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**“I have made a man every whit whole”
– the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John 7:22–23
and the concept of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible
as a metaphorical removal of a blemish***

Abstract

Foreskin, apart from its literal meaning, functions in Tanach also as a metaphor of blemish. Similarly, the circumcision is presented as a removal thereof. The perfecting function of the rite is visible in Second Temple texts, as well as in later tannaitic sources. The purpose of this paper is to analyze words of Jesus found in J 7:22–23 in the light of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, understood as a ritual performed to remove a blemish. The conclusion is that Jesus’ words in the analyzed verses continue the biblical view, attesting to an exegetical trend visible in later Jewish sources.

Keywords: Circumcision, Gospel of John, blemish, John 7:22–23, Second Temple Judaism, Jesus

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Circumcision is a recurring theme in the Hebrew Bible, which ultimately became one of the most recognizable symbols of Judaism as a whole. Even though circumcision was also practiced among the Israel's neighbors, the timing, the role and the details of the surgical procedure differed from the one performed by the descendants of Jacob,¹ thus rendering circumcision, as prescribed by the Torah, a performance unique enough to view it as a ritual closely connected to the covenant given to Israel. From the period of the Second Temple and onwards, circumcision has become the locus of the discussions on Jewish identity, equally drawing the attention of various groups within the Judaism of that time. *Brit milah* becomes a bone of contention² within the Judean societies of the Hellenistic period, since some number of the Jews influenced by and aspiring to the Hellenistic way of life decide to abandon performance of the ritual on their children, at least in Palestine.³ Moreover, some of those already circumcised sought to undo the surgery by performing a *reversed circumcision*,⁴ in order to avoid derogatory comments, a sort of peer pressure,⁵ evidenced in the Hellenistic Mediterranean world, where occasions to appear naked in public, among other males, were not rare. As an outcome of that controversy (among other factors), at least from the Maccabean period onwards, circumcision has been regarded as a *sine qua non* component of Jewish male⁶ identity. This view has been prevalent in Judaism to this day, as halachic understanding of Jewishness in majority of the communities requires male circumcision, provided the rite does not endanger the life of the person it is applied to. The Hasmonean period (167–37 BCE) witnessed the phenomenon of forced conversion to Judaism, an integral element of which entailed

¹ For more on circumcision in other nations see: Erich Isaac, 'Circumcision as a Covenant Rite', *Anthropos* 59 (1964), pp. 444–456; Jack M. Sasson, 'Circumcision in the Ancient Near East', *JBL* 85 (1966), pp. 473–476. For differences between the circumcision of Israelites and that in other nations see: Jason S. DeRouchie, 'Circumcision in the Hebrew Bible and Targums: Theology, Rhetoric, and the Handling of Metaphor', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 14.2 (2004), pp. 186–189; Robert Hall, 'Circumcision', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman, New York 1992, pp. 1025–1026.

² Of course, it seems that the phenomenon of negligence towards circumcision was rather limited in numbers during the Second Temple period. As Maren R. Niehoff puts it "uncircumcised Jews provoked some discussion, but nevertheless remained a rather anomalous minority". Maren R. Niehoff, 'Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17:1–14', *JSQ* 10 (2003), p. 89.

³ It could be the case, that the motivations for refraining from circumcision were slightly different in Palestine and Diaspora. The Jews living in the Land of Israel, who abandoned circumcision, did so as an act of conformism to Hellenistic culture, while their motivations could be described as a mix of social and political factors. The attitude of the Hellenistic Jews of Alexandria, however, might also stem from their universalistic view of religion, with allegorisation as one of its strategies. The social reasons and the process of assimilation, of course, cannot be excluded either, nevertheless, the religious aspect is undoubtedly evident. See brief discussion on various motivations of apostates during the period mentioned: Shaye J.D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (3rd ed), Louisville 2014, p. 33.

⁴ For more on reverse circumcision see: Robert G. Hall, 'Epispasm: circumcision in reverse', *Bible Review* 8 (1992), pp. 52–57; Cf.: Pirkei Avot 3:16, 1 Corinthians 7:18.

⁵ Cf.: Louis H. Feldman, 'Studies in Hellenistic Judaism', *Arbeiten zue Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 30, Leiden 2018, pp. 22, 39.

⁶ Maren R. Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 91. See also: Shaye J.D. Cohen, *Why aren't Jewish Women Circumcised: Gender and Covenant in Judaism*, Berkeley 2005.

circumcision of males.⁷ It also seems that the institution of proselytism began to take its shape during this period of Jewish independence.⁸

It is shortly after that time, when Jesus of Nazareth enters the scene, preaching and ministering in Judea, Galilee and beyond. Proclaiming the imminence of the eschatological Kingdom of God prophesied in the Tanach, he addresses his message primarily to the children of Israel, only occasionally interacting with Gentiles. As has been shown by numerous authors of the last century, Jesus is best understood in the context of the Second Temple Judaism, which provides an important background virtually for every *logion* that can be found in the Gospels. Many of his sayings, otherwise obscure or contradictory, turn out to be a precisely aimed voice in the halachic or the exegetical discourse of the period, as evidenced by other sources available. This, as we will try to prove in this paper, may be the case with respect to the words of Jesus in John 7:22–23, which constitute the only instance of Jesus mentioning circumcision.

To achieve that aim, it is necessary to first outline the purpose and the meaning of circumcision in the Hebrew Bible, along with its earliest interpretations within postbiblical Judaism, as evidenced by the extant sources. We shall mainly focus on the notion of foreskin as a blemish, and circumcision as the removal thereof, which, as we shall argue, constitutes a point of contact for the Hebrew Bible, its early interpretational traditions within Judaism and the utterance of Jesus in John 7.⁹

Circumcision as a removal of a blemish in the Tanach

A Tanach reader encounters circumcision for the first time in the Abraham narrative, which begins in Gen 12. In the process of establishing a covenant with Abraham, God promises him the Land of Israel, and an heir through whom Abraham would become *the multitude of nations*. In chapter 17, God instructs Abraham to circumcise himself and all the males of his household, including the servants that he owned. From that moment onwards, all the members of the covenant between God and Abraham are to be circumcised at the age of eight days.¹⁰ It is striking that as early as in the first mention of circumcision in the Torah, one can notice the vocabulary connecting circumcision with a lack of a blemish. In the opening verse of chapter 17, God orders Abraham to be blameless (תמים), a word which has strong sacrificial connotations and is oftentimes used

⁷ Feldman, *Judaism*, p. 172.

⁸ For more on the historical origins of conversion see: Matthew Thiessen, *Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity*, Oxford 2011; Shaye J.D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Berkeley 2001.

