο...γυναῖκες...περιτεμηκυῖαι τὰ τέκνα; γυναῖκας, ὅτι περιέτεμον τὰ παιδιά).⁵⁷⁰ Despite the

⁵⁶⁹ ⁶⁰ καὶ τὰς γυναῖκας τὰς περιτεμηκυῖας τὰ τέκνα αὐτῶν ἐθανάτωσαν κατὰ τὸ πρόσταγμα ⁶¹ καὶ ἐκρέμασαν τὰ βρέφη ἐκ τῶν τραχήλων αὐτῶν, καὶ τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν καὶ τοὺς περιτεμηκότας αὐτοὺς. “According to the decree, they put to death the women who had circumcised their children, and they hung the infants from their necks, and they did the same to their households and the men who had circumcised them.” Note that the text reads “τοὺς οἴκους αὐτῶν προενόμευσαν καὶ τοὺς περιτεμηκότας αὐτοὺς ἐθανάτωσαν” according to a correcting hand of Sinaiticus and according to Codex Purpureus Vindobonensis (they ransacked their houses, and they put to death the men who had circumcised them). The text of the Septuagint is taken from Alfred Rahlfs, *Septuaginta: Id Est Vetus Testamentum Graece Iuxta LXX Interpretes*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1979).

⁵⁷⁰ 2 Maccabees 6:10: δύο γὰρ γυναῖκες ἀνήχθησαν περιτεμηκυῖαι τὰ τέκνα· τούτων δὲ ἐκ τῶν μαστῶν κρεμάσαντες τὰ βρέφη καὶ δημοσίᾳ περιγαγόντες αὐτὰς τὴν πόλιν κατὰ τοῦ τείχους ἐκρήμνισαν. “For two women were led up because they had circumcised the children. And having hung the infants from these breasts and having led them publicly around the city, they hurled them down from the wall.”

4 Maccabees 4:25 (expressing a result of defying Antiochus's decrees): ὥστε καὶ γυναῖκας, ὅτι περιέτεμον τὰ παιδιά, μετὰ τῶν βρεφῶν κατακρημνισθῆναι προειδύας ὅτι τοῦτο πείσονται· “so that even women, because they

plain meaning of the Greek being that the women actually circumcised their children, scholars are divided as to whether these women did this or merely arranged the ceremonies.⁵⁷¹ In my view, the exact parallel in the Greek phrases for the circumcising mothers and the circumcising men (περιτεμυκνίας and περιτεμυκότητας) suggests a diversity in who performed circumcisions in this community. But regardless of whether the women directly or indirectly participated in circumcision, these Maccabean texts depict the mothers' actions as expressions of her resistance to colonial authority, her faithfulness to God, and her reason.⁵⁷² Furthermore, the Mishnah records rabbis debating whether it was appropriate for a woman to perform a circumcision, suggesting the occurrence of the practice in some circles (B. Avodah Zarah, 27a).⁵⁷³ Another set of rabbinic debates involves a scenario in which a set of sisters were circumcising their sons (tShab. 15.8; bYeb. 64b; yYeb. 6.6, 7d; Song of Songs R. 7.2.3).⁵⁷⁴ A scriptural precedent for such practice can be seen in Zipporah's circumcision of her son in Exodus 4:24-26. Even in social settings where mothers were not the circumcisers, until at least the 13th century they would join the circumcision ceremony in the synagogue and even hold their infant sons in their laps while it occurred; later, they were restricted to being in another nearby room along with other women, but they still participated by drinking ceremonial wine.⁵⁷⁵ The weight of the historical evidence points to the reality that women could be active participants in circumcision, that this

circumcised the children, were hurled down with their infants, although the women knew beforehand that they would suffer this."

⁵⁷¹ For views against their participation, see Jonathan A. Goldstein, ed., *I Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 41 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 139; Susan Haber, "Living and Dying for the Law: The Mother-Martyrs of 2 Maccabees," *Women in Judaism* 4.1 (2006): 4; Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, CEJL (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 281; Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 14.

