

# Paul's Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17-29<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The majority of interpreters conclude that in Rom 2:17-29 Paul addresses an ethnic Jew. In contrast, Runar M. Thorsteinsson has argued recently that Paul addresses a gentile, specifically a gentile who has judaized and now thinks of himself as a Jew. This article provides further support for Thorsteinsson's argument, contending that Paul, contrary to virtually all translations, does not redefine Jewishness in 2:28-29. Additionally, in vv. 21-27 Paul insists that, despite being circumcised, the gentile judaizer fails to keep the very law in which he boasts.

## Keywords

circumcision – conversion – ethnicity – identity – judaizing – Paul and the law

## Introduction

Most interpreters believe that in Rom 2:17-29 Paul engages a Jewish interlocutor and, in the process, redefines Jewishness. Standard interpretations run roughly as follows: in vv. 17-20 Paul echoes this Jewish person's lofty, boastful self-description; in vv. 21-27, Paul demonstrates that this Jewish person has no ability to boast in his law observance and circumcision because he does not

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keep the entirety of the Jewish law, resulting in his being reckoned as uncircumcised; and in vv. 28-29, Paul concludes that true Jewishness and true circumcision are inner realities, unrelated to genital circumcision.<sup>2</sup> In short, then, most scholars believe that in Rom 2:17-29 Paul rejects the common definition of Jewishness in his day, including those marks of identity which were thought to distinguish Jews from others.

Yet this interpretation results in the creation of a considerable tension within Paul's letters: outside of this passage, Paul always uses Ἰουδαίος to refer to those who were ethnically Jewish. Of the fourteen occurrences of Ἰουδαίος outside of Romans, five times Paul explicitly contrasts the term to Ἕλληνα ("Greeks"; Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 1:22, 24; 10:32; 12:13) and four times to ἔθνη ("gentiles"; Gal 2:13-15 [3x]; 1 Cor 1:23). The remaining five instances (1 Thess 2:14; 1 Cor 9:20 [3x]; 2 Cor 11:24) likewise clearly refer to Jews in an ethnic sense.<sup>3</sup>

The evidence of Romans is even more problematic for the belief that Paul redefines the term Ἰουδαίος in Rom 2:28-29 since the three occurrences of Ἰουδαίος that precede Rom 2:17-29 contrast the Ἰουδαίος to the Greek (1:16, 2:9, 10). Further, immediately after Rom 2:17-29, Paul, or possibly his interlocutor, asks what advantage the Ἰουδαίος has (3:1). Since in Rom 3:9 Paul twice uses Ἰουδαίος and contrasts the term again with Greeks, it is clear that Ἰουδαίος here still functions in its ethnic sense. This ethnic definition of Jewishness is found in the three remaining uses of the term, which contrast the Ἰουδαίος to gentiles (3:29; 9:24) and Greeks (10:12). Consequently, even in Romans Paul consistently uses the term Ἰουδαίος to refer to ethnic Jews, and he does so both before and after Rom 2:17-29.

These facts should give pause to any interpreter who believes that in Rom 2:17-29 Paul redefines Jewishness, undermining its ethnic meaning and constructing a spiritualized meaning that includes Jews and gentiles who believe in Jesus.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Philip F. Esler acknowledges the tension between this reading of Rom 2:17-29 and Rom 3:1-8, stating: "Realizing that

2 Douglas A. Campbell (*The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009] 565) acknowledges the shocking nature of this conclusion, but attempts to defuse the problem by arguing that this redefinition of Jewishness is the unintended "shameful argumentative implication" of the interlocutor's thinking.

3 A number of scholars argue that 1 Thess 2:13-16 is a non-pauline interpolation. Since the use of Ἰουδαίος in 1 Thess 2:14 fits with Paul's use elsewhere, the issue of the authenticity of these verses does not affect the argument of this article. Additionally, the letter to the Colossians contrasts Jew to the Greek (3:11). Again, while its authorship is disputed, this contrast is clearly ethnic and parallels Gal 3:28.

4 James D.G. Dunn (*Romans 1-8* [WBC 38a; Dallas: Word Books, 1988] 109) likewise notes that Paul "almost always" contrasts Ἰουδαίος to categories of gentiles.

these statements [i.e., Rom 2:17-29] may appear to have erased the reality of the divine election of Israel, Paul draws back a little to reassert the existence of Judean [i.e., Jewish] privileges (Rom. 3:1-8).<sup>5</sup> Similarly C.E.B. Cranfield, after arguing that Paul redefines Jewishness in Rom 2:28-29, admits that Rom 3:1-4 (in addition to what Paul says of the abiding benefits to ethnic Israel in Romans 9-11) seriously undermines his interpretation of 2:28-29.

### Rethinking Romans 2:28-29

This considerable tension, consequently, leads us back to a reconsideration of Rom 2:28-29, which according to NA<sup>28</sup> states:

οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερωῦ Ἰουδαίος ἐστίν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερωῦ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομή, ἀλλ' ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαίος, καὶ περιτομὴ καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι, οὐ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.

The RSV, typical of most modern translations, renders these verses in the following manner:

For he is not a real Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal. His praise is not from men but from God.<sup>6</sup>

5 Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 153. Esler's translation of Ἰουδαίος as "Judean" belongs to a recent stream of scholarship that rightly emphasizes the geographical and ethnic aspects inherent in the term. Cf. Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSJ* 38 (2007) 457-512. Nonetheless, following Daniel R. Schwartz ("Judaeans or 'Jew'? How Should We Translate *IOUDAIOS* in Josephus?" in *Jewish Identity in the Greco-Roman World / Jüdische Identität in der griechisch-römischen Welt* [ed. Jörg Frey, Daniel R. Schwartz, and Stephanie Gripentrog; AGJU 71; Leiden: Brill, 2007] 3-27), I believe that rendering the word Ἰουδαίος in English as "Jew" more accurately captures for the modern reader the same ambiguity that would have faced Paul's readers when asked what was meant by the Greek term.

