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“This We Know to Be the Carnal Israel”: Circumcision and the Erotic Life of God and Israel

Daniel Boyarin

For the letter kills but the spirit gives life.

—2 Cor. 3:6

Behold Israel according to the flesh [1 Cor. 10:18]. This we know to be the carnal Israel; but the Jews do not grasp this meaning and as a result they prove themselves indisputably carnal.

—AUGUSTINE, *Tractatus adversos Judaeos*

When Augustine condemns the Jews to eternal carnality, he draws a direct connection between anthropology and hermeneutics. Because the Jews reject reading “in the spirit,” they are therefore condemned to remain “Israel in the flesh.” Allegory is thus, in his theory, a mode of relating to the body. In another part of the Christian world, Origen also described the failure of the Jews as owing to a literalist hermeneutic, one

**Dedicated in memoriam to Professor Ephraim Elimelech Urbach.

All biblical and midrashic translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

The initial impulse to do this work came from a seminar on circumcision in Spinoza and the question of nationalism given by Jacques Derrida at the School of Criticism and Theory at Dartmouth in the summer of 1987. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at Princeton University on 27 March 1991 and at the conference “People of the Body/People of the Book” held at Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley, 29–30 April 1991. I wish to thank the participants on those occasions—especially James Boone, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, John Gager, Ilana Pardes, Brian Stock, and Froma Zeitlin—as well as the editors of *Critical Inquiry* for their very constructive critiques.

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that is unwilling to go beyond or behind the material language and discover its immaterial spirit.¹ This way of thinking about language had been initially stimulated in the Fathers by Paul's usage of "in the flesh" and "in the spirit" respectively to mean literal and figurative. Romans 7:5–6 is a powerful example of this hermeneutic structure: "For when we were still in the flesh, our sinful passions, stirred up by the law, were at work on our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are fully freed from the law, dead to that in which we lay captive. We can thus serve in the new being of the Spirit and not the old one of the letter." In fact, the exact same metaphor is used independently of Paul by Philo, who writes that his interest is in "the hidden and inward meaning which appeals to the few who study soul characteristics rather than bodily forms."² For both, hermeneutics becomes anthropology.

Pauline religion itself should be understood as a contiguous religiocultural formation with other Hellenistic Judaism.³ Among the major supports for such a construction are the similarities between Paul and Philo—similarities that cannot easily be accounted for by assuming influence, since both were active at the same time and in two quite separated places.⁴ The affinities between Philo and such texts as the fourth gospel or the Letter to the Hebrews are only slightly less compelling

1. See Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco, 1989), pp. 107–12.

2. Philo, *On Abraham*, sec. 147, in vol. 6 of *Philo*, trans. and ed. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), p. 75. It is very important to note that Philo himself is just the most visible representative of an entire school of people who understood the Bible, and indeed the philosophy of language, as he did. On this see David Winston, "Philo and the Contemplative Life," in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York, 1986–87), pp. 198–231, esp. p. 211.

3. I am aware that here I am placing myself in the middle of a great contest in the interpretation of Paul. Suffice it to say here that I am cognizant of the different possibilities of reading the Pauline corpus, including in particular the stimulating revisionist reading of Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver, B. C., 1987).

4. See Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (1966; New York, 1984), and Peder Borgen, "Observations on the Theme 'Paul and Philo': Paul's Preaching of Circumcision in Galatia (Gal. 5:11) and Debates on Circumcision in Philo," in *The Pauline Literature and Theology*, ed. Sigfred Pedersen (Århus, 1980), pp. 85–102.

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evidence because of the possibility that these texts already know Philo.⁵ I take these affinities as *prima facie* evidence for a Hellenistic Jewish cultural koine that undoubtedly varies in many respects but has some common elements throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

Moreover, as Wayne Meeks and others have pointed out, in the first century it is in fact impossible to draw hard and fast lines between Hellenistic and Rabbinic Jews.⁶ On the one hand, the Rabbinic movement *per se* did not yet exist, and on the other, Greek-speaking Jews, like Paul and Flavius Josephus, refer to themselves as Pharisees and, in Paul's case, as a disciple of Rabban Gamaliel, the very leader of the putative proto-Rabbinic party. I am going to suggest, however, that there were tendencies already in the first century that, while not sharply defined, separated Greek speakers more acculturated to Hellenism and Semitic speakers who were less so. These tendencies were, on my hypothesis, to become polarized as time went on, leading in the end to a sharp division between hellenizers who became absorbed into Christian groups and antihellenizers who formed the nascent Rabbinic movement. The adoption of Philo exclusively in the Church and the fact that he was ignored by the Rabbis is a sort of allegory of this relationship, by which the Christian movement became widely characterized by its connection with middle and Neoplatonism. In fact, this connection (between Philonic Judaism and Christianity) was realized in antiquity as well, for popular Christian legend had Philo convert to Christianity and even some fairly recent scholarship has attributed some of his works to Christians.⁷

The congruence of Paul and Philo suggests a common background to their thought in the thought-world of the eclectic middle Platonism of Greek-speaking Judaism in the first century.⁸ Their allegorical reading practice and that of their intellectual descendants is founded on a binary opposition in which the meaning as a disembodied substance exists prior to its incarnation in language, that is, in a dualistic system in which spirit

5. See Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden, 1965), and Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Leiden, 1970).

