

THE EXPRESSIVE PREPUCE:
PHILO'S DEFENSE OF JUDAIC CIRCUMCISION IN
GREEK AND ROMAN CONTEXTS*

THOMAS R. BLANTON IV

As it has been thoroughly documented in a number of works, from Menahem Stern's monumental *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, first published in 1974, to Andreas Blaschke's exhaustive treatment in *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte* (1998) and Simon Claude Mimouni's *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine* (2007), the history of circumcision as portrayed in Greco-Roman literary sources commenting on Jews and in Jewish literature itself is well known.¹ What is not frequently brought into discussions of Jewish circumcision, however, is the wealth of evidence from Greek art and comedy and Roman visual humor, where we discover elaborate systems of signification attached to the phallus, and more specifically, to the prepuce and exposed

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¹ Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols., *Fontes ad res Judaicas spectantes* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1974); Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte*, TANZ 28 (Tübingen: Francke, 1998); Simon Claude Mimouni, *La circoncision dans le monde judéen aux époques grecque et romaine: Histoire d'un conflit interne au judaïsme*, Collection de la Revue des Études juives (Leuven: Peeters, 2007).

glans of the phallus. The visual material both confirms perceptions evident in the literary material—for example, the association of circumcision with the “barbaric” customs of non-Greeks—and introduces relevant information not evident in the literary sources.

Perhaps due to an academic division of labor between art historians and specialists in textual analysis, when discussing circumcision, scholars of the Hebrew Bible, early Judaism, and early Christianity tend to overlook artistic material, focusing solely on the analysis of relevant Judaic, Christian, and Greco-Roman texts—an approach followed in the foundational studies of Stern, Blaschke, and Mimouni, for example. It is probably not coincidental that the most significant exception to this trend occurs in an article penned by neither an art historian nor a scholar of ancient Judaism, but a historian of medicine, Frederick Mansfield Hodges. In a seminal article, Hodges shows how “Greeks valued the longer prepuce and pathologized the penis characterized by a deficient prepuce—especially one that had been surgically ablated” through circumcision.² Although Hodges’s insights have been developed in a series of articles by Robert G. Hall, the wealth of information provided by Greek and Roman art and statuary remains underexploited and largely neglected in studies of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, early Judaism, and early Christianity.³

Despite the significance of Hodges’s work to the study of early Judaism, however, he seems overly harsh in his treatment of Judaic sources. One may speculate that this harsh treatment is colored by his opposition to the practice of circumcision on medical, aesthetic, and human rights grounds, unfamiliarity with the Judaic sources, or both.⁴ Hodges

² Frederick Mansfield Hodges, “The Ideal Prepuce in Ancient Greece and Rome: Male Genital Aesthetics and Their Relation to *Lipodermos*, Circumcision, Foreskin Restoration, and the *Kynodesmē*,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 75 (2001): 375.

³ Robert G. Hall, “Epispasm and the Dating of Ancient Jewish Writings,” *JSP* 2 (1988): 71–86; Hall, “Circumcision,” *ABD* 1:1025–31; Hall, “Epispasm: Circumcision in Reverse,” *Bible Review* 8.4 (1992): 52–57. Troy W. Martin (“Paul and Circumcision,” in *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, ed. J. Paul Sampley, 2nd ed., 2 vols. [London: T&T Clark, 2016], 1:113–31) also recognizes the importance of the artistic material for Judaic and early Christian studies, largely depending on Dover and Hodges.

⁴ Hodges notes a broader trend in European medicine in which there is an “increasing move towards establishing ... tissue-preserving surgeries that, like their classical antecedents, are focused on treating underlying pathology, maintaining foreskin function, and preserving natural cosmesis” (Frederick Mansfield Hodges, “Phimosis in Antiquity,” *World Journal of Urology* 17.3 [1999]: 136). One may note that ritual circumcision treats no pathology, is not tissue-preserving, eradicates foreskin function, and does not preserve natural cosmesis, and thus runs directly counter to the medical trend that Hodges describes. Moreover, Hodges utilizes a framework of human rights: “Simply stated, every human has the right to keep every body part with which he or she was born” (George C.

comments, for example, that Philo of Alexandria's "dismissal of opposition to circumcision as 'childish mockery' betrays his failure to understand the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of the Greeks' high regard for the cultivation of physical health and beauty."⁵ This brief study has two goals: First, it seeks to reiterate Hodges's fundamental but underappreciated insight that Greco-Roman artistic depictions are highly relevant to the understanding of Judaic circumcision during the Greco-Roman period; to this end, we examine some of the material that Hodges took into account and supplement it with additional, Roman material that he did not consider. Second, even while supporting and supplementing Hodges's argument in some respects, this study seeks to establish that contrary to Hodges's view, Philo was thoroughly cognizant of the "philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings" of both Greek and Roman attitudes toward circumcision, and in fact incorporated Greco-Roman philosophical, ethical, medical, and geographical reasoning into his defense of the ritual practice.

The Phallus and Its Symbolism in Greece and Rome

Like the eye, hair, and skin, the phallus was a part of the human body that acquired a wide array of symbolic associations in antiquity: it could connote beauty or ugliness, civilization or barbarism; it could be viewed as protective or threatening; it was frequently associated with production and fertility, and, of course, with sex. In what Larissa Bonfante has argued was a seventh-century-BCE cultural innovation associated with the "athletic nudity" exemplified both by ephebes exercising in the gymnasium and hoplites training for war, the Greeks often portrayed the male body

Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos, preface to *Genital Cutting: Protecting Children from Medical, Cultural, and Religious Infringements: Proceedings of the 11th International Symposium on Circumcision, Genital Integrity, and Human Rights, 29–31 July 2010, University of California–Berkeley* [London: Springer, 2013]. See also the prefaces to *Genital Autonomy: Protecting Personal Choice*, ed. George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos (London: Springer, 2010), and *Circumcision and Human Rights*, ed. George C. Denniston, Frederick M. Hodges, and Marilyn Fayre Milos (London: Springer, 2009). Relevant to the question of Hodges's familiarity with Judaism, the medical historian seems to confuse Josephus with Philo when he refers to the former as an "Alexandrine" (Hodges, "Ideal Prepuce," 403). It is worth noting that my intention in this article is not to comment on whether or not circumcision ought to be practiced in contemporary societies, but better to understand the positions espoused by one ancient Judaic writer, Philo of Alexandria, in a situation of cultural complexity and contestation.

⁵ Hodges, "Ideal Prepuce," 387.

unclothed.⁶ Classicist Kenneth Dover demonstrated that the Greek aesthetic ideal prized the youthful, athletic male body possessed of a small penis whose glans was amply covered by a long, tapering foreskin, or prepuce.⁷

As Hodges points out, the Greek beauty ideal that required the *glans penis* to be amply covered by a long, tapering foreskin is evident, for example, in the depiction of the binding of Patroclus's wound by Achilles on a vase attributed to the Sosias painter, who was active around 510 to 490 BCE.⁸ The younger, beardless Achilles wraps a bandage around the left arm of the older, bearded Patroclus, whose arm had evidently been pierced by the arrow pictured resting at an angle just below his right shin.⁹ Patroclus's *akroposthion*, the Greek term designating the portion of the prepuce that extends beyond the tip of the glans, is shown elegantly draped over his right ankle.



Figure 1. Achilles binds the wound of Patroklos (Source: "Akhilleus Patroklos Antikensammlung Berlin F2278 resized solid black bg.png," Wikimedia Commons. Image in the public domain under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain license.)

⁶ Larissa Bonfante, "Nudity as a Costume in Classical Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 93 (1989): 543–70.

⁷ Kenneth J. Dover, *Greek Homosexuality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁸ Hodges, "Ideal Prepuce," 376.

⁹ Homer depicts Patroclus as being older than and a mentor to Achilles (*Il.* 11.785–789).

Like that of the wounded warrior Patroclus, the glans of the idealized male form of what is a Greek god, most likely Zeus, is entirely covered by the prepuce in the bronze statue found off Cape Artemision and dated around 460 BCE.¹⁰ The god stands poised to hurl a lightning bolt, or perhaps a trident if, as some scholars have argued, the figure represents Poseidon.¹¹ The projectile, whether lightning bolt or trident, is now lost.

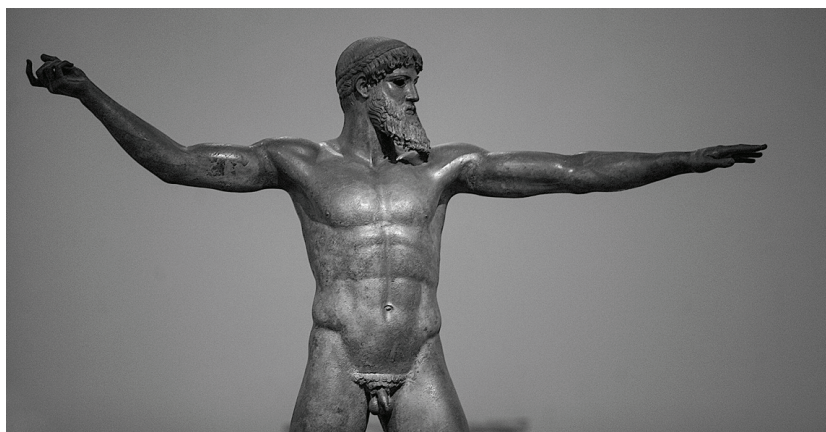


Figure 2. Artemision Bronze Zeus (or Poseidon). (Source: "Zeus [or Poseidon] of Cape Artemision," National Archaeological Museum of Athens. Image (X 15161) courtesy of National Archaeological Museum, Athens. © Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports / Archaeological Receipts Fund.)