For a view in favor of their participation according to 2 Maccabees but not 1 Maccabees, see Robert Doran, *2 Maccabees: A Critical Commentary*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 148.

For a view in favor of their participation, see Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 182.

⁵⁷² Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol*, 14–15, 26, 31–32.

⁵⁷³ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 98–99.

⁵⁷⁴ Ilan, *Jewish Women*, 182.

⁵⁷⁵ Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?*, 4, 46–47.

role was extremely important to some of them in expressing their religious, political, and philosophical commitments, and that their agency in enacting circumcision was publicly visible.

There are several important features of the culture surrounding circumcision in which Acts was written. First, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, a person's own cultural practices of genital modification or non-modification were viewed as inculcating sexual self-control and masculine propriety, as defined in opposition to outsiders' practices. Next, hegemonic colonial discourse linked ethnicity to gender and sexuality, such that ethnic difference was automatically marked in terms that included sexual deviance. At the same time, the practice of circumcision could function in the other direction, facilitating ethnic boundary-crossing within marriages by transforming the male partner's identity. Lastly, the role of circumciser could be held by a person of any gender. In the following section, I analyze the circumcision of Timothy in light of these three features.

Circumcision and Gender in Acts 16:1-5

In this analysis, I move away from older, black-and-white assessments of whether Luke was pro-women or anti-women, but instead join more recent scholars who seek to understand the gender norms that were operating within Luke's cultural milieu and how this text is in dialogue with those norms. In the 1970s, developing feminist exegesis highlighted a "conventional" reading of Luke, that it demonstrates a particular care for women along with other marginalized groups.⁵⁷⁶ In the 1980s and early 1990s, this idea began to be challenged and it was argued instead by scholars like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Rose D'Angelo that Luke in fact constrained female characters to "standards that would have been acceptable in the imperial

⁵⁷⁶ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "What Ever Happened to Those Prophesying Daughters?," in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland, 2004), 50.

world” in order “to instruct women as to the boundaries of their proper behavior.”⁵⁷⁷ Jane Schaburg opened her entry on Luke in the 1992 *Women’s Bible Commentary* with the heading “Warning”: “The Gospel of Luke is an extremely dangerous text, perhaps the most dangerous in the Bible.”⁵⁷⁸ Striking a third position, in 1994, Turid Karlsen Seim concluded that neither the pro-women nor the anti-women readings could account for all the evidence in Luke-Acts, and that instead the text ultimately carries “a certain irony, a mixed message.”⁵⁷⁹ In each case, however, the goal of feminist analysis of Luke-Acts was to evaluate the text positively, negatively, or in between in terms of the books’ contribution to the equality and liberation of women.

In subsequent decades, scholars have taken the alternative approach of analyzing ancient gender norms discursively, with particular attention to where ancient and modern gender norms might diverge. Michal Beth Dinkler has analyzed the theme of silence in the Gospel of Luke, wanting to go beyond the simple assumption in feminist biblical scholarship that women’s silence necessarily implies their subordination by the text’s author; rather, “in some contexts, silence denotes power.”⁵⁸⁰ In the final chapters of Luke, there are several anonymous women whose namelessness “creates the space for readers to engage personally in the narrative” and to step into these women’s kerygmatic shoes.⁵⁸¹ Brittany Wilson has explored how Luke-Acts depicts model male characters as compared to ancient norms for masculinity. She concludes that

⁵⁷⁷ Gaventa, “What Ever Happened to Those Prophesying Daughters?,” 51; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Women in Luke-Acts: A Redactional View,” *JBL* 109.3 (1990): 441–61.

⁵⁷⁸ Jane Schaburg, “Luke,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, 1st ed. (London: SPCK, 1992), 275.

⁵⁷⁹ Gaventa, “What Ever Happened to Those Prophesying Daughters?,” 52; Turid Karlsen Seim, *The Double Message: Patterns of Gender in Luke-Acts* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994).