⁹ For more comprehensive treatment of circumcision and its various aspects in the Hebrew Bible see Andreas Blaschke, *Beschneidung: Zeugnisse der Bibel und verwandter Texte*, (Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter 28), Tübingen 1998 and David A. Bernat, *Sign of the Covenant: Circumcision in the Priestly Tradition* (Society of Biblical Literature Ancient Israel and its Literature 3) Atlanta 2009.

¹⁰ It is this trait that makes the circumcision prescribed in the Torah unique, as other cultures performed it on boys of older age.

to describe animals without blemishes that are fit for sacrifice.¹¹ The obvious thought that comes to mind when reading Genesis 17 is that the opening call for blamelessness is, in some way, connected to circumcision,¹² which is mentioned just a few verses later, further referred to as the covenant. All the more, when we consider the fact that, in the chain of God's utterances in Gen 17:1–21, the only imperatives used are the two requirements addressed to Abraham. He is to be blameless, and the way of achieving (or executing) that is through the act of circumcision. That being said, it is clear that circumcision is pictured here as an act of obedience, which, through the means of physical observance, proved Abraham's inner disposition of faithfulness to God. We suggest that in this narrative, circumcision, through removal of the foreskin, made Abraham perfect and blemish-free, rendering him fit to fully serve God without any restraints. His foreskin symbolized a blemish that impeded, in some way, his interaction with God, thus removal of the foreskin allowed a change of invisible reality. Through a physical act of obedience towards God, Abraham was able to influence the spiritual realm.¹³

The question that needs to be raised now is the nature of the blemish that is removed by an act of circumcision. From the beginning of the story of Abram in chapter 12, one point of tension in the narrative is the apparent clash between God's promise of land and descendants and Abram and Sarai's inability to have children. Although Abram has a son (and potentially an heir) with Hagar, we learn in chapter 17 that this son is not to be the heir to the promise. It seems hardly a coincidence that it is only after Abraham performs the covenant of circumcision, that events are set in motion for Sarah

¹¹ Out of the 47 instances of this lexeme in the Torah, in most cases, it refers to sacrifices, with an exception of two instances in The Book of Deuteronomy (apart from the verse discussed here and the Gen 6:9 mentioned below). In other books of the Tanach (44x), its prevalent use is metaphorical, usually referring to righteousness, moral and spiritual perfection etc. It can be argued, therefore, that its basic meaning pertains to physical perfection and a lack of a blemish, which later on was taken as a metaphor describing the spiritual or moral reality, bearing resemblance to the physical state. In that context, Niehoff makes an interesting observation regarding the Septuagint rendering of יָמֵן – ἄμεμπτos (LEH Septuagint Lexicon: blameless, without reproach; Strong: blameless, faultless, unblamable), which makes the Greek reader unaware of the fact that the characteristic described here is somehow connected to the notion of a lack of a physical blemish, omitting the sacrificial connotations. It might have been a deliberate choice of the translators, mirroring their Hellenistic approach to Judaism, a rendering that influenced the view of Philo, who will be discussed below. Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 94. Cf.: Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament 1), ed. Robert L. Hubbard Jr. & Bill T. Arnold, Grand Rapids 1990, p. 461, J. Duncan Derrett, 'Circumcision and Perfection: A Johannine Equation (John 7:22–23)', *Evangelical Quarterly* 63 (1991), p. 215–216.

¹² This verse could be the basis on which the midrash about people being born circumcised developed, which exists in several forms. For more on the issue see: Isaac Kalimi, 'He Was Born Circumcised. Some Midrashic Sources, Their Concept, Roots and Presumably Historical Context', *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 93.1–2 (2002), pp. 1–12.

¹³ Even though Abraham might have believed that the promise of an heir has been fulfilled through Ishmael, it seems that the narrative suggests that God planned to establish his covenant with a heir born of Sarah. Abraham, thus, not necessarily viewed the act of circumcision as a way to become a father again, but the text might suggest that due to obedience to God, he was, unknowingly, able to become the father of Isaac. As Hall notes, before circumcision, Abraham was only able father Ishmael, and after it, he was able to father Isaac. Hall, 'Circumcision', p. 1027.

to conceive. In Gen 18, directly after the events described above, one of the three angels who appear to Abraham tells him that Sarah is going to have a son *at the appointed time next year*, a repetition of promise from Gen 17:15–19. The dates given in the chapters under discussion suggest that Abraham was able to conceive an heir shortly after he circumcised his foreskin, at the same time removing – as it seems – the blemish which, in some way, obstructed him from fulfilling the mission that God had placed upon him.

A similar connection can be established between the covenant of circumcision and the events of Exodus, followed by the entering into the land of Canaan 40 years later. In the first case, circumcision was connected to the redemption from Egypt (including the Israelites and those who joined them), the first Pesach and the subsequent deliverance from living in slavery under the rule of the Pharaoh.¹⁴ This is also the case when considering the events described in Josh 5:1–10, where circumcision takes place just before another Pesach¹⁵ and shortly after Israel enters the land of Canaan. The 40 years of wandering through the desert itself starts with the redemption that is connected to circumcision and ends with the removal of male Israelites' foreskins. The resemblance to the story of Abraham is striking – the breakthrough, in all three cases, is related to circumcision, which seems to be connected tightly with an advance in the God's plan, in the context of the covenant promises, first for Abraham, and then for his seed.

Another fragment useful in the outlining of the meaning of circumcision in the Torah is the curious encounter on the way to Egypt. The pericope is very obscure and unclear,¹⁶ while the LXX version offers variant readings, thus differing interpretations

¹⁴ The requirement only appears in *Exod.* 12:44–48, after the departure from Egypt, but it is clear that the text connects the removal of foreskin with the Exodus, an event perceived as enactment of God's plan for Israel, getting the people out of oppression and directing them towards a place, where they could enjoy the benefits of the covenant relationship. Going further, it is not clear whether the Israelites in Egypt practiced circumcision, as they had not circumcised their children on the desert, but it could be also because of the danger of performing it during the wander. Cf.: *Bereshit Rabbah* 46:6; See also: William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18, A new Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 2), New Haven 1999, p. 239.