Like the Greeks of the sixth and fifth century BCE, Romans half a millennium later understood the prepuce as a significant feature of the ideal male form. The Greek physician Galen, working in the second half of the second century, for example, lists the prepuce among the most splendid of nature's means of adorning the human body:

Nature out of her abundance ornaments all the members, especially in man. In many parts there is manifest ornamentation, though at times this is obscured by the brilliance of their usefulness. The ears show obvious ornamentation, and so, I suppose, does the skin called the prepuce [*πρόσθη*] at the end of the penis and the flesh of the buttocks.¹²

¹⁰ Discussed in William R. Biers, *The Archaeology of Greece: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 215–16; and briefly described by Hodges ("Ideal Prepuce," 377 n. 6).

¹¹ See *Thespiades-Zodiacus et supplementum Abila-Thersites*, vol. 8.2 of *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*, ed. Fondation pour le lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae (Zurich: Artemis, 1997), 353: "Poseidon 28"; 452: B28.

¹² Galen, *De usu partium corporis humani* 11.13; cited in Hodges, "Ideal Prepuce," 376.

In contrast, the partially exposed glans of the penis, deficient or lacking with respect to the prepuce, could be depicted by Greeks and Romans to indicate the foreign, and therefore barbaric, “other.” According to Herodotus, Colchians (from the eastern shore of the Black Sea, in present-day Georgia), Egyptians, Phoenicians, Syro-Palestinians, and Ethiopians practiced circumcision; although, he indicates, some Phoenicians abandoned the practice under Greek influence (*Histories* 2.104.2–4). An Attic red-figure amphora attributed to the Pan painter around 470 BCE depicts Herakles defeating the Egyptian King Busiris and his priests. The vase recalls a story otherwise attested by Isocrates (*Busiris* 31, 36–37) in which the Egyptian king, rather than welcoming strangers with hospitality, instead sacrificed them to the gods of Egypt. Herakles, outraged by such inhospitable treatment, killed Busiris and his entourage. As Hodges notes:



Figure 3. Herakles defeats the Egyptian king, Busiris, and his priests (Source: “Herakles fighting Busiris; Attic red-figure pelike [wine-holding vessel],” Wikimedia Commons, photo by Marsyas, Dec. 22, 2005. Image licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license.)

The painter has taken great pains to depict the priests as having fat, ugly, wrinkled, circumcised penises with a bulbous externalized glans, which contrast sharply with the neat and attractive penis of Herakles, with its elegantly long and tapered prepuce. Likewise, the snubbed noses and monkey-like faces of the Egyptians could hardly be more dissimilar to the heroic Greek profile of Herakles.¹³

An array of cultural significations is displayed in the image: the superiority of Greek culture over Egyptian (symbolized by the triumphant Herakles); Greek hospitality juxtaposed to imagined Egyptian inhospitality; the prominent, aquiline nose of Herakles juxtaposed to the small, snubbed noses of the Egyptians; and, more importantly, Herakles's small, thin penis adorned with an ample *akroposthion* juxtaposed to the larger, thick phalluses of the Egyptians, with glandes indecently exposed. The prepuce bears an array of significations that, interacting with signals associated with other body parts as well as the legendary narrative depicted, signal to Greek onlookers the superiority of their own culture over that of the barbaric Egyptians.¹⁴

One encounters another of the groups listed by Herodotus as practicing circumcision in a much later image from the Roman Period in the House of Menander at Pompeii, on a mosaic tiled between 40 and 20 BCE.¹⁵ On the floor at the entrance leading to the *caldarium*, a room for hot baths, was the mosaic image of, appropriately, a bath attendant—in this case an Ethiopian slave, depicted as an ethnic “other” with very dark skin, large phallus, and exposed glans. Both Andrew Clarke and Claudia Moser have plausibly interpreted the figure as an apotropaic symbol, meant to ward off the evil eye of envy, which was believed to exert ill effects, both magical and social, against the one on whom a malevolent gaze fell.¹⁶ It was understood that the best remedy for the evil eye was to avert the gaze by drawing the attention of the onlooker toward a fixed comic image; comedy dissipates

¹³ Hodges, “Ideal Prepuce,” 385–86.

¹⁴ For a different image apparently signaling the superiority of Greek culture over the barbarian “other,” see the picture of an Attic red-figure vase that has been interpreted as a Greek man, erect phallus in hand, running toward a sexually submissive Persian male, apparently to sodomize him; the latter figure is accompanied by the caption “I am bend-over”; so Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 105. G. Ferrari Pinney (“For the Heroes Are at Hand,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 104 [1984]: 181–83, with plate), on the other hand, interprets the scene as a parodic depiction of the epic figure Eurymedon and his Scythian squire.

¹⁵ John R. Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: Construction of Roman Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 B.C.–A.D. 250* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 129.

¹⁶ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*; Claudia Moser, “Naked Power: The Phallus as an Apotropaic Symbol in the Images and Texts of Roman Italy,” *Undergraduate Humanities Forum* 2005–2006: Word & Image, https://repository.upenn.edu/uhf_2006/11/, 47–48.

envy and malice by evoking laughter.¹⁷ Clarke notes that the Ethiopian's "un-Roman body type caused laughter—all the more so when he had an enormous phallus."¹⁸ We may add that the comedic value of the image is enhanced by the slave's indecorously exposed glans—a point to which we will return. In the mosaic, the *glans penis* is colored with purple tesserae, emphasizing its exposure.¹⁹



Figure 4. Ethiopian bath attendant with large phallus and exposed glans; House of the Mendander, Pompeii (Source: "Pompeii - House of Menander - Caldarium - Mosaic 1.jpg," Wikimedia Commons. Image in the public domain under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain license.)

In addition to characterizing the non-Greek or non-Roman barbarian or slave, categories that overlap in the mosaic from Pompeii depicting the Ethiopian bath attendant, the large phallus with exposed glans was a stock

¹⁷ See, for example, Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 131.

¹⁸ Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 131; also cited in Moser, *Phallus as Apotropaic Symbol*, 48.

¹⁹ According to Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking*, 133.

image in Greek comedy.²⁰ This is evident in a list of comic motifs enumerated by Aristophanes, who ironically likens his own comedies to a modest young woman:²¹

Look how naturally decent she is: first of all, she hasn't come with any dangling leathern phallus [σχύτινον] stitched to her, red at the tip [ἐρυθθὸν ἐξ ἄκρου] and thick, for the boys a cause for laughter [τοῖς παιδίοις ἔν' ἣ γέλως]; nor does she mock bald men, nor dance the *kordax*; nor does an old man, while speaking his lines, cover up bad jokes by beating the interlocutor with his stick. (*Clouds* 537–42; trans. Henderson, LCL, modified)²²

Aristophanes makes reference to one of the props deployed in Old Comedy, the large, thick, leathern phallus, exposed glans painted red, that was stitched to leotards worn by comic actors.²³ The phallus prop is designated by the term σχύτινον, a substantive formed from the adjective meaning “leathern,” which in this passage refers to a “leathern phallus,” as the *Greek-English Lexicon* of Liddell and Scott makes clear.²⁴ The sight of the red, exposed glans “at the tip” (ἐξ ἄκρου) of the phallus is described as a “cause for laughter” (γέλως). We can see this comic prop depicted in a red figure bell krater attributed to the McDaniel painter from Puglia, Italy, around 380 to 370 BCE. The painting depicts a scene from South Italian comedy that parodies the mythic association of the centaur Chiron with Apollo and the healing art.²⁵

²⁰ Timothy J. McNiven, “The Unheroic Penis: Otherness Exposed,” *SOURCE: Notes in the History of Art* 15 (1995): 10–16, shows that in Greek art the large phallus is associated with the elderly, slaves, manual laborers, those guilty of hubris, foreigners, and drunkards.

²¹ The irony of the passage becomes clear when one recognizes that Aristophanes uses most of the stock motifs in his own comedies; see Laura M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy*, Monographs in Classical Studies (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1984).

²² Aristophanes, *Clouds; Wasps; Peace*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Henderson, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²³ On the use of the phallus prop in Greek comedy, see Laura M. Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic Comedy*, Monographs in Classical Studies (Salem, NH: Ayer, 1984), 72–126; Gwendolyn Compton-Engle, *Costume in the Comedies of Aristophanes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 24–25.

²⁴ LSJ, s.v. σχύτινος.

²⁵ Xenophon, *Cynegeticus* 1.1–6; Philostratus, *Heroicus* 33.1–2; Pindar, *Pythian Odes*, 3.1–7. For the identification of the characters and scene depicted in the painting, see “Pottery: Red-figured Bell-krater Showing a Scene from South Italian Comedy,” Collection Online, The British Museum, https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=6123003&objectId=463873&partId=1, © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 5. Scene from South Italian comedy; underhanging phallus props prominently on display (Source: "Pottery: red-figured bell-krater...", British Museum Collection Online. Image courtesy of the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.)