⁵⁸⁰ Michal Beth Dinkler, *Silent Statements: Narrative Representations of Speech and Silence in the Gospel of Luke*, BZNW 191 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 16.

⁵⁸¹ Dinkler, *Silent Statements*, 180.

Luke occupies an in-between position, “refigur[ing] elite norms” of masculinity by relativizing the power of male characters beneath the power of God.⁵⁸² In Caryn A. Reeder’s examination of the gendered themes of war and peace in Luke, she concludes that Luke confirms some of the contemporary culture’s understanding of “militarized masculinity” but also challenges it with models of surrender.⁵⁸³ Increasingly, interpreters of Luke-Acts take as their starting point the social construction of gender and the variation in gendering practices across time and space. Although ethical analysis of Luke’s discourse may still take place, a more fundamental contention of recent work is that our modern assumptions about sex, gender, and sexuality need to be nuanced in order to grasp the gendered messages of the biblical texts.

Such a methodology of analyzing gendered discourse has been used by Christopher Stroup to better understand the circumcision of Timothy. Stroup’s methodology is not feminist *per se* but rather “gender-critical” and draws from masculinity studies.⁵⁸⁴ He draws on Judith Butler’s key contention that gender is socially constructed through discourse and performance, and he therefore focuses on how masculinity as well as femininity were constructed in the Greco-Roman world. Grounded in masculinity studies, he not only describes the assumptions of hegemonic masculinity but also sees Luke proposing an alternative masculinity.⁵⁸⁵

Stroup situates Timothy’s circumcision within the framework of “conflicting masculinities” between Jewish and Greco-Roman ideologies. He argues that “Luke’s *Übermensch*, a circumcised Jew, is also a Roman man who is more masculine than many other

⁵⁸² Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 247.

⁵⁸³ Caryn A. Reeder, *Gendering War and Peace in the Gospel of Luke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 196.

⁵⁸⁴ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 49.

⁵⁸⁵ For further on masculinity studies, see Stephen D. Moore, “‘O Man, Who Art Thou...?’: Masculinity Studies and New Testament Studies,” in *New Testament Masculinities*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 1–22; Colleen M. Conway, “Masculinity Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of New Testament, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Benjamin H. Dunning (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 77–93.

Romans... Jewish men who believe in Jesus are more manly than Greco-Roman men, and Greco-Roman men are becoming Jewish men through the power of the Holy Spirit without circumcision.”⁵⁸⁶ Essential to Stroup’s interpretation is an agonistic framework: “Luke’s Paul is a Jewish man who dominates Roman men at their own gendering game.”⁵⁸⁷ Followers of the Way can “master” Jewish leaders and Greco-Roman leaders alike and prove themselves as more masculine and capable of controlling others.⁵⁸⁸ Furthermore, they demonstrate “stoic” self-control in the face of danger.⁵⁸⁹ When the reader arrives at Acts 16, the masculine Paul fully actualizes the masculinity of Timothy by enabling him to “become a full Jewish man.”⁵⁹⁰ Even though Timothy is technically Jewish prior to his circumcision, this act is “a stark and violent illustration” that the Way challenges and refigures both Jewish and Greco-Roman ways of thinking about masculinity.⁵⁹¹ An element of brutality is conveyed by how Stroup discusses this circumcision: “Timothy’s foreskin serves as the sacrifice needed forcefully to make this point.”⁵⁹² Ultimately, the ideal masculinity of the Way can include circumcision but it is not defined solely by this practice, and as such uncircumcised Greeks and Romans can “become even more masculine” through belief in Jesus.⁵⁹³

There are several strengths of Stroup’s interpretation that I want to echo but also extend. (1) Masculinity and self-control were deeply linked in the first century. But even more specifically, sexual self-control was one such manifestation. Going one step further, I contend that circumcision is one of multiple sexualized moral questions being at in the Jerusalem council.

⁵⁸⁶ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 70–71.

⁵⁸⁷ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 70.

⁵⁸⁸ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 69–70.

