

# “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.<sup>1</sup> 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."<sup>2</sup> For both, hermeneutics becomes anthropology.

Pauline religion itself should be understood as a contiguous religiocultural formation with other Hellenistic Judaism.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> 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

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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."<sup>11</sup> 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:<sup>12</sup> “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)<sup>13</sup>

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,<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 woman<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup>

*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,<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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."<sup>23</sup> 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),<sup>24</sup> 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.*).<sup>25</sup>

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."<sup>26</sup>

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.<sup>27</sup> Rabbi Yohanan explicitly connects this kiss with the visual experience of seeing God, also a powerful erotic image.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> The homology is already implied in the Torah itself, for there Moses is spoken of as “uncircumcised of the lips” (Exod. 6:30).<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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]<sup>35</sup>

For Philo, "the flesh of the foreskin [symbolizes] those sense-pleasures and impulses which afterwards come to the body."<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.”<sup>39</sup> 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]<sup>40</sup>

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

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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.<sup>41</sup> When Paul says "matter of the heart," he echoes Jeremiah; when he says "spiritual and not literal," he echoes Plato.<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup>

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.<sup>45</sup> 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."<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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

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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.



inflict such things upon us, and do not wish to give the least retort to any one, even as the new Lawgiver commanded us: how is it, Trypho, that we would not observe those rites which do not harm us,—I speak of fleshly circumcision, and Sabbaths, and feasts. [*DJ*, p. 203]

The crucial issue dividing Judaism from Christianity is, as I am claiming throughout this work, the relation to the body as a signifier of corporeal existence in all of its manifestations, and here in particular to its status as a signifier of belonging to a particular kin-group.<sup>48</sup> The dualism of body and spirit in anthropological terms transferred to the realm of language and interpretation provides the perfect vehicle for this carnal signification to be transcended. Justin repeats accordingly the gesture of Philo in understanding the corporeal rites, the holidays, the Sabbath, and circumcision as being “symbols” of spiritual transformations (*DJ*, p. 201), again exceeding Philo, of course, in that for Philo the corporeal existence of the signifier was still crucially relevant, while for Justin it has been completely superseded:

For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old, and belongs to yourselves alone; but *this* is for all universally. . . . For the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ. [*DJ*, p. 200]

If, however, the allegorization of the Commandments on the part of a Christian like Justin creates the attractive possibility of a universalizing discourse, it also contains, perhaps inevitably, the seeds of a discourse of contempt for the Jews:

For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem. [*DJ*, p. 202]

The critique of one kind of particularism leads to one of another sort that threatens ideologically and in practice to allegorize the Jews out of exis-

48. This should not be understood as an analogical relationship—that is, of the body of the individual and the social body—but as an actual implication. If I am my body, then I am ontologically filiated with other bodies. The move from family to “nation” or “race” is, however, accomplished via the myth of origin of the cultural group in a single progenitor. For the close connection between “race,” filiation, and even place, see the quotation from Porphyry’s *Life of Plotinus* that serves as the epigraph to the final section of this paper.

tence. On the one hand Justin argues that Abel, Noah, Lot, and Melchizedek, all uncircumcised, were pleasing to God (a message of universalism), but on the other, "to you alone this circumcision was necessary, in order that the people may be no people, and the nation no nation" (*DJ*, p. 204). I would read, then, the resistance to dualism and any allegorization so typical of Rabbinic Judaism from the second century until perhaps the seventh as a gesture of self-protection.<sup>49</sup> The Rabbis and their flocks are saying: We will continue to exist corporeally, in our bodily practices, the practices that are our legacy from our carnal filiation and bodily history, and will not be interpreted out of fleshly existence.

*"From my flesh I will see God"*

The Rabbinic interpretations of circumcision focussed strongly, of course, on the physical rite itself and the inscription that it made on the body. In their writings, this mark of natural or naturalized membership in a particular people is made the center of salvation. As early Christian writings are most strongly read as a critique of the corporeality of Judaism, with its emphasis on the physical practices of a particular tribe, so, I would claim, are the midrashic writings most strongly read as a critique of the deracination of historicity, physicality, and carnal filiation that characterizes Christianity. In midrashic interpretation of circumcision as well, there is a perfect homology between the form and content of the interpretation. The following text is exemplary:

All Israelites who are circumcised will come into Paradise, for the Holy Blessed One placed His name on Israel, in order that they might come into Paradise, and What is the name and the seal which He placed upon them? It is ShaDaY. The Shi"n [the first letter of the root], he placed in the nose, The Dale"t, He placed in the hand, and the Yo"d in the circumcision.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to Paul and his followers, for whom the interpretation of circumcision was a rejection of the body, for the Rabbis of the midrash it is a sign of the sanctification of that very physical body; the cut in the penis completes the inscription of God's name on the body.<sup>51</sup> It speaks of circumcision as a transformation of the body into a holy object.

Some of the Rabbis, moreover, read circumcision as a necessary prep-

49. See Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*, p. 289.

50. *Midrash Tanhuma* 14; quoted in Wolfson, "Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 78 (July–Oct. 1987): 78.