Chiron is depicted as a paunchy, elderly man with white hair and beard ascending a staircase apparently leading to the temple of Apollo at Delphi, being pulled and pushed by two slaves who stand in front of and behind him. Aside from the lone figure who stands to the right watching the scene, who is probably Chiron's student Achilles, all the characters portrayed are depicted as grotesque and ugly, with grossly protruding noses, mouths, and lips, huge padded buttocks; and, in the case of the males, large, thick phalluses. The glans of Chiron is decorously concealed beneath the *akro-posthion*, while the glandes of the two slaves, in contrast, are comically exposed. The comedic effect is heightened by the portrayal of wrinkles in the phalluses of the two characters coded as elderly, as indicated by their grey hair, Chiron and the slave who stands behind and below him. The slave who stands above Chiron, in contrast, is portrayed as middle-aged: balding but not yet grey, with a phallus not yet so wrinkled.

The stock comedic motif of the elderly male is likewise combined with that of the exposed glans in a Boeotian black-figure ware from the sixth or fifth century BCE that depicts a hunter—a figure that Dover mistook to be

the god Zeus—as elderly, white-bearded, and balding, with a paunchy stomach and exaggerated buttocks recalling the padded costumes of comedic actors, and with a bulbous glans partially exposed. In a parodic hunting scene, the man stalks a boar that is apparently cornered, preparing to throw the crooked spear that he brandishes.²⁶ As Alexandre Mitchell observes, “Even the boar is made to look like a plump defenseless domesticated pig on the run.”²⁷ Note the stark contrast between the comedic image of the hunter poised to throw his spear depicted in the Boeotian black-figure ware—elderly, paunchy, balding, glans exposed—and the dignified, athletic image of Zeus in the Artemesion bronze statue, poised to throw the lightning bolt—an adult in his prime, fit, muscular, and athletic, with a full head of hair and ample *akroposthion* (see fig. 8).



Figure 6. Caricatured hunter, bulbous glans partially exposed for comedic effect (Source: Alexandre G. Mitchell, *Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 257, fig. 129. Vectorised drawing by Alexandre G. Mitchell. Reprinted by permission of Alexandre Mitchell and Cambridge University Press.)

In addition to connoting foreignness, slavery, or comedic laughter, the exposed glans could also indicate a state of arousal resulting from the anticipation of a sexual encounter. In such cases, the penis is pictured erect. A drinking cup attributed to the Pedieus Painter (ca. 520–510 BCE), for

²⁶ On the visual humor involved in the Beotian black ware vases, see Alexandre G. Mitchell, *Greek Vase-Painting and the Origins of Visual Humour* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); for discussion of parodic hunting scenes: 261–63; image: 257, fig. 129. For Dover’s mistaken identification of the figure as Zeus, see Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, 71, 128; image: BB16.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Greek Vase-Painting*, 263.

example, depicts a beardless youth being prepared by a female, perhaps a prostitute, for irrumation (fellatio) or, more likely given the postures of the two figures, to be mounted. The female grasps the right knee of the man, instructing him to assume a sexual posture with his legs bent beneath him, weight borne on the balls of his feet, while in her right hand she grasps his erect phallus, glans exposed.



Figure 7. Woman prepares youthful male for intercourse; the glans of the young man's phallus is exposed (Source: "Attic Red-Figure Kylix," side A, Phintias, c. 510 BCE, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.)

Moreover, images of satyrs, part animal and part human beings who are associated with revelry, drunkenness, and an overabundance of sexual desire, are frequently depicted ithyphallic, or erect, with glans alternately covered by the prepuce or exposed. An Athenian black-figure drinking cup attributed to the Amasis Painter around 520 BCE, for example, depicts two satyrs masturbating amicably. The glans of the satyr on the left is covered by the *akroposthion*, while that of the satyr on the right is exposed; the collocation suggests the successive covering and uncovering of the glans during manual stimulation of the phallus (see fig. 8).

In addition to the pursuit of sexual pleasures, satyrs are associated with revelry, the drinking of wine, intoxication, and song; and frequently portrayed as associates of the god Dionysus. In these respects, they represent the converse of the Greek aesthetic ideal: the fully human, and therefore rational, self-controlled young male, small phallus flaccid and decorously

hidden beneath its prepuce, and tipped by an elongated *akroposthion*. Timothy McNiven has shown that Greek art associated the small phallus with the characteristic of *sophrosyne*, or self-controlled moderation, the very characteristic that satyrs notably lack.²⁸ A red-figured vase attributed to Douris around 500 to 490 BCE depicts a satyr balancing a drinking cup on his large, erect phallus during a *symposion*. Note that the ideal of the *akroposthion* is observed, despite the satyr's erection; and it is in fact the rigid *akroposthion* that supports the drinking cup: a feat possible only in the artistic imagination. (see fig. 9)



Figure 8. Two satyrs masturbating amicably (Source: "Drinking cup [kylix] depicting two satyrs," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photograph © 2019, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reprinted by permission.)

The erect phallus connotes not only the pursuit of sexual pleasure but also procreation, fertility, productivity, and, by extension, even success in mercantile endeavors. The primary bearer of this symbolism was the god Priapus, the son of Aphrodite and Dionysus or, alternatively, of Dionysus and Chione, cursed by Hera with a condition of permanent erection (hence the modern medical term *priapism*).²⁹ The god's existence in a continual state of

²⁸ McNiven, "Unheroic Penis," 13, writes, "Gods, heroes, and men of the upper class are in control of themselves, and their *sophrosune* [sic] is indicated in Greek art by a dainty penis." Conversely, lack of self-control is associated with the large penis.

²⁹ For an overview, see *Aara-Aphlad*, vol. 1.1 of *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC), ed. Fondation pour le lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae



Figure 9. Satyr balances a drinking cup on his erect phallus (Source: “Komos Douris BM E768.jpg,” Wikimedia Commons, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satyr#/media/File:Komos_Douris_BM_E768.jpg; Image in the public domain under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain license.)

sexual arousal facilitated his association with fertility; consequently, his image frequented Roman gardens. Moreover, as the erect phallus of Priapus bore a similarity to the Greek herm, and indeed was often portrayed in herm-like fashion, with a head and torso emerging from a square pole, as depicted in a fresco in the House of the Surgeon in Pompeii.³⁰ Like the herm, Priapus serves a protective function; for example, in the *Priapea*, a collection of verses from the late first century or early second century CE, he is understood to protect from sexual violation women and children, both male and female, in the garden over which he presides, and to protect the garden and household against thieves.³¹

A marble statue from the late second or early third century CE portrays Priapus dressed in matronly tunics and hooded. He lifts up the tunics to expose his erect phallus. The abundance of fruits supported by the phallus

(Zurich: Artemis, 1981), 1028–29; Theodor Heinze, “Priapus,” *BNP*: <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/brill-s-new-pauly>.

³⁰ For an image, see “Pompeii – Casa del Chirurgo – Paintress,” Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_-_Casa_del_Chirurgo_-_Paintress_-_MAN.jpg. See also Moser, “Naked Power,” 40, who discusses a herm-pillar from Tivoli with an inscription to Priapus.

³¹ Recent editions of the *Priapea* include those of W. H. Parker, *Priapea: Poems for a Phallic God* (London: Croom Helm, 1988); Christiana Goldberg, *Carmina Priapea: Einleitung, Übersetzung, Interpretation und Kommentar* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1992); Louis Callebat and Jean Soubiran, *Priapées* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2012); Carmen Condoñer and Juan Antonio González, *Priapea*, *Exemplaria Classica Sup 3* (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2015).

are indicative of the god's association with fertility. The garments and pose appear to be borrowed from Aphroditus *anasyromenos* statues depicting the gender nonbinary god, breasted and wearing female clothing, lifting the skirts (*anasyromenos*) to expose a phallus in an apotropaic gesture.³² Except for the presence of the large phallus, one might suppose the image shown here to represent Aphroditus rather than Priapus.

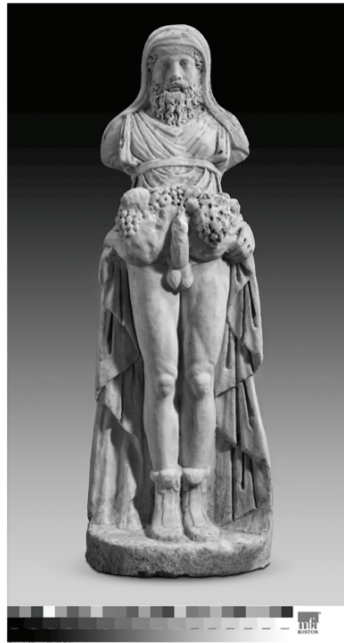


Figure 10. Priapus with vegetation around genitals (Source: "Statue of Priapus," Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Photograph © 2019, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reprinted by permission.)

Priapus's association with fertility could extended outside the garden even to signify success in mercantile endeavors, as indicated by a well-known fresco from the House of the Vettii in Pompeii. The basket of fruit at Priapus's feet, indicative of fertility and abundance, creates a visual parallel with the large bag of money, indicative of mercantile success, against which Priapus weights his semi-turgid phallus. The grotesque proportions of the phallus indicate that the image may have served apotropaic functions, averting the evil eye of envy both by suggesting that the wealth of

³² Theodor Heinze, "Hemaphroditus," *BNP*: <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/brill-s-new-pauly>; image and discussion in *LIMC* 1.1: 685: "Priapus 69"; 1034: A69.

the Vettii is attributable to the beneficial influence of the god and by evoking laughter. In spite of its comedic proportions, the phallus of Priapus retains its decorum, as the glans remains hidden beneath the *akroposthion*.