6 To name but a few commentaries which translate the passage similarly, see Dunn, *Romans* 1-8, 123; Ben Witherington with Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 91; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: WJK Press, 1994) 48-49; Simon J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1-5* (Grand Rapids:

According to this reading, there is a true Jewishness which has nothing to do with genital circumcision and other traditional cultural signifiers of Jewish identity. The true Jew is the spiritual Jew.<sup>7</sup> This supposed redefinition swings open the doors of Jewish identity so that gentiles can become Jews without undergoing circumcision and the adoption of Jewish customs. At the same time, it also excludes all those of Jewish descent who are not circumcised of heart.<sup>8</sup> As Robert Jewett states, “The Jew with a circumcised heart, whether of Jewish or Gentile lineage, performs the law out of a transformed heart, without regard to reputation.”<sup>9</sup>

But, in order to translate the passage in this way, interpreters must supply numerous additions to Paul’s Greek. Illustrative of this tendency, Cranfield provides the Greek of Rom 2:28-29 with his additions in brackets:

οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερώ (Ἰουδαίος) Ἰουδαίός ἐστιν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερώ ἐν σαρκί (περιτομή) περιτομή (ἐστίν), ἀλλ’ ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαίος (Ἰουδαίός ἐστιν), καὶ περιτομὴ καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι (περιτομὴ ἐστίν), οὐδ’ ὁ ἔπαινος οὐκ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων (ἐστίν) ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, Greek often requires English readers to supply words (especially verbs such as εἶμι). Nonetheless, as John M.G. Barclay argues, “The Greek here is elliptical, with several missing verbs and nouns, but, given the dangers of interpretative paraphrase, it is as well to use as few additions as possible.”<sup>11</sup> Stanley K. Stowers also notes the dangers associated with supplying additions to these verses: “The highly elliptical language of 2:28-29 makes it easy

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Eerdmans, 2002) 197-98; Eduard Lohse, *Der Brief an die Römer* (15th ed.; KEKNT 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003) 108; Brendan Byrne, *Romans* (SP 6; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996) 96-97; Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) 89.

7 Ernst Käsemann (*Commentary on Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980] 74) argues that “the true Jew is an eschatological phenomenon.”

8 Joseph A. Fitzmyer (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 33; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1993] 320-321) concludes: “In effect, he denies the name to those who may outwardly be Jews, but are not so inwardly. The consequences of his indictment would seem to indicate that Paul regards Jews as cut off from the promises to Israel.” Byrne (*Romans*, 105) also acknowledges the theologically problematic fact that the redefinition “of the Jew (vv 28-29) does, it is true, appear to annihilate Jewish identity.”

9 Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 236.

10 Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (6th ed.; 2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 1:175.

11 John M.G. Barclay, “Paul and Philo on Circumcision: Romans 2:25-9 in Social and Cultural Context,” *NTS* 44 (1998) 536-556 (545).

to read and translate, as traditional Christian treatments have, in a manner that spiritualizes circumcision and Judaism to the point that they vanish."<sup>12</sup> Consequently, would not a reading of these verses that makes sense of the passage and keeps paraphrasing to a minimum be preferable? Hans K. Arneson has helpfully suggested that a more accurate translation of these two verses should read as follows:

For it is not the outward Jew, nor the outward circumcision in the flesh, but the hidden Jew, and the circumcision of the heart in spirit and not in letter, whose praise [is] not from humans but from God.<sup>13</sup>

The strength of this translation is that, while it also adds *ἐστίν* when necessary, it does not require adding *Ἰουδαίος* and *περιτομή* twice, as does Cranfield's translation.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, this rendering does not require importing the word *ἀληθινός*, "true" (NRSV) or "real" (RSV), to refer to who is actually a Jew or what is real circumcision in Paul's mind.<sup>15</sup> Since Paul does not use the word *ἀληθινός*, supplying it in the text might mean one is inadvertently importing a conclusion foreign to Paul. Finally, this translation takes into account the final clause of v. 29, the relevance of which, as both Barclay and Jewett recognize, has puzzled scholars.<sup>16</sup> The central focus of Rom 2:28-29 is the praise of God, not true Jewishness or true circumcision. That is to say, ethnic Jewishness and genital

12 Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994) 155.

13 Hans K. Arneson, "Revisiting the Sense and Syntax of Romans 2:28-29," forthcoming. I am grateful to Arneson for making available this as yet unpublished research. Witherington (*Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 86) comes closest to this translation: "For [it is] not the one who is outwardly a Jew, nor the one who is outwardly in the flesh the circumcision, but the one who is inwardly a Jew, and has the circumcision of the heart in the spirit and not the letter, who [seeks] the praise not from humans but from God" (parenthetical additions are Witherington's). Nonetheless, in his comments (91-92), he unthinkingly reverts back to the standard discussion of the "real" or "true" Jew.

14 Contrary to C.K. Barrett (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [HNTC; New York: Harpers, 1957] 59), translations similar to that of Cranfield do not merely add "the simplest grammatical supplements."

15 English interpreters are not alone here. For instance, Lohse (*Brief an die Römer*, 113-114) refers to the "rechter Jude" and "wahre Beschneidung"; Ulrich Wilckens (*Der Brief an die Römer* [3 vols.; EKKNT 6; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1978] 1:156) says that Paul answers the question of "wer in Wahrheit 'Jude' ist," and believes heart circumcision is "wahre Beschneidung"; and Simon Légasse (*L'Épître de Paul aux Romains* [LD 10; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2002] 211) refers to "le vrai juif."

