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The Lack of Evidence for a Jewish Christian Countermission in Galatia

Adam Gregerman

Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies, Baltimore, MD

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Paul of Tarsus: The Apostle to the gentiles in His Jewish Context

1. Introduction

As faith in Jesus spread to Gentiles in the few decades after the crucifixion, some early Jewish Christians struggled to respond to the presence of these new believers in religious communities founded by Paul and others. Though Gentile Christians in Paul's churches had not formerly been told that they must be circumcised and convert to Judaism, some Jewish Christians thought otherwise. They believed that membership in Christian (the term is of course anachronistic) religious communities was limited to Jews.



This, I believe, is the case with Paul's opponents in Galatia, and furnishes their motivation for making the demand for Gentile circumcision that Paul so vitriolically resists. In my view, these Jewish Christian opponents, seen by many scholars as competing missionaries with Paul, were actually concerned about a much more limited and traditionally Jewish issue: threats to the boundaries of their religious community. Their demands for circumcision and observance of the Torah are meant to accommodate the present influx of Gentiles (who had been told by Paul that they were full members of the congregation) the only way they know how, by insisting that Gentile believers undergo conversion to Judaism and take on Jewish religious practices. In short, these Jews were concerned with Gentile inclusion (i.e., How can Gentiles be members of their religious community?), not Gentile salvation (i.e., How can Gentiles be saved?). The issues of mission to and salvation of the Gentiles are irrelevant or peripheral at most, *just as they*

*were largely peripheral to the concerns of contemporary (non-Christian) Jews.*¹

In my paper I argue that this issue of inclusion is the crux of their—but not Paul's—concern in Galatia, separate from any concern with Gentile salvation. It is therefore incorrect to say that their demands reflect a conservative (the most frequent scholarly description) or highly restrictive view of Gentile salvation.² Actually, we can say little about their views on the methods or even desirability of a mission to Gentiles, for all their demands are *reactions* to prior missionary activities. I demonstrate that the demands are not necessarily related to Gentile soteriology at all. Rather, their demands reflect different concerns, in that they are like those of nearly all late Second Temple Jews (from the second century BCE through the first century CE) when they considered how to include Gentiles in Jewish communities. Naturally, they expected that members would be circumcised and observe the Torah.

I focus especially on the Jewish context of the controversy in Galatia, which probably should be dated to the sixth

¹ See most recently Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 3.

² For examples of scholars' pejorative descriptions of the Galatian opponents' demand that Gentiles be circumcised (it supposedly reflects "conservative" or "extremist" Jewish opposition to Gentile salvation), see F. F. Bruce, *Epistle to the Galatians*, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 240; Stephen G. Wilson, *Luke and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 107; James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 128; Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 450; Ben Witherington, III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 7, 148.

decade of the first century.³ I demonstrate its relevance to a study of Paul's opponents there, themselves Jewish believers in Christ about whom little else is known. I begin by critically reviewing some of the most influential scholarly explanations for the opponents' demands that Gentile believers be circumcised. This section is comparatively long, because I want to illustrate the prominence of the claim I am challenging, that Paul's Galatian opponents were eager to bring salvation to the Gentiles and are "evangelistic in purpose."⁴ This claim, I argue, is not supported by evidence from Paul's letter or the ancient Jewish sources often cited for support. My criticisms are intended to bring some methodological clarity to studies of the dispute by offering guidance for future scholarly investigations of this topic that situate Paul's controversy in Galatia in its Jewish context.

I then present my own explanation for the dispute, focusing on the motivations of the opponents. It rests on two complementary arguments. First, I place the opponents in their proper social and religious context, as late Second Temple period Diaspora Jews. Because we learn little about the opponents in Paul's letter, we should draw on scholarship on contemporaneous Judaism, especially regarding Gentiles and conversion, to fill in gaps in our knowledge.⁵ I discuss the

strong concern among many Jews with maintaining clear boundaries between Jews and Gentiles, and the prominence of markers of identity such as circumcision. This helps us understand the demand Paul's opponents made. I also draw upon recent scholarship on (the lack of) Jewish missionary activity in this period, and argue for its applicability to Paul's opponents as well. In a break with the views of previous generations, scholars have now shown that there is no evidence that Jews actively sought to convert Gentiles. The same, I argue, likely holds true for Paul's Jewish opponents, whose demands can be explained without recourse to a missionary motivation entirely lacking among contemporary Jews.

Second, I consider the evidence of Galatians itself, and demonstrate that circumcision, while differently understood by Paul and his opponents, was the most prominent, perhaps exclusive source of disagreement.⁶ I then frame the dispute not as a direct clash between different Christian missionary strategies (Paul's and his opponents') based on different ideas about the same goal—the salvation of the Gentiles—but as a dispute about two different goals entirely. Specifically, I argue that Paul's perception of what was at stake in the dispute—nothing less than the Gentiles' salvation, church unity, and the spread of the gospel—was not shared by his opponents. Rather, they, like other Jews of this time, were intent on maintaining the Jewish identity of a religious movement whose boundaries were increasingly threatened by the inclusion of unconverted Gentiles. Though they, unlike most Jews, believed that Jesus was the Messiah, we should not thereby assume that they perceived these threats any differently.⁷

³ Most scholars place the letter and the events it describes in this period; e.g., Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 12; Helmut Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity*, 2 vols., vol. 2, Introduction to the New Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 109-111; Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 468-69.

⁴ This is described as the consensus view of scholars in Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 134.

⁵ I have been influenced by Alan Segal's path-breaking work on Paul, demonstrating the benefits of careful attention to the Jewish context of the disputes between Paul and other early Christians; see Alan F. Segal, *Paul the Convert*:

The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990), e.g., 36, 39, 91, 154, 192-93.

⁶ Quotations from the Bible are taken from the NRSV, though I occasionally have made small changes.

⁷ Even Jesus himself is said to be quite hostile to Gentiles. According to Matthew, he shunned them (15:21-28) and forbade his followers to preach to

2. Scholarship on Galatians

Because I will critique certain prominent and widely shared scholarly views of Galatians, it is helpful to review others' analyses of the motivations of Paul's opponents, and specifically scholars' use of Jewish sources to buttress their views. I begin with two major commentaries on the letter and then consider other important contributions.⁸

A. J. Louis Martyn

Martyn has written a landmark commentary on Galatians for the *Anchor Bible* series. Because he is especially interested in reconstructing the identity, activity, and motivations of Paul's opponents (the term he uses is "the Teachers," which I will use as well), and because his views often reflect a consensus opinion among scholars, his commentary has a prominent place in my analysis.⁹ The Teachers are, he says, Jewish Christians. Contrasting Paul's vague references to them with his seemingly intimate address to the readers, Martyn argues that they came from outside the community. He thinks they may be connected to those who challenged Paul from the Jerusalem church. Along with their preaching about the neces-

them (10:5-6). Some adhered to this until miraculously convinced otherwise (e.g., Acts 10:28; 11:3). Despite passages in which Jesus endorses a Gentile mission (e.g., Mt 28:19; Mk 13:10; Lk 24:47; the first and third are post-resurrection), it is clear from Acts that many knew nothing of these traditions and were wary of contact with Gentiles; see Stephen Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 96.

⁸ In general, the commentaries present mainstream, widely-accepted scholarly views on Galatians, and Paul's opponents in particular, and eschew the idiosyncratic and speculative claims found elsewhere; see the discussion in John Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 47-52.

