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Dialogical Differences: (De-)Judaizing Jesus' Circumcision

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This essay seeks to rethink the inscription of difference in early Christianity by focusing on the role of the circumcision of Jesus—a paradigmatically Jewish mark on the Christian savior's body—in early Christian “dialogue”-texts (both external dialogues, such as Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*, as well as *erotapokriseis*-texts, here framed as internal dialogues). When we examine how difference is both inscribed and deferred in these texts, as it is on Christ's body, we can realize how difference is never really “other” but always retained within the chorus of Christian cultural identity, a productive heteroglossia that recalls the dominant strategies of Roman imperial power.

CIRCUMCISION AND THE DIALOGIC IMAGINATION

In recent decades, historians of ancient Christianity have become increasingly sensitized to the complex processes of differentiation, rewriting the simplified “Eusebian” model of providentially guided progression of a singular, distinct “Church.”¹ In this complicating mode, these historians often turn to the murky processes of early Christian “self-definition.” Over a quarter century ago, Robert Markus elegantly noted:

I would like to thank Laura Nasrallah, of Harvard Divinity School, for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this article. The suggestions of the two anonymous readers for *J ECS* were also extremely productive, as were the comments and suggestions of the faculty and graduate students of Indiana University's early Christian studies program.

1. The root of this historiographic rewriting is, of course, Walter Bauer's *Rechtgläubigkeit und Ketzerei im ältesten Christentum* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1934), the impact of which was especially felt in the English-speaking world after the appearance of the 1971 translation by Robert Kraft and the Philadelphia Seminar on Christian Origins (as *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971]). For a discussion of “post-Bauer” studies of heresy and orthodoxy, see the articles in the recent issue of *J ECS* 14:4 (2006) on “The Question of Orthodoxy,” especially the Introduction by Lewis Ayres (395–98).

[T]he history of Christian self-definition cannot be written in terms of a steady progression from simple to complex. In one sense the whole of the church's history is a growth in self-awareness; every important encounter with a new society, a new culture, with shifts in men's assumptions about their world, themselves or God, with upheavals in the values by which they try to live, brings with it new self-discovery. Psychologists have long been telling us that we discover our selves only in encounter: what is self and what is not self are disclosed to us in the same experience.²

The "encounter" for Markus is the site of both estrangement and self-discovery, accomplished in the same moment of recognizing "the other" and (thereby) creating an awareness of "the self." More recently, in an essay likewise aiming to survey the theoretical developments of the study of early Jewish and Christian identities, Judith Lieu notes with approval the historian's focus on the continuous construction of communal "boundaries," rhetorical and yet effective means of distinguishing "self" from "other": "While not the only model for understanding the construction of identity, an emphasis on the function of boundaries has proved particularly fruitful in recent analysis of identity."³

Yet, as Lieu goes on to suggest, the repetitious effort to draw boundaries between "Jew" and "Christian" in the ancient world hints at the instability of these same boundaries: "selectivity, fluidity, dynamism, permeability are all intrinsic to the construction of boundaries. . . . Where rhetoric constructs the boundary as immutable and impenetrable, we may suspect actual invasion and penetration."⁴ Like Markus, Lieu focuses on texts in which Christianity and Judaism rhetorically enact their difference with the "other" in order to produce something like a coherent self, an "imagined homogeneity."⁵ For both scholars, it is the moment of putative boundary-making, as the "self" gazes at and engages with the "other,"

2. Robert A. Markus, "The Problem of Self-Definition: From Sect to Church," in *Jewish and Christian Self-Definition*, vol. 1: *The Shaping of Christianity in the Second and Third Centuries*, ed. E. P. Sanders (London: S. C. M. Press, 1980), 1–15, at 3.

3. Judith Lieu, "'Impregnable Ramparts and Walls of Iron': Boundary and Identity in Early 'Judaism' and 'Christianity,'" *NTS* 48 (2002): 297–313, cited here at 299. See eadem, *Image and Reality: The Jews in the World of the Christians in the Second Century* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996); *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

4. Lieu, "Impregnable Ramparts," 309.

5. Lieu, "Impregnable Ramparts," 313; see also on 301–2: "The creation of apparent homogeneity and unchangeability is, of course, part of the seduction of the idea of boundaries." See also Averil Cameron, *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire: The Development of Christian Discourse*, Sather Classical Lectures 55 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 31.

that fascinates. Our ancient Christian sources are, fortunately, replete with such moments: the encounter, the back-and-forth between Christian and non-Christian. Indeed, our textual resources constitute a cacophonous series of dialogues, a library of discourses fixated on that moment of differentiation: heresiologies, apologies, and texts *adversus Iudaeos* that place the Christian self in distinct, and distinguishing, “conversation” with a heretical, pagan, or Jewish other.

The fashion in which the formation of identities functions as a chain of overlapping dialogues is concisely articulated by literary theorist Terry Eagleton: “Like the rough ground of language itself, cultures ‘work’ exactly because they are porous, fuzzy-edged, indeterminate, intrinsically inconsistent, never quite identical with themselves, their boundaries modulating into horizons.”⁶ For Eagleton, as for Lieu, communal identity (“culture”) claims a wholeness and finitude that masks fragmentation and incompleteness: the “boundary” of identities, upon closer examination, turns out to be an ever-receding horizon. Eagleton’s comparison with the “rough ground of language”—which also aims for a precision that is always lacking in the execution—further echoes the dialectic ground of early Christian culture. As Mikhail Bakhtin long ago asserted, and his cultural studies descendants have elaborated, “language—like the living concrete environment in which the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary.”⁷ Our encounters with the world, framed by language, are (in Bakhtin’s now familiar terms) dialogical—“an encounter within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses”⁸—and therefore can never be reduced to a singular, “unitary” selfhood. Dialogue provides the appearance of discrete identities, a formal separation between self and other (speaker and addressee); yet at the same time it confounds those identities, grounding them necessarily in a temporary space of identification

6. Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Blackwell Manifestos (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 96. See also Homi K. Bhabha on the “hybrid location of cultural value” (*The Location of Culture* [London: Routledge, 1994], 173).

7. Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in idem, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422, at 288. Eagleton does not explicitly invoke Bakhtin here, but see his much earlier discussion in “Wittgenstein’s Friends,” *New Left Review* 135 (September–October 1982): 64–90, esp. 74–81. Bakhtin’s dialogics is elaborated in an explicitly postcolonial cultural register by Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 176–79.

8. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 358. See also Michael Mayerfeld Bell, “Culture as Dialogue,” in *Bakhtin and the Human Sciences: No Last Words*, Theory Culture & Society, ed. Michael Mayerfeld Bell and Michael Gardiner (London: Sage Publications, 1998), 49–62.

(communication).⁹ Dialogue creates difference and yet elides that same difference; as Eagleton suggests, “culture” operates in much the same fashion. “Self” can only ever emerge from the dialogic imagination as the strange and contingent interaction with the “other.”¹⁰

The notion that identity emerges within a cacophony of strange, overlapping voices—that the singularity of identity is, in actuality, a product of multiple voices or, to use Bakhtin’s felicitous term, “heteroglossia”¹¹—would surely come as little surprise to the architects of the ancient Roman Empire. Certainly we can catch sight of the occasional grasping toward a sense of cultural unity, an elite *Latinitas* formed around, for example, the memory of Vergil.¹² More typically, however, the vast frontiers of Empire coalesced not around the homogeneity of a *nouvel* Hellenism, but through a carefully managed spectacle of heterogeneity. The differences between the provinces and the metropolis of Rome were on display from the early days of the Empire, in the babel of the marketplace and the brutal mastery of exotica in the gladiatorial arena.¹³ To be Roman was to exert an ostentatiously precarious control over an omnipresent

9. See Dale E. Peterson, “Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin and What It Signifies,” in *Bakhtin in Contexts: Across the Disciplines*, ed. Amy Mandelker, intro by Caryl Emerson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 89–98, at p. 91: “The long and the short of it, and by far the most culturally influential side of it, is that Bakhtinian discourse analysis presumes that utterances come into the world showing and voicing the fact that they are sites of cultural contestation. Texts display themselves as linguistic arenas in which perceptible cultural conflicts are acting out or acting up.”

10. My use of Bakhtin’s notions of “dialogue” has been sharpened by the philosophical considerations of Dmitri Nikulin, “Mikhail Bakhtin: A Theory of Dialogue,” *Constellations* 5 (1998): 381–402. Many thanks to my colleagues R. Michael Feener, Hendrik Maier, and Justin T. McDaniel for drawing my attention to this article.

11. Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 133, defines heteroglossia as “the capacity of language to reflect several different discourses,” a useful gloss that I would infuse, in the late ancient context, with clearer political, even colonizing, implications.

12. Sabine MacCormack, *The Shadows of Poetry: Vergil in the Mind of Augustine*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 26 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), emphasizes the sociopolitical and religious fissures emerging from late ancient readings of “the poet.” See the perceptive study of Catherine M. Chin, *Grammar and Christianity in the Late Roman World*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

13. See the introduction and essays in *Rome the Cosmopolis*, ed. Catharine Edwards and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and the careful analysis of Roman displays of power by Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

parade of “others”; to engage with, and even internalize, their strange voices. To consider the power of Roman imperial might, therefore, is to contemplate the triumph of the dialogic imagination of Rome—the back and forth between domestic metropolis and alien provinces—on a grand cultural and political stage.¹⁴

To reimagine in a similar fashion the formation of early Christian culture as the product of a shifting and unstable dialogic imagination is, in some ways, to continue and expand the work on “others” and boundaries that presently permeates the study of ancient religious identities, particularly our many “dialogue” texts.¹⁵ To read such texts dialogically, in a Bakhtinian sense, is to refuse the absolute separation of self and other that ancient Christians anxiously demand. Dialogues do not merely construct a boundary, isolating and segregating a Christian from a non-Christian. Dialogues internalize the other, creating fissures and contradictions within. If Christians persist in defining themselves in contradistinction to some other—pagan, heretic, or Jew—they make that other an indispensable part of “Christianness” (in the same way that “Rome” comes to be understandable through its relationship to “the provinces”).¹⁶

In this essay I interrogate more deeply this Christian dialogic imagination, which both projects outward and internalizes a necessary other. My goal is to highlight the ambivalent and incomplete separation of “self” and “other” that lies beneath the totalizing veneer of early Christian discourses. My touchstone in this task is the mark of Jesus’ circumcision, the always already hybridized symbol that both invokes the boundary with the Jewish other (the “circumcised” versus the “uncircumcised”), and yet reveals that boundary to be, in reality, a hazy horizon. On Jesus’ body, the otherness of Judaism both articulates and disrupts the Christian self. Christ’s body becomes the site of a religious “dejudaization” that is always incomplete, that continues to echo with the sound of Jewish origins. All of the authors under consideration in this essay famously sought to enforce the boundary with Judaism in the first Christian centuries by engaging in literal, and figurative, “encounters” with Jews.

14. In integrating strong notions of power and control (although, as described below, always incomplete) into my dialogical readings, I stray from the optimistically multicultural postmodern application of Bakhtin’s ideas of Fred Evans, “Bakhtin, Communication, and the Politics of Multiculturalism,” *Constellations* 5 (1998): 403–23.

15. As Lieu points out (“Impregnable Ramparts,” 301–4), such reimagination also embeds the development of early Christian culture more securely in the sociopolitical worlds of the Roman Empire.

16. Nikulin, “Mikhail Bakhtin,” 385: “The other person becomes an integral and most intimate ‘part’ of myself.”

I examine here two types of dialogue texts.¹⁷ I begin with the formal, “external” dialogues, texts which depict the explicit interaction between Christianity and Judaism. First, I look at Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* and Origen’s *Against Celsus* (with particular focus on the passages in which Celsus’s fictitious Jewish interlocutor is introduced). Both Justin and Origen authoritatively appropriate the voice of Jewish otherness in the production of Christian truth and lay the groundwork for establishing Christ’s circumcision as thoroughly Jewish even as it articulates a logic of Christian supersession of Judaism. In stark contrast to these texts of seeming dialogic realism stands the later *Altercation of Simon the Jew and Theophilus the Christian*, a possibly early fifth-century dialogue that survives in a Latin recension. Here the voice of the other is but a tinny echo of an earlier Jewish intransigence, drowned out by the Christian voice in a manner that makes all too clear the ease with which a Christian could master and swallow up Jewish otherness.

In the final section of this essay I turn to an internalized mode of Christian dialogic: the emerging literary genre of “question-and-answer” texts (*erotapokriseis*), in which the Christian subject is formally split—“never quite identical” with itself, in Eagleton’s words—in the fractured production of an ideal Christian identity. Here the anonymity of Christian ignorance replaces earlier Jewish opposition, providing a more subtle, but no less polemic, interiorization of superseded Judaism. Both sets of dialogic texts, the external dialogue and internalized *erotapokriseis*, when they focus on the mark of Jesus’ circumcision, inscribe the unrealized desire to establish that “horizon” where Judaism ends and Christianity begins. They demonstrate how that horizon of religious difference remains intractably hazy: for in the dialogic imagination of Christ’s circumcision, we witness the ways in which Christians repeatedly internalized the stark otherness of Judaism. Their differentiating rhetorics disclose a sense of permeability and indeterminacy that reJudaizes even as it deJudaizes.

TALKING BACK: CHRISTIAN DIALOGUES

When analyzing the numerous dialogues of early Christian literature, scholars are often caught up in trying to tease out the social reality of the dialogue setting.¹⁸ Some historians prefer to read these texts addressed to

17. This analysis of dialogic texts emerges from a larger project on Christ’s circumcision and the rearticulation of Christian “difference” in antiquity. My focus here is solely on dialogues; in the larger work I consider a broader array of texts.