51. Although obviously circumcision only affects the male body, I shall suggest below that its symbolism did not entirely exclude females.

aration for seeing God, the *summum bonum* of late antique religious life.<sup>52</sup> This is, of course, an entirely different hermeneutic structure from Platonic allegorizing because, although a spiritual meaning is assigned to the corporeal act, the corporeal act is not the signifier of that meaning but its very constitution. That is, circumcision here is not the sign of something happening in the spirit of the Jew, but it is the very event itself—and it is, of course, in his body.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, for the Rabbinic formation, this seeing of God was not understood as the spiritual vision of a Platonic eye of the mind, but as the physical seeing of fleshly eyes at a real moment in history.<sup>54</sup> Thus, even when it spiritualizes, the Rabbinic tradition does so entirely through the body. Spirit here is an aspect of body, almost, I would say, the same spirit that experiences the pleasure of sex through the body, and not something apart from, beyond, or above the body.

Elliot Wolfson has gathered the Rabbinic (and later) material connecting circumcision with vision of God:

It is written, "This, after my skin will have been peeled off, but from my flesh, I will see God" (Job 19:26). Abraham said, after I circumcised myself many converts came to cleave to this sign. "But from my flesh, I will see God," for had I not done this [circumcised myself], on what account would the Holy Blessed One, have appeared to me? "And the Lord appeared to him."<sup>55</sup>

As Wolfson correctly observes there are two hermeneutic moves being made simultaneously in this midrash (see "CV," pp. 192–93). The first involves the interpretation of Genesis 17:1–14, which is the description of Abraham's circumcision, and Genesis 18:1 (and following), which begins, "And the Lord appeared to Abraham in Elone Mamre." The midrash, following its usual canons of interpretation, attributes a strong causal nexus to these events following on one another. Had Abraham not circumcised himself, God would not have appeared to him. This interpretation is splendidly confirmed by the verse from Job. The Book of Job, together with the other Holy Writings, was considered by the Rabbis to be an exegetical text that has the function of interpreting (or guid-

52. See Boyarin, "The Eye in the Torah."

53. Here, of course, only *his* is possible. Circumcision is accordingly a very problematic moment in the constitution of gens and gender from my feminist point of view. All I can do, it seems to me at present, is record that problematic. See, however, "CV," p. 191 n. 5.

54. See Boyarin, "The Eye in the Torah." Justin Martyr provides an excellent example of a late antique Platonic version of seeing God with the mind's eye (see *DJ*, p. 196).

55. *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* 48:1, 48:9; cited in "CV," p. 192. Much of the following section is dependent on the material that Wolfson has gathered in the two papers cited above.

ing interpretation of) the Torah.<sup>56</sup> In this case, the verse of Job, which refers to the peeling off of skin, is taken by a brilliant appropriation to refer to the peeling off of the skin of circumcision, and the continuation of the verse that speaks of seeing God from one's flesh is taken as a reference to the theophany at Elone Mamre. The reading of the sequence of the Torah's text is confirmed by the explicit causality that the Job text inscribes.<sup>57</sup> Circumcision of the flesh—peeling of the skin—provides the vision of God. As Wolfson remarks, this midrash constitutes an interpretation of circumcision that directly counters the Pauline one: "The emphasis on Abraham's circumcision . . . can only be seen as a tacit rejection of the Christian position that circumcision of the flesh had been replaced by circumcision of the spirit (enacted in baptism)" ("CV," p. 194). It is, of course, this very moment of the refusal of allegorization on the part of the Rabbis, their explicit resistance to being allegorized, that so provoked the Fathers and Augustine in particular. Yet from this passage we see as well that the characterization of Rabbinic Judaism as being unconcerned with spiritual experience is unwarranted. The physical act of circumcision *in the flesh*, which prepares the male Jew for sexual intercourse, is also that which prepares him for divine intercourse. It is difficult, therefore, to escape the association of sexual and mystical experience in this text.

The strongly eroticized character of the experience of seeing God established by the interpretation of circumcision is made virtually explicit in another (later) midrashic text, also cited by Wolfson, on Song of Songs 3:11:

*O, Daughters of Zion, go forth, and gaze upon King Solomon, wearing the crown that his mother made for him on his wedding day, on his day of bliss.* It speaks about the time when the Presence rested in the Tabernacle. "Go forth and gaze," as it is said, "And all the people saw and shouted and fell on their faces" (Lev. 9:24). "The daughters of Zion," those who were distinguished by circumcision, for if they were uncircumcised they would not have been able to look upon the Presence. . . . And thus it says, "Moses said, This is the thing which the Lord has commanded that you do, in order that the Glory of the Lord may appear to you" (Lev. 9:6). What was "this thing"? He told them about circumcision, for it says, "This is the thing which caused Joshua to perform circumcision" (Josh. 5:4).

"Which God commanded Abraham to do" (Gen. ?). It may be compared to a shopkeeper who has a friend who is a priest. He had something unclean in his house, and he wanted to bring the priest into the house. The priest said to him: If you want me to go into your house, listen to me and remove that unclean thing from your house.