6. See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, Conn., 1983), p. 33.

7. See J. Edgar Bruns, "Philo Christianus: The Debris of a Legend," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (Jan. 1973): 141–45, and John Dillon, preface to *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*, trans. and ed. Winston (New York, 1981), pp. xi–xii, and pp. 313–14.

8. See Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*. The notion that Paul has a background in Hellenistic Judaism has been advanced fairly often in the past. It has generally had a pejorative tinge to it, as if only Palestinian Judaism was "authentic," and terms like "lax" or surprisingly enough "coldly legal" are used to describe Paul's alleged Hellenistic environment. Recently this idea has been rightly discarded on the grounds that there is no sharp dividing line between Hellenistic and Palestinian Judaism. If we abandon the *ex post facto* judgments of history, moreover, there is no reason to accept the previous

precedes and is primary over body.⁹ Midrash, as a hermeneutic system, seems precisely to refuse that dualism, eschewing the inner-outer, visible-invisible, body-soul dichotomies of allegorical reading. Midrash and Platonic allegory are alternate techniques of the body.

Allegorical and Midrashic Anthropology

Philo and the Rabbis on Anthropogeny

For the close and explicit connection between sign theory and anthropology, we need look no further than Philo, who interprets Adam as the mind and Eve as the body, the supplement, the “helper of the soul”: “With the . . . man a helper is associated. To begin with, the helper is a created one, for it says ‘Let us *make* a helper for him’; and, in the next place, is subsequent to him who is to be helped, for He had formed the mind before and is about to form its helper.”¹⁰ The hermeneutic substance of the interpretation therefore thematizes its own method, for the interpretation that makes the distinction between primary substance and secondary form makes itself possible as an interpretation of the relation between Adam and Eve. Put perhaps in simpler language, the interpretation of Adam as spirit and Eve as matter is what makes possible the interpretation of the *story*, the language of the Adam and Eve narrative, as matter to be interpreted by reference to the spirit of its true meaning. Or once more, to reverse the relation, the idea of meaning as pure unity and language as difference is what makes possible the interpretation of Adam as meaning and Eve as language. It is from here that a historical vector begins that will ultimately end up in phallogocentric versus as-a-woman reading.

When we turn, accordingly, to Philo’s interpretation of the creation of woman we will find that it institutes and reproduces his “ontohermeneutics.” He first establishes the very terms and methods of his interpretive practice: “Now these are no mythical fictions, such as poets and

notions of margin and center in the description of late antique Jewish groups, no reason why Philo should be considered less authentic than Rabban Gamaliel. The question of cultural differences between Greek- and Hebrew-speaking Jews can be treated in a different nonjudgmental territory. In that light I find the similarities between Paul and Philo, who could have had no contact with each other whatsoever, very exciting evidence for first century Greek-speaking Jews.

9. I have limited the scope of this claim to allow for other types of allegory, including such phenomena as Joseph’s interpretations of Pharaoh’s dreams, as well as an untheorized allegorical tradition in reading Homer. When I use the term *allegory*, therefore, this is to be understood as shorthand for allegoresis of the type we know from Philo on.

10. Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis 2, 3*, bk. 2 sec. 5, in vol. 1 of *Philo*, trans. Rev. G. H. Whitaker, ed. Colson and Whitaker (New York, 1929), p. 227; hereafter abbreviated *AI*, bk.: sec.

sophists delight in, but modes of making ideas visible, bidding us resort to allegorical interpretation."¹¹ For Philo, the story is one of the creation of sense perception and its effects on Adam, who was formerly pure mind:

For it was requisite that the creation of mind should be followed immediately by that of sense-perception, to be a helper and ally to it. Having then finished the creation of the mind He fashions the product of creative skill that comes next to it alike in order and in power, namely active sense-perception. . . . How is it, then, produced? As the prophet himself again says, it is when the mind has fallen asleep. As a matter of fact it is when the mind has gone to sleep that perception begins, for conversely when the mind wakes up perception is quenched. [*AI*, 2:24–25, p. 241]

The creation of sense perception in the state of sleep, while recognized by Philo as a necessity, is profoundly and explicitly unwelcome to him: "But as it is, the change is actually repugnant to me, and many a time when wishing to entertain some fitting thought, I am drenched by a flood of unfitting matters pouring over me" (*AI*, 2:32, pp. 245–47). And then,