18. Compare the discussions of Tessa Rajak’s discussion of these questions with respect to Justin Martyr (“Talking at Trypho: Christian Apologetic as Anti-Judaism in

“outsiders”—like the second- and third-century apologies, or the various *adversus Iudaeos* texts framed as responses to intractable Jews—as evidence of real and antagonistic interaction.¹⁹ The apologists are responding to real pagan criticisms (and perhaps even expect that the imperial authorities to whom they address their “defenses” will be sympathetically responsive); the treatises *adversus Iudaeos* are likewise reacting to the criticisms of real Jews encountered in the public square, in formal or ad hoc debate. Others prefer instead to interpret these texts as internally directed documents, produced to delineate the boundaries of Christian thought and practice for insiders through the fiction of external animosity.²⁰ The intended audience is not a Roman governor or recalcitrant synagogue, but the occasionally wavering convert, or the dedicated neophyte eager to bolster his or her newly adopted religious persona. A common assumption on all sides of such debates is that these Christian texts of dialogue give us insight into an evolving and hardening array of Christian boundaries: whether the “pagan” or “Jew” addressed in the Christian text is “real” or not, he is believed to create for the Christian a clear sense of the otherness that must lie beyond the Christian pale.

Without staking out a position on the question of the authorial intention or immediate social setting of apologists and polemicists against Jews, I propose to hear these texts as part of the religious and cultural polyphony that produced Christianity, the anxious heteroglossia of Christian culture: the multiple and contradictory discourses that are deliberately

Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*,” in her *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 48 [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 512–33, at 526–31); Miroslav Marcovich, ed., *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 47 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997), 64–65; and Timothy J. Horner, *Listening to Trypho: Justin Martyr's Dialogue Reconsidered*, *Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology* 28 (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), who represent the range of opinions.

19. Certainly some of our ancient sources make references to public dialogues: Tertullian's *Iud.* begins with a mention of a recent debate between Jews and Christians that has prompted his writing (*Iud.* 1.1, text in Q. S. F. *Tertulliana Adversus Iudaeos mit Einleitung und kritischem Kommentar*, ed. Hermann Tränkle [Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1964], 3). See also Origen's comments cited below in n. 47.

20. The *locus classicus* for this interpretation is Adolf von Harnack, *Die Alercatio Simonis Judaei et Theophili Christiani nebst Untersuchungen über die antijüdische Polemik in der alten Kirche*, TU 1.3 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1883). For recent discussion of context and impact of this argument, see David M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew*, University of Pennsylvania Press Middle Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994) and Stephen J. Shoemaker, “‘Let Us Go and Burn Her Body’: The Image of the Jews in the Early Dormition Traditions,” *CH* 68 (1999): 775–823.

and jarringly juxtaposed in the service of crafting a social identity. Such a reading does not deny that Christians might have intended their texts for pagan or Jewish audiences, with missionary or polemical goals; nor does it rule out the possibility that these texts served internal purposes of reassurance and self-definition (or even, as scholars often end up claiming, that such texts could serve multiple purposes).²¹ The goal is to shift our understanding of these “self-differentiating” texts altogether, away from pat assumptions about boundaries and certainty of difference. The textualization of religious difference may lie not in logical resolution, but in dialogical irresolution: the problems of difference (and similarity) are not resolved, but rather enacted, creating the *sense* of a boundary (between speaker and interlocutor) without finite closure. The heteroglossic nature of Christian religious culture is thus produced and reproduced: projected ostensibly “outward” into the person of a Jewish “other,” but safely constrained within the lines of a Christian text. The circumcision of Christ, likewise the strange container of difference on the paradigmatic body of the savior, emerges as the particularly apt signal of such a project.

Justin Martyr and Trypho the Jew

One of the earliest appearances of Christ’s circumcision in early Christian literature is in the only surviving second-century “Jewish-Christian dialogue” text, Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*.²² Justin is notable among earliest Christian writers for demonstrating his mastery of “orthodox” Christianity through literary refutations of deviant heresy, recalcitrant Judaism, and impious paganism.²³ It is tempting to read Justin

21. Claudia Setzer, *Jewish Responses to Early Christian History and Polemics, 30–150 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 129–46, for instance, emphasizes Justin’s rhetorical production while still insisting we can mine the text for sociohistorical clues to early Jewish-Christian relations.

22. Ancient Christians reference other “dialogue” texts that do not survive (such as the *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus*), or are absorbed into much later redactions (such as the *Dialogue of Timothy and Aquila*): see the overview and references of William Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues: Athanasius and Zacchaeus, Simon and Theophilus, Timothy and Aquila: Introduction, Texts, and Translations*, *Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity* 58 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004), 1–15 and the survey of Lawrence Lahey, “The Christian-Jewish Dialogues through the Sixth Century (Excluding Justin),” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: A History from Antiquity to the Present*, volume 1, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reider Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson Press, forthcoming). I thank Dr. Lahey for sharing the manuscript of this survey with me.

23. In addition to *dial.*, Justin composed two *Apologies* and a (lost) heresiological text. For a concise overview of Justin’s writings and his context, see David Rokéah,

as an orthodox triumphalist, whose multivocality gave his readers a sense of security and the ability to “answer back” authoritatively to any and all outside criticism. Yet Justin’s texts, particularly the very long *Dialogue*,²⁴ also disrupt that sense of security by preserving, even hypostatizing, such criticism. The *Dialogue* is a notoriously difficult text to parse—both in historical and literary terms—as a straightforward text of Jewish-Christian differentiation. Despite Justin’s frequently rancorous tone throughout the long *Dialogue*,²⁵ the very dialogic nature of the text hints at ongoing communication and rapprochement: the shared desire to determine what divides Jew from Christian cannot help but gesture at what holds them together. I am not suggesting that, beneath a veneer of discourtesy and acrimony, Justin is trying to get in touch with his “inner Jew”; to the contrary, I think the text lays out for us the ways in which Christians of the second century felt haunted by that “inner Jew,” and sought to confront, domesticate, and humble him. Yet at the same time, this early text illustrates the ways in which such efforts at confrontation and domestication lack clear resolution.²⁶

The discussion of Christ’s circumcision in the *Dialogue* exemplifies the frustrated attempts of Christianity to confront its originary Jewishness.²⁷

Justin Martyr and the Jews, Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series, 5 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1–11. On Justin’s role in the “invention” of heresiology, see Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion de l’hérésie dans la littérature grecque, IIe–IIIe siècles* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1985), 64–92 and 110–12: “Il revient à Justin d’avoir inventé l’hérésie” (p. 110); and Daniel Boyarin, “Justin Martyr Invents Judaism,” *CH* 70 (2001): 427–61, at 449–61.

24. Horner, *Listening to Trypho*, 7, claims that *dial.* “is far and away the longest Christian document we have from the second century.”

25. Rajak, “Talking at Trypho,” especially notes the ways that Justin’s sharp antagonism is often glossed over in modern scholarship.

26. For a similar reading of Justin’s heteroglossic ambivalence with respect to “Hellenism,” see Rebecca Lyman, “The Politics of Passing: Justin Martyr’s Conversion as a Problem of ‘Hellenization,’” in *Conversion in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages: Seeing and Believing*, Studies in Contemporary History, ed. Kenneth Mills and Anthony Grafton (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2003), 36–60 and Laura Nasrallah, “Mapping the World: Justin, Tatian, and the Second Sophistic,” *HTR* 98 (2005): 283–314.

27. The only reference to Christ’s circumcision prior to Justin Martyr is Luke 2.21, and Justin’s knowledge of Luke (particularly in the form we know it) is still debated: see Charles H. Cosgrove, “Justin Martyr and the Emerging Christian Canon: Observations on the Purpose and Destination of the Dialogue with Trypho,” *VC* 36 (1982): 209–32; John W. Pryor, “Justin Martyr and the Fourth Gospel,” *SCe* 9 (1992): 153–69; Graham Stanton, “Jesus Traditions and Gospels in Justin Martyr and Irenaeus,” in *The Biblical Canons*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 163, ed.

The appearance of this stereotypical mark of Jewish identity and symbol of “the law” on Jesus’ body should be especially noteworthy in a text whose “core . . . is the vindication of what today we would call supersession,”²⁸ focused particularly on the failure of that Jewish law. For much of the *Dialogue*, Justin and Trypho debate Jesus’ status as the true messiah, with particular focus on his fulfillment of prophecy.²⁹ In earlier chapters, Justin managed to convince Trypho that many scriptural elements of the messiah could be seen in the life of Jesus. Trypho, however, balked at the virgin birth. He dismissed Justin’s Greek version of Isaiah 7.14, and instead asked whether it wouldn’t make more sense to believe that Jesus was appointed to the messiahship because of his perfect conformity to the law of Moses. Could this not be the basis on which Jew and Christian came to agree on Jesus as the Christ?

At this moment of potential dialogic convergence, Justin pulls away dramatically. The bulk of the law, he insists, was *not* given to the Jews as a source of redemption, but rather as a punishment and mark of their continual disobedience.³⁰ If the law is not a sign of salvation, it cannot be a mark of the Savior. Trypho tries again. He points out that even Justin’s own description of Jesus suggests otherwise, that Jesus *did* bear the mark of the law and could therefore satisfy Jewish expectations: “But *you* have confessed to us (σὺ γὰρ ὁμολόγησας ἡμῖν) both that he was circumcised and that he kept all of the legal precepts (τὰ νόμιμα) ordained through Moses!”³¹ (It is worth noting that there is, in fact, no point in the *Dialogue*

J.-M. Auwers and H. J. De Jonge (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 353–70, at 354–66. One anonymous *J ECS* reader wondered whether Luke 2.21 and Col 2.11 (which may also refer to Christ’s physical circumcision) imposed any “interpretive restraints” on later Christian authors, a question I address more fully in the larger project of which this essay is a part. Here I simply note that I see very little “constraint” subsequent to these brief scriptural notices: the choice to address Jesus’ circumcision seems driven more by pervasive Christian concern over boundaries and difference.

28. Rajak, “Talking to Trypho,” 513.

29. Horner, *Listening to Trypho*, 155: “The thread which keeps Trypho in the dialogue once he discovers that Justin is a Christian is a question which embodies his chief reservation about the Christian claim. Simply put: Trypho is not convinced that Jesus is the messiah.”

30. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 74–76, examines Justin’s more general arguments against circumcision and Jewish Law. See also Judith Lieu, “Circumcision, Women, and Salvation,” *NTS* 40 (1994): 358–70, which takes one of Justin’s critiques as its hermeneutical launching point; and Maren R. Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen 17:1–14,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10 (2003): 89–123, at 105–8.

31. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 67.5 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 185).

prior to this assertion where Justin does make such a “confession” to Trypho.) Trypho insists that Jesus’ exemplary and voluntary Jewishness can provide a key to the messianic rapprochement of Jew and Christian.

Justin, however, continues to demur. Instead of conceding to Trypho’s reading of Christ’s circumcision (but without denying that this “confession” accurately portrays Justin’s own beliefs about Jesus’ life), Justin chooses to recontextualize Jesus’ circumcision entirely and, along with it, Jesus’ seeming submission to Jewish law. According to Justin, circumcision in this one, special case is no longer a sign of Jewish obeisance, but rather a unique symbol of divine redemption:

And I replied: “I have confessed it, and I do confess. But I confessed that he underwent all of these things not as if he were made righteous (δικαιοούμενον) through them, but bringing to fulfillment (ἀπαρτίζοντα) the dispensation that his father—creator of all things, Lord, and God—wished. For likewise I confess that he underwent fatal crucifixion and that he became a human being and that he suffered as many things as those members of your people arranged for him!”³²

Christ’s circumcision did not demonstrate Jesus’ admirable Jewishness: on the contrary, it was of a piece with the redemptive suffering “arranged” by Trypho’s Jewish *confrères*, a mark not of fraternization but of alienation. Despite appearances, Christ’s submission to the law connotes the eradication of legal righteousness and the establishment of the boundary between Jew and Christian. Circumcision was just one more indignity that Christ suffered in order to redeem humanity, to end the “old dispensation” of the Lord and bring the righteous to a “new dispensation” (a non-Jewish dispensation) ordained by God.³³

This biographical redirection mirrors Justin’s cosmic reinterpretation of the law, as well as the division between Christianity and Judaism. In a move that is theologically unsurprising, but still notable in a “dialogue,” Justin claims to understand the Jewish law more accurately than his Jewish interlocutor. The fact that the Christian savior took the law upon himself (through such acts as circumcision) appears, in part, to authorize this rhetorical move: now Christians who understand the full scope of salvation through their redeemer can likewise understand in fullness the older dispensation of the law which that savior took on himself. Yet upon closer

32. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 67.7 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 185–86).

33. It is not clear whether the dispensation (οἰκονομία) in this passage being “brought to fulfillment” is the old covenant of the Jews or the new covenant of the Christians: the ambiguity is telling.

examination, Justin's argument remains tantalizingly vague.³⁴ On the one hand, the very Jewishness of Christ's circumcision provides Justin his warrant for a superior understanding of the law: he can correct Trypho's misapprehension of Jesus' acts and therefore the true relationship of law and messiah. On the other hand, the uniqueness of Jesus' circumcision also allows Justin to argue for the dissolution of that law. Jesus' circumcision is Jewish, yet non- (or even anti-) Jewish. The mechanics of this doubled understanding of Christ, circumcision, and law are not fleshed out. Justin merely asserts that—somehow—Jesus' participation in the rite of circumcision provides the rationale for its discontinuation. The fact that Justin follows up his point on the Mosaic law with a typical litany of patriarchs "righteous before the law" only muddies his point further.³⁵ For Christ was precisely not "righteous before the law," but rather (Justin argues) he was righteous despite, and within, the law. Only the Jews, Justin remarks (and Trypho curiously concedes) actually needed the harsh yoke of the Mosaic law, "because of the hardness of their hearts and their tendency to idolatry."³⁶ Neither the righteous patriarchs before the law, nor their spiritual descendants (the Christians) had need of such a burden. Where, then, does that leave Christ? Would he not have demonstrated the impermanence of the law much better by not submitting to its yoke?