¹⁵ The MT is problematic here, because, at the beginning of the verse, an instruction comes to re-circumcise all the males (אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂגִייתָ). The text might refer to the circumcision of those who had already been circumcised, but in the Egyptian way, which differed from the rite performed by the Israelites. Cf.: Sasson, 'Circumcision', p. 474; Isaac, 'Circumcision', p. 453. The interpretation of Rashi is also similar in this regard. This interpretation is, however, problematic, because, in v.7, we read that all those who left Egypt had been circumcised, while those who were born in the desert were not. V. 6 further states that "the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished", which might mean that after their death, the community consisted of those who left Egypt as children – circumcised in the Egyptian way, and those uncircumcised – the males born in the desert. It is also possible to interpret this in the sense of "Once again [as before the first Pesach] make sure that all of bnei Israel are circumcised", in order to prepare for the Pesach. The LXX fails to mention the act of circumcising for a second time and is limited to the command to perform the rite. See: Robert G. Boiling, *Joshua, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries 6), New Haven 1982, pp. 184, 188–189; Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (Commentary on the Old Testament 2), Peabody 1989, pp. 52–60.

¹⁶ The textual problems here comprise unclear vocabulary and syntax as well as the integration with the surrounding chapters. In Sarna's view, the text here is a shorter version of a story that circulated throughout Israel in its longer form. Since the readers knew the story, it sufficed to include it in the text of the Torah in its shorter

have been given over the ages.¹⁷ In addition to mentioning of Zipporah by her name, the text also makes use of the phrase *her son*. Furthermore, it seems that Moses is present, even though it is not stated explicitly. There is no room here to dwell extensively on the various possible interpretations of the event, yet it seems clear that whichever option we consider, the act of circumcision has apotropaic power. Regardless of who was uncircumcised¹⁸ and why, whom the Lord was trying to kill, and was touched¹⁹ by the removed foreskin, it was the removal of the foreskin that stopped the attack and saved the life of the person targeted.²⁰ Moving beyond that, when we consider the purpose of the journey mentioned in the passage discussed, another interpretation of the event seems possible. Moses was given the mission of getting the Israelites out of Egypt, an event that was to commence with the slaying of a Pesach lamb and a meal made from it. The story reveals that one of the members of Moses's household was uncircumcised, which would have rendered him²¹ unfit for the Pesach celebration.²² It can be argued then that also in the story of Moses, circumcision signifies a removal of a blemish – an act enabling (unknowingly) Moses to fulfill the plan that God had for him within the promises of covenant with Israel.

version, which explains the concise description. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation (The JPS Torah Commentary 2)*, Philadelphia 1999, pp. 24–25, 243; cf.: Umberto M.D. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, (trans.) Israel Abrahams, Jerusalem 1967. For detailed discussion on the difficulties addressed in this text, including the solutions suggested by scholars, see: Propp, *Exodus*, pp. 233–238.

¹⁷ As the text does not explicitly state who did God seek to kill (only the pronoun *him* is used, Moses not being mentioned by the name), one possible interpretation is that God sought to kill Moses's son, according to *Gen.* 17:14, where the text states that the uncircumcised male shall be cut off. Hall, 'Circumcision', pp. 1026–1027. In *Jub.* 48:2–3, the intended victim is Moses, the rescuer is the Angel of the Lord, instead of Zipporah, while circumcision is not mentioned at all. It is also absent in the chapter about Pesach (*Jub.* 50). See discussion in: Thiessen, *Contesting conversion*, pp. 79–82. To survey the historical interpretations of this obscure fragment see: Hans Kosmala, "The 'Bloody Husband'", *Vetus Testamentum* 12/1 (1962), pp. 14–28. Cf.: *M. Ned.* 3:11.

¹⁸ An account of Moses being born circumcised can be found in some later rabbinic writings, such as *B. Sotah* 12a, *Shemot Rabbah* 1:24 and others. If this was the case, the uncircumcised one would be the son of Moses.

¹⁹ The text mentions the touching of feet, but it could metaphorically refer to genitalia as well. Cf.: *Ruth* 3:4–8.

²⁰ Hall, *Circumcision*, p. 1027

²¹ The text in *Exod.* 12:48 states, that all members of the household must be circumcised, which could mean that the presence of an uncircumcised male in the family would prevent all the males of that family from participation in Pesach. See also: *Jub.* 16:23, describing Abraham as the first one observing Sukkot, where the text mentions that there was no foreigner or uncircumcised with him. Thiessen sees it as an extension of *Exod.* 12, Thiessen, *Contesting conversion*, p. 79.

²² Just as in the case of Abraham, possibly deeming Ismael as a proper heir, not expecting divine action after the act of circumcision, Moses might have not viewed the encounter on the way to Egypt as something connected to his later mission and *Exodus*. Sarna notes further that the story of Moses is associated with the story of leaving Egypt, through similar motives appearing in both accounts. The first addresses the return to Egypt, the second – the coming back to Egypt. In his view, deliverance of Moses' son, through the blood of circumcision, is an analogy to the deliverance of Israelites, through the blood of Pesach, which only circumcised men could participate in. Additionally, immediately after the story of *Exodus* in chapter 12, a description is given of a law that necessitates circumcision of all those participating in Pesach as well as of the laws of the firstborn. Sarna, *Exodus*, pp. 24–25. This reading connects our fragment with fitness/blemishlessness, backwards to Abraham and forwards to Pesach.

The above passages deal with the actual acts of circumcising the flesh of the foreskin. We have argued that the physical act is, at the same time, a symbol of a breakthrough in the spiritual reality – an act which removes a blemish and renders one fit for fulfillment of his intended purpose.²³ We shall now turn to a more metaphorical use of the vocabulary connected to circumcision, starting with the language of Leviticus, describing the fruits during the first three years of life of a tree. In Lev 19:23, an instruction can be found, forbidding the use of those fruits, describing them as *uncircumcised*.²⁴ The practice is based on a metaphorical understanding of physical reality, just as it is in the case of circumcision of ears, heart and lips, which will be discussed below.²⁵ The conclusion that can be drawn is that fruits, prior to the period prescribed, are described as having blemishes. The text mentions the *tree for food* (פֶּלִי-עֵץ מֵאֵכָל), so the blemish the metaphor indicates is the fruit's inability to fulfill the purpose it was created for, i.e. serving as food for humans. Additionally, the word used to denote a fruit in the passage (פְּרִי) might suggest connection to the story of Abraham and to the promise of making him fruitful (וְהִפְרִתִּי), a promise which came to its proper fulfillment with divine intervention, only after the act of circumcision. Just as fruit trees bear fruits that are permitted for eating only after their *circumcision*, Abraham as well had to be circumcised to bear a *fruit* that would be fit to inherit the covenant.²⁶

Another example of a metaphorical use of the concept of circumcision is the phrase *uncircumcised lips*, which Moses uses to describe his lack of speaking skills in Exodus 6:12 and 6:30. His words are a response to the calling which God had put in front of him – a mission to convey a message to the Israelites. Moses states that he is unable to deliver the message properly, because he considers his lips to be uncircumcised, meaning, unable to fulfill their main role of producing speech. A similar picture is described in Jeremiah 6:10, where the prophet speaks of *uncircumcised ears* that are unable to perform their task –

²³ Cf. Derret, 'Circumcision', p. 216: "It is ridiculous to say that circumcision affects merely the male organ: it was instituted to affect the whole person [...]".