56. See Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990).

57. For an almost identical use of Job, see *ibid.*, p. 86.

When the shopkeeper knew that there was no unclean thing there, he went and brought the priest into his house. Similarly, the Holy, Blessed One, when He wanted to appear to Abraham, His beloved, the foreskin was appended to him. When he circumcised himself, immediately, He was revealed, as it says, "On that very day Abraham was circumcised" (Gen. 17:26), and immediately afterward "The Lord appeared to him" (Gen. 18:1).

Therefore, Moses said to them, God commanded Abraham, your father, to perform circumcision when He wished to appear to him. So in your case, whoever is uncircumcised, let him go out and circumcise himself, "that the Glory of the Lord may appear to you" (Lev. 9:6). Thus Solomon said, "O Daughters of Zion, go forth and gaze upon King Solomon," the King who desires those who are perfect, as it is written, "Walk before Me and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1), for the foreskin is a blemish upon the body.<sup>58</sup>

This is indeed a remarkable text, not least for the blurring of gender that it encodes in its interpretive moves. The verse in question is also historicized, which is consistent with the entire midrashic enterprise of interpreting the Song of Songs. It is taken to refer to the event described in Leviticus 9, in which the entire People of Israel had a marvelous vision of God. This event is interpreted as a wedding between God and Israel, as are other moments of revelatory vision of God, such as the hierophany at Mount Sinai. The verse of Song of Songs that refers to King Solomon's wedding is taken, then, as an interpretation of the wedding between God and Israel described in Leviticus. This, however, is where the complications begin. By a typical midrashic pun, King Solomon [*Schelomoh*] is turned into God, the king who requires perfection [*Schelemut*]. If the male partner is God, then the female partner must be Israel. Accordingly, the "Daughters of Zion" are Israel. But this also results in a gender paradox, for many of the Israelites who participated in that divine vision were men. Those very Daughters of Zion are accordingly understood as males. The word *Zion* [Hebrew *Tsiyyon*] is taken as a noun derived from the root *ts/y/n* [to be marked], and accordingly the Daughters of Tsiyyon are read as the circumcised men of Israel.

Now I would like to suggest that more than midrashic arbitrariness is at work here, for the mystical experience *au fond*, when experienced erotically often involves (perhaps only in the West) gender paradox. The mystical experience is interpreted as a penetration by the divine word or spirit into the body and soul of the adept. This is accordingly an image of sexuality in which the mystic is figured as the female partner. This paradoxical gender assignment (when the mystic is biologically male) is a problem for

58. *Numbers Rabbah* 12:10 (Tel Aviv, 1960); also quoted in "CV," pp. 196–97.

erotic mystic imagery.<sup>59</sup> Harrison has described a similar issue in the work of Gregory of Nyssa:

When the human receptacle is described allegorically in terms of sexuality, it has to be represented as female. It is no accident that in his first work, *On Virginity*, and in one of his last, the great *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Gregory chooses feminine language to speak of the human person, especially in describing our relations with God, which for him are the definitive aspect of human identity and existence. . . . In the treatise *On Those Who Have Fallen Asleep*, he speculates that in the resurrection human reproductive faculties may be transformed into a capacity to become impregnated with life from God and bring forth various forms of goodness from within oneself. This suggests that although human persons can be either male or female in this world and will be neither male nor female in the next (cf. Gal. 3.28), on a different level they all relate to God in a female way, as bride to Bridegroom. ["AA"]

My perhaps too bold suggestion is that our midrashic text is related to the same paradox of mystical experience. Circumcision is understood by the midrash as feminizing the male, thus making him open to receive the divine speech and vision of God. My interpretation of this midrash is that of medieval mystics (see "CV," pp. 198ff): "Rabbi Yose said, Why is it written, 'And the Lord will pass over the door [literally opening]' (Exod. 12:23)? . . . 'Over the opening,' read it literally as 'opening!' That is, the opening of the body. And what is the opening of the body? That is the circumcision."<sup>60</sup> Although this text is a pseudepigraph of the thirteenth century, I am suggesting that the idea is already embryonic in the midrashic text, in which circumcised men are "daughters." The mystic pseudepigraph would then be making explicit that which is implicit in the earlier formation. This interpretation can be supported as well by various Rabbinic texts that refer to the Torah as feminizing its devotees.<sup>61</sup>

There is further important support for this notion from the reading of the famous verse of Ezekiel (16:6) in which Israel is figured as a female

59. See Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Nakedness of a Woman's Voice, the Pleasure in a Man's Mouth."

60. *Zohar*, 2:36a; quoted in "CV," p. 204. As Wolfson so persuasively demonstrates, however, the dominant kabbalistic trend was to understand the mystic as male and the divine element that he encountered as female, the *shekhina*, or even the Torah represented as female, and then the circumcision was necessary for penetration of this female, just as it is required for human sexual intercourse (see "CV," pp. 210–11). For the Rabbis (of the premedieval period), such a divine female as a solution to the paradox of mystical gender was excluded and only feminization of the male mystic was possible.