As we shall see, later interpreters of the divine circumcision handled the logic of Christ's circumcision with more finesse and creativity. Yet, I suggest, the incompleteness of Justin's own argument is exactly the point in the *Dialogue*: in it, we hear the articulation of anxiety about Justin's Christian identity, an anxiety that is neither dismissed nor glossed over. An earlier moment in the *Dialogue* clarifies this resistance to an absolute resolution of the difference between Jew and Christian. When Justin delivers his dictum on the negative, pedagogical nature of the Jewish law (imposed because of the "hardness" of the Jews' hearts),³⁷ Trypho challenges him. Trypho queries Justin: "But if someone, who knows that this

34. Horner, *Listening to Trypho*, 162, picks up on the tepidness of Justin's responses here. On Horner's reading, this rhetorical weakness is explained by the particular construction of the *Dialogue*: Horner assigns this portion of chapter 67 to the "Trypho Text," which he argues derives from the original *acta* of Justin's encounter with Trypho decades earlier. We would therefore not expect Justin automatically to counter all of Trypho's arguments.

35. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 67.7 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 186): οἱ πρὸ Μωυσέως γενόμενοι δίκαιοι καὶ πατριάρχαι, μηδὲν φυλάξαντες τῶν ὅσα ἀποδείκνυσιν ὁ λόγος ἀρχὴν διαταγῆς εἰληφέναι διὰ Μωυσέως, σφύζονται ἐν τῇ τῶν μακαρίων κληρονομίᾳ ἢ οὐ;

36. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 67.8, 10 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 186).

37. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 46.5 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 145–46).

is so [i.e., the law does not contribute to righteousness], after he knows that this one is the Christ, and clearly he has believed in him and he wishes to obey him and *also* to observe these [laws], will he be saved?"³⁸ Justin makes his own curious concession:

I said: "As it seems to me, Trypho, I say that such a one will be saved, as long as he doesn't struggle in any way to convince others (I mean those from among the Gentiles who have been circumcised from error through Christ) to keep these things with him, saying that they won't be saved unless they keep them. Just as you yourself did at the beginning of these speeches, proclaiming that I wouldn't be saved until I kept them!"³⁹

Justin draws the barest line between Christians who keep the law, but don't bother their gentile coreligionists, and Jews like Trypho, who will not realize the "truth" about their own law and will insist on imposing it on others.

But Trypho astutely notices how Justin hedges here ("as it seems to me," ὡς μὲν ἐμοὶ δοκεῖ); when pressed, Justin admits that not all Christians remain in communion with Christians who follow the law. As for himself, however, as long as the law-abiding Christians do not "compel" others to follow their example, "so I proclaim it is necessary to admit as our own and keep fellowship with all of them, as kindred spirits (ὁμοσπλάγγνοις) and brothers."⁴⁰ Already by the early second century, the fraught question of "Jewish-Christians" articulated a keen anxiety among the self-proclaimed, gentile "orthodox":⁴¹ what constitutes the lines of division (the horizon) between Judaism and Christianity, and when and how can that boundary be breached? Justin's own answer is contingent and uncertain, foreshadowing his equally uncertain discussion of the law inscribed on Christ's own person in the circumcision.

38. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 47.1 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 146).

39. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 47.1 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 146).

40. Justin Martyr, *dial.* 47.2 (ed. Marcovich, *Iustini Martyris*, 147). The term ὁμοσπλάγγνος may have a literal meaning ("of the same guts," i.e., "born of the same family") or a metaphorical one ("of the same heart" or "disposition"). It would not be the only occasion on which Justin deliberately and ambiguously invokes racialized categories of community: see Denise Kimber Buell, "Rethinking the Relevance of Race for Early Christian Self-Definition," *HTR* 94 (2001): 497–76, at 464–66 and 472; eadem, *Why This New Race: Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

41. So we can interpret Ignatius of Antioch's warning that "it is better to learn Christianity from a man who is circumcised than to learn Judaism from a man with a foreskin" as apprehension about blurring the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity (*Philad.* 6.1 [SC 10:144]); see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Judaism Without Circumcision and 'Judaism' Without 'Circumcision' in Ignatius," *HTR* 95 (2002): 395–415.

As this earlier discussion in the *Dialogue* suggests, the brief moment of disconcert surrounding Christ's circumcision, and Justin's half-hearted attempts to suggest that this sign was, at once, a disapprobation of Jewish law and a key to special Christian insight into that law, bespeak a profound blurring of distinction and problematization of difference. By the end of the *Dialogue*, difference seems to win the day over reconciliation: both Trypho and his attempts to secure a scriptural and theological middle ground with Justin are rejected. Yet this is far from a triumphalist Christian text: Trypho, also, remains ultimately unconvinced of Justin's arguments, and there is no conversion of the Jewish interlocutor to constitute the *Dialogue's* "happy ending."⁴² This ambiguous conclusion suggests, again, that we should direct our attention away from any unequivocally triumphant message of Christianity facing and defeating its Jewish "other" (whether real or imaginary), and focus instead on the ambivalent, dialogic process in which this confrontation is framed. The point seems to be not so much erasure or capitulation of "the other," but rather the preservation of that still, disturbing voice within Christianity. Justin leaves various questions of Christian truth relatively unresolved in this text; even the central Christian argument against Judaism—true "Law" versus *Torah*, true "Israel" versus the Jews—is ultimately disrupted by the dialogic back and forth, the heteroglossic lack of clear differentiation.

In a text whose fundamental purpose would seem to be the articulation of the difference *between* Judaism and Christianity, absolute difference from the Jew is deferred. The brief discussion of Christ's circumcision neatly encapsulates both the desire for certainty and the deferral of that certainty. Since Christ's circumcision cannot, for Justin, affirm the sort of valorization of Jewish law desired by Trypho, it must (somehow, even paradoxically) affirm the contingency and impermanence of that law. Yet this assertion of the Jewish law's impermanence is only possible because the Jewishness of Christ's circumcision establishes a dialogic space in which Trypho and Justin can communicate, in which Justin can assert that his knowledge of Jewish law is superior to that of the Jews. Christ's circumcision, a small feature in this very long text, becomes a resonant echo of Trypho himself: the reminder, and remainder, of the Jewish voice required to establish Christian truth that can therefore never be fully silenced.⁴³

42. A marked difference from later Jewish-Christian dialogues, in which the Jewish interlocutor is moved to convert by the experience, as we shall see in the *Altercation of Simon and Theophilus*.

43. For a different, but complementary, reading of the "dialogical process" and incongruity in *dial.*, see Boyarin, "Justin Martyr," 455–56 and the boundary-

Origen and Celsus

An even more complex interweaving of the “other” voices of Christian difference appears in the next century in Origen’s *Against Celsus*, written reluctantly at the behest of Origen’s patron Ambrose.⁴⁴ Although ostensibly an “apology” addressed to a (dead) pagan critic, this text functions, in many ways, as an illuminating counterpart and double to Justin’s “anti-Jewish” dialogue with Trypho. First, scholars have suggested that the interlocutor of Origen’s apologetic text, Celsus, a younger contemporary of Justin, may have composed his *True Doctrine* as an answer to Justin’s several “philosophical” Christian texts.⁴⁵ We are therefore picking up the threads of a century-long dialogue between parties seeking to “out-know” and thus out-argue their opponents, an empire-wide antiphony of religious differences. Second, Origen’s response to Celsus also takes the form of a literary dialogue after the fact: Origen composes his defense of Christianity to its long-dead pagan despiser as an interlinear response, preserving large chunks of Celsus’s own words and responding to them piece by piece. Because of this deliberately dialogic format, Origen’s apology *Against Celsus* sounds like a chorus of juxtaposed, competing religious voices.

The Jewish voice plays a significant role in portions of this “anti-pagan” apology. In addition to the posthumous voice of Celsus and the determined responses of Origen, we also hear the careful interpellation of a

destabilizing conclusions on 460–61, as well as the treatment of Justin Martyr in *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Divinations (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 37–73.

44. Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 214–39; Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 94–125; Michael Frede, “Celsus’ Attack on the Christians,” in *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 218–40; idem, “Origen’s Treatise Against Celsus,” in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire*, ed. M. Edwards, M. Goodman, and S. Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 131–55. On the philosophical contexts of Celsus and Origen, see Silke-Petra Bergjan, “Celsus the Epicurean? The Interpretation of an Argument in Origen, *Contra Celsum*,” *HTR* 94 (2001): 181–206.

45. An argument made by Carl Andresen, *Logos und Nomos: Die Polemik des Kelso wider das Christentum*, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 30 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1955), 308–11 and 345–72, referenced by Wilken, *Christians as the Romans*, 101. Even if the correlation between Justin’s and Celsus’s understanding of the Logos and history is due more to common Platonic roots than direct influence (as suggested by Robert Grant, “Review of *Logos und Nomos*,” *JR* 36 [1956]: 270–72), Celsus himself makes mention of the now-lost *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus* (παπίσκου τινὸς καὶ Ἰάσονος ἀντιλογίαν): see Origen, *Cels.* 4.52 (SC 136:318), suggesting a sense of ongoing interreligious “dialogue.”

dissonant Jewish voice claimed by both Celsus and Origen. Celsus's Jewish voice comes in his introduction of a prosopopoetic first-century Jew as a mouthpiece for criticisms of Jesus and of Jewish converts to Christianity.⁴⁶ Origen's responding Jewish voice comes through his display here (as throughout his oeuvre) of "firsthand" knowledge of Jews and Judaism acquired in the course of Origen's scriptural and exegetical studies.⁴⁷ We could read this Jewish interpellation as Origen's reappropriation of the Jewish origins of Christianity, made necessary by the caustic and deprecating Celsus, as Origen claims early on: "Celsus . . . thinks it will be easier to falsify Christianity, if, by making accusations against its source, which lies in Jewish doctrines, he would establish that the latter is false."⁴⁸ But when we turn to the appearance of Christ's circumcision in this text, we gain a clearer sense of the blurring place of Judaism in Origen's apology. Scholars usually read this text with an eye to "Christian-pagan" relations in late antiquity. But the insistent interplay of pagan, Christian, and Jewish voices also creates a deliberately tangled interpenetration of Christian self and Jewish other—mediated through the dead pagan interlocutor—in which the singular mark of Jewishness can simultaneously repudiate, and recuperate, the otherness of Judaism.

Origen turns to Jesus' circumcision during a long defense of Jewish customs and "wisdom."⁴⁹ Part of Celsus's argument against Gentile Christianity relied on the appropriateness of ancestral customs. According to Origen, Celsus conceded that, for the Jews at least, there might be some value in preserving Jewish custom, but there was no reason for non-Jews to adopt it: "Now if, accordingly, the Jews should cloak themselves in their own law, this is not to their discredit, but rather to those who abandon

46. Origen, *Cels.* 1.28, 32–44, 56–71, and 2.1, 3–79 (SC 132:150–52, 162–92, 228–74, 276–80, 268–476).

47. See discussion and references in Andrew S. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity*, Divinations (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 60–67, esp. 61–62. At several points in his refutation of "Celsus's Jew," Origen disputes Celsus's characterization by referring to his own more authoritative experience in public debate with "real" Jews (*Cels.* 1.45, 1.55 [SC 132:192–94, 224–28]), even going so far as to sneer at Celsus's inauthentic Jew, who cites Greek mythology "like some Greek" (*Cels.* 1.67 [SC 132:264]).

48. Origen, *Cels.* 1.22 (SC 132:132).

49. Earlier in the treatise, Origen had deferred defense of "the reason of circumcision . . . which was begun by Abraham and hindered by Jesus, who did not want his disciples to do it" (*Cels.* 1.22 [SC 132:130–32]). I thank Ellen Muehlberger, who has shared with me her stimulating paper, "Origen and Jerome on Accusations of Jewish Angel Worship" (delivered at the 2006 Society of Biblical Literature conference).

their own [ways] and make themselves over into Jews.”⁵⁰ Celsus insisted that there was nothing particularly special about Judaism, and it was therefore implausible and even culturally treasonous for good Hellenes to abandon their traditional practices to follow some dead Jewish criminal. Origen, in order to prove the superiority of Christianity, chooses first to prove the superiority of Judaism, “which has a certain greater wisdom not only than that of *hoi polloi*, but also of those who bear the semblance of philosophers.”⁵¹ Origen argues that the intellectual and historical priority of Judaism over Hellenism makes it precisely the sort of universally admirable system of belief that should be adopted by all, even Gentile Greeks.⁵² Celsus (at least in Origen’s citation) had listed several aspects of Judaism which acted as the Jews’ false basis for superiority: their concept of heaven; their worship of a single, “highest god”; circumcision; and abstention from swine. Older, and better, nations could likewise boast of these practices and, Celsus concluded, were more impressive in their religious and cultural accomplishments. After a brief defense of the Jewish concepts of heaven and monotheism,⁵³ Origen turns to circumcision.

Origen’s opening discussion of circumcision already betrays a certain ambivalence with respect to the comparative value of Judaism and Christianity. Origen first asserts, against Celsus, that Jewish circumcision is distinct from (and, consequently, superior to) the rite as practiced by various Near Eastern pagans: “the reason for the circumcision of the Jews is not the same as the reason for the circumcision of the Egyptians

50. Origen, *Cels.* 5.41 (SC 147:120–22). The rest of this section details the banality of the Jews’ religion.

51. Origen, *Cels.* 5.43 (SC 147:126). On Origen’s longstanding argument on the chronological and ontological priority of “Hebrew” wisdom over Greek philosophy, see discussion and references in Andrew S. Jacobs, “‘Solomon’s Salacious Song’: Foucault’s Author Function and the Early Christian Interpretation of the *Canticum Canticorum*,” *Medieval Encounters* 4 (1998): 1–23.

52. Of course, Origen believes his Jewish contemporaries had abandoned their “greater wisdom” when they turned on Jesus; but the blueprint of the “holy nation,” he insists, outshines that of Plato’s “city of philosophy”: “If only they hadn’t sinned by their lawlessness, in former times by killing the prophets and of late by plotting against Jesus: we would have a model of the heavenly city, which even Plato strove to describe; but I don’t know if he could achieve as much as Moses and those after him wrought, rearing a ‘chosen people’ and a ‘holy nation’ (1 Pet 2.9) set aside for God, through teachings purified from all superstition” (*Cels.* 5.43 [SC 147:127]). On later Christian writings on “Platonopolis,” see Jeremy M. Schott, “Founding Platonopolis: The Platonic πολιτεία in Eusebius, Porphyry, and Iamblichus,” *J ECS* 11 (2003): 501–31.