16 Barclay, "Paul and Philo on Circumcision," 546; and Jewett, *Romans*, 237.

circumcision do not in and of themselves guarantee that God is pleased with someone, a statement that, as we shall see below, has strong scriptural support in Jer 9:25-26 (LXX Jer 9:24-25).

Further, this translation lessens the problem created by Rom 3:1, where Paul (following Douglas A. Campbell) or his interlocutor (following Neil Elliott, Stanley K. Stowers, and Runar M. Thorsteinsson) raises the question of what benefit results from being a Jew.<sup>17</sup> If Paul redefines Jewishness, then there is great benefit to being a (spiritual) Jew and Rom 3:1-9 should make this clear. But Rom 3:1-9 reverts back to discussing the benefit of being ethnic Jews and observing the rite of genital circumcision as though Paul had not redefined Jewishness and circumcision. In contrast, if Paul is demonstrating that not all Jews have God's praise, and that not all circumcisions result in obedience, then the question naturally arises, "What is the point of being a Jew or of being circumcised?" Paul's answer ("Much in every way!") makes sense because he notes that Jews, whether they have God's praise or not, are entrusted with God's words. And, as Rom 9:1-4 demonstrates, Paul thinks ethnic Jews continue to have considerable advantages.

### Romans 2:17 and a Gentile (Proselyte) Interlocutor

If the reading of Rom 2:28-29 provided above is correct, contrary to virtually every interpreter of Romans, Paul does not here redefine Jewishness. This leads us back, then, to the identity of the interlocutor in Rom 2:17, which states, "But if you call yourself a Jew and rely upon the law and boast in God . . . (Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ καὶ ἐπαναπαύῃ νόμῳ καὶ καυχᾶσαι ἐν θεῷ)."<sup>18</sup> Paul portrays the interlocutor as one who calls himself a Jew. But, as Thorsteinsson argues, "Paul does not actually state that the person addressed in 2:17 is a Jew. Rather,

17 On whether it is Paul or his interlocutor who asks the question of Rom 3:1, see Campbell, *Deliverance of God*, 574-575; Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's Dialogue with Judaism* (JSNTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 132-141; Stowers, *Rereading of Romans*, 158-166; and Runar M. Thorsteinsson (*Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography* [CBNTS 40; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003] 236-237. The majority of interpreters believe it is Paul's interlocutor. See C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (MNTC 6; New York: Harper, 1932) 43; Barrett, *Romans*, 61-62; and Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (KEK 14; 14th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) 137.

18 As Günther Bornkamm notes ("Paulinische Anakoluthe," in *Das Ende des Gesetzes: Paulusstudien* [3d ed.; vol. 1; BEvTh 16; Munich: Kaiser Verlag, 1961] 76-92), since this is a subordinate clause, which lacks a subsequent main clause, this is an incomplete sentence.

this person is depicted as someone who wants to be *called* a Jew.<sup>19</sup> Supporting this understanding of Rom 2:17, he points to 1 Cor 5:11, where Paul uses the cognate verb *ὀνομάζω* with regard to someone who calls himself a brother, but lives in such a way that belies this title: “I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who calls himself (*ὀνομαζόμενος*) ‘brother’ if he is immoral, or greedy, or idolatrous, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a robber—do not even eat with such a one.”<sup>20</sup>

But if Paul is not redefining Jewishness, why will he not concede that his interlocutor is Jewish? Why does he distance himself from this claim? The answer, I believe, is that Paul’s interlocutor throughout the entirety of Romans 2 is someone of non-Jewish descent who believes he has become a Jew. Thorsteinsson has argued for this identification, but fails to provide a compelling explanation for the way in which vv. 21-27 function to demonstrate that this gentile interlocutor’s claim to Jewishness is, to Paul’s mind, false.<sup>21</sup> In the remainder of this article I will attempt to fill in this lacuna.

### Romans 2:21-24: The One Who Does not Practice What He Preaches

First, one must properly understand Paul’s rhetorical purpose in Rom 2:21-22, in which he mentions three vices—theft, adultery, and the combination of idolatry and temple robbery: “The one who teaches (*ὁ διδάσκων*) another, do you not teach yourself? The one preaching, ‘Do not steal (*κλέπτειν*),’ do you steal? The one saying, ‘Do not commit adultery (*μοιχεύειν*),’ do you commit adultery? The one who abhors idols (*ὁ βδελυσσόμενος τὰ εἰδωλα*), do you rob temples (*ἱεροσυλεῖς*)?”<sup>22</sup>

19 Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 159 (emphasis original). Stowers (*Rereading of Romans*, 148), following Anton Fridrichsen (“Der wahre Jude und sein Lob: Röm. 2,28f,” *Symbolae Arctoeae* 1 [1922] 39-49), notes, “Paul uses the popular philosophical motif of name (*onoma*) versus deed/reality (*ergon*), as do Epictetus and Plutarch.”

20 Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 199 n. 47. In Rom 15:20 Paul does use the verb *ὀνομάζω* without calling into question the veracity of the claim being made.

21 Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*. Cf. David Frankfurter (“Jews or Not: Reconstructing the ‘Other’ in Rev 2:9 and 3:9,” *HTR* 94.4 [2001] 403-425 [420]); Joshua D. Garroay (*Paul’s Gentile-Jews: Neither Jew nor Gentile, but Both* [New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012] 91-95); and Rafael Rodríguez (*If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2014]), who also suggest that Rom 2:17 refers to a non-Jew.