61. See also Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Nakedness of a Woman's Voice, the Pleasure in a Man's Mouth."

child.<sup>62</sup> God says to her, "I found you weltering in your blood," and blesses her, "Live in your blood." This blood is interpreted in Rabbinic literature as the blood of circumcision!<sup>63</sup> This displacement involves very complicated semiotic transactions. Israel is a female partner with respect to God, but many of the adepts in Israel are male. An event must take place in their bodies that will enable them to take the position of the female, and that event is circumcision. Ezekiel's metaphor of "weltering" in one's blood becomes the vehicle for a transformation of male blood into female blood and thus of male Israelites into female, precisely in the way that the circumcised men of Israel become "Daughters of Zion." This transformation is still powerfully enacted at the ritual level today, when at a traditional circumcision ceremony the newly circumcised boy is addressed: "And I say to you [feminine pronoun!]: In your [feminine] blood, you [feminine] shall live." These texts strongly suggest the possibility that circumcision was understood somehow as rendering the male somewhat feminine, thus making it possible for the male Israelite to have communion with a male deity.<sup>64</sup> In direct contrast to Roman accusations that circumcision was a mutilation of the body that made men ugly, the Rabbinic texts emphasize over and over that the operation removes something ugly from the male body.

A possible consequence of this interpretation, in particular the repeated figuration of the foreskin as a blemish, would be simply that females do not need to be circumcised in order to see God, just as males born circumcised do not have to be circumcised in order to see God.<sup>65</sup> While I am well aware that this suggestion can be fairly accused of having an apologetic tendency, I would like tentatively to advance it nevertheless. In support of this reading are the texts that indicate explicitly that at the Crossing of the Red Sea both men and women were equal in their vision of God.<sup>66</sup> The androcentrism of this formation is of course not affected by this reading. Its valence may, however, be somewhat reoriented, for circumcision and subincision are understood in many cultures to produce

62. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz reminded me of the importance of this passage in this context.

63. This interpretation occurs so frequently that it can be regarded as almost a topos.

64. One could, of course, read this in the opposite way, namely, that there is here an arrogation of a female symbol that makes it male, and that circumcision is a male erasure of the female role in procreation as well. I am not trying to discredit such an interpretation but rather to suggest an alternate reading, both of which may be functioning in the culture at the same time.

65. That is, there are male infants born literally without a foreskin, which was considered a special sign of divine favor. I base this claim on the fact that Balaam was listed as one of the ten who was born circumcised, which I take to be an allusion to the fact that he is the only Gentile who is portrayed as having seen God! Whether a baby born circumcised needs to have a drop of blood drawn is a controversy in halakha and is not necessarily related to the question with which I am dealing here.

66. See Boyarin, "The Eye in the Torah."

feminized men.<sup>67</sup> While it seems, therefore, that circumcision in ancient Judaism emphasizes the male-male genealogical connection, it may nevertheless have been understood not as exclusion of the female so much as inclusion of the male in filiation.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, the persistent reference to the foreskin as a blemish may be understood as a reading of circumcision as an operation that renders men more like women by removing that blemish. On this reading, circumcision, *within this Jewish cultural formation*, has something of the valence of *couvade*.<sup>69</sup>

In any case, whether or not this last proposal can be accepted, the figure of revelation as an erotically charged encounter, of a vision of God, is certainly present here. What must be emphasized, however, is that in the period with which I am dealing here, the mystical experience of Vision of God is always represented as past and as future: as concrete experience in the *historical* life of the People, Israel, and as a future desired experience for both the individual and the community. The Song of Songs is not, then, allegorically read as the eternal erotic life of the soul with God but as a song that was sung at a concrete historical moment of intimacy, at a moment in which God showed Himself to all the People.

### *Seeing God in History*

In Rabbinic religion there is no invisible God manifested in an Incarnation. God Himself is visible (and therefore corporeal).<sup>70</sup> Language also is not divided into a carnal and a spiritual being. Accordingly, there can be no allegory.<sup>71</sup> For Rabbinic Judaism, the Song of Songs is the record of an

67. See Chris Knight, "Menstrual Synchrony and the Australian Rainbow Snake," in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, ed. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 232–55, esp. pp. 247–49.

68. See Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990).

69. I advisedly do not draw on Bruno Bettelheim, *Symbolic Wounds: Puberty Rites and the Envious Male* (New York, 1952), because I do not accept a reading that universalizes any set of meanings for a given practice in a psychoanalytic mode. Cross-cultural comparison is useful because it suggests possible valences for a given practice, not because it tells us what the meanings are in a particular formation.

70. This section repeats a bit of Boyarin, "The Eye in the Torah," for the sake of the present argument. It is important to emphasize, however, that this argument does not necessarily mean that God has a body of the same substance as a human body. Alon Goshen-Gottstein has recently written an excellent discussion of this issue in "The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature," paper presented at the conference on "People of the Body/People of the Book," Stanford and Berkeley, Calif., 29–30 Apr. 1991.