53. Origen, *Cels.* 5.44–45 (SC 147:128–32).

or Colchians; therefore it should not be considered the same circumcision."⁵⁴ The praise of the singularity of Jewish circumcision is, however, undermined in the very next chapter, when Origen discusses the origins and function of circumcision in more detail: "Even if the Jews then boast of circumcision (σεμνύνονται τοῖνυν Ἰουδαῖοι τῇ περιτομῇ), they will distinguish it not only from the circumcision of the Colchians and Egyptians, but even from that of the Ishmaelite Arabs, even though Ishmael was born of their own forefather Abraham, and was circumcised along with him."⁵⁵ A historical and scriptural gloss typical of the hyper-learned Origen, this evocation of the Ishmaelite double of Jewish circumcision also subtly chastises the "boasting" Jews, reinscribing Jewish inferiority alongside the scriptural and exegetical prowess of the Christian.⁵⁶

This double-sided interpretation of Jewish circumcision is the context in which Origen introduces the circumcision of Jesus, in a manner that likewise preserves the Jews' superiority while introducing a note of disrepute. In describing the unique circumstances of Jewish circumcision, Origen speculates that it was "on account of some angel hostile (πολέμιον . . . ἄγγελον) to the Jewish people that this [rite] is even performed, who was able to injure those of them who were not circumcised, but was weakened against the circumcised."⁵⁷ He arrives at this theory through an ingenious interpretation of the enigmatic passage in Exodus 4, where Zipporah's emergency roadside circumcision of her son somehow fends off Yahweh's murderous attack on Moses.⁵⁸ Like most late ancient readers of this strange incident who discounted the possibility of a direct theophany of a transcendent God into his creation, Origen understood the agent of death as an "angel" of the Lord, and he posits:

54. Origen, *Cels.* 5.47 (SC 147:134).

55. Origen, *Cels.* 5.48 (SC 147:48).

56. In other contexts Origen lays out more substantive arguments against Jewish circumcision: see the discussion and sources in Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker," 108–14. Niehoff also points out, however, that Origen's discussions of circumcision were not uniformly negative.

57. Origen, *Cels.* 5.48 (SC 147:138).

58. This incident, of course, continues to arouse exegetical and scholarly curiosity: see the source-critical and philological analysis of William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24–6)," *Vetus Testamentum* 4 (1993): 495–523; the structuralist analysis of Seth D. Kunin, "The Bridegroom of Blood: A Structuralist Analysis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 70 (1996): 3–16; and the feminist midrash of Bonna Devora Haberman, "Foreskin Sacrifice: Zipporah's Ritual and the Bloody Bridegroom," in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, Brandeis Series on Jewish Women, ed. Elizabeth Wyner Mark (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 18–29.

Now I think this angel had power against those who were not circumcised from the people and generally against all those who worshipped the Creator alone (πάντων τῶν σεβόντων μόνον τὸν δημιουργόν), and he was powerful as long as Jesus had not taken on a body. But when he did take it on, and his body was circumcised, all [the angel's] power against those who were [not] circumcised in this piety (θεοσέβεια) was toppled: by his ineffable divinity Jesus toppled him (i.e., the angel). Therefore it is forbidden to his disciples to be circumcised and it is said to them: "For if you are circumcised, Christ is of no benefit to you" (Gal 5.2).⁵⁹

The rite of circumcision, according to Origen, affirms the superiority of the Jews: after all, the "hostile angel" has singled out the Jews because of their proper worship of the "Creator alone," in affirmation of the uniquely correct nature of their monotheistic worship. Presumably, such angelic avengers already held sufficient sway over the idolatrous pagans.⁶⁰ Yet the mark of the Jewish covenant is also revealed to be, at root, little more than a prophylactic talisman nullified by Jesus' incarnation. Christ's circumcision, therefore, reveals the hidden truth of Jewish covenant practice: even as it is superior to the polytheistic idolatry of the gentiles, it is but a stopgap measure long since eradicated by the new covenant of salvation.

This introduction of Jesus' circumcision into Origen's discussion of Jewish superiority over Hellenistic "wisdom" in his defense of Christianity weaves together several disparate threads of early Christian apology. On the one hand, Judaism is plotted as superior because it constitutes the true revelation of divine philosophy, of which Plato's later contribution is but a pale imitation.⁶¹ On the other hand, Judaism is portrayed as defunct, no longer the bearer of this divinely inspired wisdom: the narrative of

59. Origen, *Cels.* 5.48 (SC 147:138–40). The crucial "not" (μή) has been inserted by all modern critical editions and translations; see SC 138:48 n.

60. On early Christian conflation of angels and idolatry, see Annette Yoshiko Reed, "The Trickery of the Fallen Angels and the Demonic Mimesis of the Divine: Aetiology, Demonology, and Polemics in the Writings of Justin Martyr," *J ECS* 12 (2004): 141–71. On the apotropaic interpretations of circumcision, intertextualizing Exodus 4 with the Passover account, see the sources and comments of Cohen, *Why Aren't*, 16–18 and 229–30.

61. See Arthur Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture*, Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie 26 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989), 152–67 (on Origen); Peter Pilhofer, *Presbyteron Kreitton: Der Altersbeweis der jüdischen und christlichen Apologeten und seine Vorgeschichte*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2/39 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 221–84 (on Christian authors following their pagan and Jewish *Vorlage*); and Daniel Ridings, *The Attic Moses: The Dependency Theme in Some Early Christian Writers*, *Studia Graeca et Latina Gothoburgensia* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1995), on previous Christian authors.

Christian supersession (over Jews *and* pagans) is inscribed on Christ's own body.⁶² By taking circumcision upon himself, Christ both affirms the significance of the Jewish ritual and yet renders it moot and past-tense. This overlay of supersession directly onto Christ's person is so complete that Origen can introduce here (without attribution) Paul's later voice, from the Letter to the Galatians, point of departure for most Christian argumentation against circumcision. The obsolescence of the law is portrayed as synchronous with Christ's observance of that law.

Yet this polyphonous synchronicity renders supersession ultimately ambivalent, as well. As in Justin's *Dialogue*, transcendence of the law is accomplished at the moment of Christ's submission to the law. In the treatise *Against Celsus*, we are at least given a glimpse into the mechanics of such a potentially counterintuitive argument: a cosmic drama and angelic avenger are conjured "behind the scenes" in order to explain first the institution and then the eradication of this Jewish ritual. Yet the Jewishness of the ritual on Christ's body, at the beginning of the incarnation, remains incontestable, indeed, absolutely requisite for the logic of Origen's argument to make sense.⁶³ Christianity must, therefore, be constantly reminded of the remainder of Jewishness at its origins even as it persists in pushing an increasingly supersessionist line. The artful heteroglossia of Origen's apology affirms this doubled position of recuperation and repudiation of Christianity's Jewish origins. The Jewish voice functions at once as critic and defender of the truth of Christianity: Celsus's prosopopoetic Jew provides Origen with as many occasions for defending Christian novelty against Jewish critique as it does for defending Jewish custom against pagan disrespect.⁶⁴ The invocation of Christ's own circumcision at this nexus of identification and differentiation embodies the multivalence at work in the production of insistently porous Christian boundaries.

62. See also Origen, *Cels.* 2.7 (SC 132:296), where Origen seemingly refers to Christ's rejection of the significance physical circumcision and yet (as is clear from his other writings, and the passage of *Cels.*) does not forego that circumcision. In the refutation of "Celsus's Jew" claiming that Jesus was "impious," Origen exclaims: "Is it impiety to renounce bodily circumcision and bodily Sabbath and bodily festivals and bodily new moons and clean and unclean, to turn the mind toward a Law worthy of God, both true and spiritual?"

63. Origen's Christology focused a great deal on the incarnation (in comparison with, say, a Pauline Christology focused more on the resurrection); see Henri Crouzel, "Le Christ Sauveur selon Origène," *Studia Missionalia* 30 (1981): 87.

64. To take but one example, the interpretation of prophecy: "Celsus's Jew" prompts Origen both to defend the veracity of Jewish prophecy over against pagan criticism (*Cels.* 1.36 [SC 132:174–76]), and to justify Christian interpretation of Jewish prophecy over against Jewish criticism (*Cels.* 2.28 [SC 132:356–58]).

Simon and Theophilus

The *Altercatio Simonis Iudaei et Theophili Christiani* (the manuscript title of which already betrays something of a change in tone from Justin's "dialogue" and Origen's "reply") reads much differently from earlier dialogues (although some of the content may be drawn from earlier texts).⁶⁵ The *Altercation* in the form we possess it probably dates from the late fourth or early fifth century,⁶⁶ and is ascribed by the late Latin bibliographer Gennadius to an otherwise unidentified *Evagrius alius*.⁶⁷ The Jewish interlocutor, Simon, is flat and listless, providing little more than prompting for the much more fulsome and lively (and aggressive) replies of the Christian, Theophilus. "Proba mihi," Simon repeats throughout the *Altercation*, "Prove it to me," and Theophilus proceeds to prove most convincingly.⁶⁸ Simon's compliant requests for more "proof" and "evidence" might read like the plaintive inquiries of a thick-headed catechumen, were it not for the Simon's occasional, and faltering, resistance and Theophilus's sneering response: "You speak like a Jew."⁶⁹ It comes as little surprise, then, that at the end of the *Altercation*, all of his questions answered, Simon the Jew converts: "Bearer of salvation, Theophilus, good doctor of the sick, I can say nothing more: command me to be catechized and consecrated by the sign of faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed I think that, through the imposition of hands, I shall receive cleansing from my transgressions."⁷⁰

65. It was the argument of Harnack, *Altercatio*, that we could recover the lost Greek *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus* from the *Altercatio*. See now Lahey, "Christian-Jewish Dialogues," 5–6 n. 20 and 15–16.

66. Varner, *Ancient Jewish-Christian Dialogues*, 87–88 and notes.

67. Gennadius, *De viris inlustribus* 51 (text in *Hieronymus liber de viris inlustribus*. *Gennadius liber de viris inlustribus*, TU 14.1a, ed. E. C. Richardson [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1896], 79). The chapter in full reads: *Evagrius alius scripsit altercationem Simonis Iudaei et Theophili Christiani, quae paene omnibus nota est*. Presumably Gennadius is distinguishing this Evagrius from the monk of Pontus (*de viris inlustribus* 11 [TU 14.1a:65]).

68. *Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* 2.10, 3.11, 5.20 (CCL 64:261, 273). Citations from the Corpus Christianorum text are given according to the chapter and paragraph numbers of Warner's translation.

69. *Altercatio Simonis et Theophili* 3.11 (CCL 64:261): *loqueris quasi Iudaeus*. Of course, a Christian of this period could direct such a sneering response equally to an uninformed believer or a heretic. More straightforwardly, Theophilus generally addresses Simon as "Jew" (*Iudaeae: Altercatio* 1.6, 2.7, 5.19, 6.22, 6.24, 7.28 [CCL 64:259, 260, 273, 280, 282, 299]), and repeatedly tells him, "You're wrong, Jew" (*erras, Iudaeae: Altercatio* 2.8, 2.9, 3.12, 3.13 [CCL 64:260, 265]). On two occasions only, Theophilus addresses Simon by his name (*Altercatio* 4.17, 7.28 [CCL 64:271, 299]).

70. *Altercatio* 8.29 (CCL 64:300).

That Simon's conversion should be the "happy ending" of this later dialogue demonstrates already its distance from the dialogic imagination of Justin or Origen.

In a somewhat different register, then, this late Latin dialogue appropriates and integrates the Jewish voice into Christian truth. This Christian mastery of the Jewish voice—both repudiating and revaluing the Jewish origins of Christianity—is once more signaled by the intervention of Christ's circumcision. The circumcision of Jesus is introduced in this instance by Theophilus the Christian, in the midst of his "proof" that Christ is the prophesied subject of Isaiah 7–8. Simon had suggested, through an intertextual reading of Isaiah 37.22 ("The virgin daughter of Zion has despised you and mocked you") that the "virgin" of Isaiah 7.14 allegorically represented Zion. Theophilus counters that Simon's allegory is nonsensical. Isaiah's earlier prophecy had spoken of a *literal* child, "who ate butter and honey" (Isa 7.15), was born of "David's lineage" (Isa 7.13), and who in his infancy received the "strength of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria" (Isa 8.4).

Theophilus proceeds to lay out the correct interpretation of the Isaiah passage, which subordinates any allegory to the literal interpretation. "First, it is explained that Christ ate butter and honey, in accordance with the birth of all infants. We believe this and so we maintain our faith; and certainly he was circumcised on the eighth day."⁷¹ The author of the *Altercatio* introduces here an argument that was used earlier against docetists and Marcionites: a literal reading of Isaiah 7 proves Christ's fleshly infancy and consequently the reality of his human form.⁷² Like all children (according to this reading), Christ ate the food of infants: butter and honey. Furthermore, in proof of his real childhood, he was really circumcised. The logic seems to be that, since Christ was demonstrably a child (as his infant circumcision proves), he would certainly have eaten the foods of a child (butter and honey) and, therefore, so far fits the description of the child in Isaiah's prophecy. The ritual of circumcision in this interpretation has

71. *Altercatio* 3.14 (CCL 64:269).

72. The argument appears in Tertullian, *Marc.* 3.13 (text in *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem*, 2 vols., ed. and tr. Ernest Evans [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], 1:206–210) and in *Iud.* 9 (Tränkle, *Adversus Iudaeos*, 20–23) which takes up much of the argument of the anti-Marcionite tractate. On the relationship of these two texts, see Tränkle, ed., *Q. S. F. Tertulliani Adversus Iudaeos*, liii–lix. Tertullian does not, however, bring Christ's circumcision into this part of his argument in those works. Harnack, *Altercatio*, 91–96, briefly surveys the places he sees comparison with Tertullian's *Iud.*, and concludes that both Tertullian and the *Altercatio* relied on an older, Greek dialogue.

little or no resonance with Judaism:⁷³ its purpose is to reinforce Christ's literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Only when the literal significance of the passage has been understood should allegory be introduced: the "butter and honey" of Christ's infancy are additionally understood to be the "anointing of the spirit" and the "sweetness of his teaching, which we follow and so we attain faith." The "spoils of Samaria" are likewise first read literally—as the gifts of the Magi—before being allegorized as the pagan abandonment of idolatry in the face of Christ's truth.