²⁴ וְעָרְלָתָם עָרְלָתוֹ אֶת-פְּרִיָּו. Milgrom renders it literally: "you shall treat as foreskin its foreskin with its fruit", a translation, which does not seem particularly smooth and rather mirrors the Hebrew text. An excerpt from the ESV states "you shall regard its fruit as forbidden", while in the KJV the fragment says "then ye shall count the fruit thereof as uncircumcised". The two excerpts are correct meaning-wise, but do not properly convey the picture presented in the Hebrew text. Milgrom further suggests that before the three year period passes, fruits should be treated as the foreskin and shall be cut. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22, A new Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Yale Bible Commentary 4), New Haven 2000, p. 1676. Hartley explains that such fruits are excluded from being used by members of the covenant, just as the uncircumcised are excluded from the covenant. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (World Biblical Commentary 4), Dallas, TX 1992, pp. 303, 306. Niehoff notes that the notion had even been rendered non-literally in LXX, which does not describe the fruits as uncircumcised, but as ritually unclean. Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 98.

²⁵ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation* (The JPS Torah Commentary 3), Philadelphia 1989, p. 130.

²⁶ Hall notes that before circumcision, Abraham was only able to conceive Ishmael, however, soon after the ritual, he fathered Isaac. Only through circumcision was he able to remove the blemish that prevented him from fathering Isaac, who, in turn, would inherit the covenant. Hall, 'Circumcision', p. 1027.

hearing the voice of God.²⁷ In both instances, the *uncircumcision* of the mouth and ears respectively renders communication with God hard or impossible. We shall conclude our study of the circumcision verses in the Tanach with the notion of a circumcision of the heart, which appears a number of times²⁸ in the Torah. In all instances, it is closely connected to repentance and a return to God and the commandments. An uncircumcised heart, in turn, signifies rebellion and lack of repentance. The whole concept consists of a notion that an uncircumcised hearth is veiled in a metaphorical foreskin,²⁹ which needs to be removed by a metaphorical act of circumcision. In its uncircumcised state, it holds a blockage, a blemish, which prevents fulfillment of its main role – serving as a medium for human-God connection.

Understanding the Circumcision in the Second Temple Period

Before we move on to John 7, we shall briefly discuss the way circumcision was viewed during a period, the culmination of which witnessed the ministry of Jesus. Various groups within the Second Temple Judaism in Palestine, be it the Pharisees, the Yachad or the Sadducees, shared at least one view – the validity of physical circumcision,³⁰ which was seen as a divine command and not merely a social marker. This would be true in the Land of Israel and the diaspora. The little attention paid, in the texts from our period, to the issue of circumcision suggests that the rite was universally regarded as valid and necessary.³¹ The different views of circumcision, evidenced in the Second

²⁷ Propp, *Exodus*, p. 274. McKane points out, however, that the context of the chapter associates the meaning with an unwillingness to accept the message God gave to Israel through Jeremiah. The blemish described by the metaphor of uncircumcised ears refers then not to the state of total deafness, but a selective one, consisting of a desire to accept an illusion, along with rejection of the truth. William B. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (International Critical Commentary 19/2), Edinburgh 1986, p. 145. Similarly, as Keil & Delitch note, since the addressees' ears are as if they were overgrown with foreskin, it is senseless to speak to them. Carl F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Commentary on the Old Testament 8), Grand Rapids 1988, pp. 138–141.

²⁸ *Deut.* 10:12–16, 30:6; *Lev.* 24:16. Cf.: *Jr.* 9:24–25, where the prophet rebukes those who are circumcised in the flesh and not in the hearth. In *Ez.* 44:9, we read about the future temple, which “no stranger, uncircumcised in heart, nor uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter”.

²⁹ Duane E. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1:1–21:9*, World Bible Commentary 6A, ed. Bruce M. Metzger, Nashville 2001, p. 204. Tigay similarly notes that the verse refers to “a mental block that has made Israel stubborn”. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary 5, Philadelphia/Jerusalem 1996, p. 108.

³⁰ Ed P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE*, Minneapolis 2016, p. 350. Koren states that in the Second Temple literature there is no hint of a notion that an uncircumcised male (either not circumcised at all or one who has performed an epispasm) could belong in the Jewish commonwealth. Yedidah Koren, ‘The ‘Foreskinned Jew’ in Tannaitic Literature: Another Aspect of the Rabbinic (Re)construction of Judaism’, *Zion* 4 (2017), p. 403 (hebrew).

³¹ Daniel R. Schwartz, ‘Ends Meet: Qumran and Paul on Circumcision’, in *The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline*, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 102, ed. Jean-Sebastien Rey, Leiden 2014, p. 295, in reference to

Temple Literature, pertain to the significance, the role and the timing of the rite, rather than its validity.

The most extreme view, arguably, was that mentioned in *Jub.* 15:24–26, where the text states that only those who are circumcised on the eighth day after birth belong to the covenant.³² This limited the members of the covenant to those who were born as Jews in a family that kept the ordinance in its proper timing. In the chapter discussed, author stresses the biblical notion that the ordinance is to be performed forever (v. 25, 28), because it is written on the heavenly tablets.³³ The text further discusses (v. 33–34) those who neglect circumcision in its proper timing, which is viewed as equal to renouncing the covenant and becoming like nations, a sin for which there is no forgiveness. In Jubilees, the validity of physical circumcision is coupled with a reference to the circumcision of heart (*Jub.* 1:23), a metaphor of repentance, consistent with the biblical use discussed above.³⁴ The metaphorical use of circumcision is also present in DSS, which apart from the above verses from Jubilees, do not mention physical circumcision at all.³⁵ That reticence in this regard attests to the fact that for the members of the covenant it was a *sine qua non*.

Josephus, in his writing takes physical circumcision for granted,³⁶ even though he sees it more as a commandment than a part of the covenant or its token. It is consistent, however,

Thiessen, *Contesting conversion*, p. 5. Again, there must have been those neglecting the rite, but they were in no means representative for Judaism as a whole, see p. 2 and discussion on Philo below.