Figure 11. Priapus with phallus on scale; fresco, House of the Vettii, Pompeii
(Source: "Pompeya erótica6.jpg," Wikimedia Commons.
Image in the public domain under the CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain license.)

Life Imitates Art: Medical Interventions

The Greek artistic ideal of the glans fully covered by an ample prepuce apparently exerted an effect on the lives of Greek and Roman males. Modern physicians have noted that the length of the prepuce may naturally change over time; its maximum length is reached during puberty. Moreover, due to natural variation, some males are born with more, and others with less ample foreskins. Therefore, it was deemed desirable to extend the length of the prepuce in cases where its amplitude was insufficient to fully cover the glans. As Hodges notes, "Greeks valued the longer prepuce and pathologized the penis characterized by a deficient prepuce—especially

one that had been surgically ablated—under the disease concept of *lipodermos*.³³ The medical term *lipodermos* derives from Greek verb *leipō*, “to be wanting, missing, or lacking,” combined with the noun *derma*, “skin.” He who suffers from the condition “lacks skin” to sufficiently cover the glans.

Various medical treatments were devised to remedy the condition. In his *De Materia Medica*, first century CE physician and herbalist Pedanius Dioscorides of Cilicia recommends the herb thapsia, to which he attributes both laxative and purgative qualities: “It is useful for the prepuce of those suffering from *lipodermos*, providing it not be as a result of circumcision. It induces swelling, which when bathed and anointed, restores the defect of the *posthē* [foreskin].”³⁴ Dioscorides’s exemption of circumcision indicates that amputated prepuces were not amenable to herbal treatment as were congenitally foreshortened ones. Soranus of Ephesus, who practiced medicine in the late first and early second centuries CE, recommends a different remedy for infants judged to have been born with defective foreskins: the wet nurse should stretch the foreskin forward over the glans and tie it in place with thread, “for if gradually stretched and continuously drawn forward, it [the foreskin] easily stretches and assumes its normal length and covers the glans and becomes accustomed to keep the natural good shape.”³⁵

In his work *De Medicina (On Medicine)*, Roman encyclopedist Aulus Cornelius Celsus (ca. 25 BCE–ca. 50 CE) describes two surgical remedies for *lipodermos* and one additional procedure to secure the prepuce over the glans. The latter procedure, known as infibulation, is the least invasive. It involves making perforations on either side of the prepuce and securing the prepuce over the glans penis with thread until the perforations are cicatrized, at which time a light pin (*fibula*) is inserted through the perforations, holding the prepuce in place so that the glans is completely covered. Celsus notes, however, that the procedure, which is performed “either for the sake of the voice, or for health’s sake” is “more often superfluous than necessary.”³⁶

The more invasive surgical remedy for *lipodermos* involved stretching the prepuce so that it covered the glans, tying it in place, and subsequently making one incision around the base of the penis near the pubes so that the

³³ Hodges, “Ideal Prepuce,” 375.

³⁴ Trans. of Hodges, “Ideal Prepuce,” 395.

³⁵ *Gynecology* 2.34, quoted in Hall, “Epispasm,” 2.

³⁶ Celsus, *De Medicina* 7.25; trans. W. G. Spencer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971).

detached skin slid forward toward the tip; the result was that “a sort of small ring is laid bare in front of the pubes, to which lint is applied in order that flesh [i.e., scar tissue] may grow and fill it up.” This procedure, which was applied in cases in which the prepuce was congenitally foreshortened, resulted in an enhancement of the *akroposthion*.

Epispasm, the recommended treatment in cases in which the foreskin was not foreshortened congenitally but removed surgically, “after the custom of certain races,” involved not one but two incisions. The first, extending around the penis at its base near the pubes, corresponds with the procedure already described. The second incision was made around the penis just below the glans. Celsus assures his readers that “this is not so very painful, for once the margin [adjacent to the glans] has been freed, it can be stripped up by hand as far back as the pubes, nor in so doing is there any bleeding.”³⁷ The entire section of penile skin, thus severed at both ends, was slid forward to cover the glans. Affusions, plasters, and bandages were applied to prevent infection and to hold the skin in place until the wounds healed.

The sustained attention to and variety of treatments for *lipodermos* indicate the pervasiveness of the aesthetic ideal of the lengthy prepuce. If nature did not furnish a suitably ample covering for the glans, the herbalist’s chest, the wet nurse’s thread, and the physician’s needle and scalpel offered measures to remedy the defect.

The Chronic Exposure of the Glans: Judaic Circumcision according to Philo

Although, as indicated earlier, Hodges viewed Jewish writers like Philo as being fundamentally out of touch with the Greco-Roman preputial aesthetic, this seems highly unlikely. Hodges claims that Philo’s “dismissal of opposition to circumcision as ‘childish mockery’ betrays his failure to understand the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of the Greeks’ high regard for the cultivation of physical health and beauty.”³⁸ However, the claim that Philo fails to understand the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of the preference for the intact phallus among Greeks and Romans is on the face of it a strange assertion to make, especially given that Philo wrote in Greek, was deeply imbued by Platonic philosophical ideals, and lived in Alexandria, a thoroughly Hellenized metropolis during first century BCE

³⁷ Celsus, *De Medicina* 7.25 (trans. Spencer).

³⁸ Hodges, “Ideal Prepuce,” 387.

and first century CE. In what follows, we briefly describe Philo's Alexandrian context and show that he was, contrary to Hodges's claim, both well aware of and engaged with Greek and Roman perceptions of the phallus and foreskin.

Philo's Alexandria

The city of Alexandria in which Philo lived around the turn of the era was marked by diverse cultural influences. The native Egyptian population, who during the Roman period were required to pay a *laographia*, a tax on *laoi*, or "natives," were represented, as were Greeks, who had held sway for three centuries during the Hellenistic, Ptolemaic Dynasty. During the reign of Augustus Ceasar (27 BCE–14 CE), Alexandria became a Roman province tasked to provide grain to Rome.³⁹ A sizeable population of Judeans or Jews were present in the city; their number in the first century CE has been estimated to have been around 180,000, or even as high as half a million, ten to twenty percent of whom were Judean.⁴⁰ As Jan Bremmer noted, the Alexandrian population was organized according a sociopolitical hierarchy that privileged Romans, Greeks, Judeans, and Egyptians, in that order.⁴¹ Philo himself was thoroughly conversant with Greek (Platonic) philosophy, rhetoric, and arithmetic; Daniel Schwartz opines that "it can hardly be doubted that Philo attended a gymnasium, especially in light of his rhetorical abilities and his fondness for athletic imagery."⁴² Moreover, Philo's brother, Alexander the Alabarch, was a wealthy merchant who held a post collecting taxes on produce imported to Egypt from Arabia; and his nephew Tiberius Julius Alexander would eventually become governor of Egypt under Nero, would play a role in the sack of Jerusalem under Titus, and would take a position as praetorian prefect in Rome. And Philo himself was selected to lead a Jewish delegation to Gaius Caligula in Rome in 38/39 CE.⁴³ Maren Niehoff has recently argued that after visiting Rome, Philo began to distance himself somewhat from Platonic traditions in favor

³⁹ I rely for this brief history on Daniel R. Schwartz, "Philo, His Family, and His Times," in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, ed. Adam Kamesar (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14–24.

⁴⁰ Positing 180,000: Schwartz, "Philo," 15 n. 20; positing 500,000, 10–20 percent Judean: Jan N. Bremmer, "The First Pogrom? Religious Violence in Alexandria AD 38?," in Jörg Frey et al., eds., *Alexandria: Hub of the Hellenistic World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

⁴¹ Bremmer, "First Pogrom?"

⁴² Schwartz, "Philo," 18.

⁴³ Schwartz, "Philo," 10–14.

of enhanced engagement with Roman Stoicism.⁴⁴ Although Niehoff may have overstated the case for Philo's break with Platonic traditions in favor of interaction with Stoic ones, Philonists agree that the Alexandrine was familiar with both Greek and Roman philosophical traditions.⁴⁵ In view of his Greek education, his interaction with both Platonism and Stoicism, his ties to the gymnasium, his family connection to highly placed Roman officials, and his own participation in a delegation sent from Alexandria to Rome, it is demonstrable that Philo was thoroughly conversant with Greek and Roman attitudes; and it is likely that this familiarity extended beyond philosophy to encompass Greek and Roman perceptions regarding the significance of the prepuce and its absence. As we will see in the following discussion, far from being ignorant of the "philosophical and ethical underpinnings" of the Greek and Roman preference for the intact prepuce, Philo's writings evidence both a keen awareness of and an intensive interaction with Greco-Roman discourses regarding both phallus and foreskin.