22 Scholars have debated the meaning of this latter charge of temple robbery or sacrilege and its connection to idolatry. J. Duncan Derrett (“‘You Abominate False Gods; But Do You Rob Shrines’ (Rom 2.22b),” *NTS* 40 [1994] 558-571) lists six different possible translations



These accusations against the anonymous teacher (ὁ διδάσκων), frequently identified as a “typical” or “representative” Jew, have stirred the imaginations of numerous Christian interpreters. For instance, Cranfield argues that Rom 2:21-22 reveals the hypocritical behavior of some of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries, who were actually involved in stealing, committing adultery, and robbing temples.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, C.H. Dodd believes that Romans 2 is “evidence enough of the terrible degradation of Jewish morals in the period preceding the Destruction of the Temple.”<sup>24</sup> To be sure, it is unlikely that every Jew in Paul’s day was a paragon of virtue, but this observation is a far cry from the implied or explicit claim that all Jews in Paul’s day were involved in one or all of these three activities. Neither Cranfield nor Dodd cites convincing evidence for this portrayal of the immoral nature of Jews in the first century CE.<sup>25</sup> Instead, they permit Paul’s rhetoric in this passage to guide their imaginations.

At worst, Paul might be making the uncontroversial claim that some of his contemporary Jews failed to lead exemplary moral lives. In a vast improvement upon the suggestion that Jews as an ethnic group were universally implicated in degraded morals, a number of scholars, following Francis Watson, believe that Paul had a specific historical incident in mind. This incident, mentioned by Josephus, involved a few Jewish men who defrauded a Roman noblewoman named Fulvia of her donation to the Jerusalem temple (*Ant.* 18.81-84).<sup>26</sup> Yet the supposed connection to Rom 2:21-22 is unconvincing, for it fails to explain Paul’s reference to adultery. Additionally, even if Paul’s community knew of this incident, there would be little reason for Paul’s readers to associate any Jewish teachers in their midst with the actions of a few rogues some thirty years prior. Finally, only a few Jews were involved in these actions; presumably

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of this phrase. Given that the preceding two illustrations demonstrate hypocrisy, I suggest that Paul envisions someone here who claims to abhor idols, but then desires and steals the valuable objects which are used in cultic worship of these idols, an action contrary to the prohibition of LXX Deut 7:25.

23 Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:168. Likewise, Gathercole (*Where is Boasting?* 212) states: “Israel as a nation is subject to the same defilement [as gentiles] because of these three transgressions: stealing, adultery, and robbery of pagan temples.”

24 Dodd, *Romans*, 39.

25 Cranfield cites Strack-Billerbeck (Str-B 3:109-111, 113-115) for evidence of rabbinic accusations against individual teachers who say one thing and do another, but then concedes that these passages do not imply, “as Paul does, that all contemporary Jews are guilty of the evils which are described.”

26 Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (rev. and exp. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007) 203-205. Campbell (*Deliverance of God*, 561), for instance, claims that this story “perfectly” explains this passage.



the majority of Jews were not guilty of such misdeeds. Consequently, Paul's interlocutor, or a reader of Paul's letter to the Romans, needs only demonstrate the existence of exceptions to this rule. As Timothy W. Berkley asks, "[H]ow is the interlocutor or someone identified with the interlocutor as a Jew, in Käsemann's words, 'trapped' by accusations that have no application to most individual Jews?"<sup>27</sup>

As numerous scholars have noted, the decline narrative of Rom 1:18-32 corresponds most closely to Wisdom of Solomon 13-15, which depicts the depravity of the gentile world. But no scholar, to my knowledge, has noted that Wisdom of Solomon also contains material which corresponds strikingly to the three actions Paul notes in Rom 2:21-22. In a lengthy portrayal of the vices of the gentile world, the author states:

For whether they kill children in their initiations, or celebrate secret mysteries, or hold frenzied revels with strange customs, they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either treacherously kill one another, or grieve one another by adultery (νοθεύω), and all is a raging riot of blood and murder, theft (κλοπή) and deceit, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, confusion over what is good, forgetfulness of favors, pollution of souls, sex perversion, disorder in marriage, adultery (μοιχεία), and debauchery. For the worship of idols (ειδώλων θρησκεία) not to be named is the beginning and cause and end of every evil (RSV 14:24-27).

For Wisdom of Solomon, a whole host of vices characterizes the gentile world, and all of them spring from the initial mistake of abandoning worship of the true god for worship of idols.

This parallel between Wisdom of Solomon and Rom 2:21-22 suggests that Paul still has in mind stereotypically gentile vices. One could argue that the teacher who preaches against theft, adultery, and idolatry is Jewish. Nonetheless, Paul's statements elsewhere suggest that he thinks these vices are peculiar to gentiles alone. In his letter to the Corinthians, a community that was predominantly gentile, Paul asks: "Do you not know that the unjust will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters (ειδωλολάτραι), nor adulterers (μοιχοί), . . . nor thieves (κλέπται), nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 6:9-10). Dale B. Martin rightly notes that this list, including the three

<sup>27</sup> Timothy W. Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant to Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17-29* (SBLDS 175; Atlanta: SBL, 2000) 133.

vices of idolatry, adultery, and thievery, consists of “stereotypically pagan” vices, which makes it likely that in Rom 2:21-22 Paul highlights vices thought to be characteristic of the gentile world.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, it is also unlikely that gentile readers would agree with Paul if he were thought to be claiming that all gentiles were adulterers, thieves, and temple robbers. And if Paul intends to show that his gentile interlocutor is guilty of these specific sins, it is even more unlikely that he could have convinced anyone that such accusations had any foundation. After all, this judaizing gentile would describe himself in the glowing terms of Rom 2:17-20 (that is, someone who claims to know God’s will, approves what is excellent, and is instructed from the law).<sup>29</sup> The solution, I believe, is to posit a very different purpose to these verses.