³² This view is consistent with the LXX and SP reading. Thiessen recently suggested that the original text of *Gen.* 17:14 contained the phrase 'on the eighth day', whereas MT only reflects the later stage of textual development. As he admits, however, the full extant *Jubilees* text is an Ethiopic translation of the Greek translation of the Hebrew work, therefore other explanations exist, which could account for the presence of that phrase in *Jub.* 15:14. Matthew Thiessen, 'The Text of Genesis 17:14', *JBL* 128/4 (2009), pp. 631–633. Thiessen further argues that limiting of *proper* circumcision to that performed on the 8th day, excludes a possibility of conversion and links Jewish identity to pedigree. See: Daniel R. Schwartz, *Ends Meet: Qumran and Paul on Circumcision* (The Dead Sea Scrolls and Pauline Literature), ed. Jean Sebastien Rey, Leiden 2014. For further argumentation see: Thiessen, *Contesting conversion*, pp. 73–78, 82–84. Segal points out that the text of *Jub.* 15:25–26 is an inner-Jewish halakic polemic and does not refer to the lack of circumcision but (merely) to a delay in its performance during, for various reasons. The practice might be ascribed to Pharisees, while its development would be evidenced in the later lenient halacha preserved in *m. Shabb.* 19:5. See the entire discussion in Michael Segal, *The Book of Jubilees* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 117), Leiden 2007, pp. 232–245. Similarly Aharon Shemesh, 'Shabbat, Circumcision and Circumcision on Shabbat in Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls', in *Rewriting and Interpreting the Hebrew Bible: The Biblical Patriarchs in the Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Beihefte Zur Zeitschrift Fur Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 439), ed. Devorah Dimant & Reinhardt G. Kratz, Berlin 2013, p. 265. Feldman sees the strong language of *Jub.* 15:26 as a response to the Hellenistic tendencies of the period, and the refraining from circumcision as one of those tendencies. Louis H. Feldman, *Judaism and Hellenism Reconsidered* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 107), Leiden 2006, pp. 295–296. Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 90.

³³ In the Tanach, both circumcision and Shabbat (which is also written on the tablets) are signs of the covenant. In *Jubilees*, these entail the only two commandments that the angels of presence and angels of holiness were given. Segal, *Jubilees*, p. 239.

³⁴ Thiessen, *Contesting*, p. 74.

³⁵ The circumcision of one's evil urges (1QS V 5) or the heart (1QS V 26; 1QpHab XI 13; 4Q434 114; 4Q504 411), as listed by Schwartz, 'Ends meet', p. 301.

³⁶ Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 90.

with his silence about the covenant aspect in other places,³⁷ ignoring the promise of Land and moving away from the solely ethnic understanding of Jewish identity, connecting it instead with strict observance of the Mosaic law.³⁸ Given his apologetic and hellenized account, it is noteworthy that Josephus maintains the stance that circumcision is an ordinance that is to be performed. Like the author of Jubilees, Josephus stresses the timing of circumcision, differentiating between the Jewish practice and that of other nations.³⁹

Even Philo, who is often perceived as a precursor of the later Christian allegorization of circumcision,⁴⁰ accuses those who neglect circumcision, focusing solely on its metaphorical meaning.⁴¹ For him, circumcision was connected to the Mosaic Law instead of the covenant with Abraham,⁴² a view, which arguably influenced the later Christian understanding of the rite. It is striking however, that even in its allegorical understanding, circumcision was a symbol of “exercising continence and endurance in the matters of the Law”.⁴³ As such, the allegorical meaning of circumcision in Philo is an expansion of the rite into the spiritual realm, not a substitution of the physical one by spiritual, remaining in full accord with the requirements of the Torah and the metaphorical meaning of the rite, as described above.⁴⁴ Philo’s Hellenistic Judaism,⁴⁵ thus, is one that takes physical circumcision for granted, not limiting it to a social marker, but rather inserting a new

³⁷ Josephus’ understanding of the concept of covenant as well as its hellenisation has been described in detail in: Paul Spilsbury, ‘Josephus’, in *Justification and Varigated Nomism: Vol. 1 The Complexities of The Second Temple Judaism* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2.140), ed. Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O’ Brien & Mark A. Seifrid, Tübingen 2001, pp. 241–260.

³⁸ As his retelling of the events in *Joshua 22* (*Ant.* 5:97–113) shows. Spilsbury claims it is aimed at the countering of some diaspora tendencies, according to which ethnic origin without obedience to the Law was viewed as sufficient for maintaining the Jewish identity. Spilsbury, ‘Josephus’, pp. 251, 258–259.

³⁹ *Ant.* 1:214. Note that, circumcision is not mentioned in the retelling of the story of Dinah in *Jub.* 30 as well as in *Josephus* (*Ant.* 1:340) and *Philo* (*Migr.* 224). These authors’ silence regarding circumcision in such well-known story shows that they viewed it as non-covenantal. Thiessen, *Contesting conversion*, pp. 79–80. Cf.: Koren, ‘The ‘Foreskinned Jew’, pp. 405–408; Schwartz, ‘Ends meet’, pp. 299–300.

⁴⁰ An example of this allegorization can be found in Derret’s article: “When God acts through the Messiah, the latter’s miracles, of which Moses in a sense knew (*Jn* 1:45, 5:46), can be said to have been intellectually prepared for by circumcision, which loses any emphasis there ever was upon its mechanical aspects as soon as this unexpected light is thrown upon it.” Derret, ‘Circumcision’, p. 218.

⁴¹ *Migr.* 89–93. Cf.: David M. Hay, ‘Philo of Alexandria’, in *Justification and Varigated Nomism: Vol. 1 The Complexities of The Second Temple Judaism* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament 2.140), ed. Donald A. Carson, Peter T. O’ Brien & Mark Seifrid Tübingen 2001, pp. 361, 375.

⁴² Niehoff, ‘Circumcision’, p. 95. Note the closeness to *Josephus* in this regard. As Hay notes, however, Philo does use the word occasionally. Hay, ‘Philo’, p. 369.

⁴³ This allegorical interpretation, as mentioned in the Law, must have been a product of a Jewish thought as well. Niehoff, ‘Circumcision’, p. 96.

⁴⁴ Note *Ezek.* 44:9, speaking of the circumcision of flesh and body as the requirements for entering the new Temple. Cohen sees Philo’s rebuke against the *extreme allegorizers* not as one addressed to apostates but as a way of correcting those who saw the possibility of staying in Judaism while obeying only the allegorical sense of the commandments, abandoning their literal meaning. Cohen, *Maccabees*, p. 34.