"He built it to be a woman" (Gen. ii. 22), proving by this that the most proper and exact name for sense-perception is "woman." For just as the man shows himself in activity and the woman in passivity, so the province of the mind is activity, and that of the perceptive sense passivity, as in woman. [*AI*, 2:38, p. 249]

And finally, the verse that in the Bible is one of the clearest statements of the acceptance of the fleshliness of human beings, even the celebration of it, becomes for Philo something else entirely:

"For this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and the twain shall be one flesh" (Gen. ii. 24). For the sake of sense-perception the Mind, when it has become her slave, abandons both God the Father of the universe, and God's excellence and wisdom, the Mother of all things, and cleaves to and becomes one with sense-perception and is resolved into sense-perception so that the two become one flesh and one experience. Observe that it is not the woman that cleaves to the man, but conversely the man to the woman, Mind to Sense-perception. For when that which is superior, namely Mind, becomes one with that which is inferior, namely Sense-perception, it resolves itself into the order of flesh which is inferior, into sense-perception, the moving cause of the passions. [*AI*, 2:49–50, pp. 255, 257]

It is easy to see here how for Philo the theory of the body and the theory of language coincide. His allegorical method, which privileges the spiritual

11. Philo, *On the Account of the World's Creation Given by Moses*, sec. 157, in vol. 1 of *Philo*, p. 125.

sense (“the soul”) is exactly parallel to his anthropological doctrine, which privileges mind over the corporeal. The nexus of allegory and contempt for the senses is tight. In both, a secondary carnal entity—respectively material signs, woman, the body—is contrasted to a primary, spiritual entity—allegorical meaning, man, mind.

In the Rabbinic formation as well there is a homology between corporeality in language and in anthropology. In order to demonstrate this parallelism, I would like to quote a midrashic version of the creation of man and woman, showing how here also the substance of the interpretation is thematized by its method:

And God said let us make a human, etc. Rabbi Yohanan opened:¹² “Behind and before You formed me, and You placed Your hands upon me” (Ps. 139:5). Said Rabbi Yohanan, if a man is righteous, he will enjoy two worlds, for it says, “behind and before You formed me”; but if not, he will have to account for it, for it says, “and You placed Your hands upon me.” Said Rabbi Yermia the son of El’azar: When the Holiness (Be it Blessed) created the first human, He created him androgynous, for it says, “Male and female created He them.” Rabbi Samuel the son of Nahman said: When the Holiness (Be it blessed) created the first human, He made it two-faced, then he sawed it and made a back for this one and a back for that one. They objected to him: but it says, “He took one of his ribs [*tsela*’].” He answered [it means], “one of his sides,” similarly to that which is written, “And the side [*tsela*’] of the tabernacle” (Exod. 26:20). Rabbi Tanhuma in the name of Rabbi Banayah and Rabbi Berekiah in the name of Rabbi El’azar: He created him as a *golem*, and he was stretched from one end of the world to the other, as it says, “My *golem* which Your eyes have seen.” (Ps. 139:16)¹³

Reading the midrashic text we will see that it also, in its constitution of language and meaning, fits its content as myth of simultaneous origin for the male and the female. Here there is no translation of the text onto another abstract meaning plane, no opposition of the letter, the carnal form of language, to its spirit, its inner, invisible meaning. The entire hermeneutic effort is devoted to working out the concrete details of what happened

12. “Opened” is a technical term for the production of a special kind of midrashic discourse before the daily lection from the Torah. It involves the citation of a verse from the prophets or the Hagiographa, which is then shown to be interpretative of the opening verse of the lection (in this case, Ps. 139:5). Its ideological function (in my view) was to demonstrate the interconnectability of all parts of Scripture as a self-glossing text.

13. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* [Hebrew], ed. Jehuda Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1965), 1:54–55. This is the classic and most important midrash on Genesis, and all my examples of Rabbinic interpretation of Genesis will be adduced from this text. As in all midrashic texts, it is a collection of many different sayings from different Rabbis and different periods, edited into a single, multivocal text, in Palestine some time in the fifth century or so. Its closest cultural congeners are, accordingly, the Greek Fathers.

and specifying them. This is done, moreover, by relating the story in Genesis to another set of material signifiers, namely, Psalms 139, quoted twice in our midrashic text. One verse of the psalm—"Behind and before You formed me, and You placed Your hands upon me"—gives rise to the interpretation of the first human as a two-faced creature later separated into its component parts,¹⁴ while another—"My *golem* which Your eyes have seen"—produces the interpretation of the first created human as an unsexed, undifferentiated embryonic human. The use of these two verses as keys to the interpretation of the events told in Genesis is rendered possible by a hermeneutic theory that sees the Bible as a self-glossing work and hermeneutics as a process of connecting concrete signifiers—not as a process of replacing concrete signifiers with their spiritual meanings.¹⁵ Specifically, in this case it derives from a tradition that reads Psalms 139 as a commentary on the story of Adam. This is shown by the fact that two more verses from the same psalm are also interpreted with reference to Adam later in the same midrash.¹⁶ Accordingly, if Philo's allegory is the restoration of the visible text (body) to its source and origin, to its spiritual, invisible meaning (spirit), midrash is the linking up of text to text to release meaning—without any doctrine of an originary spirit that precedes the body of the language of the Torah. The midrashic text thematizes neither a supplementarity for the woman¹⁷ nor for its own materiality and physicality as text. Man and woman, body and spirit, language and meaning are inseparably bound together in it from the beginning. It escapes the logic of the supplement entirely because the culture resists the Platonic metaphysics of signification.