⁹ I have adopted his term "the Teachers" for Paul's opponents, which is less pejorative than traditional terms such as "Judaizers" or "antagonists" and does not define them only by contrast with Paul.

sity of faith in Christ, they added the requirement to observe the Torah.¹⁰

According to Martyn, while circumcision is the most immediate and divisive issue, the Teachers' expectations are broader and include other commandments as well. This is because they are, he emphasizes, zealous Jewish missionaries, and manifest their zeal not, for example, by vaguely hoping that Gentiles will one day accept the obligation to observe the commandments, but by actively striving to convince Gentiles to do so in the present. They are, Martyn writes, "in the proper sense of the term evangelists," spreading the gospel by engaging in a mission that is similar to Paul's in scope and ambition. This mission is not simply reactive, but "positive." They are impelled by a desire to extend the blessings first offered to Abraham and the Jews to "all human beings," and to "invit[e] Gentiles to *enter* the people of Israel."¹¹ In theological terms, their concerns are soteriological. Their aim is not simply to accommodate the incorporation of Gentile believers in an originally all-Jewish religious movement but to achieve their salvation according to their own nomistic standards, for they believed that "God will judge all human beings on the basis of the Law."¹²

Martyn does not just rely on Galatians, but also uses other texts, especially Jewish texts from the late Second Temple and early rabbinic periods. These are useful, he says, because he finds "pertinent data" in "Jewish traditions [such] as those preserved in Sirach and the Dead Sea Scrolls." He also considers the Wisdom of Solomon, rabbinic literature, Joseph and Aseneth, and works by Philo. Methodologically, he relies on "significant [Jewish] parallels" to the views of the Teachers.

¹⁰ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33A, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 117-26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 121-22, 269. Italics in original.

¹² *Ibid.*, 196.

He searches for shared (“pertinent”) motifs in Galatians and elsewhere that may explain their behavior. For example, referring to the Wisdom of Solomon and Joseph and Aseneth, he concludes that the “Teachers are thus first cousins, so to speak, of various Diaspora Jews who dramatically portrayed and even facilitated conversion to Judaism.”¹³

This broad claim is, however, seldom buttressed by Jewish sources. For example, his parallels are weakened by the absence of any references to relevant passages in the Wisdom of Solomon, perhaps because the text says nothing about a Torah observant Gentile mission. In fact, there is little indication the author of the text hoped that the idolatrous and benighted Gentiles might improve their religious behavior and recognize the God of Israel, let alone become proselytes.¹⁴ Martyn also focuses on the strange, highly individualistic ritual of one Gentile’s conversion in Joseph and Aseneth, but grants that the text offers no actual encouragement or plan for broader missionary activity. Aseneth’s conversion is also weakened as a relevant parallel by the author’s general disinterest in her observance of the distinctive Torah rituals that marked off Jews from Gentiles. Aseneth, we might say, at most converts to a vague ethical monotheism rather than to Judaism specifically, at least not Judaism as the Teachers and most Jews understood it.¹⁵

Elsewhere, Martyn adduces texts from rabbinic literature and Philo’s writings that present Abraham as a model for converts, because the Teachers supposedly appealed to Abraham in a similar way (3:6-29). Yet these texts offer no encouragement for a Gentile mission, and should probably be

read simply as illustrations of Abraham’s remarkable piety.¹⁶ They do not clarify the reasons for the distinctive demand of the Teachers that Gentiles should undergo circumcision, which is the crux of the dispute in Galatians. Martyn also refers to rabbinic statements that express the hope that all humanity will observe the Torah in trying to explain the Galatian Teachers’ motivation to “bring the Law to the Gentiles.”¹⁷ However, these rabbinic hopes are also unrelated to any demand that Gentiles undergo circumcision. They are strictly eschatological and do not include the commandments given to Israel (like circumcision), just a limited number assigned to Gentiles only. Gentiles would remain Gentiles even after the messiah comes, making this claim irrelevant for discussions of conversion (let alone conversion to Torah observant Judaism).¹⁸

Paradoxically, Martyn agrees with the current scholarly consensus that non-Christian Jews did not proselytize to the Gentiles (see below). This weakens any supposed link between other Jews and the Teachers, because, again, their distinctiveness is precisely in their supposed zeal for Gentile circumcision. He nonetheless insists on some relevance for these Jewish texts: “But the rejection of an organized Jewish mission to Gentiles does not tell us that the motif of hoped-for conver-

¹³ Ibid., 118-22.

¹⁴ Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 68.

¹⁵ Ibid., 148-49. See also Rainer Riesner, “A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?,” in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000): 211-250 (227).

¹⁶ E.g., Philo, *Virtues* 219; *Tanhuma Lekh Lekha* 32a, in Martyn, *Galatians*, 125. Nancy Koyzis has shown that Abraham, who is often mentioned in Second Temple Jewish texts as the first proselyte, is generally praised for his rejection of idolatry, rather than his fidelity to the Torah. He is therefore not a model for conversion to Torah observant Judaism; see Nancy Koyzis, *Paul, Monotheism and the People of God: The Significance Of Abraham Traditions For Early Judaism And Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2004).

¹⁷ E.g., Genesis Rabbah 98:9, in Martyn, *Galatians*, 125. See also Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud*, trans. Israel Abrahams, Second ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 310.

¹⁸ Though he does not include them, even texts that do suggest it would be good for Gentiles to follow the Torah (e.g., Philo, *Virtues* 102-04) should probably be seen primarily as paeans of praise to the Torah without any practical implications for outreach to Gentiles.

sions is wholly absent from the literature of Diaspora Judaism."¹⁹ This is quite a low bar for relevance. While it is true that some Jews wondered about and even hoped for the salvation of the Gentiles, Martyn fails to demonstrate that the occasional presence of hints of this idea contribute much to our understanding of the Teachers and their explicitly "evangelical" mission.

Because such evidence is lacking, he also focuses on other possibly relevant motifs that might explain an interest in conversion: disdain for Gentile idolatry and vague beliefs that the Torah is God's instruction to all peoples, Jews as well as Gentiles.²⁰ Again, however, he recognizes that these hopes never encouraged other Jews to undertake a Gentile mission, and that future hopes for the salvation of the Gentiles had no connection to present practices. (It is even debatable whether these motifs can be attributed to the Teachers from the limited evidence of Galatians.) Martyn therefore resists the most compelling conclusion, that Jewish texts offer no support for his hypothesis that the Teachers were zealous Christian missionaries influenced by contemporary Jewish ideas about the Gentiles. More seriously, he does not consider whether Jews' near universal lack of interest in a Torah observant mission to the Gentiles is shared by the Teachers as well. This, I argue below, is far more likely.

B. Hans Dieter Betz

In his *Hermeneia* commentary on Galatians, Betz's views about the Teachers are often broadly similar to those of Martyn. They are, he says, Jewish Christians, perhaps connected with Paul's other opponents from Jerusalem. They are also missionaries, and strongly antagonistic to Paul and his

views of the Torah. In particular, Betz highlights similarities between the Teachers' preaching and Paul's preaching. He suggests that there is much more that unites than divides them. The conflict, at least from Paul's perspective, is almost entirely limited to a dispute over the necessity for Gentiles to observe the commandments of the Torah, such as circumcision.²¹ Betz is occasionally more specific about those aspects of Paul's hostility to Torah observance that provoked them. He suggests that they may have resisted his claims about the "freedom" (1:4; 2:4) that was gained by the new believers in Christ. This may have struck them as indifferent to the power of Torah as a guide for holy living, and foolhardy for offering them little help for overcoming sin and temptation.²²

Analyzing their motivations, Betz argues that the demand for circumcision addressed to Gentile believers in Galatia was not just a reaction to the Teachers' disagreement with Paul. Like Paul, they were evangelists for faith in Christ. Betz insists on the missionary zeal of the Teachers. Their motivation was soteriological. They were "serious about the salvation of the Gentiles."²³ He recognizes that Paul, because of his hostility, cannot be trusted to provide a reliable report of their views, but nonetheless works backwards from Paul's claims to reconstruct theirs.²⁴ Paul's message of Christian freedom, which vitiates the necessity to observe the commandment of circumcision, was, Betz says, incendiary to them. They "saw [his message] as lawlessness and judged its religious status as leading to eternal condemnation." Just as Paul made the salvation of the Gentiles his highest priority, they too "turned to making converts among the Gentile Christians" for the same rea-

²¹ Betz, *Galatians*, 5-9.