71. I would like to clarify two things at this point. The first is that allegory, both as a genre of text production and as a reading practice, is a notoriously slippery category. Therefore it should be clear that when I say "allegoresis" I mean allegorical reading of the Philonic-Origenic type, which has a fairly clear structure as well as explicit theoretical underpinnings. It is a hermeneutic structure in which narrative on the physical or worldly level is taken as the sign of invisible and spiritual structures on the level of ideas. It follows,



actual, concrete, visible occurrence in the historical life of the People, Israel. When the Rabbis read the Song of Songs, they do not translate its "carnal" meaning into one or more "spiritual" senses; rather, they establish a concrete, historical moment in which to contextualize it.<sup>72</sup> It is a love song, a love dialogue to be more specific, that was actually (or fictionally, according to some views)<sup>73</sup> uttered by a lover and a beloved at a moment of great intimacy, at an actual historical moment of erotic communion, when God allowed Himself to be seen by Israel, either at the Crossing of the Red Sea or at the Revelation at Mount Sinai:

Rabbi Eliezer decoded [*patar*] the verse in the hour that Israel stood at the Sea. *My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep* (Song 2:14), that they were hidden in the hiding place of the Sea—*Show me your visage*; this is what is written. "Stand forth and see the salvation of the Lord" (Exod. 14:13)—*Let me hear your voice*; this is the singing, as it says, "Then Moses sang" (Exod. 15:1)—*For your voice is lovely*; this is the Song—*And your visage is beautiful*; for Israel were pointing with their fingers and saying "This is my God and I will beautify Him" (Exod. 15:2).

Rabbi Akiva decoded the verse in the hour that they stood before Mount Sinai. *My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep* (Song 2:14), for they were hidden in the hiding places of Sinai. *Show me your visage*, as it says, "And all of the People saw the voices" (Exod. 20:14)—*Let me hear your voice*, this is the voice from before the Commandments, for it says "All that you say we will do and we will hear" (Exod. 24:7)—*For your voice is pleasant*; this is the voice after the commandments, as it says, "God has heard the voice of your speaking; that which you have said is goodly" (Deut. 5:25). [SSR, p. 73]

To be sure, the lover was a divine lover but the beloveds were actual human beings, and the moment of erotic communion was mystical and visionary. The difference between the midrashic and the allegorical lies not in the thematics of the interpretation but in the language theory underlying the hermeneutic. This is the reverse of what is usually claimed.

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therefore, that literal here is not opposed to metaphorical, for metaphor can belong to the literal pole of such a dichotomy, as was clearly recognized in the Middle Ages. Moreover, reflections on allegory such as Paul de Man's or Walter Benjamin's are not relevant for this issue. Note that I am not claiming here that midrash is absent from Christian reading. The Gospels themselves, Paul, and even much later Christian literature contain much that is midrashic in hermeneutic structure (more, in my opinion, than is currently recognized—in *Piers Plouman*, for example). My claim, rather, is that allegory, in the strict sense, is absent or nearly so in midrash.

72. See Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, pp. 105–17.

73. See Boyarin, "Two Introductions to the Midrash on the *Song of Songs*" [Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 56 (July–Sept. 1987): 479–500.

That is, one typically finds it stated that the methods of midrash and of allegory, with regard to the Song of Songs, are identical, and that only the actual allegorical correspondences have changed; but this is not so in my opinion. In the allegory the metaphors of the language are considered the signs of invisible entities—Platonic ideas of mystical love—while in the midrash they are the actually spoken love poetry of an erotic encounter. For many allegorists, the reading becomes a sublimation of physical love, while for the Rabbis, I would suggest, it is the desublimation of divine love, an understanding of that love through its metaphorical association with literal, human, corporeal sexuality. It is not irrelevant to note that the Rabbis all had the experience of carnal love.<sup>74</sup> The Song is not connected with an invisible meaning but with the text of the Torah: letter with letter, body with body, not body with spirit. This is an entirely different linguistic structure than that of Philo and his followers, even when the readings may turn out to be thematically similar or genetically connected.<sup>75</sup> For the Rabbis, it is the concrete historical experience of the Revelation at Sinai that is described by the Song of Songs, while for the allegorists it is the outer manifestation in language of an unchanging inner structure of reality—an abstract ontology, not a concrete history.

The disembodiment of history in allegoresis is most clearly brought out in Origen's brilliant interpretation of the Song of Songs. Once more, the contrast with Origen provides us with an especially effective way of seeing what is different in midrash. In the theoretical justification for allegory in his introduction, Origen remarks:

So, as we said at the beginning, all the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to those that are hidden; so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, which from actual things and copies teaches us things unseen by means of those that are seen, and carries us over from earthly things to heavenly.