14. To be sure, the *Genesis Rabbah* text does not state this explicitly, but it is implicit in the structure of the midrashic text. The whole point of citing Rabbi Yohanan's interpretation of the verse from Psalms is to chain it to an interpretation of the same verse that will be connected with the first verse of the lection, namely, Genesis 1:27. That connection can only be accomplished if the Psalms verse is indeed the background for Rabbi Yermiah's statement. Later midrashic texts, which are the earliest and (culturally) closest readers of the midrash, explicitly read the text this way. See, for instance, *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. S. Buber, 4 vols. (1885; Jerusalem, 1964).

15. See James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven, Conn., 1981), pp. 137–38, which already marked this difference. See also Gerald L. Bruns, "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 625–46. Bruns's description of midrash is fine; what is missing, paradoxically, is precisely some attempt to come to grips with the *differences* between midrash and allegory. This is not to say, of course, that the Fathers did not often read the Bible as self-glossing also.

16. See *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis*, 1:89, 137–38.

17. Even those Rabbinic readings that do not interpret the first human as androgynous do not (to the best of my knowledge) ever derive an ontologically secondary or supervenient status for women from her secondary creation. For further discussion see chapter three of my forthcoming book.

Gregory of Nyssa and Midrash on the Manna: Allegory and Asceticism

Verna Harrison has shown in a recent paper how in the commentaries of Gregory of Nyssa (a follower of Origen) the discourse of asceticism is coarticulated with allegory. Her discussion of Gregory's interpretation of the manna, when contrasted with the midrashic treatment of this sign, will give us an elegant emblem of the differences between these two formations. The literal interpretation of the manna as physical food had been one of the major bones of contention of the Evangelist against "Jewish" hermeneutic. In analyzing the Father's reading of this contention, Harrison provides us with an exceedingly clear formulation of one way of looking at the nexus between hermeneutics and the body:

For Gregory's primary audience in the ascetic community, where fasting and chastity are highly valued as spiritual practices, biblical texts involving food and sexuality, such as the Manna in the Exodus story and the conjugal love in the Song of Songs, are often pastorally inapplicable in their literal sense. Ascetics can read such materials as Scripture only if they are interpreted in another way. So Gregory finds it appropriate to understand them allegorically.

Moreover, within his broadly Platonic world-view, allegory allows him to transfer the concepts and images of nourishment and intimacy from the material to the intelligible world. In his hands, this deliberate transition from text to interpretation becomes an excellent tool for expressing how the ascetic re-directs natural human desire from bodily pleasures toward God. Exegetical method thus comes to mirror ascetic behavior itself and conversely embodies a redirection of thought which can serve as a model for the corresponding re-direction of human drives and activities.¹⁸

There is then a perfect fit between the hermeneutics and anthropologies of this system, as we have already observed for Philo. The troping of language from the literal to the figurative—which is called moving from the carnal to the spiritual—exactly parallels the turning of human intention from the desire and pleasure of the body to the desire and pleasure of the soul. Linguistic structure and psychology are thus isomorphic. Even more, I would suggest that this kind of allegorical reading as practiced by this line of Jewish and then Christian Platonists is itself an ascetic practice (and not only a model for one), for the very renunciation of the pleasure of the text, understood as story and about bodies, is itself a turning from corporeal pleasure to spiritual contemplation. This articulation between an allegorical hermeneutic and an ascetical anthropology

18. Verna E. F. Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa," paper presented at Society of Biblical Literature convention, New Orleans, Nov. 1990; hereafter abbreviated "AA."

is brought out particularly clearly with respect to the manna, which is taken as a figure for

the incarnation and perhaps also the Eucharist. Christ is the true food of the soul. However, the fact that the Manna is uncultivated is also interpreted as a reference to the Virgin, who conceives her son without a man's seed. Her womb, empty of any human impregnation, is filled from above with divine life. Like the stomach receiving food, it has become an image of the human person as receptacle. By implication, the ascetic, like Mary, is called to turn away from human relationships so as to be united with God, receiving him within herself. Gregory makes this point explicitly in the treatise *On Virginity*: "What happened corporeally in the case of the immaculate Mary, when the fullness of the divinity shone forth in Christ through her virginity, takes place also in every soul through a virginal existence, although the Lord no longer effects a bodily presence." ["AA"]