⁵⁸⁹ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 70.

⁵⁹⁰ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 71.

⁵⁹¹ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 71.

⁵⁹² Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 49.

⁵⁹³ Stroup, “Making Jewish Men,” 71.

Furthermore, I argue that Jewish masculine identity via circumcision was not forced to accept positive ethnic belonging at the cost of negative outside accusations of effeminacy. The testimony of Philo demonstrates that Luke's reclamation of circumcised masculinity can be viewed in continuity with other Jewish reclamations of this period. (2) Affect is undoubtedly important to wrestle with when it comes to the topic of circumcision. But I contend that Luke-Acts depicts circumcision within a positive, joyful affective sphere rather than a negative, violent one. I read Timothy's circumcision in keeping with the emotional tenor already established in the book. (3) Stroup calls our attention to Paul's role as circumciser and what possibilities for self-actualization he makes available for Timothy. I analyze Paul's positionality not as one that embodies masculinity and domination, but instead take into account Timothy's own possible willingness, as well as the historical backdrop of parents and even mothers carrying out circumcision for their children.⁵⁹⁴

The Jerusalem council decision, which precedes Timothy's circumcision and which Timothy goes on to proclaim, is not only an exemption of gentiles from circumcision; it is also a reiteration to them of the importance of gentiles adhering to Jewish ethics that include sexual self-control (15:20, 29). The necessities (τῶν ἐπ'ἀνάγκης, v. 28) of behavior in the Way do not include circumcision but they do include avoidance of sexual immorality (πορνεία, vv. 20, 29) along with idol sacrifice, blood, and what was strangled. Although the latter three items may

⁵⁹⁴ My discussion of how Paul is gendered in the act of circumcising Timothy may be profitably viewed within broader conversations about the gendering of Paul. For a selection of contributions that treat Paul's depiction in Acts, see Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele, "Gendering Violence: Patterns of Power and Constructs of Masculinity in the Acts of the Apostles," in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (Cleveland, 2004), 193–209; Brittany E. Wilson, "Destabilizing Masculinity: Paul in the Book of Acts and Beyond," *JBRec* 2.2 (2015): 241–61; Susan E. Hylan, "Malleable Masculinity: Rethinking Paul's Masculinity in Light of Valerius Maximus," *JSNT* 45.2 (2022): 157–76. For a selection of contributions that focus on the Pauline letters, see Jennifer Larson, "Paul's Masculinity," *JBL* 123.1 (2004): 85–97; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007); Jeremy Punt, "Mr Paul: Masculinity and Paul's Self-Presentation (1 Cor 11–13)," *IDS* 50.2 (2016): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.4102/ids.v50i2.2001>.

logically be relevant to specifically non-Jewish religious contexts, the first item may be surprising in its lack of cultural specificity. Some scholars have proposed that it appears because sexual immorality is metaphorically and polemically related to idolatry, or because it refers specifically to Levitical sexual laws.⁵⁹⁵ In addition, I propose that it also be seen as a logical answer to a question about whether other gendered, sexual norms need apply if the regulation of genital modification is relaxed. The council's message reaffirms the importance of sexual self-control itself, regardless of whether one's body fit the norms of masculine propriety according to various discursive communities. Although Jewish and non-Jewish Greco-Roman thought had different dominant mores about the respectable appearance of male genitalia, they agreed with the broader virtue of the moderate, disciplined male sexual self.

Next, I propose that Timothy marks a continuity rather than a radical discontinuity or "extreme" example within the text.⁵⁹⁶ John the Baptist, Jesus, and Abraham are all discussed as becoming circumcised in the narrative of Luke-Acts, including Abraham as an adult. Circumcision is represented as a gift that continues to be passed down among Jewish followers of the Way and that is not devalued or discouraged, as Acts 21 affirms through Paul's conversation in Jerusalem. The model of coalition can help explain how distinctly Jewish modes of masculine embodiment could still have deep meaning and worth, even as other modes of masculine embodiment were recognized as legitimate.