But this relationship does not obtain only with creatures; the Divine Scripture itself is written with wisdom of a rather similar sort. Because of certain mystical and hidden things the people is visibly led forth from the terrestrial Egypt and journeys through the desert, where there was a biting serpent, and a scorpion, and thirst, and where all the other happenings took place that are recorded. All

74. There are ways in which later Christian allegorical readers of the Song of Songs seem to be more like the Rabbis *in this respect, at any rate* (see SS, pp. 9–10). It is perhaps no accident that this shift takes place, as Astel notes, when monastic orders are founded that “recruited their members from among adults, all of whom had lived in secular society. Many were drawn from aristocratic circles; a high percentage had been married; most were familiar with secular love literature” (SS, p. 9).

75. See Urbach, “The Homiletical Interpretations of the Sages and the Expositions of Origen on Canticles, and the Jewish-Christian Disputation.”

these events, as we have said, have the aspects and likenesses of certain hidden things. And you will find this correspondence not only in the Old Testament Scriptures, but also in the actions of Our Lord and Saviour that are related in the Gospels.<sup>76</sup>

Origen's text describes a perfect correspondence between the ontology of the world and that of the text. In both there is an outer shell and an inner meaning. The actual historical events described in the biblical narrative are dissolved and resolved into the hidden and invisible spiritual realities, which underlie and generate them as material representations.

We can do no better in illustrating the contrast between Origen's hermeneutic understanding and that of midrash than to take his very example. When the midrash reads this text, the scorpion remains a scorpion and the biting serpent a serpent:

*And they went out into the Desert of Shur* (Exod. 15:22). This is the Desert of Kub. They have told of the Desert of Kub that it is eight hundred by eight hundred parasangs—all of it full of snakes and scorpions, as it is said, "Who has led us in the great and terrible desert—snake, venomous serpent and scorpion" (Deut. 8:15). And it says, "Burden of the beasts of the Dry-South, of the land of trial and tribulation, lioness and lion, . . . *ef'eh*" (Isa. 30:6). *Ef'eh* is the viper. They have told that the viper sees the shadow of a bird flying in the air; he immediately conjoins [to it], and it falls down limb by limb. Even so, "they did not say, 'Where is the Lord Who has brought us up from Egypt, Who has led us in the land of Drought and Pits, land of Desolation and the Death-Shadow?'" (Jer. 2:6). What is Death-Shadow? A place of shadow that death is therewith.<sup>77</sup>

The hermeneutic impulse of this classical midrashic text is to concretize, to make tangible even more strongly than does the biblical text itself, the fearsomeness of the physical desert, of the physical thirst, of the physical fear of snakes and scorpions to which the historical Israel was prey in the desert, certainly not to translate these into symbols of invisible spiritual truths and entities.<sup>78</sup>

76. Origen, *The Song of Songs*, p. 223.

77. *The Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, 3 vols. (1933–35; Philadelphia, 1976), 2:87–88.

78. The knowledgeable reader may very well raise an objection at this point, since there is a midrashic text that reads the lack of water at Marah as a failure to study Torah, and this has been taken as a typical example of allegory in midrash. First of all, even if the example were relevant, its very marginality within midrashic discourse would nevertheless not change the description of midrash materially. Second, as I have argued in another context, even this text does not construct itself hermeneutically by the procedures of anything like Alexandrian allegory. See Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, pp. 57–80.

*Carnal Israel*

Plotinus, the philosopher of our times, seemed ashamed of being in the body. As a result of this state of mind he could never bear to talk about his race or his parents or his native country.

—PORPHYRY, *Life of Plotinus*

Porphyry exposes with rare incandescence the intimate connection between the corporeality of the individual and his or her connection with "race," filiation, and place, and the Neoplatonic revulsion from both. This interpretation furnishes us with a key to understanding the resistance of the Rabbis to Platonism as well. As loyal a Jew as Philo was, he could not entirely escape the consequences of his allegorizing in a devaluing of the physical practices and genealogy of Israel. Where physical history and physical ritual exist only to point to spiritual meanings, the possibility of transcending both is always there. Ronald Williamson has put it this way:

It seems that for Philo, alongside traditional, orthodox Judaism, there was a philosophical outlook on life, involving the recognition of the purely spiritual nature of the Transcendent, in which one day, Philo believed, all mankind would share. In *that* Judaism the idealized Augustus, Julia Augusta and Petronius—among, no doubt, many others—had already participated.<sup>79</sup>

For Philo, such a spiritualized and philosophical Judaism, one in which a faith is substituted for works, remains only a theoretical possibility,<sup>80</sup> whereas for Paul it becomes the actuality of a new religious formation that tends strongly to disembody Judaism.<sup>81</sup> These elements of embodiment

79. Williamson, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 13.

80. According to H. A. Wolfson, Philo allowed for the possibility of uncircumcised "spiritual" proselytes. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (1947; Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 369. Borgen ("Observations on the Theme 'Paul and Philo,'" p. 87) seems to think that such uncircumcised proselytes could have been fully accepted as Jews by Philo, a proposition that I find unconvincing. Nor am I convinced by Borgen's reading of the Talmud at *Shabbath* 51a to the effect that for Hillel circumcision was not a prerequisite for conversion. Shaye Cohen's comprehensive work in progress on conversion in late antique Judaism should clear up many of these doubtful issues.