We observe here another moment that will be increasingly important in the analysis: the move of allegoresis from the historical specificity of events to an unchanging ontology. Manna, literally the record of real, corporeal, historical events that took place among a specific people, becomes transformed into the sign of an eternally possible fulfillment for everyman's soul. Accordingly, the analogy drawn between the human body—and its corporeal needs, pleasures, and desires—and the soul, on the one hand, and fleshly language versus spiritual, allegorical meaning on the other, becomes a perfect vehicle for the transcendence of the physical, bodily life that is required to transform Judaism from the cult of a tribe to a world-cultural system.¹⁹

For the Rabbis of the midrash, the manna is the literal record of a corporeal food, miraculously given to this people Israel at a particular moment in history. To be sure, it was wonderful food, protean in taste, wondrous in odor and color, miraculous in its exact measure, and distinguished from all other food in that it was perfectly absorbed by the body so that there was no bodily waste. But it was food, not an allegorical sign of something spiritual. As such, it remains a sign of corporeality. Insistence on the literal, corporeal concreteness of the manna constitutes for the Rabbinic formation a claim that the physical, historical existence of Israel in the world remains the ontologically significant moment. There is, accordingly, a perfect homology between the sign theory or hermeneutics and anthropology of the Rabbis, as there is for the dualist Jews and Fathers as well. For the Rabbis, for whom significance is invested directly in visible, tangible, corporeal bodies in the world, the generating human

19. See Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), p. 5. Jaeger makes the point there that Johann Gustav Droysen, the "discoverer" of Hellenism, was motivated by the desire to explain how Christianity became a world religion!

body, the tribe, its genealogy and concrete history, and its particular physical, corporeal practices are supremely valued. This is, of course, a point of view that neither the more cosmopolitan Jews—like Philo—nor Christianity could tolerate. Both took advantage of a dualistic ontology to solve the cultural problem. For the less radical Philo, the body remained significant but was significantly downgraded vis-à-vis the spirit, both the body of sexuality and the body of language/history. Both the carnal and the spiritual were meaningful, but in a severely hierarchical way. For the more radical Paul and most of the Fathers, the body was devalued much more completely, retaining significance primarily as a pointer to spirit and the spiritual/universal sense.²⁰

God's Kisses: Origen and Midrash on the Song of Songs 1:2

Another excellent example of this hermeneutic of the body can be found in Origen. For this Father, words stand in a relation of correspondence to ideas that are immaterial and imperceptible. Although Origen's work on the Song of Songs has been shown to have close thematic affinities with the interpretations of the midrash,²¹ his linguistic strategies are nearly opposite to them. In excess of Philo, for whom the flesh (and fleshly language) are understood as necessary helpers to the spirit (and the allegorical meaning), for Origen the carnal and the spiritual meanings do not parallel each other but are actually opposed, as the body is opposed to the soul. In Ann Astel's vivid formulation,

achieving the intensity of an erotic love for God depends, moreover, on the sublimation of every bodily desire—even, in Origen's own case, at the cost of self-castration. . . . The mark of a perfect soul is precisely this power "to forsake things bodily and visible and to hasten to those that are not of the body and are spiritual."

Origen's method of exegesis, then, directly parallels the process of mystical marriage which is the Song's secret subject. Even as the exegete moves away from the *Canticum's* literal, carnal meaning to its *sensus interioris*, the bridal soul, renouncing what is earthly, reaches out for the invisible and eternal. . . . An almost violent departure from the body itself and from literal meaning energizes the soul's

20. Implied here is a particular reading of Paul on the Torah and the Commandments that will be expanded later in the text. I take the sacraments to be a reproduction of the original *mysterion* of the incarnation, however, so resurrection in the flesh is problematic for me. See John G. Gager, "Body-Symbols and Social Reality: Resurrection, Incarnation and Asceticism in Early Christianity," *Religion* 12 (Oct. 1982):345–64, for a very important discussion of this issue.

21. See Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation," in *Studies in Aggadah and Folk-Literature*, ed. Joseph Heinemann and Dov Noy, vol. 22 of *Scripta hierosolymitana* (Jerusalem, 1971): 247–75.

ascent. To pass beyond the literal, carnal *sensus* is to escape the prisonhouse of the flesh.²²

For Origen the very process of allegorical interpretation constitutes *in itself and already* a transcendence of the flesh. Accordingly the divine kiss is understood by him to refer to the experience of the soul, "when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, to unravel what was tangled, to unfold what was involved, to interpret parables and riddles and the sayings of the wise along the lines of her own expert thinking."²³ Since in Origen's Platonism the world of spirit is the world of the intelligible, for him "intellection and loving are one and the same" (*SS*, p. 4),²⁴ and the discovery of the true and pure spiritual meaning behind or trapped in the carnal words constitutes the divine kiss. It enacts that "overcoming carnal desire [that] ultimately enables the soul to return to its original state and become once more a *mens*" (*ibid.*).²⁵