²² *Ibid.*, 8-9, 32, 42.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7. Elsewhere, Betz says it is also possible they faced pressure from non-Christian Jews, who were unhappy that they seemed to welcome unconverted Gentiles into their community; see Betz, *Galatians*, 316.

²⁴ Betz, *Galatians*, 230, 314.

¹⁹ Martyn, *Galatians*, 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 119, 122.

sons, for they were in basic agreement with him about this goal.²⁵ The details differ, but they too wanted nothing less than “to ensure the Gentile Christians’ salvation [i.e., deliverance from eternal condemnation] by subjecting them to circumcision.” Betz is strikingly confident in reconstructing these views, and in particular why they preached to the Galatians. Above all, he elevates their demand that Gentiles be circumcised to a theological principle: “They deny that Gentile Christians can be saved by God’s grace.”²⁶ Or, as he says elsewhere, they “denied in the name of Christ that ‘faith in Christ’ is sufficient for salvation” without Torah observance.²⁷

Like Martyn, Betz also cites Jewish texts. His argument rests on supposed Jewish precedents for the Teachers’ preaching Torah observance to the Gentiles as the only way anyone could be saved. Betz suggests a sort of general rule to explain this motivation: “It is one of the principal doctrines of Judaism that God gave the Torah for the purpose of providing a way for Israel into eternal life.” Regardless of whether one thinks that Betz overstates the centrality of the afterlife in Jewish thought, there is a more immediate problem. Betz’s statement is inexplicably exclusivist about Jewish soteriology. That is, he moves from the claim that Jews believed that those *who are obedient* to the Torah *are rewarded* with eternal life, to the claim that Jews believed that those *who are not obedient* to the Torah *are decisively cut off* from eternal life, as a way to explain the Teachers’ activities. This harsh idea, which Betz simply calls “the Jewish position,” means that (some? all?) Jews assumed that, because they were rewarded for (even saved through) Torah observance, Gentiles could not be saved unless they converted. The Teachers were thereby motivated by a

²⁵ Ibid., 7.

²⁶ Ibid., 90. Betz here is commenting on the views of those in Jerusalem (2:4-5), but says “whatever Paul says about his opponents in Jerusalem applies also to his present opponents in Galatia.”

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

seemingly altruistic desire to ensure that Gentiles could share in this eternal life, for they feared that if they did not preach circumcision to them they would inevitably be cut off from it. Without this exclusivist assumption, he says, the Teachers “would never have required the Galatians to accept circumcision and Torah.”²⁸

This conclusion is not persuasive, for the second claim (Gentiles must observe the Torah) does not follow from the first (Torah observance brings eternal life), either logically or in the historical sources. First, in his formulation of the “doctrine,” there is nothing exclusivist about such an idea of Torah observance. Betz fails to demonstrate that its *centrality* for some Jews proves its *necessity* for all humanity. Actually, even if this claim about Torah were true, it need not inspire missionary outreach for what could perhaps be described as altruistic motives (i.e., a desire to save the Gentiles through Torah observance). Jews might just as readily accept that they themselves alone were to be saved, and need not strive to bring the demand to observe the Torah to the nations.²⁹

Second, the Jewish texts he cites do not support this exclusivist claim or furnish a motive for proselytism. Betz adduces expressions of praise of the Torah for its life-giving qualities in biblical, Second Temple, and rabbinic texts,³⁰ but fails to show that Jews accordingly denied such benefits to non-Jews who refused to convert. If this claim, that Jews believed that the Torah in essence condemns all non-Jews, is to furnish a motivation for preaching to the Gentiles, this lack of contem-

²⁸ Ibid., 174.

²⁹ Of course, the idea that there is a straightforward connection between Torah observance and salvation in ancient Jewish texts (both from the Second Temple and Tannaitic periods) has been widely questioned, most prominently by E. P. Sanders; see E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1977), 419-28.

³⁰ E.g., Dt 30:15-30; 32:47; Prov 3:1; Sir 17:11; mAvot 2:8; 6:1ff.

porary evidence is especially problematic for such an important point. In fact, he does not show that the Teachers believed this either, and it is simply speculation that they may have had such motives. I do not want entirely to deny that a few Jews may have had such exclusivist views of the Torah.³¹ However, it remains unproven that Betz's broad claim (he calls this "its traditional Jewish role" for the Torah) holds for Jews generally or the Teachers specifically, or is relevant to their views of Gentiles.³²

C. Other Studies of Galatians

In addition to these two prominent commentaries, I want to consider two additional studies that analyze the motivations of the Teachers. The scholars share one basic assumption: the Teachers were missionaries, seeking the salvation of the Gentiles.³³ George Howard, for example, in *Paul: Crisis in Galatia*, while agreeing with this, recognizes that "there does not seem to have been a view [in extant Jewish literature] that Gentiles as a whole...would join Judaism in the present age." He therefore refuses to draw on Jewish parallels to explain the Teachers' behavior. One might have hoped that this would have led him to question whether they did in fact share Paul's

³¹ Jubilees 15:24-26 is the most well-known example of this, though this is an especially strict and exclusivist viewpoint; see below.

³² Betz, *Galatians*, 173-74. Strangely, the only text he cites that may support this claim, that Jews were insistent that unconverted Gentiles faced eternal damnation and did something about it (i.e., tried to convert them), is from the New Testament (Acts 15:1)! See Betz, *Galatians*, 9.

³³ Besides those critiqued here, other studies that offer similar interpretations include Robert Jewett, "The Agitators and the Galatian Congregation," *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970-71): 198-212 (200-01); Koester, *History and Literature*, 124-25; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, Second ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 115. They too argue that Paul's opponents were competing missionaries who insisted on circumcision as a requirement for salvation, though Jewett thinks pressure from non-Christian Jews also may have contributed to the demand.

"missionary thrust." Instead, he explains what he sees as missionary activity in another, highly speculative way.³⁴

Howard sets up a hypothetical contrast between two groups: those who reject any missionary outreach to the Gentiles on the one hand, and Paul and the Teachers on the other. The first group includes those he calls "ultraconservative [Jewish] Christians," who shunned the inclusion of Gentiles, and nearly all non-Christian Jews, who ignored questions about Gentile salvation or passively deferred them to the eschaton. Neither had any interest in proselytism, though many of the Jews, Howard says, expected that the Gentiles eventually would be saved. The other group, Paul and the Teachers, rejected such inaction. Unlike Jews who expected that Gentiles would be saved at the end of days, they believed that this hope was not eschatological. Rather, "the *time* the Gentiles were envisioned to be included" was the present.³⁵ They therefore eagerly sought to convert Gentiles.

On the surface, this seems reasonable, and Howard is to be credited at least for the recognition that there would be something distinctive about the Teachers' demands for circumcision in the present if they were zealous missionaries. However, a logical possibility is not the same as evidence, for Howard assumes what he needs to prove. That is, he *starts* with the assumption that the Teachers are missionaries who, like Paul in most ways except for the demand for circumcision, endeavored to save the Gentiles. He *then* tries to explain this with a hypothetical contrast to those who did not. The lack of evidence for such a motivation from the views of the Teachers themselves, rather than from a reconstruction of their views based on Paul's motivations, undermines the usefulness of

³⁴ George Howard, *Paul: Crisis in Galatia: A Study in Early Christian Theology*, Second ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xvii-xix, 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, xxiii. Italics in original.

such a model. He does not consider whether it is Paul who is unusual, even unique, in his views of Gentile salvation, which would undermine any comparison of the Teachers with Paul. Surprisingly, his admission that nearly all contemporary Jews were not interested in engaging in proselytism does not prompt him to question his assumptions about the Teachers, though they were of course another group of first century Jews.