This christological interpretation of Isaiah 7–8 might not seem particularly noteworthy, but for the strange insertion of Christ's circumcision. Of all the signs of Christ's infancy that might be drawn from the gospels—swaddling, being carried, and so on—why single out such a Jewish proof in the service of refuting Jewish biblical exegesis? Partly (as we shall see) the author is laying some textual groundwork for the more fulsome reinterpretation of circumcision to come later in the dialogue. But I suggest he is also inverting commonly held values of Christian Old Testament interpretation. In other exegetical duels over this Isaiah passage, we tend to see the Jewish side coded as "literal" (the "Virgin Birth" is no more than the prediction of the birth of King Hezekiah to his "maiden" mother) while the Christian side is "spiritual": Justin's own interpretation of Isaiah 7 in the *Dialogue with Trypho* stands as an early and classic example.⁷⁴ Here, however, the Jewish position is represented as too freewheeling and allegorical—the "virgin" as Zion—while the Christian insists that the literally carnal interpretation must take priority. In essence, Theophilus reverses the exegetical stream: claiming both the "carnal," or Jewish, interpretation alongside the allegorical, spiritual reading. Jesus' circumcision, then, represents this Christian absorption of Jewish carnality. Just as Christ took on circumcision, but seemingly only as proof of his universal humanity, so

73. I mean that Theophilus ascribes no apparent Jewish significance to the act here—covenantal or ritual significance, for example—apart from his assumption of circumcision as a routine aspect of Jesus' (Jewish) infancy.

74. See Justin, *dial.* 66, 77–78 (Marcovich, *Iustinus*, 183–84, 203–6). A source critic would no doubt point out that Justin himself broached Christ's circumcision in the midst of his interpretation of Isa 7, discussed above. I think it entirely possible that the author of the *Altercatio* had some version of *dial.* at hand; nonetheless, we do the author a disservice to imagine him simply a slave to his sources: if he chose to build on the intersection of Isa 7 and the circumcision of Christ, we can imagine he had reasons for doing so and supplemented earlier interpretations with his own emphases. Justin, for instance, does not discuss the "butter and honey," the proof of Christ's human infancy, or the necessary building of figurative upon literal exegesis as the author of the *Altercatio* does.

too Theophilus appropriates the fleshly, Jewish mode of reading as part and parcel of universal Christian truth.

Simon is, predictably, convinced by Theophilus's Christianizing interpretation.⁷⁵ The discussion moves on to other aspects of Jesus' messiahship, and soon to the new covenant ushered in by Christ's advent. Simon returns to the question of circumcision:

We indeed read many things, but we do not understand them in that way. So I want to understand, one by one, each of the things I ask you to be proven by the evidence of truth. Now, because God instructed that circumcision be performed, which he first entrusted to the patriarch Abraham, and which you professed earlier that Christ underwent [*quam circumcisionem Christum habuisse superius professus es*], how then are you going to persuade me to believe, you who forbid circumcision?⁷⁶

Simon picks up Theophilus's earlier thread of the circumcision of Christ in such a way as to allow Theophilus to introduce the familiar Pauline trope of Abraham's righteousness "before he was circumcised" (*priusquam circumcideretur*; see Rom 4.10). For Theophilus, Abraham's dual status—believer without circumcision and believer with circumcision—presages the dual nature of the universal church, "showing that two peoples would come into the faith of Christ: one would come having been circumcised and one would come still having the foreskin." Following Simon's lead, Theophilus moves directly from Abraham's circumcision to Christ's: "For if Christ had not been circumcised, how would you believe me today or the prophets, who say that Christ came from the seed of David? Circumcision is in fact a sign of race, not of salvation [*circumcisio enim signum est generis, non salutis*]."⁷⁷ Theophilus's response is, as before, a mixture of literal and figurative interpretation, of dejudaising and rejudaising

75. *Altercatio* 4.15 (CCL 64:269–70): *Bene quidem per omnia interrogationibus meis patefacis mysteria, et quia Christum deum, dei filium, ore dei prolatum, verbo genitum et ex virgine natum probasti*. As often throughout the *Altercation*, Simon the Jew sounds remarkably like a catechumen.

76. *Altercatio* 5.18 (CCL 64:272). Simon's language here—*superius professus es*—recalls Trypho's introduction of the circumcision of Christ to Trypho (σὺ γὰρ ὁμολόγησας ἡμῖν) which, as I noted, was in fact not preceded by such a "confession." The interlocutory doublet may suggest a common source for both Justin and "Evagrius," such as the lost *Dialogue of Jason and Papiscus*; or, perhaps, "Evagrius" had at hand a different version of the *Dialogue with Trypho* than comes down to us.

77. *Altercatio* 5.18 (CCL 64:273). This concluding phrase, along with the general argument about circumcision and "salvation" (*salus*), is also found in the late-fourth century exegesis of Gregory of Elvira, *Tractatus Origenis* 4 (CCL 69:27–34), a possible source for "Evagrius."

exegesis. The general thrust of Theophilus's interpretation is spiritualizing and universalizing; the "old covenant," and its sign of circumcision, point inevitably to the extension of salvation to all peoples, Jewish and Gentile. It is, as Justin had insisted to Trypho, not a sign of salvation but one of "race" (*genus*). Theophilus adds to Justin's earlier reading of Christ's circumcision the notion of messianic condescension: Christ had no need of circumcision, but took it upon himself so that Jews would willingly receive his message of salvation. He condescended to the Jews by taking on their "racial" sign; although, tellingly, Theophilus does not explicitly state whether this condescension actually makes Christ Jewish, or functions merely as a strategic disguise. Indeed, we are led to believe that Christ is an antitype of Abraham, who is *both* "uncircumcised" and "circumcised," the father of Jews and Gentiles alike.

For Theophilus, circumcision—even (and especially) the circumcision of Christ—is the Jewish sign of the former covenant that, ultimately and paradoxically, leads Jews away from that former covenant. The "Law" both makes and unmakes the Jew. As if to drive home the doubled nature of circumcision, as the mark of Jewish "race" and the sign of that race's absorption into a universal salvation, the *Altercation* then introduces the example of the lawgiver himself: Moses. Simon asks about the salvific circumcision of Exodus 4.25, prompted perhaps by Theophilus's claim that circumcision does not bring "salvation" (*salus*).⁷⁸ Although no avenging angels appear in the *Altercation*, we should recall Origen's similar association of Exodus 4.25 with the circumcision of Christ. Theophilus's interpretation is even more straightforwardly christological:

All things, whatever [Moses] did, he was anticipating them in Christ's image. Surely his wife Zipporah, who circumcised the boy, is understood as the synagogue. Moreover, what she says, "Let the blood of the boy's circumcision cease," means that at the time of Christ's advent the circumcision of boys stopped. And so God says the following to Moses: "Build for me an altar of uncut stones (*lapidis non circumcisis*), as also you will not bring an iron tool on them" (Deut 27.5), because certainly in his coming Christ was to build a church of uncircumcised people (*de populo incircumciso*).⁷⁹

In the case of Abraham, the sign of circumcision had signaled the coming church comprising both Jews and Gentiles. Christ's circumcision is

78. *Altercatio* 5.19 (CCL 64:273). Simon cites the Exodus passage according to the Latin version of the Septuagint: *Stet sanguis circumcisionis pueri*. That is, Simon suggests that Moses' son was literally "saved" by being circumcised.

79. *Altercatio* 5.19 (CCL 64:273).

“racially” more ambivalent (does assuming the Jewish “sign of race” make Christ himself a Jew, or is he just passing?), but also is effected in order to bring Jews out of their former covenant into his saving church. Finally, in this strange story from the life of Moses—who does everything as an “image of Christ”—the advent of Christ (and, we should understand, his own circumcision) answers the prayers of “the synagogue” that infant male circumcision “should cease” and to construct a church built of “uncut” (*non circumcisi*) Gentiles. All circumcising roads, including Jesus’ own, lead Jews out of their own circumcising covenant. In the subsequent sections of the *Altercation*, Theophilus explains to Simon the true circumcision “of the heart,” and continues leading him down the path to conversion and baptism.

On first blush, the *Altercation* presents a typical, dejudaizing Christian interpretation of circumcision: the faithfulness of Abraham before circumcision, the temporary nature of the law of Moses, the transformation of incomplete and prefigurative “signs” into full salvation at the coming of Christ. But the dialogic format of the *Altercation*, the back-and-forth between suggestible Jew and authoritarian Christian, injects a subtle nuance of *rejudaizing* into the discussion, only heightened by the centrality of Christ’s own circumcision. For while the truth and end of circumcision remains ineluctably Christian, it is also persistently Jewish: this “sign” creates the *genus Iudaicum*, the “Jewish race,” even as it instructs them on how to give up their “genus” for Christian salvation. Circumcision, the ambivalent circumcision of Christ in particular, functions as a shorthand not for the eradication of Judaism in favor of Christianity, but for the transformation of Judaism *into* Christianity. Furthermore, it is a transformation that remains conspicuously visible, on the surface, apparent to the triumphant, spiritual church of the Gentiles. Even at the climax of the *Altercation*, when Simon pleads to progress (like a catechumen) from instruction to the baptismal font, Theophilus’s response invokes not the new covenant, but the old: “A blessing indeed! So Isaac blessed Jacob, and through his hand received blessing, so that the greater might proceed from the lesser, so also Ephraim and Manasseh were exchanged by the imposition of hands.”⁸⁰ Again, Christian triumph echoes in the voice of the “old covenant” (the blessings of the patriarchs, here read as an allegory for the choosing of the “younger son” over the elder). The appropriation of the Jewish voice, almost comically subservient in the *Altercation*, remains audible and essential to the spiritual victory of Christianity.

80. *Altercatio* 8.29 (CCL 64:300).

Justin's *Dialogue* and Origen's apology *Against Celsus* ventriloquize the voice of Christian others and are two of our earliest Christian writings to hint at the complex, and unresolved, boundaries with Jews and Judaism through Christ's circumcision. Scholars of Christian difference in antiquity have often been tempted to seize upon this presentation of the "the other's voice" in such texts to reconstruct some historical account of Jewish and pagan opposition to Christianity (the Quest for the Historical Trypho or Celsus, perhaps). Yet the small sign of the circumcision of Christ, whose unavoidable difference destabilizes the boundaries of Christian identity, suggests that something more intricate is taking place within early Christian dialogues with Jewish others. The entirely schematic format of the *Altercation of Simon and Theophilus*, in which a two-dimensional Jewish character is led like a marionette to the baptismal font, makes this point even more clearly: in tracing the interaction of Jewish and Christian voices in late antiquity, we may do better to attend to the dialogic genre rather than to the historicity of characters and events. The encoding of the "other" in the dialogue is not some unwitting byproduct of a nascent and immature Christian confrontation with the other: it is the deliberate preservation of heteroglossia, a dialogics of identity that inscribes and destabilizes difference.

It is important to recognize that the format of these texts conveys ideological meaning as well as the content. By producing dialogues, these three authors conveyed the Christian desire to speak, at times, in the voice of the other: to sound like "the Jew" or "the pagan" (or, in Origen's case, both). We need not read the attempt to erect a firm boundary against Judaism as merely reactive ("they're just responding to criticism from Jews"), nor explain the tenuous and often contradictory nature of those boundaries as a result of the primitive level of religious development ("they're still figuring out their positions").⁸¹ These externalized dialogues of difference that draw on the irresolvable multivalence of the divine circumcision, on my reading, are deliberately and productively heteroglossic in their articulation of Christian identity vis-à-vis Judaism.

Especially the *Altercation*, from a later period than Justin's or Origen's text, on the other side of the Constantinian divide, serves to illuminate the hybrid character of the early Christian dialogic imagination. That is, beyond the debates about the historicity of Trypho, Celsus, or even the

81. See the sympathetic reading of Demetrios Trakatellis, "Justin Martyr's Trypho," *HTR* 79 (1986): 289–97, who prefers to see the *Dialogue* as "beyond the stereotyped classification of anti-Jewish or anti-Christian . . . dominated by a consuming shared passion for the truth revealed in Scriptures" (297).

prosopopoetic Jew of the *Contra Celsum*, the *Altercatio* underscores the degree to which Christians conjured and constructed a Jewish voice precisely to serve their own needs. Simon, the weakest member of the chorus of Jewish voices surveyed here, makes all too clear the desire for Christians to exert control over “the Jew” on the written page. Even if we can convince ourselves that we hear traces of a “real Jew” somewhere in Simon’s obsequious interlocution,⁸² we must confront him as a creature of Christian literary projection. In fact, Simon’s character rang so false for Adolf von Harnack that he served as a center-piece for the great German church historian’s argument about the fictitiousness of all such “Jewish-Christian dialogues.”⁸³ For Harnack, unable to believe that Simon was anything more than a cipher, the actual target of such texts, from Justin’s *Dialogue* onward, were the heretics and pagans who truly troubled the early Christians, not the moribund Jews who had slinked off after their failed rebellions and rejection of Christ.⁸⁴

But if Simon’s flatness makes us recognize the artifice involved in the Christian production of these ancient Jewish voices, the robustness of Justin’s Trypho and even Origen’s own ambivalence in the face of a rhetorical Jewish opponent lead us to acknowledge the flipside: that, for all of this literary invention and artifice, Christians were drawn to elaborate the image of the Jew as their troubling interlocutor. The dialogic imagination of early Christians did not erase and silence those Jewish voices, but preserved them. The fact that Simon turned so easily to the baptismal font may lead us to question the “historical Simon,” or even his authentic Jewish credentials; it should not, however, lead us to ignore his necessary *Jewishness*, the framing of Christian mastery as an encounter with a Jew, the transformation of a Jew, and a desire to confront and domesticate Jewishness within Christianity.