In the midrash on Song of Songs 1:2, this very kiss is understood quite differently, albeit still as divine. In Origen, the erotic meanings of the kiss in the first verse of the Song, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," are sublimated into intellection because of his doctrine that the body is a sign of the fall of the soul from God and must be transcended to be reunited with Him. In the midrash it is that very body, the actual mouth, that experiences God's kiss:

He will kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. Said Rabbi Yohanan, "An angel would take the Speech from the Holy, Blessed One, each and every word, and court every member of Israel and say to him: Do you accept this Speech? It has such and such many requirements, and such and such many punishments, such and such many matters which are forbidden, and such and such many acts which are mandatory, such and such many easy and difficult actions, and such and such is the reward for fulfilling it. And the Israelite would say to him: Yes. And then he would further say to him: Do you accept the Divinity of the Holy, Blessed One? And he would answer him: Yes and again yes. Immediately, he would kiss him on his mouth, as it is written, 'You have been made to see in order to know' (Deut. 4:35)—by means of a messenger."²⁶

22. Ann W. Astel, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *SS*.

23. Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. and ed. R. P. Lawson (Westminster, Md., 1957), p. 61, quoted in *SS*, pp. 3–4.

24. See also Gerard E. Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis: Origen and the Two Swords* (Berkeley, 1979).

25. For a related account of allegory in Augustine, which is nevertheless interestingly different, see Jon Whitman, "From the Textual to the Temporal: Early Christian 'Allegory' and Early Romantic 'Symbol,'" *New Literary History* 22 (Winter 1991):161–76, esp. p. 166.

26. *Song of Songs Rabbah* [Hebrew], ed. Shimson Dunsky (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 13; here-

The erotic connotations, overtones, and charges of this description of divine revelation (even the prefiguration of Molly Bloom), as it was experienced by each and every Israelite, are as blunt as could be imagined.²⁷ Rabbi Yohanan explicitly connects this kiss with the visual experience of seeing God, also a powerful erotic image.²⁸ These erotic implications were to be most fully developed in the midrashic (and later mystical) readings of the rite of circumcision. In those readings, the performance of that rite was understood as a necessary condition for divine-human erotic encounter—for seeing God.²⁹

The medieval Jewish mystics speak of a “Covenant of the Mouth” and a “Covenant of the Foreskin,” thus suggesting a symbolic connection between mouth and penis, between sexual and mystical experience.³⁰ The homology is already implied in the Torah itself, for there Moses is spoken of as “uncircumcised of the lips” (Exod. 6:30).³¹ This analogy suggested to the Rabbis an extraordinary reading of circumcision as a necessary condition for divine revelation, whether oral or visual. Indeed, it is in the matter of circumcision that the midrashic tradition had from the beginning most sharply split from the Jewish-Platonic hermeneutic tradition.

Philo’s longest discussion of circumcision is in *On the Special Laws*, a tract whose name reveals what I take to be a common concern among such personalities as the author of *The Wisdom of Solomon*, Philo, and Paul; that is, the specialness of Jewish rites and the ways that these mark off the Jews from others.³² Circumcision is, in a sense, chief among these, and by

after abbreviated *SSR*. By translating the Hebrew word *mehazzer* as *court* in the first sentence, I may be loading the dice in the direction of eroticism; however I do not think so. *Mehazzer*, while it may mean generally to attempt to persuade someone to do something, very often has the sense of persuading someone to marry one. Given the explicit eroticism of the context, therefore, I think this is the most adequate translation.

27. Although, to be sure, a very late glossator has added the words, “It didn’t really happen so, but he made them hallucinate it” (*SSR*, p. 13 n. 4).

28. See Daniel Boyarin, “The Eye in the Torah: Ocular Desire in Midrashic Hermeneutic,” *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 532–50.

29. The gender implications of this do not escape me and will be treated (to the extent that I am able) below.

30. Compare the interpretations of this homology cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol,” *History of Religions* 27 (Nov. 1987): 189–215, esp. pp. 207–11; hereafter abbreviated “CV.”

31. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz offered another reading of this in “The Nakedness of a Woman’s Voice, the Pleasure in a Man’s Mouth: An Oral History of Ancient Judaism,” paper presented at the Annenberg Research Institute’s colloquium on “Women in Religion and Society,” Philadelphia, 6 May 1991.

32. See 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. Greenspan, Earle Hilgert, and Burton L. Mack (Chico, Calif., 1984), pp. 51–79.