The entire diatribe has been moving to demonstrate that the interlocutor, who claims to be a Jew and is preaching law observance, is no better off than the gentile pagan world that he condemns. Paul’s point is to create *the pattern* of someone who preaches one thing but does the opposite. The target of Paul’s attack is the pretentious hypocrite. As Stowers argues, “The pretentious person is above all a boaster and someone who pretends to be what he is not. This person strives for the external trappings of wealth, honor, power, or virtue rather than really possessing them.”<sup>30</sup> Theophrastus provides numerous examples of the pretentious person (ἀλαζών). An example of the pretentious person is the one who rents a house and then claims that it is his family’s house that he is considering selling because it is too small (*Characters* 23.9). This understanding of the pretentious person fits perfectly Rom 2:21-22. The one who preaches against theft commits theft. The one who speaks against adultery commits adultery. The one who abhors idols robs temples. I believe that Paul chose these particular actions out of the panoply of vices because of a specific similarity: in each, the person benefits precisely from what does not belong to him. The thief steals possessions that belong to another; the adulterer has intercourse with a person who is not his spouse; and the temple robber profits from an idol he claims to reject and abhor. While appearing to be a

28 Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995) 175. Cf. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 212.

29 Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 217-218. He, too, acknowledges that he has “some doubts about the rhetorical effect of such a charge.” On the spectrum of judaizing options, see Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Hellenistic Society and Culture 3; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 140-174.

30 Stowers, *Rereading Romans*, 145.

just and virtuous person, this teacher secretly reaps the unjust benefits of the very vices against which he rails.

Rom 2:23 confirms that Paul is concerned less with these individual vices than he is with the pattern that his examples establish: "You who boast in the law, through disobedience to the law do you dishonor God (ὅς ἐν νόμῳ καυχᾶσαι, διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως τοῦ νόμου τὸν θεὸν ἀτιμάζεις)?" Here, too, interpreters frequently miss Paul's intention, concluding that Paul demands perfect obedience to the entire Jewish law of the one who boasts in it. In fact, they seem to read Paul under the influence of the epistle of James, which states: "For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one [thing] (ὅλον τὸν νόμον τηρήσῃ πᾶσι δὲ ἐν ἐνί), becomes guilty of all. For the one who said, 'Do not commit adultery' also said, 'Do not murder.' And if you do not commit adultery but you murder, you are a transgressor of the law (γέγονας παραβάτης νόμου)" (2:10-11).<sup>31</sup> James argues that if one obeys one aspect of the law (by not committing adultery), but does not obey another aspect (by committing murder), one has not kept the whole law. If Paul were making this claim, he would need to argue similarly: those who preach against adultery, do you steal? Those who preach against stealing, do you commit adultery? But Paul's purpose lies elsewhere. Romans 2:21-22 is meant to illustrate the absurdity of the person who preaches one thing, but does the exact opposite.<sup>32</sup> On the basis of the LXX rendering of Isa 52:5b, Paul states that because this person boasts in the law,

31 Similar remarks are found in rabbinic literature. For instance, *t. Demai* 2.5 states: "A proselyte [Manuscript Erfurt reads נג, not נל] who took upon himself all the obligations of the Torah except for one item—they do not accept him. R. Yosé the son of R. Judah says, 'Even [if it be] a minor item from among the stipulations of the scribes' (*t. Demai* 2:4). Translation of Jacob Neusner, *The Tosefta: Translated from Hebrew with a New Introduction* (2 vols.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002). But, as E.P. Sanders (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983] 28) notes, in rabbinic literature, the stress is not on attaining perfect obedience, but on acceptance of the entire law.

32 Fridrichsen ("Jude," 45) notes that Epictetus frequently accuses so-called Stoics of also saying one thing and doing the opposite. For instance, Epictetus asks, "Why did you pride yourself on what was not your own? Why did you call yourself a Stoic?" (*Diss.* 2.19.19). Epictetus points to the fact that people do not live the virtuous life of the Stoic, asking, "Why, then, do you delude yourselves, and cheat others? Why, then, do you assume a costume that is not your own; and walk about in it, mere thieves and filchers of clothes and properties that do not belong to you?" (2.19.28). Later he states, "Why, then, do you call yourself a Stoic? Those who falsely pretend to the Roman citizenship are punished severely; so are those who falsely claim something as great as this and so venerable a title to be dismissed with impunity?" (3.24.41). Translations taken from Christopher Gill and Robin Hard, *The Discourses of Epictetus* (London: Dent, 1995).

but transgresses this selfsame law, he causes God's name to be blasphemed amongst the gentiles (2:24).

### Gentile Circumcision and Pretension (Rom 2:25-27)

If theft, adultery, and temple robbery function as illustrations of a broader principle, what particular aspect of the law is his interlocutor guilty of preaching but not keeping? The answer, as Rom 2:25-27 makes clear, is the rite of circumcision. Thus, vv. 17-24 prepare the argumentative ground for the specific issue Paul addresses in vv. 25-29. Of course the interlocutor would condemn the person who does the very thing against which he preaches. Romans 2:23 leads to the principle that Paul and his interlocutor will agree upon: the one who breaks the very law he boasts in dishonors God. All of this sets up the trap Paul intends to spring upon his gentile interlocutor, who boasts in and preaches circumcision, but does not actually keep the law of circumcision.