Todd Wilson, in *The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia*, shares the assumptions that the Teachers were missionaries and motivated by concerns for the salvation of the Gentile believers. His contribution to the topic is his attention to what he sees as one specific motivating factor. They hoped, he says, to spare these new Christians a terrible fate. If they failed to undergo circumcision, they would be “cursed” by the Law (3:10, 13). The Teachers were convinced that those outside the covenant established with Abraham in Genesis 17 through circumcision were at risk of being “cut off” from God (5:4). They therefore took on the responsibility to warn “the [Gentile] Galatians of the consequences of failing” to be circumcised.³⁶ Wilson assembles biblical passages that link “blessing and life” with “incorporation into Abraham” through circumcision, especially from Genesis and Deuteronomy. He also adduces passages from Second Temple literature (Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, and Dead Sea Scrolls) that affirm “the inseparability of the Law and the covenant during the NT period.” These demonstrate the types of motivations—bringing the otherwise forsaken Gentiles into an exclusivist, salvific Torah-based covenant—that could explain proselytism.³⁷

However, he admits that few of the biblical texts he cites are actually quoted in Galatians. This undermines the rele-

³⁶ Todd Wilson, *The Curse of the Law and the Crisis in Galatia: Reassessing the Purpose of Galatians* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 57-60.

vance of these Jews’ views to the Teachers’ message, and threatens Wilson’s even more speculative argument, based only on possible allusions, that the Teachers took it upon themselves to “warn” the Gentile believers. At most, he admits, he detects what he calls “hints” of these passages in the letter. For explaining a central feature of the Teachers’ identity, these hints yield little reliable data.³⁸

A more serious weakness, already seen above, is that Wilson’s passages—whether from the Bible or post-biblical literature—seldom say anything about the Gentiles. Some passages he cites do threaten Jews with punishment for disobedience.³⁹ However, it is speculation, unsupported by nearly any texts, that such threats against Jews who did not follow the Torah were expanded to include uncircumcised, non-Torah observant Gentiles as well. In these sections, Gentiles are not even in view, and we do not know what Jews thought about them. Furthermore, the connection between such a claim about Gentiles and an eagerness to undertake missionary activity to Gentiles is even weaker. One should not argue from meager evidence in external sources and Galatians itself that the Teachers threatened them with “the deleterious consequences of failing to embrace the covenant of circumcision” and then eagerly responded with proselytism.⁴⁰ Actually, Wilson fails to show that any other Jews shared this concern for Gentiles and then undertook a mission to encourage them to be circumcised.⁴¹ The connection then between these passages and his reconstruction of the Teachers’ views and actions is tangential and possibly irrelevant.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 56-64. He mentions, among other texts, Dt 13; 30; Sir 24; 32; 39. Wilson implicitly grants the weakness of his argument by consistently using very tentative language when suggesting that Paul or the Teachers have a text in mind even though it is neither quoted nor alluded to.

³⁹ E.g., 4 Ezra 7:24; Jubilees 30:20-22.

⁴⁰ Wilson, *Curse*, 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

In my review of past scholarship, I have begun to critique the claim that the Teachers were, like Paul, missionaries who are eager to bring Gentiles to salvation, only with the added demand for circumcision. Specifically, I have challenged arguments for the relevance of the views of contemporaneous non-Christian Jews.⁴² Contrary to these scholars' views, I believe that the Teachers, unlike Paul, were not motivated by concerns with Gentile salvation, but rather with the problem of an influx of unconverted, non-Torah observant Gentiles into an originally all-Jewish religious movement. Their demand for circumcision reflects this. Their views, as best as we can reconstruct them, parallel those of nearly all other Jews of their time in this concern with maintaining traditional Jewish bound-

⁴² Alongside my critiques, I should in fairness also note that some scholars do not argue that the Teachers' demand for circumcision primarily or exclusively reflects concerns for the salvation of the Gentiles. For example, Paula Fredriksen and Jerry Sumney consider possible concerns of Jewish Christians that they were quickly being outnumbered by Gentile Christians. This development may have alienated other Jews and caused some to think it contributed to a delay in the coming of the end of days, though we lack convincing evidence for this provocative claim; see Paula Fredriksen, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," *Journal of Theological Studies* 42 (1991): 532-64 (561); Jerry L. Sumney, "Paul and Christ-believing Jews he Opposes," in *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts*, ed. Matthew Jackson-McCabe (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007): 57-80 (67-74). Francis Watson suggests the Teachers' demands reflect a desire to remain a reform movement "within the Jewish community" rather than to become a sectarian movement estranged from the Jewish community; the latter, he says, was only Paul's goal. This observation helpfully underscores the "membership" function of circumcision, though Watson nonetheless (and unnecessarily) also affirms another claim, that they sought the salvation of the Gentiles as well. However, the claim about membership is sufficient to explain the demand, especially because the claim about a soteriological motive rests on an unproven link between the Teachers and other Jewish Christians from elsewhere; see Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, Revised ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 114-25. Also, see E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983), 18-19; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 54-55; Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, vol. 9, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 29.

aries, in this case, through the ritual of circumcision. This furnishes an explanation for their demand that is sensitive to the late Second Temple period context and the Jewish identity of the Teachers. I next want to turn to this context and consider two related features of Judaism in this period: concerns with maintaining Jewish communal boundaries, and widespread lack of interest in missionary activity and the salvation of the Gentiles generally. Later, I turn to the evidence of the letter to the Galatians.

3. Torah Observance, Circumcision and the Maintenance of Jewish Communal Boundaries

In light of the prominence of the Teachers' demand for circumcision, I believe that we should situate them in the context of the widespread concern among other late Second Temple Jews with preserving a distinctive Jewish identity. Many Jews, especially those living amidst Gentiles as a minority in the Diaspora, accomplished this through observance of rituals and practices like circumcision that established boundaries between insiders and outsiders.⁴³ Jewish identity in the late Second Temple period, as in many other periods, is carefully defined by boundaries. In the Bible and in later Jewish traditions we find a prominent tendency to demarcate insiders and outsiders in many areas of life: in commandments about food, appearance, and above all religious observance (i.e., worship of and faithfulness to the one God of Israel). Even commandments not explicitly separatist in intent, such as food laws in Leviticus 11, in practice "bind the Jewish community together in distinction from others and thus solidify Jewish ethnic identity

⁴³ John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE-117 CE)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 399-444.

on a daily basis.”⁴⁴ Not surprisingly, even Jesus and his early followers, like other Jews, observed these commandments.⁴⁵

In practice, most Jews willingly interacted with Gentiles in some ways (e.g., economically) while refraining from other types of interaction (e.g., worship). Nonetheless, one could reasonably generalize that many Jews in this period, regardless of where they lived, remained committed to maintaining a distinct identity. In the late Second Temple period Jews “always had to work out strategies to maintain their identity,” and therefore “began to emphasize their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the Gentiles and to highlight those rituals and practices that would separate them from the nations of the world.”⁴⁶ This type of concern is especially prominent for Jews beginning in the Hellenistic era. This was a time of large Diaspora communities and, for those in diverse urban centers, an ancient form of religious pluralism. There were abundant opportunities to choose one’s religious identity, prompting many to focus on defining “Jewishness” far more explicitly and clearly than before.⁴⁷

The commandments had the effect of separating Jews from Gentiles—in their flesh (as with circumcision), in their use

⁴⁴ Ibid., 437.

⁴⁵ E.g., Mt 5:17; 23:1-23; Acts 10:14; 21:20-21. Despite scholarly disputes over some details of Jesus’ views of the commandments, observance of the Torah was undeniably valued among many in the first few Christian generations; see E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 245-69.

⁴⁶ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 135-36.