⁴⁵ As Cohen claims, the very term needs to be used with caution, as all forms of Judaism of the late Second Temple period had been hellenized to some extent. The intent here is to point to the Greek-speaking Jews of Diaspora, particularly those in Alexandria. Cohen, *Maccabees*, p. 29.

meaning into it, and ultimately connecting it to man's restoration to the original creation in the image of God.⁴⁶ He sees circumcision as a necessary part of Jewish identity, and stresses the fact that proselytes should circumcise both the heart and the foreskin. It needs to be noted that he held an inviting attitude towards those who wanted to become part of the community of Israel and, as Niehoff has put it, "expected any rational person to accept and carry out Mosaic laws. He registered with satisfaction that many pagans had already done so".⁴⁷ Philo's circumcision is therefore a physical act, which signifies a restoration, a motif close to the notion of the removal of blemish introduced above.

John 7:21–23

Although, as can be seen, circumcision is one of important concepts in the Hebrew Bible and taken for granted in a Second Temple Literature, it is virtually absent from the synoptic Gospels. Only Luke refers to it, in 1:59 and 2:21, in the story of Jesus's circumcision. The only other mention of the ritual can be found in the passage in John 7, describing Jesus's participation in the festival of booths in Jerusalem. It is found in the first of the series of speeches, spanning from vv. 14 to 24. At the beginning, the dialogue participants are *Jews*, the discussion with whom provoked a response from *the crowd*, while in v. 25, which seems to be a continuation of the situation, the ones who react are called *the people of Jerusalem*. A constant debate has been taking place among scholars, as to what the precise meaning of *Ioudaioi* in the gospel of John⁴⁸ is, a question which can have various answers, depending on the verses analyzed. We shall assume that the audience here is not the Pharisees,⁴⁹ but rather some leaders of the Jews living in Judea, who adhered to the mainstream or the Judaism common at the second quarter of the 1st century CE. It seems clear that the text is meant to polemize with some of the aspects of the mainstream Judaism at the time, whether it is the Judaism contemporaneous to Jesus or the post-redaction one.⁵⁰ The text starts with an information that Jesus was

⁴⁶ Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 102.

⁴⁷ *Mos.* 2:25–33, *Praem.* 152. Cf.: Niehoff, 'Circumcision', pp. 101–102; As such, if Philo did attach social-marker meaning to circumcision, he did not mean to limit the participation and exclude those without the sign, but rather to invite converts to the community of Israel, which would be marked by circumcision. The ultimate fate of the nations, in Philo's view, was to abandon their ways and turn to the observance of Mosaic Law (*Mos.* 2.44), which he saw as valid for all humanity. Hay, 'Philo', pp. 371–374.

⁴⁸ As Reinhartz notes, "the appropriate translation of this term is one of the most contentious issues in Johannine studies". Amy-Jill Levine, Mark Zvi Brettler (ed.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford 2011, pp. 156–157; cf. an essay about *Ioudaioi* by Joshua D. Garroway, *Ibidem.*, pp. 524–526. See also Cohen, *Beginnings*, pp. 69–106, on the overall use of this and the connected terms.

⁴⁹ Michaels speaks of the leaders, J. Ramsey Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (The New International Commentary on the New Testament), ed. Bruce M. Metzger, David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Baker, John D.W. Watts, Ralph P. Martin, Grand Rapids 2010, p. 434. Beasley-Murray sees the Jerusalem elite here, George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (World Biblical Commentary Vol. 36), Dallas 1999, p. 108.

⁵⁰ Critical commentators often point out that the Gospel of John is to be read in the context of the Johannine community and its relations to the formative Judaism of late first century CE. Reinhartz argues, however, that

teaching in the temple during Sukkot, and it was his teaching that amazed the Jews. It seems then that he was interacting with the general population of Judea, who gathered in the religious center of Judaism for the feast prescribed in the Torah. It is obvious then that the matters discussed involved the Torah and its interpretation – *halacha*.⁵¹

The reaction invoked by his teaching seems to be positive, even though the listeners were surprised that his ability to explain the scripture does not result from formal learning, which was expected of a person regarded as an educated one.⁵² He claims to be relaying the teaching of God, not his own, as those who speak of their own authority, seeking their own glory (v.17–18). What comes after is a rhetoric question – “has not Moses⁵³ given You the law?” The reference to the law of Moses makes room for a statement that none of *you* keep the law, which might refer to the alleged intent of murder, which entails a breaking thereof.⁵⁴ The reaction of *the crowd*, apparently disagreeing with Jesus’s accusations, might indicate, that the dialogue with a greater number of people as the audience, which started with a certain kind of Jewish leaders who *did* want to kill him,⁵⁵

instead of reading *John* as a text documenting a story of the Johannine community (or a simultaneous two level reading of the story of Jesus *intertwoven* with the story of the Johannine community), as historical and textual evidence suggest, it should be read as an account of Jesus’s story and not a description of the later experience of his followers. Levine & Brettler, *Jewish Annotated*, pp. 152–153. Johannine community is usually described as Jesus-oriented Jews (with those gentiles who joined them), who at some point parted with the greater Jewish society increasingly dominated after 70 C.E. by the rabbinic version of Judaism. The polemic aspect is therefore valid both if the verses are analyzed in context of historical Jesus as well as of the Johannine community. What is more, recent research put into doubt the early clear-cut parting-of-the-ways hypothesis, so it might be that even if we take a stance that the perspective presented here represents a clash between a certain community of Jesus-oriented Jews and the mainstream/rabbinic Judaism in its formative stage, it could still be interpreted as an intra-Judaism polemic. For further reading regarding Jesus-oriented Jews as representants of different forms of Judaism, see: Karin H. Zetterholm, ‘Alternate Visions of Judaism and Their Impact on the Formation of Rabbinic Judaism’, *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting: from the first to the seventh century* 1 (2014), pp. 127–153. For more on the hypothetical Johannine community see: Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times*, New York 1979.

⁵¹ Michaels, *John*, p. 434

⁵² Brown understands this verse as reference to the lack of learning under other rabbis (despite the anachronism). Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII*, Anchor Bible Series 29a, New York 1966, pp. 312, 316. Also Beasley-Murray refers to this quoting *b.Sotah* 22a, Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 108. Carson speaks of a “lack of formal training”, Donald A. Carson (ed.), *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids 1990, p. 311.

⁵³ The reference to Moses in 7:19 and 7:22 links the chapter to the Sabbath healing incident, where Moses is mentioned in 5:45. It further increases the possibility that the discussion revolves around *halacha*.

⁵⁴ Carson, *John*, p. 314. Pancaro presents a more theological explanation, claiming that “the Jews do not do the Law because they do not believe in Jesus and, as a result, unjustly persecute and condemn him”. Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity according to John*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 42. Leiden, 1975. This view, however seems to represent later Christian exegesis rather than original intent of our text.