Philo's own testimony ridiculed in his environment.³³ Philo offers four standard explanations and defenses of the practice, all of which promote rational and universal reasons for being circumcised. In fact, Philo emphasizes that the Egyptians are also circumcised.³⁴ Finally, he offers in his own name two "symbolic" [*symbolon* (*OSL*, bk. 1, 7:105)] readings of circumcision. The explanation most relevant for us is the first, namely,

the excision of pleasures which bewitch the mind. For since among the love-lures of pleasure the palm is held by the mating of man and woman, the legislators thought good to dock the organ which ministers to such intercourse, thus making circumcision the figure of the excision of excessive and superfluous pleasure, not only of one pleasure but of all the other pleasures signified by one, and that the most imperious. [*OSL*, bk. 1, 7:105]³⁵

For Philo, "the flesh of the foreskin [symbolizes] those sense-pleasures and impulses which afterwards come to the body."³⁶ What we see, then, in Philo is a typical middle Platonist interpretation of the meaning of circumcision. It is middle Platonist both in its form and in its substance: in its form because it is allegorical in structure and in its substance because it is ascetic in content.³⁷ Once again the nexus of these two moments is demon-

33. See Philo, *On the Special Laws*, trans. Colson, in vols. 7 and 8 of *Philo*, esp. bk. 1, 7:101; hereafter abbreviated *OSL*.

34. The circumcision of the Egyptians appears in a very early (late first century) polemic against "The Jews," *The Epistle of Barnabas* (9:6), where the author writes, "But you will say: 'But surely the people were circumcised as a seal!' But every Syrian and Arab and all the idol-worshiping priests are circumcised; does this mean that they, too, belong to their covenant? Why, even the Egyptians practice circumcision!" (*The Epistle of Barnabas* [9:6], *The Apostolic Fathers*, rev. ed., trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. Michael W. Holmes [Grand Rapids, Mich., 1989], p. 174). What was a defense in Philo's apology for Judaism vis-à-vis "pagans," becomes an attack in this apology for Christianity vis-à-vis Judaism.

35. Philo's second interpretation is also fascinating. He writes:

The other reason is that a man should know himself and banish from the soul the grievous malady of conceit. For there are some who have prided themselves on their power of fashioning as with a sculptor's cunning the fairest of creatures, man, and in their braggart pride assumed godship, closing their eyes to the Cause of all that comes into being, though they might find in their familiars a corrective for their delusion. For in their midst are many men incapable of begetting and many women barren, whose matings are ineffective and who grow old childless. The evil belief, therefore, needs to be excised from the mind with any others that are not loyal to God. [*OSL*, bk. 1, 7:105, 107]

36. Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, bk. 3 sec. 52, supp. 1 of *Philo*, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), p. 253.

37. In content, if not in form, Moses Maimonides's interpretation of the function of circumcision is very similar to Philo's. According to him, it was instituted "to bring about a decrease in sexual intercourse and a weakening of the organ in question, so that this activity be diminished and the organ be in as quiet a state as possible" (Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. and ed. Shlomo Pines [Chicago, 1963], p. 609). It is fascinating

strated. Philo, however, typically berates those who, having a proper understanding of the meaning of circumcision, ignore the physical observance of the rite.³⁸

Paul goes much farther than Philo in a radical reinterpretation of circumcision. Where Philo argued that circumcision both symbolizes and effects the excision of the passions—that is, it symbolizes the reduction of all passion by effecting in the flesh of the penis a reduction of sexual passion—Paul “ties the removal of the fleshly desires exclusively to the believer’s crucifixion with Christ.”³⁹ Since he allegorically interpreted circumcision as the outer sign performed in the flesh of an inner circumcision of the spirit, therefore, I would claim that circumcision was for Paul replaced by its spiritual signified. Once again, as in the case of Gregory, the thematics and the form of an allegorical reading perfectly double each other, for the transfer from a “carnal” meaning of the language to a “spiritual” one exactly parallels the transfer from a corporeal practice to a spiritual transformation. Paul returns again and again to this theme, most clearly in such passages as the following:

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 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. [Rom. 2:25–29]

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evil-workers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the true circumcision, who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put not confidence in the flesh. [Phil. 3:2–3]⁴⁰

If the Romans passage were only an attack on hypocritical Jews who keep public commandments and ignore private ones, there would be nothing

to see how the influence of Greek philosophical attitudes produces the same results in Jews as unconnected as Philo and Maimonides.

38. See Borgen, “Observations on the Theme ‘Paul and Philo,’” p. 86, and John J. Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century,” in *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, Calif., 1985), pp. 163–86.