⁴⁷ Koester, *History and Literature*, 124; J. L. North, “The Development of Religious Pluralism,” in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, ed. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 174-93; Cohen, *Beginnings*, 109-39; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 11.

of time (as with Sabbath observance), and in their involvement in social or political life in the Diaspora (as with the avoidance of idolatrous civic rituals), to mention a few of the most prominent. Such separation was viewed positively, at least by Jews, and “functioned as identity markers.”⁴⁸ Among these, circumcision, even though not immediately visible, was especially significant. Because of its prominent association with Abraham in Genesis 17, it was a commandment treated with seriousness and zeal.⁴⁹ It marks the (male) Jew’s membership in the covenant made with the Patriarchs, and, when done on infants, presages a life of fidelity to the Torah and its many ordinances. Jews were so deeply committed to its observance that some, a few centuries before Paul, circumcised their children despite threats of execution (1 Macc 1:60-61). Not surprisingly, it became a symbol of both religious and social membership par excellence. Gentiles, though often mocking it as self-mutilation, recognized its prominence (and a few were even willing to undergo the dangerous procedure, as in Galatia). The ritual “was virtually synonymous with Judaism in the Roman period.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ James D. G. Dunn, “The New Perspective on Paul,” in *Jesus, Paul and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster / John Knox, 1990): 183-214 (194).

⁴⁹ In light of the Bible’s surprisingly infrequent early references to circumcision, its importance seems to have grown over time; see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), 52.

⁵⁰ John J. Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century,” in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us: Christians, Jews, ‘Others’ in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars, 1985): 163-86 (163). Relevant texts include Philo, *Migration* 89-94; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1:192; 13:257-58; 20:38; Tacitus, *Histories* 5:5:2; Suetonius, *Domitian* 12:2. Also, see Scot McKnight, *A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 82; Barclay, *Mediterranean Diaspora*, 438-39; Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 51.

The corollary to this focus on the maintenance of religious boundaries is the insistence on circumcision as the ritual for crossing the boundary and converting to Judaism. Those who chose entirely to give up their Gentile religious identity marked this dramatic change just as Abraham did when he first entered the covenant, through circumcision. This ritual was widely seen as a requirement for men who sought to join the Jewish community, an early (perhaps first) step to a major, far-reaching reorientation of one's life.⁵¹ Even though some unconverted and uncircumcised Gentiles worshiped in synagogues, undoubtedly making many Jews glad to see them recognize and honor the God of Israel, they nonetheless remained pious Gentiles. Without circumcision and other changes (e.g., severing one's family ties; education in and observance of the Torah) they remained outsiders.⁵²

I do not want to minimize some lingering obscurities in our understanding of the role of circumcision in conversion in antiquity or deny that there were diverse meanings assigned to the ritual.⁵³ Some scholars have even suggested that there are scattered hints that circumcision was not always required for

⁵¹ Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 52-60; McKnight, *Light*, 79-82; Martin Goodman, *Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 81-82; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 508.

⁵² McKnight, *Light*, 47. Gentiles who frequented synagogues—so called “God-fearers”—are found in Acts, Josephus, and elsewhere, and called by various (likely non-technical) names; see the survey of sources in Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-135 A.D.)*, ed. Fergus Millar and Matthew Black (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1973), 3:1:150-76; Judith M. Lieu, “Do God-fearers make Good Christians?,” in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, Paul Joyce, and David E. Orton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994): 329-45; Cohen, *Beginnings*, 156-74; John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 264-70.

⁵³ Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 3-54.

proselytes.⁵⁴ These few obscurities notwithstanding, however, I want to emphasize the centrality and ubiquity of the concern with Jewish boundaries, including the mark of circumcision, and the prominence of the ritual for converts to Judaism. Most Jews were eager to maintain their distinctiveness and resisted threats to key aspects of their identity.

This does not mean that Jews denounced all those who were uncircumcised as evil or ultimately cut off from salvation, or disbelieved that the God of Israel was likewise the God of the nations and might even care for them as well. However, they did draw distinctions between outsiders and insiders, and set rules for how one becomes and remains among the latter. These concerns with membership and inclusion must be clearly distinguished from concerns with the ultimate fate of the Gentiles and their relationship with the God of Israel. The former topic relates to communal boundaries; the latter topic relates to soteriology.⁵⁵ While related, these are not the same. Discussions about membership affect the community in the present, and reflect the ways that it defines itself vis-à-vis the Gentile world. There is no necessary relationship between these discussions and theological questions about whether Gentiles will be accepted or rejected by God, and on what grounds such judgments are made. When I review Paul's letter, I argue that

⁵⁴ A link between circumcision and Jewishness may not have been universally affirmed, and there are hints that some converts were not required to be circumcised; Neil J. McElaney, “Conversion, Circumcision and the Law,” *New Testament Studies* 20 (1974): 319-341; Collins, “Symbol of Otherness,” (170-79). McElaney has made this argument most emphatically; see the critiques in John Nolland, “Uncircumcised Proselytes?,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism in Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 12 (1981): 173-94; Goodman, *Mission*, 81-82.

⁵⁵ This distinction is noted by Segal, *Paul the Convert*, 191. Others confuse these categories. For example, Dunn writes that Jews insist “on certain works as indispensable to their own (and others?) standing within the covenant, and therefore indispensable to salvation,” in James D. G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 16.

the Teachers' demand for circumcision reveals not zeal for conversion or concerns with soteriology but entirely predictable concerns with Jewish identity. These prompted them to issue a demand identical to that issued by other Jews: if one wants to be a member of a Jewish religious community, one needs to become a Jew. There is a high burden of proof on those who would argue that the Teachers, though believers in Jesus, were different. When I turn to Galatians, I will argue that the evidence points in precisely the opposite direction.

4. Lack of Evidence for Missionary Activity in Late Second Temple Judaism

In order to clarify the motivations and actions of the Teachers, I want to draw on an important and relevant trend in recent scholarship on late Second Temple Judaism: the increasingly widespread doubts about the existence of Jewish proselytism intended to convert Gentiles to Judaism. Due to the work of Scot McKnight, Shaye Cohen, and Martin Goodman, to name some of the most prominent scholars, "a new consensus is beginning to emerge according to which...Diaspora Judaism was not a missionary religion."⁵⁶ This is vital for a study of the Teachers, for it should at the very least make us skeptical about the oft-heard claim that Paul's opponents, themselves late Second Temple period Jews, were zealous missionaries. While we are given little information about them in the letter, the

⁵⁶ Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Adolph Harnack's 'The Mission and Expansion of Judaism': Christianity Succeeds where Judaism Fails," in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger A. Pearson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991): 163-69 (166). See also McKnight, *Light*, Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Was Judaism in Antiquity a Missionary Religion?," in *Jewish Assimilation Acculturation and Accommodation: Past Traditions Current Issues and Future Prospects*, ed. Menachem Mor (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992): 14-23; Martin Goodman, "Jewish Proselytizing in the First Century," in *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire*, ed. Judith Lieu, John North, and Tessa Rajak (London and New York: Routledge, 1992): 53-78; Goodman, *Mission*.

almost complete lack of evidence that contemporaneous Jews sought to convince Gentiles to become Jews and to join Jewish communities is difficult to reconcile with scholars' frequent attributions of such behavior to the Teachers.

This consensus, as noted, is relatively recent. Many, perhaps most scholars long believed that Judaism in the late Second Temple period was a vigorous missionary religion.⁵⁷ However, this has been decisively challenged. There is now broad opposition to claims that Jews ever engaged in a proselytic mission. McKnight writes, "Second Temple Judaism was largely unconcerned with missionary activity...it was not a missionary religion, even though conversion did take place."⁵⁸ This

⁵⁷ See for example works by prominent scholars such as Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM, 1967), 11-17; George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, 2 vols. (New York: Schocken, 1971), 1:323-53; Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 96-112. A recent, more nuanced attempt to defend Judaism as a missionary religion was made by James Carleton Paget, "Jewish Proselytism at the Time of Christian Origins: Chimera or Reality?," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 62 (1996): 65-103. His claims are critiqued in Riesner, "A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?," (217-48); James Ware, *The Mission of the Church in Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2005), 27.