⁵⁵ The notion of killing also connects chapter 7 to chapter 5, where the healing performed by Jesus on Shabbat results in the *Ioudaioi* planning to kill Jesus (*John* 5:17), a theme repeated again in *John* 7:1.

eventually provoked a response of the greater crowd gathered, accusing him of being possessed by a demon.⁵⁶

What follows next is Jesus's statement that he did *one work* and they are amazed. He is obviously referring to the event in 5:1–18, where he had healed a man on Sabbath. Moreover, it is clear that the argument does not suggest a one-time episode, but rather Jesus's typical attitude, meaning that *one work* could be the first, but certainly not the only instance.⁵⁷ Jesus's interlocutors are amazed by the fact that he is able to interpret the Torah without any formal education and without referring to any authority. In turn, he is surprised that they marvel at his precedent,⁵⁸ which, as he claims, comes from God. Continuing the discussion about Sabbath, Jesus turns to the case of circumcision, indicated by Moses,⁵⁹ which is also performed on Sabbath, if it falls on the eighth day after birth. Circumcision is not the central issue here. The discussion revolves around the proper way of observing Sabbath and, more generally, around the stratification of the commandments.⁶⁰ It is unclear whether, at the period discussed, circumcision was

⁵⁶ Beasley-Murray, *John*, p. 109; Brown, *John*, p. 317. For a more detailed survey of the scholars' opinions on that matter see: Michaels, *John*, pp. 443–444.

⁵⁷ Michaels, *John*, p. 444.

⁵⁸ Carson writes that it is not the healing that marveled them, but the fact that he told another man to carry his mat on Sabbath, thus exceeding the accepted norms of Sabbath behavior. Carson, *John*, p. 314. If it is so, through his precedent, he claimed the power to rule, with regard to the *halacha*, independently of the religious establishment. As Kister says, the *halacha* regarding this kind of healing during the time of Jesus, is uncertain, but the text suggests that it was seen as violation of Sabbath. As he notes, later on (in the Amoraic period), a possible lenient ruling was permitted from the time after Jesus's death, as described in *b.Shabbat* 109a and *p.Shabbat* 14:4, 14d. Menahem Kister, 'Plucking on the Sabbath and Christian-Jewish Polemic', *Immanuel* 24/25 (1990), p. 40. One might wonder then if the encounter mentioned in the text, or in the stories, influenced the later *halacha*, making it more liberal.

⁵⁹ The insertion, however, acknowledges that it does not come from Moses *but from the fathers*. This curious glossa is difficult to explain. As Niehoff has shown, the connection of circumcision in the writings of Philo, contrary to the Torah account, has been moved from a covenant to law. In his *Questiones*, Philo ignores the part in *Gen.* 17:11, which calls circumcision a sign of the covenant. He discusses circumcision elsewhere, but in the context of the Law and not the covenant. Niehoff, 'Circumcision', pp. 93–95. One wonders then if this insertion was an insertion made by Jesus *correcting himself* (Michaels, *John*, p. 445) or a glossa inserted by the editor of the gospel, correcting the notion (Hellenistic tendencies?) that circumcision is best described in connection with the Law of Moses, rather than in connection with the covenant with Abraham. Michaels states that this addition testifies about the Johannine community's positive attitude towards circumcision and their respect towards it as a form of healing. Michaels, *John*, p. 446. The mention of Abraham could also be a reflection of the second temple piety, as reflected especially in *Jubilees*, where patriarchs are shown to keep the main commandments long before the Law given on Mt. Sinai. Apart from the performance of the first covenantal circumcision (which has biblical basis), Abraham is presented in *Jub.* 18 as an initiator of a 7-day festival, which will become Pesach (called differently in *Jubilees*), which connects him even more to circumcision, even though the connection is not of biblical provenance.

⁶⁰ The case with the plucking on the Sabbath, an episode in *Matt.* 12:1–8, is similar. In his article, Kister wonders if the situation is that of a *piquach nefesh*, admitting that most of the scholars claim it was not. He suggests that Jesus here might be expanding the limits of the *halacha*. Kister, 'Plucking', p. 37. It seems likely, however, that rather than expanding the *halacha*, he propounded not basing the interpretation on the current halachic views, but on an understanding, that, as he claimed, it comes directly from God.

considered work, but later tannaitic evidence (*m.Shabb.* 19, *t.Shabb.* 16) shows that eventually circumcision came to be viewed as work, which, however, overrides Shabbat. Based on our text and the structure of Jesus's argument, it might be argued that the interlocutors did see circumcision as an act to be performed on Shabbat as well, whether constituting a work or not.⁶¹ Jesus, however, does not see healing or circumcising as work, and therefore a violation of Sabbath, which needs to be explained by supersession of the first by the later. The attack is not on the performance of Shabbat, but on the whole system of interpretation, which, in Jesus's eyes, led to wrong conclusions.

In v. 23, we get some further argumentation by Jesus: "If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken,⁶² are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well?"⁶³ It has been recognized by many scholars that the rhetoric here uses a hermeneutical rule, which later on is labeled as *qal va-homer*.⁶⁴ Jesus enters the dialogue over the halacha, first addressing the system of interpreting the precedence of the commandments, and then, utilizing the rhetorical methods used in Judaism, sets out to prove his point. The goal of the argumentation is clear – Jesus was not breaking the Torah⁶⁵ when he made a man's whole body well on

⁶¹ As contrasted with description of the Dead Sea Sect's practice narrated by Shemesh, who claims that in case the 8th day fell on Shabbat, circumcision was to be performed on Friday – the 7th day. Shemesh, 'Shabbat', pp. 284–285. If this was the case, the views of Jesus's interlocutors regarding that matter would be lenient, as compared with DSS.

⁶² Kister suggests, after Strack-Billeberg, that the phrase "so that the Law of Moses may not be broken" is a corruption of the original verse "because it is punishable by premature death", as in *t.Shabb.* 15 (16):16, which was misunderstood at some point of transmission. With the reading proposed, the verse would address the traditional belief that an infant is in danger of premature death, if the rite is not performed in proper time, while the apotropaic function of circumcision is strengthened. Menahem Kister, 'The Sayings of Jesus and the Midrash', *Immanuel* (Winter 1982/83), pp. 39–40. If this is the case, circumcision can be viewed as *pikuach nefesh*, and the argument made in this paper is further strengthened, with Jesus utilizing the contemporary halachic traditions to make his point. Derret mentions that scholars have frequently linked our pericope with the idea of *pikuach nefesh*, but he rejects this connection, not seeing any danger to life in this case. Derret, 'Circumcision', p. 219.