In Rom 2:25 Paul addresses his central concern. He states, "For circumcision benefits, if you keep the law. But if you are a transgressor of the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?" (Περιτομή μὲν γὰρ ὠφελεῖ ἐὰν νόμον πράσσης: ἐὰν δὲ παραβάτης νόμου ᾖς, ἡ περιτομή σου ἀκροβυστία γέγονεν. ἐὰν οὖν ἡ ἀκροβυστία τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλάσῃ, οὐκ ἡ ἀκροβυστία αὐτοῦ εἰς περιτομήν λογισθήσεται; 2:25-26). Paul claims that circumcision profits if one keeps the law. But if one transgresses the law, one's circumcision becomes uncircumcision. Again, most interpreters understand Paul to be claiming that failure in law observance in one area leads to one being considered a lawbreaker in every area. And since no one can keep the Jewish law perfectly, why keep any aspect of it? While some modern interpreters of Paul might find such logic compelling, Paul's contemporaries would not have. Interpreters often take Paul's statement as evidence that he thinks that a person needs to be completely law observant for his circumcision to be of value. But is this the case? Did Jews, and did Paul, believe one needed to be perfectly obedient to the law for circumcision to be of value? Based on this interpretation, most scholars have argued that Paul thought circumcision was of no value, for no one could keep the law perfectly. Yet when his interlocutor asks the question, "What is the value of circumcision?" (τίς ἡ ὠφέλεια τῆς περιτομῆς;), Paul's response is not that it is of no value, but that it is of much value in every way (πολὺ κατὰ πάντα τρόπον, 3:1-2). Did the slightest transgression of the law really render circumcision null and void?

More to the point, even James, who uses similar logic, does not conclude that one should abandon law observance. Here again, I think we must turn to Paul's explicit examples of the one who preaches against theft but then steals, and the one who preaches against adultery but then commits it. Following this established pattern, Paul's claim that circumcision is of value only if one keeps the law should be taken to refer not to the entirety of the Jewish law, but specifically to the law of circumcision. In other words, circumcision is of value if one follows the entirety of the law on circumcision.

The second-century BCE book of *Jubilees* provides a helpful parallel in its lengthy discussion of the rite of circumcision. When God institutes the practice of circumcision, he says to Abraham: "I am now telling you that the Israelites will prove false to this ordinance. They will not circumcise their sons in accord with this entire law because they will leave some of the flesh of their circumcision when they circumcise their sons" (*Jub.* 15:33).<sup>33</sup> Most interpreters see here a reference to the practice of *periah*, in which the entirety of the foreskin is removed.<sup>34</sup> The author considers genital circumcision that does not include *periah* to be a circumcision that is not in accord with "this entire law." And failure to keep this entire law is nothing less than proving "false to this ordinance."

The prepositional clause διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς in Rom 2:27 confirms that Paul's point pertains specifically to the legislation of circumcision.<sup>35</sup> This phrase further describes the one who is a transgressor of the law, although as Jewett notes, "the precise meaning of the phrase διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς ('by/through letter and circumcision') remains a matter of debate."<sup>36</sup> Of the 197 occurrences in Paul of the preposition διὰ when it takes the genitive, the vast majority indisputably mean "through," whether in the sense of agency, means, or movement through space or time.<sup>37</sup> Despite this fact, interpreters almost

33 Quotations from *Jubilees* are taken from James C. VanderKam, *The Book of Jubilees: A Critical Edition* (CSCO 511; Louvain: Peeters, 1989).

34 See, for instance, 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; Brandeis Series on Jewish Women; Hanover, N.H.: Brandeis University Press, 2003) 87-97.

35 In his brief discussion of this verse, Gathercole (*Where is Boasting?* 128) omits this clause.

36 Jewett, *Romans*, 234.

37 Daniel B. Wallace (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 368-369) provides no other possible translations of such a construction. H.W. Smyth (*Greek Grammar* [rev. Gordon M. Messing; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984] 1685.1) notes that sometimes this

universally render *διὰ* with the genitive here as “in spite of” or “while.”<sup>38</sup> In support of this translation, they posit the infrequently attested use of *διὰ* with the genitive to indicate attendant circumstances, because, as Thorsteinsson argues, “it is difficult to see how *γράμμα καὶ περιτομή* can constitute the means by which the interlocutor transgresses the Law.”<sup>39</sup> Most interpreters point to BDF (223.3) as evidence that *διὰ* with the genitive can have this meaning. But BDF itself points to only two other Pauline passages, Rom 14:20 and Gal 4:13, where such a function is supposedly seen, the latter of which provides no evidence of this usage since the preposition *διὰ* takes here an object in the accusative (*δι’ ἀσθένειαν*). Thus, on the basis of Rom 14:20 alone, BDF suggests that the *διὰ* construction of Rom 2:27 should be understood as signifying attendant circumstance: “you who, because (or although) you have the writings and circumcision. . . .” Such a translation requires the addition of the phrase “you have,” making *γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς* the direct object of this paraphrastic addition. Such a translation might be permissible, but again, would it not be preferable to translate it in a way that adds as little as possible to the Greek while still making sense? Additionally, if we can provide an interpretation of this passage that makes sense of this phrase functioning instrumentally, we should prefer it to the attendant circumstance interpretation, since the vast majority of such phrases mean “through.”<sup>40</sup>

If, following Thorsteinsson, I am correct in arguing that in Rom 2:17-29 Paul continues his diatribe with a gentile interlocutor, it becomes clear how this person could be circumcised and yet a law transgressor by means of circumcision and the letter. Careful attention to the circumcision legislation of

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construction refers to a state, feeling, property, or quality, but that such constructions take the verbs εἶναι, γίνεσθαι, or ἔχειν.