81. In a recent letter to me, John Miles has made the following very important comments:

The faith-vs.-works dispute which you present as Christianity-vs.-Judaism has a long history, starting well before the Reformation, as a dispute *within* Christianity. A pagan who converted even to the Pauline form of Christianity was enjoined to follow a strikingly different ethical code and to abstain from a host of usages that were incompatible with monotheism. The result did not put him in continuity with Judah as a tribal, genetic community, but it was works, nonetheless, not just faith. It is, in fact, the survival of this much of the concrete Jewish program that makes Christianity indigestible

are inextricable from one another. If the body of language is its meaning and essence and the body of the person is his or her "self," then the history of Israel and the practices of that Israel are the physical history and practices of the body Israel. This resistance to dualism in language, body, and peoplehood is both the distinction of Rabbinic Judaism and its limitation, while post-Pauline Christianity, with its spiritualizing dualism, was universalizable but also paid an enormous price.

Paul's allegorical reading of the rite of circumcision is an almost perfect emblem of this difference. In one stroke, by interpreting circumcision as referring to a spiritual and not corporeal reality, Paul made it possible for Judaism to become a world religion. It is not that the rite was difficult for adult Gentiles to perform—that would hardly have stopped devotees in the ancient world—it was rather that it symbolized the genetic, the genealogical moment of Judaism as the religion of a particular tribe of people. This is so both in the very fact of the physicality of the rite, of its grounding in the practice of the tribe, and in the way it marks the male members of that tribe (in both senses), but even more so, by being a marker on the organ of generation, it represents the genealogical claim for concrete historical memory as constitutive of Israel.<sup>82</sup> By substituting a spiritual interpretation for a physical ritual, Paul was saying that the genealogical Israel, "according to the Flesh," is not the ultimate Israel; there is an "Israel in the spirit." The practices of the particular Jewish People are not what the Bible speaks of, but of faith, the allegorical meaning of those practices. It was Paul's genius to transcend "Israel in the flesh." On this reading, the "victory" to which Charles Mopsik refers was a *necessary* one: "a split opened two millennia ago by the ideological victory over one part of the inhabited world of the Christian conception of carnal relation—

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for Gnosticism. The sentence to which I allude continues "whereas for Paul it becomes the actuality of a new religious formation which disembodies Judaism entire." Christianity looks disembodied by comparison with Rabbinic Judaism, but by comparison with Gnosticism it looks pretty corporeal. [John Miles, letter to author, Mar. 1991]

The attentive reader will note that I have modified the quoted sentence in partial response to Miles's wise cautions. Note that I am not claiming that there is a fundamental incompatibility between a literalist reading and Christianity. Even as radical an allegorist as Origen is very ambivalent with reference to the literal meaning of the Gospels and the sacraments, often distinguishing between the letter of the law, which kills, and the letter of the Gospel, which gives life. See Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis*, pp. 50–55. However, as Caspary points out, at other moments Origen proclaims that the letter of the Gospel also kills. See also the quotation above from Origen on the Song of Songs where he explicitly declares that the Gospel is also allegorical.

82. See the brilliant interpretation of circumcision in Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Fruitful Cut: Circumcision and Israel's Symbolic Language of Fertility, Descent, and Gender," chap. 6 of *The Savage in Judaism*, pp. 141–76, and Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Nakedness of a Woman's Voice, the Pleasure in a Man's Mouth."

and of carnal filiation—as separate from spiritual life and devalued in relation to it.”<sup>83</sup>