Lastly, the boundary-crossing decisions of Timothy's mother through her intermarriage are described in the text even as she is named as faithful (πιστῆς, 16:1). She married a Greek man, but unlike the Herodian women discussed above, she does not seem to have persuaded him to become circumcised. Unlike the Maccabean women, she did not circumcise her son or arrange

⁵⁹⁵ Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 266–67; Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, 556–58.

⁵⁹⁶ Stroup, "Making Jewish Men," 71.

for his circumcision. But her decisions are not necessarily depicted as wrong, even though different decisions are made later in Timothy's life. When Paul steps in to circumcise Timothy, he inhabits the usual role of a mother, a father, or a trusted community member. As Mitzi Smith describes, although with a different metaphorical valence, "Paul treats Timothy like his child/son."⁵⁹⁷ My conclusion differs significantly from Stroup's assessment that "this act is performed (or perpetrated) by a Jewish man who dominates non-Jewish men and thus embodies the epitome of masculinity."⁵⁹⁸ Instead, Paul acts in a specifically gender-neutral role when he passes on circumcision to Timothy, who in other writings is even called Paul's son (1 Tim 1:2).

Conclusion

As a feminist reader of this text who is also alert to possible Orientalist and anti-Jewish stereotypes, I do not read Timothy's circumcision as inherently sexist or as necessary to denounce on gendered grounds. Although Jewish circumcision in the first century was indeed a gendered practice, it was not a practice that inherently alienated women, as Christian thinkers have too often accused. Rather, circumcision was an event that a whole community participated in, including mothers. Furthermore, being circumcised was significant but not to the extent that it was equated with participation in God's covenant, and women were not logically excluded from community life and leadership. The ethnic dimensions of circumcision also factor into its gendered and sexual meanings. To different audiences, there were different ways to cultivate the shared value of sexual self-control in the way that one approached genital modification, whether through circumcision or through maintenance of a foreskin of appropriate length. Circumcision was not only a theological or religious practice, and not even only a gendered or sexual practice,

⁵⁹⁷ Smith, "Paul, Timothy, and the Respectability Politics of Race," 4.

⁵⁹⁸ Stroup, "Making Jewish Men," 71.

but a practice that reflected internal ethnic ties and that factored into how dominant groups viewed “foreign” populations.

In Luke’s account of Timothy’s circumcision, Timothy’s mother ultimately does not pass circumcision on to either her partner or her son, although she could have. Instead, Paul takes on the parental role in Timothy’s circumcision, a position that was not inherently gendered. In the context of the Jerusalem council decision, Timothy’s circumcision may represent a proposal for reconciling two communities’ radically divergent views of what the body of a sexually moderate man should look like. Instead of elevating only the Jewish view of circumcision as a symbol of self-control or only the non-Jewish Greco-Roman view of the foreskin as protection against indecent exposure, the nascent Christian community allows gentiles to continue inhabiting foreskinned bodies and allows Jews to continue practicing circumcision while both are committed to the value of sexual morality, the content of which continues to be debated and reimagined within antiquity and for today.

Conclusion

This dissertation has focused on Acts 16:1-5 as an important passage in at least three ways: as a puzzling text that has evaded satisfactory interpretation; as a description of circumcision, a practice that has been viewed in anti-Jewish and Orientalist ways throughout the history of Christianity; and as a narrative about a communally embedded, agential act, which prompts reflection on how traditions more broadly are regarded in liberal discourse. Throughout my analysis, South Asian feminist interlocutors have been my primary conversation partners as I have sought more nuanced ways of speaking about each of these topics.