38 For instance, H.A.W. Meyer, *Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über den Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (KEK 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1865) 1:134; Marie-Joseph Lagrange, *Saint Paul: Épitre aux Romains* (Études Bibliques; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1950) 56; Hans Wilhelm Schmidt, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (THNT 6; Berlin: Evangelische, 1962) 55; Otto Kuss, *Der Römerbrief* (3 vols.; RNT 6; Regensburg: F. Pustet, 1957) 1:90; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:174; Barrett, *Romans*, 59; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 172-173; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 322; Byrne, *Romans*, 103; Jewett, *Romans*, 219; and Campbell, *Deliverance of God*, 565.

39 Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 228 n. 232.

40 To my knowledge only Gottlob Schrenk (“γράφω, γραφή, γράμμα, ἐγγράφω, προγράφω, ὑπογραμμός,” *TDNT* 1:742-773 [765]) and Dunn (*Romans* 1-8, 123) have argued for an instrumental function to the preposition. Schrenk provides no rationale for how the phrase functions, while Dunn concludes that it is through the ethnocentric use of the law that Israel finds itself condemned.

Jewish scriptures once again enables the reader to make sense of Paul's seemingly nonsensical claim that one can be circumcised and yet be considered a transgressor of the law through circumcision. According to the legislation of Gen 17:12 and Lev 12:3, Jewish circumcision is distinct from the circumcision of other nations in that it occurs on the eighth day after birth. Covenantal circumcision is not merely any form of circumcision, but specifically circumcision on the eighth-day. In fact, LXX Gen 17:14, supported by *Jubilees* and the Samaritan Pentateuch, states that the person not circumcised on the eighth day after birth is cut off from the covenant people.<sup>41</sup> As Genesis 17 shows, Ishmael undergoes circumcision at the age of thirteen, but falls outside the covenant God made with Abraham. His circumcision has no covenantal or legal benefit. In contrast, in Genesis 21, Abraham circumcises the lone covenantal seed, Isaac, on the eighth day after his birth. According to Gen 17:9-14, God's command to circumcise refers only to Abraham's sons and to the slaves of his household.<sup>42</sup> Any adult gentile male undergoing circumcision fails to keep the law because he does not do so on the eighth day after he was born, and because he is not Abraham's son or slave.<sup>43</sup>

This interpretation finds reception-historical support in the earliest extant commentary written on Romans. In his discussion of Romans 2, Origen provides an allegorical interpretation of circumcision, but then pauses to examine the literal meaning of the Old Testament commandments regarding the rite. He states of Genesis 17, "Indeed, [God] openly declares that he wants even those born of foreign parents to be circumcised, that is to say, those who by no means are regarded as Abraham's stock. . . . [Yet o]n no occasion has he mentioned the proselyte, i.e., the foreigner, but he certainly orders the indigenous slave to be circumcised, whether born at home in that nation or even the one bought at a price. He does not bind the freedman, the guest, or the foreigner to be circumcised" (*Comm. Rom.* 2.13.11).<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Origen makes the same point with regard to Lev 12:3: "Notice here as well how Moses is commanded to speak only to the sons of Israel [see Lev 12:1] concerning the law of circumcision;

41 I have argued elsewhere ("The Text of Genesis 17:14," *JBL* 128.4 [2009] 625-642) that the LXX, SP, and *Jubilees* preserve the earliest inferable text of Gen 17:14.

42 For this reading of Genesis 17, see my *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 30-42.

43 Even Abraham's (and Israel's) slaves do not enter into the covenant through circumcision. See Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 30-31.

44 Translations of Origen's *Commentary on Romans* are taken from Thomas P. Scheck, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5* (FOC 103; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).



there is no mention of those born in a foreign land [that is, a non-Israelite]. For if we believe that what is entered in the law has been written through the divine Spirit, then assuredly nothing can be considered either to have been added or kept silent to no purpose. For this reason it is absolutely critical to observe the distinctions" (2.13.12). On the basis of these exegetical observations, Origen concludes that any gentile Christian who undergoes physical circumcision fails to keep the commandment.

A gentile undergoing circumcision in order to become a Jew fails to keep the law of circumcision in the very act of being circumcised. He is circumcised and yet becomes a transgressor of the law of circumcision through the γράμμα (best translated as the "detail" or "prescription" of the law) and through the rite of circumcision.<sup>45</sup> His circumcision is reckoned as uncircumcision (cf. Rom 2:25).

#### Paul's Use of LXX Jeremiah 9:24-25 in Romans 2:25-29

Additionally, Paul is not the first Jew to claim that the physical circumcision of gentiles is to be considered uncircumcision, since this is the way Jeremiah characterized circumcised gentiles in LXX Jer 9:24-25:

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will visit upon all the circumcised their foreskin (ἐπὶ πάντας περιτετμημένους ἀκροβυστίας αὐτῶν). On Egypt, and on Idumea, and on Edom, and on the sons of Ammon, and on the sons of Moab, and on every one who shaves his face round about, that is, those dwelling in the wilderness—for all the gentiles are uncircumcised in flesh (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἀπερίτμητα σαρκί), and all of the house of Israel are uncircumcised in their heart (ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίας αὐτῶν).