⁵⁸ McKnight, *Light*, 7. In addition to the works by Cohen, Goodman, and McKnight mentioned above, see A. Thomas Kraabel, "The Roman Diaspora: Six Questionable Assumptions," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33 (1982): 445-64; A. Thomas Kraabel, "Immigrants, Exiles, Expatriates, and Missionaries," in *Religious Propaganda and Missionary Competition in the New Testament World: Essays Honoring Dieter Georgi*, ed. Lukas Bormann, Kelly del Tredici, and Angela Standhartinger (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994): 71-88; Riesner, "A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?"; Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai, "Christian Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism: The Later Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz, 4 vols., vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 977-1034 (990-93). We should exclude the well-known example of the Hasmoneans' supposedly forcible conversion of the Idumaeans in the late second century BCE as a largely political and military event unrelated to this topic; see Richard Horsley,

alternative claim reflects more sophisticated and precise investigations into Jewish attitudes toward and relations with Gentiles. I want to summarize these findings, rather than make the argument again from the primary sources, for it has been made repeatedly by others. There is not unanimity among scholars on all details, though the general conclusions are clear and persuasive.⁵⁹

As is well known, Jews and Gentiles interacted extensively, especially in the Diaspora, and Gentiles were often curious about Judaism. Gentiles attended the synagogue and other religious gatherings. Some Jews were gladdened by their presence, whether for social, theological, or other reasons. However, activities and attitudes that formerly were cited as evidence for Jewish proselytism are now explained differently.

For example, while presentations of Judaism in positive or generic moral terms may have been appealing to non-Jews, they are much more easily explained as written for a Jewish audience and need say nothing about a desire or actions to convert Gentiles. Expressions of eagerness to have Gentiles recognize the superiority of the God of Israel likewise say nothing about efforts taken to bring this about, or reflect anything other than idealistic yearnings. One could more easily imagine that these were meant to encourage Jews to be faithful to their own god or to feel pride in their own traditions. Even if such exhortations were intended to persuade Gentiles, there are major differences in both motivations and in practical implications between encouraging praise of God and a proselytizing mission that demands that Gentiles undergo circumcision.

Galilee: History, Politics, People (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 42-52.

⁵⁹ On the possible exceptions, McKnight says that they are "too scarce and scattered to be considered a commonplace in Judaism...the significant data can be reduced to about a handful," in McKnight, *Light*, 75.

While the former is plausible, we lack specific evidence of the latter.⁶⁰

Theoretically, many Jewish texts written in Greek were accessible to non-Jews and could have been intended for missionary activity and outreach. However, at a time before mass production of books, it is highly doubtful that non-Jews read them, or could understand the biblical allusions or religious ideas in them if they did.⁶¹ Such texts reveal nothing about missionary motivations among Jews, besides perhaps pious hopes for some change of heart amongst Gentiles. Some scholars speculated about the dramatic growth in the number of Jews in this period and said this could only be the result of proselytism. This claim is undermined by the lack of any clear connection between such growth and proselytism, or even evidence of unusual rates of growth at all.⁶²

In contrast to assumptions about intense Jewish interest in proselytism, a more nuanced understanding of the sources now leads scholars to differentiate between a wide range of behaviors and views and actual missionary activity. Goodman, for example, helpfully separates the desire to undertake "a mis-

⁶⁰ Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 489.

⁶¹ An early, skeptical view of the proselytic function of Jewish literature is Victor Tcherikover, "Jewish Apologetic Literature Reconsidered," *Eos* 48 (1956): 169-93. More recently, see Goodman, *Mission*, 3-7; John Barclay, "Apologetics in the Jewish Diaspora," in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, ed. John R. Bartlett (London: Routledge, 2002): 129-48.

⁶² See Georgi, *Opponents of Paul*, 84; Louis Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 293. Needless to say, we do not have reliable population figures for this period; see Brian McGing, "Population and Proselytism: How Many Jews were there in the Ancient World?," in *Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman Cities*, ed. John R. Bartlett (London: Routledge, 2002): 88-106.

sion to win converts” from other attitudes that may appear similar but lack this key motivation. He finds evidence for “informative” missions (a desire to share general information without altering others’ behavior); “educational” missions (a desire to influence others’ behavior without expecting that they would take on a new belief system); and “apologetic” missions (a desire to convince others to recognize one’s own deity without devoting themselves to that deity’s worship or joining the community of that deity’s followers). “Proselytic” missions, on the other hand, would reflect an entirely different motivation: to bring outsiders into one’s religious community in the present.⁶³ Similarly, McKnight highlights the issue of intentionality. In particular, he notes the difference between a self-conscious commitment to missionary activity and behavior that may make Judaism attractive to Gentiles without seeking to bring them into the Jewish community. Mission can only be “behavior that intends to evangelize nonmembers so that these nonmembers will convert to the religion.”⁶⁴ Activity that incidentally or unintentionally leads to this result, while perhaps informative about Jewish relations with Gentiles, is nonetheless largely irrelevant to the topic of mission. Surveying the Second Temple sources, both scholars doubt that Jews in this period intentionally sought converts.

Theological beliefs about the Gentiles undergird this discussion of mission. Scholars even doubt that Jews had any theological motivation to convert Gentiles to Judaism. Goodman writes, “[I]t is hard to see why [Jews] should have thought

⁶³ Goodman, *Mission*, 3-4.

⁶⁴ McKnight, *Light*, 4-5. His use of the term “evangelize” is inappropriate for the discussion of non-Christian proselytism, but his point is clear. Also, in an important recent article, Riesner argues that “there is ‘no single item of conclusive evidence’ for Jewish missionary activity among the Gentiles,” in Riesner, “A Pre-Christian Jewish Mission?,” (249). He quotes Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 293.

good gentiles needed to become Jews to win divine approval.” Most Jews simply did not believe that was necessary.⁶⁵ Jewish views of the fate of the Gentiles are directly relevant to the question of whether any Jews thought converting them was a worthwhile endeavor. Many believed that some or even most Gentiles could be “saved” at the end of days without needing to convert to Judaism. Such a so-called positive perspective appears often in Jewish documents, in expectations and even hopes that God will be favorable to (righteous) non-Jews as well.⁶⁶ This vitiates any motivation to presently seek to convert Gentiles to Judaism. If Gentiles could look forward to a divine reward comparable to that of the Jews, there is no reason for any Jew to strive to convince them to change their current religious beliefs and practices, let alone undergo circumcision (if male) and take on Torah observance.⁶⁷

Yet while common, this is not the only view. Negative expectations about the inevitable doom and destruction of the Gentiles also can be found. Some Jews denounced all Gentiles. They had no hope that non-Jews ever might be acceptable to God or eligible for conversion. These views were often present in the writings of those who were most hostile to Gentiles in general because of their supposed immorality and idolatry.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Goodman, *Mission*, 169; also, 61.

⁶⁶ Collins, “Symbol of Otherness,” (169); Terence L. Donaldson, “Proselytes or Righteous Gentiles? The Status of Gentiles in Eschatological Pilgrimage Patterns of Thought,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 7 (1990): 3-27; Fredriksen, “Judaism.”; Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 499-505.

⁶⁷ Paula Fredriksen has noted the frequency of the view that Gentiles can be saved as Gentiles, in Fredriksen, “Judaism,” (546-48). See also Goodman, *Mission*, 132. Some Jews did expect that Gentiles needed to give up idolatry to be considered righteous Gentiles, at least at the end of days; e.g., Tob 13:11; 14:5-6; Sir 36:11-17.

⁶⁸ E.g., Jubilees 15:26; Pseudo-Philo, *Biblical Antiquities* 11:1-2; Apocalypse of Abraham 22:4; see Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles*, 510.