83. Charles Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah,” trans. Matthew Ward, in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, 3 vols. (New York, 1989), 1:49. The reading of Paul that I am promulgating here is a modified version of the revision of our understanding of Paul that has been recently advanced by Gaston and Gager. The older interpretations of Paul’s doctrine presupposed that he had held that Christian faith had *replaced* Jewish practice of the law. This conviction has in recent years been attacked as the origin for a theological anti-Judaism and even of anti-Semitism. Accordingly, some radical Christians (for example, Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* [New York, 1974]) have questioned the possibility of retaining Paul as the source of their theology, while Gaston and Gager have radically reread him as meaning *only* that Gentiles need not be circumcised and keep the Commandments in order to be part of the people of God. Gaston’s is a brave, noble, and stimulating exegetical effort, but ultimately stumbles on something that he could not have known, namely, that “Works of the Law,” as a synonym for the Commandments of the Torah, did exist in the Hebrew of Paul’s day, as we know now after the discovery of the Qumran text entitled “Some of the Works of the Law.” I am proposing that Paul need not be so thoroughly reread in order to redeem him from the charge of anti-Judaism. I find myself in agreement with Alan Segal who argues that “the idea of two separate paths—salvation for gentiles in Christianity and for Jews in Torah—does not gain much support from Paul’s writings” (Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* [New Haven, Conn., 1990], p. 130). This does not amount, however, to an accusation of anti-Judaism on Paul’s part. Gaston and Gager have convincingly argued that Paul was not attacking the Jews in his letters to the Gentiles but have not proven, in my opinion, that he was not reinterpreting the meaning of Torah for all and producing a critique of those who disagreed with him. Why shouldn’t he have done so? In my reading, Paul’s critique was not of legalism, nor was it a critique that denied spirituality to the pharisaic Jews; it was rather a critique of the understanding that membership in the kinship group, again whether natural or naturalized, as symbolized by circumcision, was of religious (soteriological) importance (see Segal, *Paul the Convert*, p. 124). In other words, I think that Justin Martyr understood Paul better than Rudolf Bultmann did, and Paul neither gives “a totally distorted picture of Judaism or else bases his portrayal on insufficient and uncharacteristic (even though authentic) evidence,” as a recent writer has put it (Heikki Räisänen, “Legalism and Salvation by the Law: Paul’s Portrayal of the Jewish Religion as a Historical and Theological Problem,” in *The Pauline Literature and Theology*, p. 68). Paul was a Jew who read the Torah in a particular way, a way prepared for him by his culture and the perceived requirements of his time. (On the connection of Paul to Philo, see also Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*.) The culture was the culture of allegory, and the requirement was to produce Judaism as a universalizable religion (compare Räisänen, “Legalism and Salvation by the Law,” p. 78). No form of Judaism that insisted on the literal reading of Israel’s history and practices could become a world-cultural system, not because the practices are too difficult, but because they are by their very nature too culturally specific and emphasize concrete, historical filiation and memory. Circumcision in Islam provides a further argument for this conclusion, for in that formation, of course, adult circumcision is practiced, and it has not been a bar to Islam becoming a world-cultural system. It is, therefore, not the practice of circumcision but the value or interpretation of circumcision within the Jewish formation that was disturbing. (This point was made to me by James Boone when I delivered this paper at Princeton.) This further raises the issue of the elision of Islam in general in my discussion, an omission that I am going eventually to have to rectify, but that I can justify in the mean-

On the other hand, the Rabbis can be read as a necessary critique of Paul as well—or, if I am wrong in my reading of Paul, of other Christian thinkers who certainly held such views—for if the Pauline move had within it the possibility of breaking out of the tribal allegiances and the commitments to one's own family as it were, it also contains the seeds of an imperialist and colonizing missionary practice. The very emphasis on a universalism, expressed as concern for all of the families of the world, turns very rapidly (if not necessarily) into a doctrine that they must all become part of our family of the spirit with all of the horrifying practices against Jews and other Others that Christian Europe produced.<sup>84</sup> From the retrospective position of a world that has, at the end of the second Christian millennium, become thoroughly interdependent, each one of the options leaves something to be desired. If on the one hand the insistence on corporeal genealogy and the practice of tribal rites and customs produces an ethnocentric discourse, a discourse of separation and

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time by confining my analysis to late antiquity. On the other hand, Boone's remark stimulated me to begin thinking about Islam as the realization of a third structural possibility for the future of Judaism, which was present in solution, as it were, in the first century.

By coincidence, shortly after being favored with Boone's powerfully stimulating intervention, I received an enormously helpful letter from Miles, which addresses the same issue in a brilliant formulation:

You show that Christianity is a thoroughly Jewish movement by showing that Rabbinic Judaism had to define itself by struggling against the ideal of a universalized, spiritualized Israel within its own ranks. Rather the same point can be made from the Christian side by noting how strong a fight the "Judaizers" put up against the apostles—Peter's vision in Acts is at least as important a witness in this connection as anything in Paul (Acts 11:1–10). But in more coded ways all the Gospels bear witness to this struggle. One New Testament scholar says that if there is any issue that may be said to occur on every page of the New Testament it is this struggle. And the Judaizers did have a viable alternative, even though they lost.

I mean that an aggressively internationalized, messianic Judaism need not have been a spiritualized Judaism. Consider the example of Islam, its scriptures in Arabic, everywhere; its relationship to a stated moment in history and a given place fully intact. Islam is undeniably international and yet one of the least spiritual—in the Platonic sense—religions of all time. I do think, in fact, that herein lay the brilliance of Muhammad's double critique of Judaism and Christianity. He rejected the ethnocentrism of the Jews and the spiritualism and philosophical madness (homoousion vs. homoiousion and all that) of the Christians. Recall the stress that the first, still Judaistic generation of Christians placed on relations with Jerusalem—like Muslims' with Mecca—and you see how viable the defeated alternative might have been. [Miles, letter to author, Mar. 1991]

I would only add that in addition to the Jewish church, one could also cite the evidence for proselytizing on the part of non-Christian Jews in the first century and before. Islam thus completes the typology. Paul is no more an anti-Semite than Abraham Geiger, the founder of Reform Judaism, even if we conclude, as I do, that his hermeneutic was for ethnic Jews and Gentiles alike.

84. See Marc Shell, "Marranos (Pigs), or From Coexistence to Toleration," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Winter 1991): 306–35.

exclusiveness, on the other hand the allegorization, the disembodiment of those very practices, produces the discourse of conversion, colonialism, the “white man’s burden”—universal brotherhood *in* “the body” of *Christ*.<sup>85</sup>

85. See *ibid.*