Philo's Defense of Circumcision in Its Greco-Roman Context

Philo interacts knowledgeably with Greek and Roman philosophy, ethics, medicine, and geography in relation to the practice of circumcision. This interaction is particularly evident in Philo's *On the Special Laws* and *Questions and Answers on Genesis*. Of these two texts, Philo's treatment of circumcision in *On the Special Laws* constitutes a suitable starting point for discussion, since Hodges refers to that text when he writes that Philo's "dismissal of opposition to circumcision as 'childish mockery' betrays his failure to understand the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings" of the Greek aversion to circumcision. Philo's characterization of Greek opposition to circumcision as "childish," however, ought not be taken to imply that he fails to grasp "underpinnings" of the Greek (and Roman) preputial aesthetic. It is not misunderstanding that prompts Philo to characterize opposition to circumcision in this way, but rather what he characterizes as an unwise and disrespectful dismissal of the practice that "impugn[s] the good sense of great nations." We examine the text of *Spec.* 1.1–3 in more detail below. Before examining the text, however, two relevant issues must

⁴⁴ Maren R. Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria: An Intellectual Biography*, Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁴⁵ See, for example, the following reviews of Niehoff's work: Carlos Lévy, review of Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, *SPhiloA* 30 (2018): 183–91; René Bloch, review of Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, *AJSR* 43 (2019): 201–4; Stephan Hecht, review of Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, *RQ* 113 (2019): 273–75.

be addressed: How are we to identify the party or parties that engage in “childish mockery” of the practice of circumcision in the text, and why does circumcision occupy first place in the discussion in *On the Special Laws*?

Maren Niehoff has argued that the mockery that Philo refers to in *Spec.* 1.3 originated not from Greeks or Romans, as Hodges's statement implies, but from other Jews. Niehoff writes:

While Philo in *De Specialibus Legibus* does not give any clues regarding the background of these critics, he provides some information in *De Migrationi Abrahami*. It clearly emerges here that he has Jews in mind. He accuses them of overly indulging in the allegorical meaning of Mosaic law and thus becoming oblivious to its actual performance (*Migr.* 89).⁴⁶

Niehoff's view, however, is extremely unlikely. *Migr.* 89, which Niehoff cites as evidence, nowhere refers to mockery of circumcision. On the contrary, the Jewish interpreters referred to in that text agreed with Philo in holding circumcision in high regard; they understood that one could follow God's injunction to become circumcised without severing the physical foreskin, a position that Philo unequivocally rejected (*Migr.* 92). “Overly indulging in the allegorical meaning of Mosaic law,” however, hardly constitutes mockery of the practice of circumcision. On the contrary, the exegetical procedure itself indicates the high regard in which the biblical text advocating circumcision was held. Secondly, it is unlikely that Philo would refer to the position of his Judaic interlocutors in *Migr.* 89 as “childish and unwise,” as he characterizes the mockers addressed in *Spec.* 1.3. The Platonizing hermeneutical strategy of interpreting biblical texts as metaphors indicating rational self-control over the passions is one in which Philo himself engages extensively, and which he elsewhere associates with wisdom (see, e.g., *Decal.* 1). The metaphorical reception of Philo's Judaic interlocutors in *Migr.* 89 must therefore be distinguished from the “childish and unwise” mockery addressed in *Spec.* 1.3. Moreover, Philo's notice that the mockery originates with οἱ πολλοί in 1.1 and his identification of circumcision as a practice of “great nations” (μεγάλα ἔθνη) in 1.3 strongly suggest that he writes to defend a regional and ethnic practice against criticism by a majority of outsiders. Lastly, Niehoff points to no parallels as examples of *Jews* mocking circumcision. On the other hand, the mockery of circumcision is amply attested in non-Judaic sources, a point to which we will return below. It is therefore highly likely—if not almost certain—that it

⁴⁶ Maren R. Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17: 1–14,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10 (2003): 101.

was non-Jews rather than Jews who engaged in the “mockery” of circumcision that Philo addressed in *Spec.* 1.3.

Another contested issue concerns the reasons why Philo addressed circumcision in the prolegomenon to his *On the Special Laws*, a document that treats the Decalogue or Ten Commandments as a framing device to discuss an assortment of biblical injunctions. An influential argument in regard to that question was advanced by Richard Hecht, who sought to demonstrate that two factors account for Philo’s placement of the material at the beginning of the treatise: first, circumcision represents the removal of arrogance and conceit, or the presumption “that man is something more than a creature of God,” and therefore represents the “‘vestibule’ or portal through which one must pass if one is to understand properly the nature of the *nomos* and its special laws”; and second, that by associating circumcision with other nations like Egypt, Philo combats charges of “Jewish particularism.”⁴⁷ Hecht’s position, however, is untenable for two reasons. First, it overlooks the clear statements and grammatical structure of *Spec.* 1.1: ἀρξομαι δ’ ἀπὸ τοῦ γελωμένου παρὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς (“And I will begin with that which is laughed at among many people”). “Laughter” is listed as the issue of prime concern in connection with Philo’s choice to “begin” his discussion with circumcision. Hecht ignores this. Philo continues: even that ancient, philosophically-minded people, the Egyptians, practiced circumcision. And then: παρὸ καὶ προσῆκον ἦν παιδικὴν χλευεῖν μεθεμενοῦς ... ἀναζητῆσαι τὰς αἰτίας, ὧν χάριν ἐκράτησε τὸ ἔθος (“And for that reason it would be proper to give up childish joking ... to seek the causes on account of which the custom prevailed...”). Philo uses παρὸ, a contracted form of παρὰ ὅ, to introduce “a proposition that is *logically* deduced from a preceding proposition ... that was *made as its basis*”: thus the translation “for that reason” or “in consequence of that fact.”⁴⁸ In consequence of the fact that Egyptians, like Judeans, practice circumcision, Philo reasons that it would be “proper” to “give up childish joking” in order to seek out the reasons for the practice;

⁴⁷ Richard D. Hecht, “The Exegetical Contexts of Philo’s Interpretation of Circumcision,” in *Nourished with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn, Earle Hilgert, and Burton L. Mack, Scholars Press Homage Series (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984), 75. Hecht’s arguments are cited approvingly by Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 155, 157.

⁴⁸ G. K. Beale, Daniel J. Brendsel, and William A. Ross, *An Interpretive Lexicon of New Testament Greek: Analysis of Prepositions, Particles, Relative Pronouns, and Conjunctions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 8, where the authors define the logical relationship of “inference” between clauses or sentences (emphasis is that of Beale et al.). The Greek lexicon of Liddell and Scott clearly indicates that παρὸ serves an inferential function, glossing it “wherefore” (LSJ, s.v. “παρὸ”)—a usage that does not, however, occur in the New Testament material surveyed by Beale, Brendsel, and Ross.

reasons that Philo subsequently enumerates. The clear import of Philo's statements is that he begins (*ἀρξομαι*) his discussion of the "special laws" with circumcision precisely because it provokes the "laughter" of "the many."

While Hecht's exegesis of Philo is otherwise highly instructive, his main arguments to account for the placement of circumcision at the beginning of *On the Special Laws* must be rejected, as they fail to grapple sufficiently with the clear wording of *Spec.* 1.1. When stating reasons for opening the treatise with a discussion of circumcision, Philo does not mention the presumption "that man is something more than a creature of God." The question of whether Philo attempted to counter charges of Jewish particularism in the prologue needs to be approached judiciously: whereas circumcision was certainly perceived as a marker of ethnic particularity, it would be a strange way for Philo to argue if, as Hecht suggests, he attempted to "universalize" the law by associating circumcision with Egypt, as Egyptians, too, were identified as ethnically "other" (or, "particular") by Greeks and Romans, in part based on their practice of circumcision, as we have seen. Instead, Philo explicitly states a very specific ground for beginning *On the Special Laws* as he did: he wished to address the derision of circumcision, expressed in the form of mocking laughter, by Greeks and Romans.

In his important study tracing the history of Judaic circumcision from Genesis through the Talmuds, Simon Mimouni registers surprise at the fact that Philo begins *On the Special Laws* with a discussion of circumcision. This is "astonishing" (*étonnant*), writes Mimouni, because circumcision does not appear to be numbered among the "special laws" that form Philo's subject matter; the subject does not recur later in the treatise. Mimouni continues: the position of Philo's discussion of circumcision at the beginning of this treatise "is perhaps indicative of the problem this practice poses in the world in which he lives. Moreover, Philo himself points out that circumcision is the object of 'mockery of the crowd,' and that it has indeed been an easy joke in the Greek-Roman milieu."⁴⁹ Although Mimouni does not elaborate the observation that circumcision offered opportunity for "an easy joke" in the Greco-Roman milieu, the data provided by Greek and Roman art and statuary amply justify such a statement. As we have seen, Old Comedy regularly made use of the image of the phallus with

⁴⁹ Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 100: "Cette position première dans le traité est peut-être l'indication du problème que pose cette pratique dans le monde où il vit. D'ailleurs, Philon, lui-même, relève que la circoncision est objet de 'railleries de la foule,' et qu'elle a été effectivement un thème de plaisanterie facile dans le milieu gréco-romain." The translation is mine. Martin, "Paul and Circumcision," 123–24, also views Greco-Roman ridicule as the reason why Philo begins his treatise with a discussion of circumcision.

indecently exposed glans as a comic motif; Aristophanes refers to it as a “cause for laughter” (γέλως). This is evident in the fourth century BCE vase painting depicting the healing of Chiron, although there the comedic effect was produced by the indecent exposure of the glans due to an insufficient prepuce rather than an amputated one. Moreover, visual humor involved in Roman apotropaic images depicting the circumcised phallus, including the image of the Ethiopian bath attendant in the House of the Vettii, is of particular significance: the apotropaic power believed to inhere in the image of the enlarged and/or circumcised phallus derived in part from its ability to mollify envy, and thus to ward off the evil eye, by producing laughter.⁵⁰ Further confirmation is provided by Josephus, who complains that the “Hellenizing” Egyptian Apion “denounces us [i.e., Judeans] for sacrificing domestic animals and for not eating pork, and he jeers at [χλευάζει] the practice of circumcision” (*Ag. Apion* 2.13).⁵¹ In the second century CE, Marcion would cite circumcision as a hindrance to missionary activity because “everybody turns away from pain and flees from the derisive mockery which results from shameful ugliness.”⁵² The circumcised phallus connoted, from the Greek and Roman perspectives, barbarism and comedic laughter; laughter that from the Judaic perspective was experienced as “jeering” and “mockery.” Thus Mimouni is probably correct in his surmise that it was due to “the problem this practice [i.e., circumcision] poses in the world in which he lives” that prompted Philo to place it in the prominent first position in *On the Special Laws*: circumcision posed a notable problem that Philo wished to address directly as a central issue of Judaic law.