The circumcision of Christ encapsulates this hybridizing impulse: the Jewish remainder that completes Christian identity (and yet, at heart,

82. See, for instance, William Horbury, *Jews and Christians in Contact and Controversy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 170 and 205.

83. See Harnack, *Altercatio* and now the discussion of Lahey, “Christian-Jewish Dialogues,” 5–9, who takes a more optimistic approach to this text as evidence for authentic Jewish criticism of Christianity.

84. See Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Introduction: Traditional Models and New Directions” and Andrew S. Jacobs, “The Lion and the Lamb: Reconsidering Jewish-Christian Relations in Antiquity” in *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95, ed. Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 1–33 and 95–118.

potentially disrupts it—for what is to stop suggestible Simon from turning into troubling Trypho?). Just as Christ's circumcision for these authors leaves the indelible trace of the Jew on the savior's body, the trace that somehow speaks against the totality of Judaism, so too the careful retention of a Jewish voice in the service of a refutation of Judaism instructs us on the ways in which Christians blurred their own literatures of difference. This blurring is neither a sign of confusion or hesitation on the part of the dialogue-writers, nor a sign of religious immaturity, but—like the divine circumcision itself—a deliberately fashioned discourse of dialogic multivocality that makes Christian culture “work.”

POSING THE QUESTION:
“IF THE SAVIOR WAS CIRCUMCISED . . .”

As I suggested above, the Jewish interlocutor in the *Altercation of Simon and Theophilus* often sounds more like an unformed catechumen, eager to be brought into the Christian mysteries, than a resistant and recalcitrant religious outsider. In the dialogic space of the *Altercation*, this confusion of self and other strikes me as deliberate: a way of more fully assimilating that otherness into the orbit of Christian control, of taming and yet retaining the heteroglossia of religious identities. The suggestive overlap of Jewish resistance and neophyte ignorance leads me to introduce a second set of texts into my exploration of the dialogic imagination of Christ's circumcision. These are texts from the fourth through seventh centuries that more fully internalize that “other voice” of Christian identity, texts which scholars have dubbed *erotapokriseis* (following a middle Byzantine neologism) or “question-and-answer texts.”

As a genre, the *erotapokriseis* emerge out of the literary flotsam and jetsam of classical *paideia*, perhaps like the gospel genre.⁸⁵ Various pre- and para-Christian authors made use of the “question-and-answer” format (known classically as ζήτηματα or *quaestiones*) within treatises, letters, or other formal genres.⁸⁶ Philo of Alexandria is known to have subjected

85. See the classic essay of Jonathan Z. Smith, “Good News is No News: Aretalogy and Gospel,” in *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 23 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), 190–207, followed by Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 5 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 3–4, 46–65.

86. The classic study remains the six-part publication of Gustave Bardy, “La littérature patristique des ‘quaestiones et responsiones’ sur l'Écriture Sainte,” *RB* 41 (1932): 210–36, 341–60, 515–37; 42 (1933): 14–30, 211–29, 328–52 (cited as Bardy,

biblical texts to a “question-and-answer” treatment in the larger context of his scriptural commentaries,⁸⁷ and late ancient Aristotelian and Platonic instructors also found the process a useful instructional tool. The isolation of the question-and-answer format as an independent, self-conscious *genre*, however, seems to be the elaboration of Christian authors in the fourth century.⁸⁸ Some Christian writers, such as Augustine, located their *erotapokriseis* in specific social contexts: an identified questioner has approached them (often in writing) and requested guidance, which is then provided in a responsive, question-and-answer framework.⁸⁹ Other Christians chose to leave their questions and answers floating in a kind of anonymity, identifying neither the questioner nor (except to the extent that we can identify an author at all) the answerer.

My exploration of the dialogic imagination of Christ’s circumcision provides, perhaps, a further context for the rise of this variegated genre in Christian literary circles in the early period of the Christian Roman Empire:

“Littérature patristique I–VI”). Bardy, “Littérature patristique I,” 211–12, briefly notes that the genre seems to emerge out of philosophical pedagogy, but also remarks, “Il est inutile d’insister sur les origines du genre” (211). Bardy’s yeoman’s work of cataloguing is now supplemented by the collected essays in *Erotapokriseis: Early Christian Question-and-Answer Literature in Context, Proceedings of the Utrecht Colloquium, 13–14 October 2003*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 37, ed. Annelie Volgers and Claudio Zamagni (Leuven: Peeters, 2004); and Yannis Papadoyannakis, “Instruction by Question and Answer: The Case of Late Antique and Byzantine *Erotapokriseis*,” in *Greek Literature in Late Antiquity: Dynamism, Didacticism, Classicism*, ed. Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 91–106, who also places these texts in a dialogic context.

87. Bardy, “Littérature patristique I,” 212–17; Peder Borgen and Roald Skarsten, “Quaestiones et solutiones: Some Observations on the Form of Philo’s Exegesis,” *Studia Philonica* 4 (1976–77): 1–16; Pieter W. van der Horst, “Philo and the Rabbis on Genesis: Similar Questions, Different Answers,” in Volgers and Zamagni, *Erotapokriseis*, 55–70.

88. See the overview and references of Claudio Zamagni, “Une introduction méthodologique à la littérature patristique des questions et réponses: Le cas d’Eusèbe de Césarée,” in Volgers and Zamagni, *Erotapokriseis*, 7–24, who distinguishes between a question-and-answer *process* (evident from Aristotle onward) and a question-and-answer *genre*, which he claims originates with Eusebius. On this technical (but not unimportant) point, Bardy seemed already in some agreement, saying of Eusebius’s *περὶ τῶν ἐν εὐαγγελίοις ζητημάτων καὶ λύσεων*: “pour la première fois, dans la littérature patristique, nous rencontrons le titre exact qui caractérise le genre littéraire dont nous nous occupons ici” (“Littérature patristique I,” 228).

89. On Augustine’s several *quaestiones* texts, see Bardy, “Littérature patristiques III,” 515–37; and the much more expansive catalogue of Ronald J. Teske, S.J., “Augustine of Hippo and the Quaestiones et Responiones Literature,” in Volgers and Zamagni, *Erotapokriseis*, 127–44.

the increasing internalization of the otherness, the *heteroglossia*, of the larger Roman world within the Christian mentality. Just as the production of external dialogic texts—Justin's anti-Jewish *Dialogue* or Origen's anti-pagan treatise *Against Celsus*—might allow for uncomfortable otherness to be confronted, controlled, domesticated (and yet, importantly, never eradicated), so the *erotapokriseis* could take this effort at internalizing otherness one step further by substituting Christian naïveté for external criticism.⁹⁰ Questions which in other contexts seem shocking or challenging coming from a non-Christian (on scriptural inconsistencies, or the impossibility of Christ's incarnation or resurrection⁹¹) are softened by being reframed as the queries of Christian innocence. Whereas a pagan or Jew might aggressively challenge Christian theology or exegesis, a Christian neophyte transforms those incisive critiques into naive curiosity.⁹²

For this reason, perhaps, the challenge of Christ's circumcision to Christian identity emerges in its most direct form in the *erotapokriseis*. In the external dialogues—Justin, Origen, the *Altercation*—an unspoken anxiety of otherness lurked beneath the dejudaizing, and rejudaizing, literary efforts of our authors. These dialogues framed Jewish challenges to Christianity in a variety of ways: Christians selectively appropriated scriptural law, they were inconsistent in their veneration of God's covenant, and so forth. While Christ's circumcision partially, and variably, might answer these charges, it was never allowed to raise the explicit question: "But doesn't Christ's circumcision somehow make you Christians Jewish?" Yet it is, in some respect, this unarticulated anxiety that necessitates meeting and domesticating the otherness of Judaism through Christ's circumcision: the fear (or, perhaps, desire?) that the original Jewishness of Christ, the apostles, the Scriptures, might unwittingly infect Christians. We find the direct formulation of this potential effect of Christ's circumcision in one of the earliest fulsome question-and-answer texts, that of Ambrosiaster.

90. See Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," 282–84 on "internal dialogism" and 324–28 on "double-voicedness." See also the critical discussions of Evans, "Politics of Multiculturalism," 405–6 on "intentional and nonintentional" dialogues; and Nikulin, "Mikhail Bakhtin," 399: "[R]ejoinders of the inner dialogue (with oneself) and of the outer dialogue (with the other) are not really separable, but always intersect; they both interrupt and support each other."

91. Such topics were staples of *adversus Iudaeos* and Christian apologetic texts, and also appear regularly in Christian *erotapokriseis*. See, for example, the discussion of Augustine's "question-and-answer" texts alongside his polemical treatises (such as *Faust.*) of Teske, "Augustine of Hippo."

92. Bardy, "Littérature patristique V," 215, points out that the possibly fourth-century Greek Ps.-Justin *Quaestiones ad orthodoxos* recycled issues raised by Celsus, Porphyry, and the Emperor Julian in their respective anti-Christian treatises.

Ambrosiaster

The shadowy figure dubbed “Ambrosiaster”⁹³ organized his late fourth-century *Liber quaestionum* as a series of scripturally ordered queries.⁹⁴ Upon closer examination, this scriptural arrangement functions along the same lines as the “question-and-answer” format in general: it is a literary device to contain and reframe larger, and perhaps more troubling, questions of Christian faith and knowledge. Using this organizing rubric, Ambrosiaster can include under the “Old Testament” questions like *Quid est deus?* and under the “New Testament” questions like *Si unus est deus, cur in tribus spes salutatis est?* The “questioner” in this text is invisible and, in fact, exists only as a series of tabular questions appended to the beginning of the text:⁹⁵ he is the disembodied voice of Christian inquiry, whose interrogational *bona fides* is evident primarily in the instructional (if, occasionally, aggressive) tone Ambrosiaster takes in his answers. There is likewise no preface, leaving us to imagine a context for the *Liber quaestionum*. Given the context of other contemporary Latin *erotapokriseis*—found in letters and treatises of Jerome and Augustine, for instance⁹⁶—we can most easily envision Ambrosiaster acting as the ecclesiastical authority setting out to correct the average Christian reader and direct him away from possible error. That is, much like the external dialogues examined above, Ambrosiaster’s *Liber quaestionum* is concerned with boundaries. The desire to keep the putative questioner on the right theological track lends a distinctly polemical and, at times, apologetic edge to Ambrosiaster’s “answers.” His particular attention to Jews and Judaism has even led some

93. See Alexander Souter, *A Study of Ambrosiaster*, TSt 8.4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905); and, for more recent bibliography and discussion, Annelie Volgers, “Ambrosiaster: Persuasive Powers in Progress,” in Volgers and Zamagni, *Erotapokriseis*, 99–125.

94. Different MSS contain various numbers of questions: see the “Prolegomena” of *Pseudo-Augustini quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti cxxvii*, CSEL 50, ed. Alexander Souter (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1908), vii–xxxv. I am following Souter’s critical edition, which lists 47 “Old Testament” questions and 80 “New Testament” questions (although questions 100–127 are an Old/New Testament catch-all). See Souter, *Study*, 161–74 on Ambrosiaster’s likely date (366–82 c.e.) and location (Rome).

95. The editor of the critical edition, Alexander Souter, notes in the *apparatus criticus* that he inserted the individual “chapter titles” before each question: “Singulorum capitulorum sectiones ipse constitui” (CSEL 50:13).

96. See Volgers, “Ambrosiaster,” 99–100 and Andrew Cain, “In Ambrosiaster’s Shadow: A Critical Re-Evaluation of the Last Surviving Letter Exchange between Pope Damasus and Jerome,” *REAug* 51 (2005): 257–77, esp. 268–75, who persuasively gauges Ambrosiaster’s literary impact in late fourth-century Rome and Jerome’s sense of competition with him (echoed later, of course, by Augustine’s literary emulation and challenge to Jerome).

scholars to posit that Ambrosiaster was a former Jew, on the theory that no zeal matches that of the convert.⁹⁷ But as we have already seen in the externalized dialogues of Justin, Origen, and the *Altercation*, more compelling concerns about identity and otherness might lead a Christian to appropriate and repudiate the voice of the Jewish other.

While Ambrosiaster's chapter traditionally titled *adversus Iudaeos* might seem a logical place to investigate his attitude toward the Jewish heritage of Christianity,⁹⁸ more telling are those briefer *quaestiones* that approach Christianity's latent Jewishness obliquely. In the obscure chapter *de lingua Hebraea* (*Liber quaestionum* 108), Ambrosiaster uses philology to engage the ongoing polemical debate between Jews and Christians over the legacy of Abraham, a debate ostensibly stretching all the way back to the time of Jesus and Paul.⁹⁹ Ambrosiaster begins with the assumption (shared by his contemporaries and, it should be noted, by modern biblical scholars) that "Hebrew" derives from "Heber" (Gen 10.24–25, 11.14–17), a patronymic that would associated the Hebrews (and their Jewish descendants) more specifically with the "family of Shem, by family, language, land, and nation" (Gen 10.31).¹⁰⁰ Nothing could be further from the truth, Ambrosiaster asserts: *Hebraeus* actually comes from (*H*)*Abraham*.¹⁰¹ The Hebrew language, Ambrosiaster goes on to explain, is the divine tongue of creation, spoken by Adam in Eden and extinct after the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel.¹⁰² Later this language—which, Ambrosiaster points out, no longer has "any land or any people" (*neque terram . . .*

97. Many of the "questions" and "answers" are highly polemical, aimed at the Jews and pagans of Ambrosiaster's milieu (late fourth-century Rome). On his polemical interests, see Franz Cumont, "La polémique de l'Ambrosiaster contre les païens," *Revue d'Histoire et de Littérature Religieuses* 8 (1903): 417–40; L. Speller, "Ambrosiaster and the Jews," *SP* 17.1 (1982): 72–78; and Souter, *Study*, 180–83.

98. Despite the questionless title, *quaestio* 44 (CSEL 50:71–81) is actually framed as a scriptural "answer" to the meaning of the location of the "house" of God in Isa 56.7.