39. Borgen, “Observations on the Theme ‘Paul and Philo,’” p. 99.

40. See also Gal. 6:11–17 and Col. 2:11: “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ.” I do not quote this passage in the text because the attribution of this letter to Paul is in dispute.

new in his doctrine at all. He would be a preacher continuing in the prophetic tradition, which we have no reason to doubt was continued in his day. No prophetic or pharisaic preacher, however, could produce an *opposition* between circumcision and the Commandments. Circumcision is one of the Commandments. What is new, then, in Paul's teaching on circumcision, is the opposition between some practices that are in the flesh and others that have to do with the spirit, that is, in the Platonistic organization of the opposition between that which is kept and that which is rejected by such Jews.⁴¹ When Paul says "matter of the heart," he echoes Jeremiah; when he says "spiritual and not literal," he echoes Plato.⁴² Paul goes farther than Philo in his explicit and repeated statements that the significance of the physical practice of circumcision is canceled by its spiritual meaning, "for in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6).

The Dialogue of Justin Martyr and the Jew Trypho on Circumcision

While there is scholarly doubt as to Paul's intentions with regard to circumcision, there is none whatever about the intentions of his earliest readers. They certainly understood him to be abrogating circumcision as the transcendable physical sign of an inner and invisible spiritual transformation. A remarkable text of the early second century will help us to appreciate the interactions between Jews and Christians (by this time we can and must speak of Jews and Christians) on the question of circumcision and its correlation with other issues of corporeality. I am referring to the famous *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, perhaps the last occasion in late antiquity when something like a true dialogue between the two communities would be produced, that is, a dialogue in which the Jew is not merely a trope but a speaking subject.⁴³

41. On this reading, the Romans passage is less of an embarrassment to a consistent reading of Paul as having held that spiritual meanings replace physical rites. See Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York, 1983), p. 204.

42. Borgen produces a somewhat similar interpretation:

In this way we see that Paul has as background the Jewish dualism between a life in (pagan) passions and desires, and a life under the Law of Moses. He replaces this dualism, however, by the dualism between a life in (pagan) passions and desires and a life in the power of the eschatological Spirit.

As a result, if a person in this eschatological situation still claims that one has to live under the Law of Moses, he comes in conflict with the eschatological reality of the Spirit. In this way those who still cling to the works of the Law of Moses are with logical consequence pushed together with those who live in (pagan) passions, since both categories oppose Christ and the life of the Spirit. Thus, Paul's thinking moves from the idea of (pagan) fleshly desires to life under the Law also being flesh, since man in both cases puts his trust in man's effort and boasting (6:12–13), and not in the cross of Christ. [Borgen, "Observations on the Theme of 'Paul and Philo,'" p. 98]

43. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*,

Trypho quite eloquently represents the puzzlement of a Rabbinic Jew confronted with such a different pattern of religion:

But this is what we are most at a loss about: that you, professing to be pious, and supposing yourselves better than others, are not in any particular separated from them, and do not alter your mode of living from the nations, in that you observe no festivals or sabbaths, and do not have the rite of circumcision.⁴⁴

In a word, we have here the true cultural issue dividing Christians and Jews, certainly by the second century and, I think, already in the first: the significance of bodily filiation, membership in a kin-group for religious life.⁴⁵ As long as participation in the religious community is tied to those rites that are special, performed by and marked in the body, the religion remains an affair of a particular tribal group, "Israel in the flesh."⁴⁶ The near obsession with circumcision in all of these people is not to be explained in the difficulty of the performance of the rite but in that it is the most complete sign of the connection of the Torah to the concrete body of Israel. People of late antiquity were willing to do many extreme and painful things for religion. It is absurd to imagine that circumcision would have stood in the way of conversion for people who were willing to undergo fasts, the lives of anchorites, martyrdom, and even occasionally castration for the sake of God.⁴⁷ And so Justin answers Trypho:

For we too would observe the fleshly circumcision, and the Sabbaths, and in short all the feasts, if we did not know for what reason they were enjoined you,—namely, on account of your transgressions and the hardness of your hearts. For if we patiently endure all things contrived against us by wicked men and demons, so that even amid cruelties unutterable, death and torments, we pray for mercy to those who

vol. 1 of *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*, 5 vols. (Chicago, 1971–89), 1:15, and Robert S. MacLennan, *Early Christian Texts on Jews and Judaism* (Atlanta, 1990), pp. 53, 85–88. MacLennan's book is a most important summary of and contribution to our understanding of Justin's text and its background, and contains a rich bibliography on Justin (p. 49 n. 2). I do not cite it extensively here because I am focussing on only a small part of the text. It is important to note that Justin himself does not cite Paul explicitly. However, MacLennan notes the similarity of their expression on the issue that concerns us here (see pp. 74–75).

44. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue of Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, with Trypho, a Jew*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, trans. and ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, 10 vols. (1885; Grand Rapids, Mich., 1980–83), 1:199; hereafter abbreviated *DJ*.

45. See *The Epistle of Barnabas*, p. 174.

46. See also the very helpful remarks in Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis*, pp. 17–18 and 51–60 on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments in Paul and Origen.

47. On this reason for castration, see *ibid.*, pp. 60–62.

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