Having established both that it was the widespread mockery of circumcision that prompted Philo to insert it into the prominent first position in *On the Special Laws* and that the mockery originated with Greco-Roman rather than Judaic groups, we turn to examine the text in more detail, as it provides the rationale for Philo’s attempts to justify the ritual practice. The relevant text occurs in the prologue to *On the Special Laws*, which reads as follows:

⁵⁰ Moser, “Naked Power,” 46, writes: “Laughter, according to a widespread belief in the ancient world, was considered an effective method to avert the Evil Eye, for ‘laughter is itself apotropaic’ and ‘sexual imagery could be a source of mirth, releasing tension and anxiety’” (citing Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* [Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005], 260).

⁵¹ Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. Henry St. James Thackeray, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: Heinemann, 1962).

⁵² Cited in Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity,” 114.

And I will begin with that which is laughed at among many people [ἀπὸ τοῦ γελωμένου παρὰ τοῖς πολλοῖς]. Now the practice which it laughed to scorn [γελάτται], namely the circumcision of the genital organs, is very zealously observed by many other nations, particularly by the Egyptians, a race regarded as pre-eminent by its populousness, its antiquity, and its attachment to philosophy. And for that reason, it would be proper to give up childish joking [παιδικὴν χλεύην] and to enquire in a wiser and more respectful spirit [φρονιμώτερον καὶ σεμνότερον] into the causes on account of which the custom prevailed, instead of dismissing the matter prematurely and impugning the good sense of great nations [καταγινώσκειν μεγάλων ἔθνῶν εὐχέρειαν]. (*Spec.* 1.1–3)⁵³

The lines constitute a preamble to Philo's discussion of Judaic laws. Given the association of the exposed *glans penis* with laughter in Greek comedy and, in Roman art, with attempts to use visual humor to ward off the evil eye, it is perhaps not as astonishing as Mimouni thought that Philo chose to open his discourse with a defense of circumcision. In response to what he characterizes as the "childish joking" and "derisive laughter" with which the image of the circumcised phallus was pervasively greeted, Philo attempted to provide a sense of legitimacy to the circumcision ritual in a "wiser and more serious spirit." As Louis Feldman notes, "a kind of 'Egyptomania' had swept through some of the most fashionable circles of Roman society in the last half of the first century B.C.E.; hence, Philo's retort that circumcision was also practiced by the Egyptians was a most effective reply to those who ridiculed it."⁵⁴ Moreover, Philo's mention of "wisdom" in the passage is apropos, since *philosophia*, philosophy or the "love of wisdom," is the primary witness that he enlisted in his defense of circumcision. Far from ignoring the "philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings" of the Greek and Roman preputial aesthetic as Hodges suggested, Philo both deployed and reinterpreted philosophical traditions in his defense of the ancestral Judaic practice of circumcision.

Philo's philosophical defense of circumcision was to interpret it as a metaphor for the "excision of the pleasures of the body" (*Migr.* 89–93). He agreed with the Judaic interlocutors described above that biblical laws held metaphorical or allegorical meanings; he disagreed by retaining the observance of the laws in their literal sense. Following Platonic traditions, he reasoned that the bodily passions tied the immortal soul too closely to earthly pursuits and hindered the philosophical contemplation of transcen-

⁵³ Philo, *The Special Laws*, trans. F. H. Colson, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 101 (modified).

⁵⁴ Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 155. Feldman appears to rely directly on Hecht, "Philo's Interpretation of Circumcision," 77, here.

dent truths (compare, e.g., Plato, *Phaedr.* 249–251; *Symp.* 210–212 A). One needed to be metaphorically circumcised, that is, to remove one's passions, in order properly to pursue philosophy as Philo understands it.

In his QG 3.46, for example, Philo likens circumcision to the removal of "superfluous growths" so that the mind (*nous*) might be "pure and naked of every evil and passion" and so become "free and unbound." Free of the passions that impede it, the mind could ascend to the heavenly realm to attain a vision of transcendent truth (see, e.g., *Her.* 69–70; *Migr.* 9). Philo depicted circumcision as having a twofold significance: literally, it involves the excision of penile foreskin, and metaphorically, it involves the excision of passions from the soul. As Mimouni notes, "The two circumcisions advanced in the Philonian interpretation of Genesis 17 suggest an allegorical reading directly related to the philosophical theme of the ascension of the soul."⁵⁵ Philo advocates the Platonic view that the physical body and its passions "weigh down" the soul, hindering it from accomplishing its upward journey toward the ideal, heavenly realm that is evident only on the basis of philosophical contemplation. Philo's metaphor thus links the Judaic ritual practice of circumcision with Greek philosophical attempts to attain insights that transcend those of the mundane world.

Philo's notion of the twofold circumcision is expressed clearly in *Questions and Answers on Genesis*. The full text of this philosophico-exegetical is extant only in Armenian, although some Greek fragments remain. In cases in which Greek fragments are lacking, retroversion of the Armenian into Greek offers an indication of the original terms and phrases used. In QG 3.46, Philo expounds Gen 17:10b–11a:

What is the meaning of the words, "There shall be circumcised every male of you, and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin"? I see two circumcisions, one of the male, and the other of the flesh; that of the flesh is by way of the genitals, while that of the male, it seems to me, is by way of reason. For that which is, one might say, naturally male in us is the mind [*ὁ νοῦς*], whose superfluous growths it is necessary to cut off and throw away in order that it may become pure and naked of every evil and passion, and be a priest of God. Now this is what He indicated by the second circumcision, stating (in) the Law that "you shall circumcise your hardness of heart," which means your hard and rebellious and refractory thoughts, and by cutting off and removing

⁵⁵ Translation of the author. The original reads (Mimouni, *Circumcision*, 103): "Les deux circoncisions avancées dans l'interprétation philonienne de Gn 17 suggèrent une lecture allégorique mise directement en relation avec le thème philosophique de l'ascension de l'âme."

arrogance, you shall make the sovereign part [τὸ ἡγεμονικόν; i.e., the mind] free and unbound.⁵⁶

Philo relies here on the notion that humans have a twofold nature, subsisting from a combination of perishable body (i.e., "flesh") and immortal mind (νοῦς/διάνοια): the human being "was created at once both mortal and immortal: mortal with respect to the body, and immortal with respect to the mind" (*Opif.* 46.135: γεγενῆσθαι θνητὸν ὁμοῦ καὶ ἀθάνατον, θνητὸν μὲν κατὰ τὸ σῶμα, κατὰ δὲ τὴν διάνοιαν ἀθάνατον). He genders the mind male and the body or "flesh," albeit implicitly, female.⁵⁷ The physical body is circumcised when tissue is removed from the prepuce, whereas the "male creature," mind, is metaphorically circumcised when "superfluous shoots," connected with what is wicked and vile, are "pruned away and to cast off." Philo mixes the metaphor of circumcision with that of arboriculture here; the two metaphors are linked by the aspect of excision. He is aided in his metaphorical interpretation of circumcision by the idea, persistent in earlier, biblical literature, of the "circumcision of the heart" (e.g., Deut 10:16; 30:6), which he interprets as referring to the removal of "rebellious thoughts and ambition," thus rendering the mind "free" to pursue a vision of heaven through contemplation of Judaic Scriptures in a philosophical mode.

Philo's views on of the excision of the passions take on additional significance when he interprets circumcision as a metaphor for the excision specifically of sexual desire. As we have seen, the pulling back of the foreskin to expose the glans was associated with sexual activity, and this connotation may be present even in the absence of an erection. For example, hypersexual satyrs were sometimes pictured with glans exposed even when the penis was flaccid.⁵⁸ The chronic exposure of the glans by circumcision could thus be associated with chronic lewdness. As Troy Martin aptly notes, "Circumcision ... permanently exposes the glans and renders the male perpetually sexually aroused."⁵⁹ Nor was this point lost on the Romans. The historian Tacitus writes that "as a nation, they [Judeans] are very inclined to lust" (*proiectissima ad libidinem gens*), although, he concedes,

⁵⁶ Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 240–41, slightly modified.