The roots of both of these views (and there are more in between) lie in prophetic passages about the Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible,⁶⁹ which were then further developed and nuanced over time, especially as Jews moved into majority-Gentile cities and regions. Despite differences in both the positive and negative scenarios, there is a predictable lack of interest in actively seeking to bring Gentiles into the Jewish community not as sympathetic visitors or outsiders but as converts to Judaism. This is a common feature along the entire spectrum of views of Gentiles. On the one hand, for those with positive views of Gentile salvation, such efforts would be excessive and unnecessary. On the other hand, for those with negative views of Gentile salvation, and typically negative views of Gentiles generally, such efforts likely would be denounced as a waste of time. Fredriksen's statement applies to both scenarios: "Judaism had little reason, ideologically or theologically, to solicit converts."⁷⁰

These findings need to be kept in mind when studying the Teachers, for Jews' overall lack of interest in missionary activity suggests that the Teachers' demand for circumcision also reflects something other than missionary motivation. A far more likely explanation has already been mentioned: potential members of a Jewish religious movement were expected to take on observance of the Torah, with the demand for circumcision as the first step. There is nothing especially zealous or even unusual about this demand, nor does it necessarily reveal anything about proselytism. Circumcision was widely accepted as an entrance ritual to Judaism, and the insistence that Gentiles who sought to join the community go through it is typical.

⁶⁹ See the list of passages in Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 214-18.

⁷⁰ Fredriksen, "Judaism," (540).

5. The Evidence of Galatians

A. The Crux of the Conflict: The Teachers Challenge Paul's Views of Circumcision and Torah

As noted, there has long been intense scholarly interest in Paul's Galatian opponents. Many have sought to reconstruct as much as possible about them, especially their precise identity and whether they had a connection with opponents in other places.⁷¹ While these are important topics for Pauline studies generally, for my investigation into their motivations I address only briefly the murky issues related to the difficult topic of their identity. In my review of the scholarship, I have focused on one topic, their demand for circumcision, and its supposed connection to missionary activity. When turning to the letter itself, my focus remains on what is relevant to this topic, for which it is important to note my agreement with the scholarly consensus that they are Jewish Christians, committed to observance of the Torah.⁷² Above all, they seemed to have focused on circumcision in their preaching, though they probably expected the Gentiles to follow the entire corpus of biblical commandments (4:10).

⁷¹ J. Gunther provides a schematic list of dozens of scholarly opinions through 1973, in John J. Gunther, *St. Paul's Opponents and their Background: A Study of Apocalyptic and Jewish Sectarian Teachings* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), 1-6. Since then, more scholars have offered their own views; see Matera, *Galatians*, 2-6.

⁷² I use the term "Jewish Christian" in a relatively limited sense for Jews who believe in Jesus as the Christ while affirming the binding authority of the Torah and its commandments, just like other non-Christian Jews who esteemed such observance (of rules for food, worship, circumcision, etc.) a religious requirement. Needless to say, there is much scholarly disagreement about so-called "Jewish Christianity"; see the essays in Matthew Jackson-McCabe, ed., *Jewish Christianity Reconsidered: Rethinking Ancient Groups and Texts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

I believe it is most likely that they were well-known to the Galatians. Paul does not use their names, but refers to them dismissively as “those” ones (5:12; 6:12). To his dismay, many welcomed them. This is relevant because their demand is more easily explained if they came from the same region or community. Presumably they had some standing to intervene, even if they represented a different faction in the same community. Their local origins would explain why they have any concern for this congregation, and specifically for the observance of commandments of the Torah. This is precisely the type of concern that would most often arise among those who knew each other, especially if they were already worshiping together. Even if Paul’s church was a majority-Gentile church (the actual constituency is unknown), there was likely diversity in other local churches, including Jewish Christians.⁷³ While some, as noted above, have argued that the Teachers were outsiders, especially if they were connected with the community in Jerusalem, there is no clear evidence for this.⁷⁴ On the contrary, we should not presume they are distant interlopers and meddlers. Paul never makes this charge, which we might expect were it true. Claims about their distant origins indirectly buttress the hypothesis I am challenging, that they are competing missionaries who range widely through the region much like Paul with their own message of salvation for the Gentiles.

⁷³ Paul makes references to multiple churches in a region elsewhere; e.g., 1 Cor 16:1; 2 Cor 8:1. Unfortunately, we know little about the presence of Jews in Asia Minor in this period, though inscriptions reveal their presence in the second and third centuries. This is another complication to studies of Galatians, in addition to the well-known obscurities about the specific location of the congregation; see Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-135 A.D.)*, 3:1:17-36; Betz, *Galatians*, 4-5; Martyn, *Galatians*, 16.

⁷⁴ Jewett, “The Agitators,” (204); Martyn, *Galatians*, 120; Howard, *Crisis in Galatia*, 2. Compare Joseph B. Tyson, “Paul’s Opponents in Galatia,” *Novum Testamentum* 10 (1968): 241-54 (252).

To understand the Teachers’ message, we must next turn to the scanty information Paul provides about the history of his relationship with the church. As background, we learn that he founded the community, and he addresses its members as “children” (4:19). He recalls his initial meeting, and the warm welcome he received (4:13-14). Paul expected that the Gentile believers would remain faithful to his message. They were “running well,” for they affirmed his teachings as true (5:7). This original message he boldly calls “the gospel of Christ,” which is his preaching as they first received it (1:7). The history of the community is seen as a series of stages along a religious journey. The Gentiles first were pagans, and then went on to believe in his circumcision-free gospel (4:8-9). However, since his founding of the church, others (the Teachers) began to present a different message. This is a disruptive step and provokes Paul’s angry letter.

I want to emphasize a key feature of this brief historical reconstruction, the Teachers’ *reactive* role. As Jewish Christians, it is highly likely that their message is a targeted response to one problematic aspect of Paul’s missionary preaching, his acceptance of unconverted, non-Torah observant Gentiles, and not a competing missionary endeavor. This is an important distinction, for it affects our understanding of their motivations. We do not know how much time has passed between Paul’s original appearance and their intervention, or between their intervention and Paul’s letter, but the order of events is clear. The Teachers presented their views to Gentiles who had already heard Paul preach about Christ and against circumcision. This latter issue dominates Paul’s letter, and likely prompted their intervention in the first place.

We cannot ascertain how the Teachers learned of Paul’s views, though his opposition to Gentile observance of

the Torah was controversial.⁷⁵ This was not the sole reason Paul was challenged by others, but it was undoubtedly a prominent and recurring source of contention, and likely prompted the Teachers' involvement here too. Interestingly, Paul's expression of astonishment (1:6) suggests he was taken by surprise. While it is certain that the Teachers initiated the conflict with their demands, Paul might have expected problems. In fact, he tells us in this same letter that elsewhere he was enmeshed in heated disputes over observance of the Torah. Jewish believers opposed him, both directly and indirectly, presumably in response to what *they* had heard (2:4, 12). The specific topics of the disputes are murky and may have varied from circumcision to food laws, but the general issues of Torah observance and the pattern of opposition are clear. These other believers, including church leaders, upon becoming aware of Paul's teachings, obstructed and opposed him. Like the Teachers, they seem to have responded to parts of his message they rejected.

Paul's lack of attention to other issues in the letter reveals that the range of the Galatian dispute was strictly limited to this issue to which the Teachers were responding. This is important for understanding their motives for intervening. They focused on circumcision alone, which was preeminently a marker of Jewish religious and social identity and, for Gentiles, a ritual for those seeking entry into the Jewish community. Paul had surely touched on many topics when he originally preached the gospel, but in this letter, he focuses on these topics of circumcision and the Torah almost exclusively. Nearly every statement he makes, even on seemingly tangential issues, buttresses his rejection of the requirement that Gentiles observe the Torah, precisely what the Teachers showed

⁷⁵ Though Luedemann's theory of a unified anti-Pauline front appearing in multiple places is questionable, his survey of the relevant sources on opposition to Paul is helpful; see Gerd Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul in Jewish Christianity*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

up and demanded. There seem not to have been other, broader issues at stake, supporting my focus on the prominence of this religious ritual for the Teachers and Paul (though for different reasons; see below).