Jeremiah first describes all these nations as circumcised, but then goes on to distinguish between Israel, who is uncircumcised in heart, and "all the

45 Schrenk (*TDNT* 1:765) also suggests that γράμμα should be rendered as "prescription of the law." Such a use of γράμμα can be seen in Plato, *Pol.* 293a; 302e; [Plato] *Epin.* 7.325d; Aristotle, *Pol.* 2.b.16 (1270b.30); Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.8; and Thucydides, *Hist.* 5.29.3, in reference to a single clause within a contract. This latter example parallels nicely the covenant or contract God makes in Genesis 17: the breaking of one clause, the timing of the rite, renders the whole contract void.

nations/gentiles who are uncircumcised in their flesh.”<sup>46</sup> These gentiles are paradoxically genitally circumcised yet reckoned as uncircumcised in the flesh, precisely the condition Paul discusses in Rom 2:25. Significantly, Berkley has demonstrated clearly that Paul alludes to LXX Jer 9:24-25 in Rom 2:25-29, although he misunderstands Jeremiah's logic and the way in which it supports Paul's argument. Of LXX Jer 9:24-25 he states, “The reason that those who are physically circumcised are considered uncircumcised in Jer 9:26 is that they are not circumcised inwardly or spiritually: ‘all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in their hearts’ (ἀπερίτμητοι καρδίας αὐτῶν). This is also the case implied in Rom 2:25, where the circumcision of those who break the law becomes uncircumcision.”<sup>47</sup> Berkley fails to notice that Jeremiah's accusation against the gentile nations that practice genital circumcision is not that they are uncircumcised in heart; rather, and the LXX translator makes this even more apparent than the MT, Jeremiah claims that while circumcised, they are uncircumcised in their flesh (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη ἀπερίτμητα σαρκί).

Such a seemingly contradictory accusation (these gentile nations are physically circumcised and yet somehow physically uncircumcised) has caused confusion amongst interpreters of Jeremiah. Richard C. Steiner provides one possible solution to this problem, arguing that Egyptian circumcision allowed for the retention of the foreskin, while Israelite circumcision included *periah*, and amputated the entirety of the foreskin from the penis.<sup>48</sup> Thus, to the Israelite eye the Egyptians (and by extension the other nations mentioned here) retained their foreskin in spite of their circumcision. They were circumcised, yet uncircumcised. Steiner's interpretation provides a plausible explanation of this passage and rightly emphasizes that physical circumcision remained important for Jeremiah.

On the other hand, it is also possible that the timing of the rite enabled Jeremiah to make this distinction. As noted above, the Jewish law required that circumcision occur on the eighth day after birth. In this way, Jewish circumcision could be distinguished from the circumcisions practiced by many of its neighbors. Genesis 17, for instance, distinguishes between Ishmael and Isaac based on the timing of their circumcisions. We know that, whereas Israel circumcised its males on the eighth day after birth, the Egyptians and Arabs

46 The MT states only that “all the gentiles are uncircumcised” (כל הגוים ערים). Since the LXX reading draws out the contrast with Israel, who is uncircumcised “in heart,” it is probable that the LXX translator added it as an explanatory gloss.

47 Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, 88.

48 Richard C. Steiner, “Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah (9:24-25) in Light of Josephus and Jonckheere,” *JBL* 118.3 (1999) 497-526.

circumcised at a much later date.<sup>49</sup> While the timing of circumcision in Edom, Ammon, and Moab is uncertain, it is likely that, under the influence of the Arabs and Egyptians, they too circumcised adult males, not infants.

Just as Jeremiah claims that gentile circumcision is no different from uncircumcision, and does so via the details of gentile circumcision which differ from Israelite circumcision, so Paul can claim that gentiles who undergo circumcision are truly uncircumcised and are transgressors of the very law that they are trying to keep. What is more, Paul then uses to his advantage Jeremiah's depiction of the house of Judah who is physically circumcised, yet uncircumcised of heart. Jeremiah does not conclude that genital circumcision is unimportant for Judah; rather, he stresses that it is insufficient. In addition to practicing genital circumcision, Judah needs to be circumcised of heart. Since they are not, God will visit them with the same punishment he visits upon these other nations. While Judah is genitally circumcised, it is not circumcised of heart, and is, therefore, not pleasing to God. None of these claims suggests that Jeremiah thinks that circumcised Jews who are uncircumcised of heart are not real Jews or that genital circumcision is not real circumcision.

Likewise, in Rom 2:28-29 Paul attempts to convince his gentile readers that although they are unable to keep the law of genital circumcision, they do not need to do so to receive God's praise. Just as genitally circumcised Jews are pleasing to God when they are also circumcised of heart, genitally uncircumcised gentiles can be pleasing to God through circumcision of the heart, a rite with no temporal stipulation.

## Conclusion

While virtually every scholar has concluded that in Rom 2:17-29 Paul has criticized an interlocutor of Jewish descent who insists on the importance of law observance, Thorsteinsson has rightly called this interpretation into question. The Jew of this passage is only a *so-called* Jew. He thinks of himself as a Jew, but Paul disagrees. And Paul disagrees, not because he has redefined Jewishness, but because he does not believe that a gentile can actually become a Jew. Paul rejects the belief, held by some of his contemporary Jews, believers in Jesus and otherwise, that gentiles needed to, or at the very least could, become Jews. For

49 Material culture, such as the relief reproduced in *ANEP*, fig. 629, depicts Egyptian circumcision occurring at a later age. In the corresponding text (reproduced in *ANET*, 326) the boy speaks to his circumciser, further indicating that infant circumcision is not intended. For Arab circumcision at the age of thirteen, see Gen 17:25 and Josephus, *Ant.* 1.214.

Paul, as for a number of other second-temple Jews, most notably the author of *Jubilees*, gentiles profited nothing from the adoption of the law. Paul could allude to the details of the law in Genesis 17, as well as to the prophet Jeremiah, to bolster his claim that getting circumcised did not make gentiles into Jews; it, in fact, reconfirmed their identity as transgressors, since they were breaking the very law they were trying to keep. Paul believed that undergoing circumcision and adopting the Jewish law left gentiles in the same predicament facing non-judaizing gentiles (Rom 1:18-32). In contrast, Paul believed that the God of Israel had dealt with the gentile problem in Christ, a belief he carefully unpacks in Rom 3:21-8:39.