⁵⁷ On the gendering of the mind as male and body as female, Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity," 95–96.

⁵⁸ Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, image B80; see also the amphora of satyrs treading out wine with Dionysus by the Amasis Painter; photo in Biers, *The Archaeology of Greece*, 184, no. 7.33.

⁵⁹ Martin, "Paul and Circumcision," 116.

“they abstain from intercourse with foreign women” (*Hist.* 5.2).⁶⁰ Martial’s jests about the genitalia of Jewish males in his *Epigrams* likewise suggest that Jews were seen as sexually hyperpotent.⁶¹ In *Epigram* 7.55, for example, the poet contrasts his own phallus, which he coyly characterizes as “well-behaved and small” (*proba et pusilla*) with that of a Judean, whose member is presumed to have just the opposite characteristics.⁶²

In stark contrast, Philo asserts that the exposed glans of the circumcised Jewish phallus represents not a chronic state of lust, but chronic self-control and a rejection of lust. Commenting on Gen 17:24–25, which indicates that Abraham’s son Ishmael was circumcised just at the onset of puberty at age thirteen, Philo writes:

[God] instructs him who is about to undertake marriage by all means to circumcise his sense-pleasures [ἡδονάς] and amorous desires, rebuking those who are lascivious and lustful, in order that they may restrain their excessive embraces, which usually come about not for the sake of begetting children but for the sake of unrestrained pleasure. (QG 3.61)⁶³

Arguing that circumcision represents the excision of sensual pleasure and sexual desire, and therefore functions as a “rebuke” to lustful persons. The

⁶⁰ Trans. of C. H. Moore, Loeb Classical Library (modified); cited in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors* 2:26. On the Roman perception that the exposed glans signaled sexual insatiability, see Pierre Cordier, “Les Romains et la circoncision,” *Revue des Études juives* 160 (2001): 337–55. The factor of ethnicity is also certainly involved; as Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2:40, notes, “the notion is mostly based on the common typology of the strong sexual passions credited to barbarians, especially to those of the East.”

⁶¹ On *Epig.* 7.82, see Marie Roux, “Martial, *Epigrams* VII.55,” *Judaism and Rome: Re-thinking Judaism’s Encounter with the Roman Empire*, <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/martial-epigrams%C2%A0vii82>, who notes that “the pulling back of the foreskin of the Jews may have become a humorous and provocative motif because their sex organs were associated with some kind of priapism and unrestrained sexuality totally opposed to the self-control which characterized the Roman citizen with good morals.” Commenting on *Epig.* 7.35, Dwora Gilula, “Did Martial Have a Jewish Slave?,” *Classical Quarterly* 37.2 (1987): 532–33, writes, “Martial and his slave have a true super-mentula, such as is typical of lustful, sexually potent Jews” (533). See also Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 99–102. For an important discussion of the significance of the terms ψωλός, *verpus*, and *recutitus* (all referring to the uncovering of the glans, either due to sexual arousal or to circumcision), see Martin, “Paul and Circumcision,” 117–18.

⁶² Martial, *Epig.* 7.55; see also Marie Roux, “Martial, *Epigrams* VII.55,” *Judaism and Rome: Re-thinking Judaism’s Encounter with the Roman Empire*, <http://judaism-and-rome.cnrs.fr/martial-epigrams%C2%A0vii55>.

⁶³ Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 264. Only fragments remain of the Greek version of *Questions and Answers on Genesis*; the extant sixth century Armenian version that Marcus translates was based on a Greek exemplar.

sexual use of the Jewish phallus, Philo opines, is not to gratify sensual desires but to sire children; it is thus both restrained and goal oriented.

Philo opines that circumcision, rather than signaling a chronic state of libidinousness, signals an effective remedy for lewdness. Reflecting on Gen 17:10, which indicates that only males and not females were to undergo the rite of circumcision, Philo addresses the evident gender disparity as follows:

But the divine legislator ordained circumcision for males alone for many reasons. The first of these is that the male has more pleasure in, and desire for, mating than does the female, and he is more ready for it. Therefore He rightly leaves out the female, and suppresses the undue impulses of the male by the sign of circumcision. (*QG* 3.47; trans. Marcus, LCL)

Again Philo inverts the stereotypical Greek and Roman association of circumcision with an overabundance of sexual desire; in his view, circumcision rather “suppresses the undue impulses” characteristic of sexual desire. In both *QG* 3.61 and 3.47, Philo understands the significance of the circumcised Jewish phallus in a manner that is the converse of the views expressed by Tacitus and Martial.

Closely related to the notion of the circumcised Judean as hypersexualized, exposed glans signaling a chronic state of sexual anticipation is the notion that Judeans and other circumcised are especially prolific, undoubtedly as the result of their chronic concupiscence. In his *Histories*, Tacitus writes:

Still they [i.e., Judeans] provide for the increase of their numbers. It is a crime among them to kill any newly-born infant. They hold that the souls of all who perish in battle or by the hands of the executioner are immortal. Hence a passion for propagating their race and a contempt for death. (*Hist.* 5.5; trans. Godley, LCL)

Alongside their “inclination to lust,” mentioned earlier, Tacitus lists an interdiction against infanticide and the belief in the immortality of the soul as factors contributing to Judean prolificness, as both are held to “provide for the increase in their [i.e., Judeans’] numbers.”

Philo accepts the stereotype that Judeans, like their circumcised Egyptian counterparts, are more prolific than peoples whose males remain uncircumcised. Indeed, in *Virt.* 64, he goes so far as to state that Jews are the “most populous” (πολυανθρωπότατος) of all the nations on earth! In a tellingly contradictory statement, he makes the same claim about another circumcised group, the Egyptians (*Spec.* 1.2). Philo is clearly aware of the stereotype of the prolific, circumcised male, and he not only accepts it, but lists it as a point of Jewish pride.

Rather than attributing prolificacy to chronic concupiscence as signaled by the exposed glans, however, Philo develops an elaborate, rationalizing explanation that involves medical, philosophical, and geographic components. In his *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, for example, Philo writes that Abraham and the other Judaic patriarchs instituted the rite of circumcision

for the sake of populousness [ἐνεκα τῆς πολυανθρωπίας], for we see that nature is a living thing and very well disposed toward man [φιλόανθρωπον]. Now as wise men they knew that as the seed often flows into the fold of the foreskin, it likely that it will be scattered unfruitfully; but if there is no obstacle to prevent [it], it will succeed in reaching its proper place. For this reason such nations as practice circumcision increase greatly in population. (QG 3.48)⁶⁴

Philo supports his contention that circumcision is performed in order to increase the population by providing a medical rationale. Judeans are especially prolific, writes Philo, because the foreskin is not present to impede the free flow of semen into the vaginal canal, preventing it from being “scattered unfruitfully.” We may note that Philo’s explanation links fertility to the physical characteristics of the phallus. In his *On the Generation of Animals*, the philosopher Aristotle had similarly provided a “scientific” rationale as to why, in his view, the smaller phallus valued in classical Athens was particularly fecund: “This does in fact happen with men who have a large penis [τῶν μέγα τὸ αἰδοῖον ἔχόντων]: they are less fertile than those who have a moderately sized one [τῶν μετριαζόντων], because the semen gets cooled off by being transported too great a distance, and cold semen is not generative” (*Gen. an.* 1.7; trans. Peck, LCL, modified).⁶⁵ While Philo’s explanation is quite different from Aristotle’s, both philosophers suggest that the physical characteristics of the phallus directly effect fertility; for Philo, the circumcised phallus facilitates the unimpeded transmission of semen; for Aristotle, the smaller phallus prevents its cooling.

In addition to his medical rationale, Philo suggests a philosophical justification for circumcision by prefacing his discussion in QG 3.48 with the notice that “nature is a living thing and very well disposed toward man.” This formulation hews closely to a Stoic formulation recorded by Diogenes Laertius, who writes, “They [the Stoics] say that God is a living thing [θεὸν δ’ εἶναι ζῶον] that is immortal and rational and intelligent, perfect in happiness [τέλειον ἐν εὐδαιμονία], not admitting of any evil, [and]

⁶⁴ All translations of *Questions and Answers on Genesis* are those of Ralph Marcus, LCL.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

provident [προνοητικόν] toward the world and its inhabitants.”⁶⁶ Laertius’s language thus parallels that of Philo, although God, rather than nature, is referred to as the “living being” who is “provident” toward humans.⁶⁷ However, the Stoics regularly identified God (i.e., Zeus) or the gods in general with nature. Cicero writes that according to Chrysippus, “God is the world itself [*ipsumque mundum deum*] ... he is the common nature of all things [*naturam universam*], universal and all-embracing” (*Nat. d.* 1.39).⁶⁸ Similarly, Alexander of Aphrodisias writes: “[The Stoics say that] the world [τὸν κόσμον] is a unity which includes all existing things in itself and is governed by a living, rational, intelligent nature [ὑπὸ φύσεως διοικούμενον ζωτικῆς τε καὶ λογικῆς καὶ νοεῶς]” (*Fat.* 191.1).⁶⁹ The cosmos is understood as a well-ordered being that may be identified with God or with nature, which are taken to be synonymous.⁷⁰ The notion that God, Zeus, or nature is well-disposed toward humans is nicely captured by Plutarch, who, albeit in the context of an anti-Stoic argument, reports that the Stoics “says that God is ... benevolent, caring, and beneficent [φιλόανθρωπον καὶ κηδεμονικὸν καὶ ὠφέλιμον]” (*Comm. not.* 1075E).⁷¹

Philo similarly interacts with the Stoic idea of nature in *On the Creation of the World*, where he writes: “The world is in harmony with the law and the law with the world, and ... the man who observes the law is thus a citizen of the world, directing his actions in relation to the [rational] purpose of nature [πρὸς τὸ βούλημα τῆς φύσεως], in accordance with which the entire world is also administered” (*Opif.* 3).⁷² Maren Niehoff has shown how Philo reinterprets the laws of the Decalogue in conversation with Stoic precepts. The result, however, is not simply a recapitulation of Stoic ideas, but a more complex interaction between Stoicism and biblical traditions

⁶⁶ Trans. of A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 323 (slightly modified). The Greek text appears in the same work (2:321).