Exegetically, the major difficulty of this passage is: why is Timothy circumcised? In chapter 1, I laid the groundwork for considering this question by first unpacking the two conventionally contrasting categories of Judaism and Hellenism, cultures within which Timothy has often been seen as torn. Next, I presented my argument that Timothy is depicted in the narrative as Jewish even as he simultaneously holds some Greek ethnic and cultural characteristics, and I highlighted the possibility of Timothy's agency in his circumcision as part of his own practice of Judaism. In chapter 4, I reviewed the modern contexts that have made Timothy's adult, religious circumcision so unfathomable to a Western Christian audience, as well as the historical prejudice against circumcision present in Christianity. I contended that circumcision is instead represented in Luke-Acts in terms of joy, community, diversity, and ethical decision-making, and that Timothy's circumcision should be viewed against this discursive background. Chapter 6 contended that Timothy became circumcised precisely as a Jewish person participating in the coalition of the Way; prompted by the Jerusalem council's decision, he participated in circumcision as part of a public acknowledgement of the rite's continued value for Jewish Christ followers. Lastly, I argued that as the circumcised Timothy

proclaimed that gentiles need not be circumcised, he passed on the Jerusalem council's approval of multiple modes of sexual embodiment.

I have also sought to contribute to discussions of circumcision taking place in New Testament studies more broadly. Against a Hellenistic background, this practice has too often been coded as traditional, irrational, and forced. These false assumptions create difficulty in understanding Acts 16:1-5 but also texts like Galatians, when adults become circumcised. When we as interpreters recognize the presence of Orientalist and anti-Jewish logics in past scholarship and in our own thoughts, we can reformulate and create new frameworks that better account for the historical evidence with which we are presented. The politics around circumcision today will also continue to change, and we will need to be alert to the possible impact of those shifting dynamics. In chapter 5, I saw a challenge to hegemonic Christian views of circumcision in the Lukan depiction of circumcision: as a communal act, a joyful gift, an everyday occasion, a covenantal affirmation, and a practice around which a diversity of views has accrued. By thinking about the agency involved in circumcision in terms of self-actualization, I sought to equally avoid Orientalist, nativist, and liberal resistant ways of reducing the many meanings present in circumcision. Next, I located the importance of circumcision for Jewish followers of the Way as tied to their participation in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious coalition that centered Judaism. Lastly, I considered the gendered significance of circumcision in the context of competing views about how genital modification impacted masculinity, as well as in light of the fact that not only males participated in circumcision by receiving it, but community members of multiple genders could perform it and could be impacted by it. Feminist discussions of circumcision need to be alert against the threat of perpetuating Orientalist anti-Judaism when engaging in the valuable task of critiquing patriarchal constructions.

Amidst multiple possible approaches to the topic of circumcision, I focused on the topic of agency. This issue is central to interpreting Acts 16:1-5 since the possibility that Timothy chose his own circumcision has so rarely been considered. The very concept of choosing a tradition is a loaded suggestion, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has demonstrated with the example of *sati*, because it is equally dangerous to propose that the Oriental subject is forced to engage in a tradition or to propose that the Oriental subject rightly performs a pure native practice. As Saba Mahmood adds, the temptation for the liberal feminist (or the otherwise liberal and liberationist reader) is to see a choice for tradition as occurring only when it leads to resistance. I have taken up Mahmood's proposal that agency should not be thought of as autonomy, but rather as self-actualization, which always takes place in dialogue with existing norms. This construction allows us as biblical interpreters to see more agency in the text, in two senses: we can see more characters engaging in agential acts, even as we would still place those acts in the context of constraining power dynamics and hegemonic norms; and we can see obviously agential characters as more deeply embedded in communities and philosophical frameworks that are providing the very foundations for their agency. As South Asian feminist theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty show us, we can still offer critiques of unjust power structures even as we are alert to avoiding stereotyped forms of logic and are instead working to provide descriptions that are specific as well as humble.⁵⁹⁹

⁵⁹⁹ "If there is a normative political position that underlies this book, it is to urge that we—my readers and myself—embark upon an inquiry in which we do not assume that the political positions we uphold will necessarily be vindicated, or provide the ground for our theoretical analysis, but instead hold open the possibility that we may come to ask of politics a whole series of questions that seemed settled when we first embarked upon the inquiry." Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 39.

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