99. Jeffrey S. Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews: Abraham in Early Christian Controversy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991).

100. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 108.2 (CSEL 50:522). On contemporary opinion, see Jerome, *Liber Hebraicorum quaestionum in Genesim* 1.10.24 (PL 23:955): *Heber, a quo Hebraei*. On modern scholarly opinion, see Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Genesius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (repr.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1979), 720. Some of this discussion on the Hebrew language is repeated in Ambrosiaster's *Commentary on Paul's Letters*.

101. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 108.2 (CSEL 50:252). Throughout the chapter, Ambrosiaster provides philological arguments for lost gutturals, transposed consonants, and shifting vowels.

102. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 108.6–7 (CSEL 50:255–56).

neque gentem)¹⁰³—was restored by God’s chosen ones, Abraham (from whom the language now took its name, *Hebraeus*) and Moses.¹⁰⁴

That Ambrosiaster intended this somewhat esoteric discussion of languages and names to reverberate in Jewish-Christian debates over Abraham’s spiritual patrimony seems clear from one trenchant New Testament example of a “Hebrew” invoked in the course of his answer: the apostle Paul. Paul famously referred to himself as a “Hebrew born of Hebrews” (*Hebraeus ex Hebraeis*; Phil 3.5). For Ambrosiaster, however, Paul’s boasting of his “Hebrewness” was due to his likeness in piety to Abraham, not his ethnic or linguistic origins among the Jews.¹⁰⁵ In a few dense paragraphs on a seemingly esoteric topic, Ambrosiaster takes the ethnic and linguistic core of “Jewishness” as it was understood in his day, and thoroughly deJudaizes it: Hebrew means Abrahamic, Abrahamic refers to piety, and even the apostle Paul whose ambiguous Jewishness might trouble early Christians is rendered safely, and unequivocally, non-Jewish.

The question of Christ’s circumcision—another moment at which Christianity might seem perilously Jewish—receives a similarly fine treatment. The question arises early in the section reserved for *quaestiones novi testamenti*, immediately following a question on the baptism of Jesus: “Why was the Savior—even though he was born holy (*sanctus*) and was called Christ the Lord at his very birth—baptized, even though baptism takes place on account of purification and sin?”¹⁰⁶ Assuring the questioner that Christ was, indeed, born without sin and therefore had no *need* of baptism (indeed, this is why John demurred: Matt 3.14–15), Ambrosiaster explains: “It was fitting that he should be as an example to those who would later become ‘sons of God’ [John 1.12], whom he taught would be made sons of God through baptism.”¹⁰⁷ The very next question pursues this idea of Christ’s exemplary activity on earth: “But if the Savior was baptized so that he would be as an example, why did he, having been circumcised, forbid others from being circumcised?”¹⁰⁸ Ambrosiaster begins

103. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 108.7 (CSEL 50:256). The passage is somewhat confusing, as Ambrosiaster seems about to concede that Jews still speak Hebrew: *denique neque terram aliquam habet inter homines, ut ceterae linguae, neque gentem exceptis Iudaeis, quia primo homini data est in paradiso.*

104. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 108.8 (CSEL 50:256).

105. This is made even clearer in the more fulsome discussion of Ambrosiaster’s *Commentarius in Philippienses* 3:5/7 (CSEL 81.3:152–53); see the discussion of Andrew S. Jacobs, “A Jew’s Jew: Paul and the Early Christian Problem of Jewish Origins,” *JR* 86 (2006): 258–86, at 265–67.

106. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 49 (CSEL 50:95–96).

107. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 49.1 (CSEL 50:95).

108. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 50 (CSEL 50:96–97).

his response in a manner befitting a treatise structured according to New and Old Testaments:

The circumcision of the foreskin (*circumcisio praeteriti*) was a dated commandment (*temporis mandatum*), which rightfully possessed authority until Christ; it remained in force until such time as Christ was born, who was promised to Abraham, so that, as for the rest, circumcision has ceased since the promise has been fulfilled.¹⁰⁹

Ambrosiaster invokes a familiar patristic strategy for explaining the difference between Old and New Testament obligations, used also in the *Altercation*: a “difference in times” by which Christ’s advent created a cosmic rupture between then and now, a Jewish past and a Christian present.¹¹⁰ Of course, this has the effect of relegating his Jewish contemporaries to a state of hopeless anachronism, but at least provides an opportunity for understanding their willful blindness to New Testament truth. Ambrosiaster also creates a space within his own orthodox religion for an account of the Jewish past: it is the prehistory of salvation, a time of commandments once honored but now “fulfilled.”¹¹¹

As Ambrosiaster continues, however, we see that his Christian appropriation of the Old Testament promise is not quite so gracious. After affirming Abraham’s covenant in Genesis 17, Ambrosiaster proceeds to transform it entirely. I cite the rest of his “answer” in full, continuing directly from the quotation above:

Now, Isaac was promised as a type of Christ (*figura Christi*). For God said to him: “in your seed all nations will be blessed (*in semine tuo benedicentur omnes gentes*)” (Gen 22.18); this is Christ. Indeed that faith which Abraham received was restored by Christ, with the result that “in the seed of Abraham” (which is Christ) “all nations will be blessed.” Such was Abraham’s promise.

Therefore circumcision was the sign of the promised son—that is, Christ. At his birth it was fitting for the sign of the promise (*signum promissionis*)

109. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 50 (CSEL 50:96).

110. On “difference in times” as a strategy of ancient Christian exegesis, see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 145–52 and 225–30 on circumcision in particular.

111. Compare his discussion of Abraham’s circumcision in *Liber quaestionum* 12 (CSEL 36–39), framed as the question: *quare Abraham fidei suae signum circumcisionem accepit?* Quite simply, Ambrosiaster dismisses any sense that this constituted self-mutilation, but rather the ultimate sign of trust in God (he draws the interesting parallel with Achior at the end of the book of Judith). The circumcision is an unequivocally positive sign, and also points ahead to *futurus Christus*.

to cease; nevertheless also that the one who was promised should himself receive the sign of his father (*signum patris*) when he came, so that he would be known as the one who was promised to justify all the nations (*gentes*) through faith in the circumcision of the heart. Now since bodily circumcision (*circumcisionis corporale*) was a seal (*signaculum*) of the son born according to the flesh to the father, Abraham, so too for those born according to the spirit the circumcision of the heart is a spiritual sign; therefore it is more correct, after Christ, no longer to require circumcision according to the flesh.¹¹²

Ambrosiaster's exegetical logic is typically dense and begins by reframing the "promise" invoked earlier in his answer. We learn, immediately, that Christ was the promised "child according to the flesh" of Genesis 17, while Isaac was merely a "type" (*figura*). Therefore, as the fruit of the promise, it was fitting for Christ to receive the "sign of the promise," that is, circumcision. Already the voice of Christian identity is shaded by Jewish undertones. Christ's circumcision—as the child of Abraham's flesh, as part of the "promise" made in Genesis 17—might appear no different in kind from the circumcision of any Jew, past or present: also performed on children of Abraham's flesh, also in memory of the "promise" made in Genesis 17. This interplay of *carnalis* and *spiritualis* then becomes a lynchpin in the rest of Ambrosiaster's answer.

For if the "promised son" explains why Christ was circumcised, it does not yet answer the question as it was posed: why should not every Christian take this physical circumcision as a literal example and follow suit? (Especially when one considers the immediately preceding *quaestio*, in which Christ's baptism served exactly this exemplary purpose.) Ambrosiaster explains that precisely because *Christ*, and not Isaac, fulfilled the ancient promise to his "father" Abraham, it was fitting and necessary that the seal of that promise should no longer be necessary. Instead, a "spiritual circumcision of the heart" must take its place for those children born according to the "spirit."¹¹³ In fact, we learn, this was the entire purpose of the promise, its sign, and its fulfillment, for the key passage in the Genesis covenant for Ambrosiaster is Genesis 22.18, "in your seed shall be blessed all the *nations*," that is, all of the Gentile Christians, the spiritual "children of Abraham." Despite its carnality, embedded in the logic of

112. Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 50 (CSEL 50:96–97).

113. By "spiritual circumcision" Ambrosiaster seems to indicate a moral "excision" of fleshly "blindness," and not a typology for baptism: see, for instance, *Liber quaestionum* 12.2 (CSEL 50:37): *nebula carnis circumcidi haberet a cordibus hominibus per fidem Christi, quia carnalis error obstat caliginem praestans humanis cordibus, ne cognoscerent creatorem.*

the Abrahamic covenant, Christ's circumcision reveals the truth about circumcision in general: that this Jewish sign was, in truth, a sign to the Gentiles, and always had been. Ambrosiaster's answer doubly inscribes the (seeming) Jewishness of Jesus and the absolute non-Jewishness of Christianity in the same stroke.

In this one condensed dialogic moment, we glimpse both the desired "horizon" between Christianity and Judaism and its determined lack of definition. Christ, in his circumcision, embodies this moment of heteroglossia, particularly through his representation of *both* "carnal" and "spiritual" truths. On the one hand in this passage, as elsewhere in the *Liber quaestionum* (and throughout early Christian writings¹¹⁴) the categories of *carnalis* and *spiritualis* function as a shorthand for the qualitative difference between Jews, mired in the blindness of the fleshly law, and Christians, liberated by spiritual grace.¹¹⁵ So the Christian questioner can rest assured that he need not fear finding himself on the wrong side of that divide: he is a spiritual "son," like all faithful believers, part of the blessed "nations." Christ's revelation of the truth of circumcision thus affirms the Christian's spiritual superiority.

Yet we note that this spiritual surety is guaranteed by the son "according to the flesh," whose literal, physical descent from Abraham—as well as his submission to the literal, physical seal of circumcision—will always, of necessity, create a kind of kinship with "real" Jews. Christ's circumcision is effective in its revelation and fulfillment because it is *carnalis*, in exactly the fashion that the Jews persist in their *circumcisio carnalis*. We have already seen how the Jewishness of Christ's circumcision remains visible in the external dialogues, affirmed by the literal voice of Jewish interlocutors. Although here the Jewish interlocutor has been replaced with an invisible, and faceless, Christian, the visibility of the Jewish other remains, on the surface of Christ's body and in the theological logic of his actions. It is not enough for the Christian to claim spiritual truth, he must also acknowledge its fleshly basis. In Ambrosiaster's terse reply we hear the doubled voice of Christian dialogic: the utter rejection, and appropriation, of Jewish otherness.

114. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 2: "This accusation against the Jews, that they are indisputably carnal, was a topos of much Christian writing in late antiquity."

115. See, for instance, Ambrosiaster, *Liber quaestionum* 44.10 (CSEL 50:77): *idcirco autem nova lex data est, id est spiritualis, ut cessarent carnalia*. As I noted above, *quaestio* 44 in the MS is labeled *adversus Iudaeos*.

Ps.-Athanasius and "Duke Antiochus"

Once expressed, this direct confrontation with and internalization of the other Jewish voice in this dialogic form expanded. By nature, the *erotapokriseis* is a flexible form—much like the biblical commentary—ever expanding to include more questions, different answers, and varying voices of Christian inquiry. The relatively well-known *Liber quaestionum* itself comes down to us in multiple textual traditions, with contents ranging from 115 to 151 questions and answers.¹¹⁶ Pseudonymous sets of questions in the later Latin west and Greek east provided a similarly flexible format, not only for containing the anxiety of theological uncertainties but for safely expanding the subtextual chorus of voices in this Christian heteroglossia.¹¹⁷ The circumcision of Christ, we should not be surprised to learn, is one internalized Christian anxiety that finds itself the object of ongoing attention in this format.

The question-and-answer text known as the *Quaestiones ad ducem Antiochum* was, by the seventh century or so, ascribed to Athanasius of Alexandria. While Athanasius's writings provide one of the many sources for the compilation of this *erotapokriseis*-text, its authorship and provenance are otherwise unknown.¹¹⁸ The most common surviving Greek version probably dates from the seventh or eighth century,¹¹⁹ and possibly betrays the influence of the rise of Islam;¹²⁰ these *Questions to Duke Antiochus* may even have been edited and adapted until the time of the Crusades.¹²¹ While most *erotapokriseis* can be considered something of a hodgepodge, bringing together heresiology, scriptural commentary, philosophy, cosmology, and myriad other Christian discourses, the *Questions* is a particularly disjointed conglomeration of a wide variety of sources

116. Discussed by Volgers, "Ambrosiaster," 100.

117. See the texts surveyed in Volgers and Zamagni, *Erotapokriseis* and Bardy, "Littérature patristique."

118. Bardy, "Littérature patristique VI," 328–32 and Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1997), 96–97 and nn. 142–46.

119. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 96, says it is "in part at least a product of the seventh century"; Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 133, dates it to "the last quarter of the seventh century." The composite, and evolving, nature of the text, however, makes dating something of an impossible task since versions of the *Quaestiones* could have been circulating for a century or more before taking on its present form in the post-Islamic period. Certainly, as we shall see, the discussion of Christ's circumcision could belong just as easily to the fifth century as the eighth.

120. Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 123–25.

121. Bardy, "Littérature patristique VI," 332.

held together by little more than an enduring title and textual transmission.¹²² Various “sources” can be identified—especially prominent Christian writers of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries—but my interest here is not source criticism. Rather I seek to gain insight into the ways ancient and early medieval Christians created a space for the dialogic cacophony of different voices even as they were ostensibly refining and narrowing the bounds of “orthodox” identity. Certainly a loud voice in that babel, for the author(s) of the *Questions*, was the insistent voice of Jewish criticism and the equally pressing call for sharp, diverse responses.¹²³

The question concerning Christ’s circumcision comes among other discussions of ritual correctness, stated here even more baldly than in Ambrosiaster’s *Book of Questions*: “Why, since Christ was circumcised, are we not also circumcised like him?”¹²⁴ Here is “Athanasius’s” answer in full:

Christ, being the Son of God, came to fulfill the law, so that he would not be considered hostile to God (αντίθεος) nor opposed to the God who has given the law (αντίδικος τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ δεδωκότος τὸν νόμον). For early and late have the Jews accused him of this. But since he fulfilled the requirements of the law on our behalf, we are no longer under the law, but under grace. Therefore Christ tells us through Paul: “but if you are circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you” (Gal 5.2). The result therefore is that we recognize clearly that all those who have been circumcised are strangers to Christ (ἄλλότριοι τοῦ Χριστοῦ), whether they are believers or unbelievers, Jews or Greeks, since they boast in the law of Moses and do not follow Christ.¹²⁵

For just like all those who, supposing they can offer sacrifice to God through blood and senseless creatures, nullify and make abominable the bloodless sacrifice of Christ: so all those who have been circumcised in the flesh revile and reject the spiritual circumcision, that is, holy baptism; for the one is like the other.