⁶⁷ As Dirk Baltzly notes, in Stoic cosmology, “The entire cosmos is a living thing and God stands to the cosmos as an animal’s life force stands to the animal’s body, enlivening, moving and directing it by its presence throughout” (Dirk Baltzly, “Stoicism,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism/>).

⁶⁸ Trans. of Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:323; Greek text: 2:321–22.

⁶⁹ Trans. of Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:337; Greek text: 2:338.

⁷⁰ A variant on the idea occurs in Cleanthes’s Hymn to Zeus, where Zeus is not identified with nature, but rules and orders it: “Zeus, originator [or, “chief”] of nature, steering all things with law”; see Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, Greek text: 2:326–27.

⁷¹ Trans. of Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:327; Greek text: 2:327–28.

⁷² Cited according to the translation of Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, 155.

such that “Philo’s philosophical reinterpretation of Mosaic law offers an enlightened form of [Judaic] ethnicity.”⁷³

Philo’s notice that “nature is a living thing” that is “well-disposed toward humans” thus has an identifiably Stoic ring and is in keeping with the generally Stoicizing approach that he takes in his later writings. This conclusion is justified in spite of partial Judaic parallels, including the description of Israel’s god as a “living God” in passages such as Deut. 5:25; 2 Kgs 19:16; Jer 10:10; and Dan 6:27, and an emphasis on God’s kind disposition toward humanity, for example, in Exod 34:6 and Matt 6:25–33. The Stoic influence in Philo’s formulation is apparent in the mention of *physis* rather than God, per se, as an active power with concern for humanity. Moreover, the term *zōon*, “living thing,” is to be contrasted to the more typically Judaic formulation “the living God” (ὁ θεὸς ζῶν), a phrase that frequently occurs in contrasts to “lifeless” idols (Isa 37:14–20; Bel 5). The Stoic usage, therefore, is quite distinct. Moreover, the juxtaposition of *physis*, *zōon*, and divine *philanthrōpia* in a single passage clearly indicate Philo interacts with Stoic formulations in *QG* 3.48. A caveat must be registered, however: although in some passages, Philo “virtually identifies nature with God,”⁷⁴ he generally recognizes “the most fundamental divide of all ... between God, transcendent eternal Being and sole first principle, and that which receives the benefit of his creative activity, belonging to the realm of genesis.”⁷⁵ Thus Philo does not in principle adhere to the Stoic view that God and nature are to be equated.

Philo’s use of the term “nature” also hints beyond Stoic cosmology to Stoic ethics, with which it is closely related. In the Stoic view, “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) and “living well” are to be achieved by “living in accordance with nature [κατὰ φύσιν ζῆν]” (Stobaeus, *Ecl.* 2.77);⁷⁶ that is, living “in accordance with the nature of oneself and that of the whole [ordered cosmos], engaging in no activity wont to be forbidden by the universal law, which is the right reason pervading everything and identical to Zeus” (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae* 7.87–89).⁷⁷ Philo’s placement of the reference to nature, which is “well-disposed toward humanity” just after the notice that circumcision was instituted “for the sake of populousness” (ἐνεκα τῆς

⁷³ Niehoff, *Philo of Alexandria*, 170.

⁷⁴ David T. Runia, *Philo of Alexandria: On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*, Philo of Alexandria Commentary Series (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 219, citing *Spec.* 1.100; 3.184.

⁷⁵ Runia, *Philo of Alexandria*, 22.

⁷⁶ Greek text in Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2:389.

⁷⁷ Trans. of Long and Sedley, *Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1:395. On “living well,” see David Sedley, “The Goal,” §17 of “Stoicism,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/stoicism/v-1/sections/the-goal>.

πολυανθρωπίας) and just before his medical explanation of exactly how the rite serves to facilitate procreation strongly suggests that circumcision is practiced "in accordance with nature," and thus, in accordance with "the right reason pervading everything." Unlike the Stoics, however, Philo attributes this "right reason" to the God of Israel rather than to Zeus. Thus his suggestion that circumcision was practice "in accordance with nature" is in keeping with biblical passages indicating that the God of Israel enjoined the practice (Gen 17:10–11), passages that Philo cites.

In addition to his argument that circumcision promotes fertility and his Stoicizing suggestion that it is performed "in accordance with nature," Philo develops a medico-environmental rationale for the practice, combining medical and environmental justifications. In QG 3.48, Philo writes:

Not only the Jews but also the Egyptians, Arabs and Ethiopians and nearly all those who inhabit the southern regions near the torrid zone are circumcised. And what is the particular reason if not that in these places, especially in summer, the foreskin of the genitals, which is the skin that surrounds and covers (them), becomes inflamed and infected. But when this is cut off, by being laid bare (the penis) is restored, and the affliction is resisted and expelled. For this reason the nations which are in the northern regions and all those to whom has been allotted a portion in those regions of the earth which are windy are not circumcised. For in those regions, as the heat of the sun is relaxed and diminished, so too is the disease which is produced by heat in the skin of the parts of the body. (QG 3.48)

Philo here relies on the knowledge that physicians would sometimes amputate not only the foreskin, but even—in cases of severe infection—the entire *glans penis*. In his treatise *De Medicina*, the first century CE encyclopedist Aulus Cornelius Celsus devotes substantial passages to the treatment of ulcers of the testicles and penis, a "lesion that the Greeks call *phimosis*" (*Med.* 7.25; see also 6.18; 25.2).⁷⁸ The condition could be treated by the application of lineaments, poultices, or, in more extreme cases, by cauterization or the incision or removal of the foreskin, or even of the glans itself if gangrene had set in (*Med.* 6.18).

Philo combines the knowledge that Roman medicine recognized the value of removing parts of the phallus in cases of extreme infection with the observation that the climate tends to be hotter in the "southern regions" (i.e., those situated closer to the equator), and, based on the view that infection is facilitated by warm weather, reasons that Egyptians, Arabians, and Ethiopians, like Judeans, circumcised their males preemptively as public health precaution. He thus recognized the fact that circumcision was, from

⁷⁸ On this condition, see Hodges, "Phimosis in Antiquity," 133–36.

Greek and Roman perspectives, a marker of ethnic "otherness," while at the same time seeking to displace that interpretation by supplying an alternative, medico-environmental rationale that justified circumcision as a salutary accommodation to a torrid environment. On this view, environment is the salient factor distinguishing the circumcised from the uncircumcised, and not, as in the more typical Greek and Roman views, the contrast between civilization and barbarism. Philo's medico-environmental rationale suggests that the practice of circumcision is nothing less than a medical treatment prophylactically applied to avoid penile infection in hot climates.

Conclusion

In summary, Philo's Platonizing attempt to reinterpret circumcision philosophically as a metaphor for the "excision of the passions," his Stoicizing suggestion that it is performed "in accordance with nature," his medical explanation linking it to enhanced fertility, and his medico-environmental explanation that it prevented penile infection in hot southern climates, all constitute attempts by a well-educated Jew to provide "wiser and more serious" interpretations of circumcision that could, at least in theory, serve to counter the "derisive laughter" and "scorn" associated with the ritual practice by his Greek and Roman contemporaries. Frederick Hodges is to be commended for pointing to a significant amount of Greek art and indicating its relevance to the understanding of Judaic circumcision in its Hellenistic context; this material significantly adds to perspectives otherwise known from the literary material that is more familiar to scholars of ancient Judaism. Moreover, the Greek material that Hodges pointed to can be supplemented with depictions of the circumcised ethnic "other" as apotropaic symbols to ward off the evil eye of envy by invoking laughter in Roman art. On the other hand, Hodges was quite wrong to characterize Philo as failing to understand the "philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings" of Greek disapproval of circumcision. Quite the contrary: Philo's apologias for circumcision indicate deep interaction with Platonic and Stoic philosophy, Stoic ethics, and Roman medicine and geography. Philo, however, did not simply adopt Greco-Roman discourses tout court; rather he modified and adapted them to serve the Judaic agenda of defending circumcision in view of the very negative evaluation placed upon it by non-Judaic interpreters. The examination of the evidence provided by Greek art and comedy, and Roman visual and poetic humor allows contemporary interpreters, two millennia later, more fully to appreciate the social and

cultural pressures that could impel some Jews to abandon the practice of circumcision in favor of a purely metaphorical understanding, and that elicited Philo's attempts to provide respectable philosophical and medical justifications for the ancestral rite whose practice he defended.

University of Erfurt