⁶³ Duncan understands the question "Are you...?" as an idiomatic complaint, which means "it is absurd that you..." Duncan 212. If this is so, Jesus would be implying that his logic is in full compliance with the Torah, as shall be discussed below.

⁶⁴ Michaels, *John*, p. 445; Pancaro, *The Law*, p. 163. Cf.: *b.Shabb* 132a and *b.Yoma* 85b, contra Derret 'Circumcision', p. 221–223.

⁶⁵ Cf. *Mt.* 12:11–12, *Lk.* 13:15–16. Scholars are divided on the matter whether Jesus broke the Law in this case and in general. Bernard, for example, argues that Jesus did break the Law in this instance, which seems to be a more traditional view, seeing Jesus as generally not respecting the precepts of the Mosaic Law. John H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John Volume 1* (International Critical Commentary Series), p. 266. Similarly, Pancaro views Jesus as not observing shabbat, even though he phrases it differently: "Jn does not consider the work of Jesus a violation of the Sabbath, but its abrogation." Pancaro, *The Law*, p. 164. A more positive description of Jesus's attitude towards the Torah can be found in Kister's description of the Sermon on the Mount: "We know that Jesus does not attempt to contradict the Torah; just the opposite is true". Kister, 'Plucking', p. 43. For detailed discussion on scholarly views on Jesus's breaking of Shabbat and on the Second Temple context of his various Shabbat healings see: Lutz Doering, 'Much Ado about Nothing? Jesus' Shabbat Healings and their Halachic Implication Revisited', in *Judaistik und Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*:

Sabbath (ὅλον ἄνθρωπον ὑγιῆ ἐποίησα ἐν σαββάτῳ), just as it is not against the Torah to *make well* one part of the body through circumcision. What is curious here is the parallelism of the two parts of the sentence – a fact that does not draw much attention in most of the commentaries. While Jesus is trying to prove that “making well⁶⁶ a man’s whole body” (NRSV) is permitted on Sabbath, in doing so, he affirms the validity of the view that circumcision is indeed *making well* the bodily part it is applied to.⁶⁷ It is accomplished through a removal of the blemish of foreskin, a view which we have seen to have strong foundations in the biblical text itself. Circumcision is presented as an example of healing, in order to support Jesus’s *work* of healing from chapter 5, as permitted by Torah.⁶⁸ Our fragment, therefore, certainly shows the controversy emergent between Jesus and his audience. The issue, however is not the validity of circumcision (and Shabbat), but rather the discussion on proper performance of the commandments, an attitude that can easily be mapped⁶⁹ within the Second Temple Judaism.⁷⁰

Standorte – Grenzen – Beziehungen (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments 226), ed. Lutz Doering, Hans-Gunther Waubke & Florian Wilk, Göttingen 2008, pp. 213–241.

⁶⁶ Others render ὑγιῆ ἐποίησα as *healing* (NRSV, NIV, NLT, Douay-Rheims) or making one *perfectly well* (ISV). The KJV, ERV and ASV have *making a man every whit whole*. Note the similar expression (ὕγιης γέγονας) in the Shabbat healing incident (*John* 5:14).

⁶⁷ Or, if we accept the above-suggested alteration of text by Kister, Jesus could even be stating that just as they perform a rite saving life from premature death, he healed the whole body. In the current reading of the text, Jesus’s action would be *homer* and circumcision – *qal*. Should we accept the emendation, it would be opposite. The idea of circumcision as perfecting later on also appears in tannaitic sources (*m.Ned.* 3:11, *Gen. Rabb.* 46) and targums. In *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishamael* (Shabbeta 1, Ki Tissa), commenting on *Exod.* 31:13, a very similar saying, resembling that in *John* 7:23–24, is attributed to Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah. The presence of this interpretive tradition both in *John* and the later tannaitic sources attests to the fact, that it was operative in an earlier period and thus has a long history. Part of this process, as evidenced in our text, entailed transformation of the meaning of circumcision from a sign of the covenant to an act of healing. Derret further notes that ὅλον could be a reference to Aramaic ܫܠܡܐ, which in turn appears in targums as translation of Hebrew שלם. If so, the *J* 7:23 saying would contain a word pun which Derret renders as “I have made a whole man whole”. For further sources and bibliography see Derret ‘Circumcision’, p. 215–217. Pancaro, however manages to read the verse as showing that “circumcision was – like all Jewish rites and like Judaism itself – but the shadow of the things to come.” Pancaro, *The Law*, p. 165.

⁶⁸ Duncan, p. 213.

⁶⁹ For the concept of *mapping* and its application in New Testament research, see: Serge Ruzer, *Mapping the New Testament*, Leiden 2007.

⁷⁰ In this respect it is curious to note, that in his article Derret reaches conclusions somewhat opposite to ours, basing on the same evidence. Having discussed in detail the link between circumcision as perfection/healing both in *John* and rabbinic sources, he fails to note the positive attitude of Jesus towards the rite. On the contrary, ending his otherwise insightful discussion, he concludes with a cliché that seems to originate from theology rather than analysis of the text in its original Jewish setting: “It is not simply a question of Jewish institutions’ becoming obsolete, which in a sense they did for believers. It is a question of *why* they did so. Circumcision notionally commences the perfecting of the supine male; Christ places the willing recipient of his grace on the road indeed.” Derret, ‘Circumcision’, p. 223–224.

Conclusion

As can be seen, the viewing of circumcision as a removal of a blemish has been a continual trend in the Hebrew Bible. Beginning with the story of Abraham, throughout the Torah, and ending with the Prophets, it is a recurring theme, interwoven between the most important events of the history of Israel and its covenants. With the physical observance underlying the base meaning of circumcision, the biblical text expands the notion of a foreskin as a blemish, and its removal as perfecting, healing or making well. The metaphor is then used with reference to other parts of the body, in most cases with the purpose of describing one's disposition toward God and the covenant. As it has been shown, Jesus's attitude towards circumcision is positive⁷¹ and in full accord with the description of the rite contained in Tanach. Employing the biblical motives for his argumentation, in no way does he attempt to undermine the importance of the rite, and in a subtle way confirms its perfecting function, even if he does it aside his main argument. The construal of circumcision as the making of one bodily part well, placed on the side of the main argumentation, however, betrays the deep thematic connection between the Gospel of John and the Hebrew Bible, once again affirming the historical description of Jesus as a teacher that is rooted deeply within the Second Temple Judaism, whereas the covenant of Israel is the central theme underlying his message.

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⁷¹ Niehoff, 'Circumcision', p. 102.

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