122. Bardy, “Littérature patristique VI,” 332, coolly remarks: “Inutile de nous arrêter sur ces chaînes; qu’il nous suffise d’opposer leur médiocrité à l’intérêt des ouvrages homogènes qui peuvent se recommander du nom d’un auteur unique.”

123. Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 116–37, places the *Quaestiones ad Antiochum* in conversation with other anti-Jewish sources of the period, and notes that the *Quaestiones* itself seems to have made fulsome use of explicitly anti-Jewish source material.

124. Ps.-Athanasius, *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem* 37 (PG 28:620): τίνος χάριν τοῦ Χριστοῦ περιτεμηθέντος, οὐ περιτεμόμεθα καὶ ἡμεῖς, ὡς αὐτός;

125. Olster, *Roman Defeat*, 123, translates this section as follows: “Thus, we thereby know clearly that all the circumcised are races that are alien to Christ, whether faithful or unfaithful, Jews or pagans, since they puff themselves up with the Mosaic law, and do not follow Christ.” His translation of ἄλλότριος as “of an alien race” and Ἕλληνας as “pagans” helps him emphasize the utility of this passage in addressing the “far more important implications [in the seventh century] that circumcision had for the Arabs, their victories, and the question of God’s favor” (124).

For not in the law did Christ render the devil and the demons powerless, nor did he effect salvation through it: but in the cross. So the demons do not look upon the law with fear and trembling, but rather when they see the cross they tremble and flee, and they are rendered powerless and chased away.¹²⁶

Several arguments from earlier dialogues and other Christian explications of the circumcision of Christ are woven here together, into a variety of “voices.” On the one hand, Christ seems to ameliorate his own baffling circumcision with the Pauline exhortation on the uselessness of the act (recall that Origen similarly juxtaposed Paul’s words with Christ’s actions). For “Athanasius,” these words remind good Christians that circumcision becomes the ultimate mark of non-Christianity, by which both “Jews and Greeks” can be recognized and excluded. Like all other marks of the “law of Moses,” such as sacrifice, circumcision is rendered ineffective by the world-transforming act of Christ’s salvation in which all Christians should hope to participate. Do demons quake at the sight of sacrifice or (we are led to imagine) circumcision? No, it is the sign of the cross that drives away evil.

Such an answer is, of course, a perfectly reasonable explanation for Christian non-circumcision, ultimately reaching back to interpretations of Paul himself: to trust in the law is to doubt in the cross, and lose salvation. This answer does little, however, to explain *Christ’s* own circumcision. Surely it was not to mark him as outside the community of the faithful? Surely good Christians posing the query are not to understand by this response that Christ himself misplaced his trust in the law? No, the beginning of the response clarifies this for us—in some ways. For, as we can see, Christ’s circumcision was at once a scrupulous adherence to the law and a total obliteration of that law.

First there is the idea of Christ’s ministerial condescension, which we saw Theophilus invoke in the *Altercation*. For Jews—both in the period of the New Testament and, we learn, even unto the (nebulous) time of the questioner—“have accused” Christ of being “hostile to God” (ἀντίθεος) the lawgiver. Circumcision removes this argument and proves Christ’s connection to God’s (earlier) law. More than that, however, Christ “fulfilled”

126. Ps.-Athanasius, *Quaestiones ad Antiochum Ducem* 37 (PG 28:620–21). The reference to a “bloodless sacrifice” is likely meant to contrast the Eucharist with Old Testament sacrifice (many thanks to David Brakke and the anonymous reader for *J ECS* for pointing this out to me). Nonetheless (as Laura Nasrallah likewise pointed out to me), the invocation of the crucifixion in the same passage as the initiatory moment of Christ’s sacrifice does problematize the “bloodlessness.”

the law. This notion of “fulfillment,” which also appears in some biblical commentaries on Jesus’ circumcision, draws partially on the claim in Matthew 5.27 that Jesus came “not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it.” While modern biblical scholars may claim that the evangelist’s intent here was to intensify and internalize the precepts of the Torah, ancient and medieval Christians understood “fulfillment” rather differently, as the response makes clear. Here “fulfillment” means something like “filling to the brim” or “paying in full.”¹²⁷ Jesus has not simply observed the law (perhaps a more straightforward sense of “fulfillment”), he has entirely satisfied it for all future generations, to the point that any further observance of the law is not only moot but contraindicated. Thus, Jesus can go on to proclaim (through Paul) that circumcision is “of no benefit,” for Christ’s observance of the law has completely filled it out.

Although the responder goes on to trace out the implications of this fulfillment (specifically, the fact that circumcision now serves only and entirely as a negative marker of “outsider” status for Christians), it is worth lingering over this creatively reimaged moment of Jesus’ circumcision. At this moment, gesturing ritually to his Jewish contemporaries and future Jewish critics, Jesus is at once embodying and emptying out the content of the law. He is, at this one charged instant, completely filling and completely full of the Jewish law, so completely superfull of Jewishness that he uses up all of the positive Jewishness in the cosmos. This Christian internalization of Jewish otherness, otherwise feared and derided in this short chapter and throughout the rest of the *Questions*, is compelling, to say the least. The reader must imagine Jesus at one and the same moment as intensely, overwhelmingly Jewish in his fulfillment of the law (otherwise, some trace of obligation might remain) even as he *de-judaizes* salvation for all time. The potentially threatening identification with a Jewish Jesus with which the question began has been only partly allayed: Jesus’ Jewishness lingers, potently, at this ordinary moment of Christian salvation.¹²⁸ Any boundary-making effected later in the response can therefore only be partial and incomplete. The other voice of the Jewish law, “senseless” and “bloody,” echoes still.

127. See, for example, Cyril of Alexandria, *Homilia 12 in Lucam (in occursum Domini)* (PG 77:1041).

128. It is worth reminding ourselves of the very different way in which early Christians imagined Christ’s Jewishness. While 21st-century Christians casually and frequently remark that “Jesus was a Jew” (as, for instance, when I explain my current research to nonacademic friends), early Christians did not conceive of Christ as Jewish: he was God who had become incarnate *among* Jews.

CONCLUSIONS: OTHER VOICES

Historians of early Jewish-Christian relations have, understandably, attended with some eagerness to the echoes of other voices embedded in ancient Christian dialogue texts. The temptation to recover the elusive voice of Jewish resistance as a counterpoint to the sheer volume of Christian polemic and apology is, indeed, a worthy project. My goal in this essay has not been to undermine such a task, but rather to nuance it. For the Christian act of appropriating and speaking in a Jewish voice conveys more than inadvertent historical data; it provides insight into the convoluted and contradictory processes by which ancient Christians formed their collective religious identities. The literary staging of a dialogue might very well preserve some authentic Jewish point of critique or belief; it also, importantly, subsumes and internalizes that critique into the lines of a Christian text and transforms that Jewish voice into one carefully managed strain in the chorus of Christian culture.

The circumcision of Christ, appearing occasionally in these dialogue texts, provides one key to untangling this staged antiphony of Christian and Jewish voices. The freighted symbol of Jewish identity in the ancient Roman world, re-encoded by the Pauline traditions lying at the core of “orthodox” Christianity, could not but disrupt any sense of secure religious boundaries when imagined on the body of the Christian savior. The incorporation of the Jewish voice into literary articulations of Christian identity lodged that “other voice” firmly within the logic of that identity. Judaism is not, in these texts, elided or eliminated; it is preserved and hypostatized, to be conjured up time and again, contained (perhaps) but always present. In some of the texts I have examined, such as Justin’s *Dialogue*, the problem of Judaism remains conspicuously unresolved. In Origen’s *Against Celsus* and the later Latin *Altercation of Simon and Theophilus*, the circumcision of Christ signals how Christians could rewrite Judaism as a legible symbol of Christianity itself, transmuting the negatively coded Jewish traits of “Law” or “flesh” into positive Christian values. My introduction of the *erotapokriseis* texts as an internalized form of Christian dialogue is meant to demonstrate how profitably Christians might imagine their own identity as a chorus of (not always harmonious) voices even as they insisted on the monophonous singularity of orthodoxy. For Ambrosiaster or the serial authors of the *Questions to Duke Antiochus*, Christ’s circumcision at the same time celebrated and amplified anxieties about boundaries, making Jesus into a paradigmatic symbol of Jewish/Christian paradox and contradiction.

I have suggested, at the outset of this essay, a plausible historical context

for the curious Christian desire to assert singularity and identity through the articulation and internalization of otherness: the cultural economy of the late ancient Roman Empire. For Rome, the other must always be simultaneously repudiated and incorporated; difference was not eliminated, but conspicuously managed as a sign of imperial force. Within this fluid and permeable imperial system, the Romans frequently came to understand the alien strangeness of provincial otherness as a carefully controlled cultural economy of signs. The Jews, scattered through the Roman Empire, were located in this cultural economy by a variety of signs, not least of which was circumcision.¹²⁹ The Roman historian Suetonius recalled an incident from his childhood in which the strands of these imperial economies—cultural, economic, political, and military—materialized in a single moment:

Besides the other [taxes], the Jewish tax (*Iudaicus fiscus*) was pursued with especial vigor: for which those persons were turned over (*deferebantur*)¹³⁰ who either lived a Jewish life undeclared or who, lying about their origins, had not paid the levy imposed on their people (*genti*). I recall being present, as a teenager, when an old man, of ninety years, was inspected by a procurator (and a crowded court!) to see whether he was circumcised.¹³¹

This brief, brutal scene condenses for Suetonius's readers the convoluted role of Jewish circumcision in the Roman diaspora: a physical sign of distinction and strangeness that functioned as a legible mark of provincial identity in the fluid cultural economy of the Roman Empire.¹³² The

129. On the stereotypical function of Jewish male circumcision in the Roman world, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Hellenistic Culture and Society 31 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 25–68.

130. The verb either indicates prosecution (being “turned over” to the courts) or, more likely, “snitching” (*delatio*), an interesting glimpse into the dynamics of “multicultural” life in the ancient city.

131. Suetonius, *Vita de Caesarum: Domitianus* 12.2. Text and translation from *Suetonius: Lives of the Caesars*, LCL, ed. and tr. J. C. Rolfe, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950–51), 2:364–66. On this incident, see Martin Goodman, “Nerva, the *fiscus iudaicus*, and Jewish Identity,” *JRS* 79 (1989): 40–44; Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 42–43. Although this example is from the first century, circumcision persisted in the Roman economy of signs as the marker of “Jewishness” throughout the late antique period.

132. On the various cultural perceptions of Jewish circumcision in the early empire, see Pierre Cordier, “Les romains et la circoncision,” *Revue des Études Juives* 160 (2001): 337–55 and Raʿanan Abusch, “Circumcision and Castration under Roman Law in the Early Empire,” in Mark, *Covenant of Circumcision*, 75–86.

circumcised genitals of the tax-dodging Jew become part of the juridical processes that make the empire function. When Martial contemplated the sexual prowess of foreskinless Jewish men,¹³³ or Juvenal bemoaned the weird Jews who “worship the sky” and “by and by, shed their foreskins,”¹³⁴ we can read in these texts the literary expression of the cultural economy of Roman imperialism. Juvenal’s catalogue of foreign incursions into the city of Rome—despite their satiric intent and negative tone—reinforce the image of Rome as conqueror and manager of alien peoples. For Juvenal to refer so familiarly (if sneeringly) to Jewish circumcision is to assert his knowledge—and, in a sense, his control—over their strangeness within the bounds of empire. It is to assert the containing power of *Romanitas*. Yet by lodging that strangeness so firmly inside empire, the imperial self is also rendered instable, liable to threatening otherness within.

Likewise circumcision, this symbol of Jewishness par excellence, came to be incorporated into the fractured singularity of Christian identity on Christ’s body. This assumption of otherness becomes visible to us through texts that most clearly and deliberately stage the multiple voices of self and other comprising Christianity: the dialogue texts. Here, in texts traditionally read as the vanguard of religious boundary-formation, we glimpse the partial and even contradictory ways in which Christianity configured itself vis-à-vis the Jewish other. Much like the delicate cultural economy of Roman imperialism, moreover, this Christian staging of the simultaneous repudiation and internalization of difference could generate a fragile sense of self, always vulnerable to the other it maintains within. Yet even as we can sketch a plausible historical context for such a maneuver in the analogous operations of Roman imperial culture, we can also attend to the lasting effects of this sly internalization of otherness that always supports yet threatens the coherence of cultural identity. Perhaps the Christian absorption of its originary Jewishness, evident in these dialogue texts through the paradoxical circumcision of Christ, has left its lasting marks on the formation of cultural identities even into our postmodern period.¹³⁵ At the very least we can appreciate the resonances between the premodern and the postmodern that are made visible. Although speaking of twentieth-

133. Martial, *Epigrammata* 7.30.5; see Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 41 and 351–57.

134. Juvenal, *Satura* 14.99; Cohen, *Beginnings of Jewishness*, 44.

135. See the concluding section of Daniel Boyarin and Virginia Burrus, “Hybridity as Subversion of Orthodoxy? Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity,” *Social Compass* 52 (2005): 431–41.

century articulations of race and hybridity, Robert Young's description of "culture" works well for the strategies of an early Christian dialogic imagination as well: "Culture never stands alone but always participates in a conflictual economy acting out the tension between sameness and difference, comparison and differentiation, unity and diversity, cohesion and dispersion, containment and subversion."¹³⁶

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136. Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 53.