I can illustrate the centrality of this issue of the observance of the Torah by looking, for example, at Paul's autobiographical statements about both his pre-Christian and Christian periods. From these we can glean that Paul and the Teachers were engaged in a tightly circumscribed dispute. When he recounts how far he "advanced in Judaism" before God revealed Christ to him, he wants to support a specific claim: his critique of the Jewish Christians' interpretation of the Torah is legitimate (1:13-14). He is aware of an apparent paradox of his present position, as a formerly zealous Jew preaching against circumcision (in this case, to Gentiles). He therefore justifies this by appealing to his knowledge of and formerly exceptional devotion to the Torah, encapsulated in the phrase "I was...zealous for the traditions of my ancestors."⁷⁶

In another autobiographical statement, Paul links his apostolate to a divine call (1:1, 11-12, 15-20). It was received from God, not from other humans. While his opponents were probably questioning the legitimacy and origins of his call, their attack must be seen in the specific context of the intense dispute regarding his Gentile mission. Paul's response should be read not as a general defense of his apostolic legitimacy *per se* but rather of his missionary message and method. The stress in his claim that God directly charged him to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles should be placed not on 'God' but on 'the gospel to the Gentiles'. While both are integral parts of his missionary self-understanding, it is the message to the Gentiles that was controversial and provoked the Teachers' opposition. He therefore emphasizes in his defense the reason for his call in the first place—"that I might proclaim [Jesus Christ] among

⁷⁶ Cf. Phil 3:1-9.

the Gentiles”—and the divine origins of his opposition to circumcision (1:16). The roots of the Gentile mission and message go back to God, who charged him with a unique task. Again, this is autobiography for a polemical purpose on a contentious issue.⁷⁷

The same singular focus on the issue of Torah observance can be discerned in another section. In 5:16-26, Paul offers ethical guidance regarding proper behavior toward other believers and God. This section also has a specific function in the argument of the letter, as part of his defense of his opposition to Gentile circumcision. He offers a stark dichotomy relevant to his critique of the Teachers' demands: one should live a life in “the spirit” rather than a life “subject to the law” (5:16-18).⁷⁸ On the one hand, Paul repeatedly lays out the challenges that believers face. He praises right conduct (avoidance of sexual misdeeds, contentiousness, drunkenness, etc.) and insists they avoid desires of the flesh, which, predictably, are linked with all sorts of immoral acts (5:16, 17, 18, 22). On the other hand, he does not focus solely on ethical behavior, but, not surprisingly, includes a polemic against observance of the commandments of the Torah. He offers a contrast meant to highlight its irrelevance: “But if you are led by the spirit, you are not subject to the law” (5:18). Sins, he says, can be overcome without a need to observe the biblical commandments.⁷⁹

More radically, in a related section a bit later Paul sharpens this antinomy of spirit and flesh by subsuming under the latter the ritual of circumcision. Recalling this earlier denunciation in 5:16-26 of immoral deeds in the flesh, he says that those who demand this ritual from the Torah want to “make a good

showing in the flesh” (6:12-13). Circumcision is thereby linked to the dreadful ‘fleshy’ behaviors listed in 5:19-21. Life in the flesh is marked not only by hateful, antisocial, and unrestrained acts, but by circumcision as well. When faced with the requirements to observe the commandment, believers must make a choice between faithfulness to the spirit or observance of the Torah.⁸⁰

Paul therefore connects right conduct—the ostensible focus of 5:16-26—with the main polemical point of the letter. Circumcision, here as elsewhere, is the pitfall to be avoided, only in this case on *ethical* grounds. “The last two chapters of Galatians presuppose the same polemical situation as the first four.”⁸¹ Nonetheless, by pointing out this connection, I do not want to deny any inherent significance to Paul’s portrait of a spiritual and moral life. Such guidance is a feature of Paul’s letters.⁸² However, I do want to emphasize the dominant polemical function of this section as well, for it reveals Paul’s (and the Teachers’) consistent focus on this one divisive issue.

Furthermore, Paul’s focus on this issue not only reveals its centrality to the dispute, but also suggests a high level of agreement with the Teachers on many other issues that, while presumably important, go unmentioned. For example, on the basic conviction that Gentile believers must forsake all the other (false) gods they previously worshiped, Paul and the Teachers held the same position. Both naturally shared a traditional Jewish abhorrence of paganism.⁸³ This too confirms my claim that the disagreement is quite limited in scope, and should caution readers against assuming much about the Teachers beyond their concern for this one topic. Paul grudg-

⁷⁷ Luedemann, *Opposition to Paul*, 98.

⁷⁸ On Paul’s ethics in Galatians 5-6, see Barclay, *Obedying the Truth*. Also, see John Barclay, “Mirror-Reading a Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (1987): 73-93 (87).

⁷⁹ See Matera, *Galatians*, 207-11.

⁸⁰ Cf. 3:2-3.

⁸¹ Sanders, *PLJP*, 49.

⁸² Cf. Rom 13:13-14; 2 Cor 12:20-21; Eph 5:2-6:9, if authentic.

⁸³ E.g., 4:8; see Paula Fredriksen, *Augustine and the Jews: A Christian Defense of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Doubleday, 2008), 37.

ingly admits that the Teachers, as fellow Christians, offer “another gospel” (1:6). They seem not to have had much to say about Christ, at least not in any way that provokes Paul. Their views were probably irrelevant or uncontroversial compared to the one pressing and contentious issue of circumcision.

In fact, Paul’s few christological statements either directly reflect this dispute over the Torah, or seem to be entirely straightforward and not contentious. In the first category is a statement such as, “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (6:14). This christological statement is a direct critique of those who (he says in the previous verse) supposedly “boast about the flesh” because they convince others to be circumcised (i.e. in “the flesh”) (6:13). Paul sets up an implied contrast in which all other forms of boasting, namely, about the Torah, are said to vitiate the religious significance of the cross.

Similarly, we find a christological summary in 4:4-6 that buttresses his argument against the need for circumcision. He writes, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law in order to redeem those who were under the law.” Those who would put themselves “under the law” by accepting circumcision would in essence be reversing the process that Christ (or, better, Paul in his original preaching) first began. Elsewhere, the same holds true for those who would symbolically be “crucified with Christ” so that Christ “lives in [the believer]” (2:19-21). Though Christ “loved” the believer and “gave himself” for the believer, his death—what Paul calls “justification”—is useless if one would observe the Torah. The believer must choose one or the other option, “for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.”⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Other relevant passages include 3:13-14, 27-29.

By contrast, the few other christological statements are not controversial and hint at broad agreement. This is a topic Paul largely ignores in this letter unless directly linked with this dispute.⁸⁵ Amazingly, Paul only once refers to Jesus’ resurrection, at 1:1, in a statement that is formulaic and probably doxological.⁸⁶ In fact, given his singular focus, Paul and his opponents probably agreed about much, including christology. In sociological terms, Paul’s intense opposition reflects, on the one hand, just how close the two groups are on many issues, which go unmentioned because of this agreement. On the other hand, their disagreement over the one issue of circumcision was highly contentious and threatening, precisely because the two sides were otherwise so similar.⁸⁷ Again, the scope of the conflict is quite limited.

To summarize, we can establish the main and perhaps only issue of contention, and otherwise speculate that there were broad areas of agreement about other fundamental issues. The dispute revolves around the commandment of circumcision in the Torah. Paul’s teachings provoked the Teachers’ intervention, to which Paul then responded. While Paul, as noted, does raise a variety of issues (such as his call and ethical behavior), this one issue not only dominates the discussion (and provokes repeated angry outbursts [1:6; 3:1-4; 5:12]), but is almost always connected to every other issue. It is therefore reasonable to assume that these other issues were not directly raised by the Teachers but by Paul himself as he worked through his main argument and only touched upon them in passing.

⁸⁵ E.g., 1:3; 3:13-14; 6:18.

⁸⁶ Martyn, *Galatians*, 85.

⁸⁷ This reflects theories about the intensity of social conflict between otherwise similar groups developed by Lewis Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1956).

B. Salvation vs. Inclusion: Disagreement over What Was at Stake in the Conflict

Importantly, we should not assume that the Teachers' views on circumcision and Torah observance were mirror images of Paul's own. Paul of course is vitriolically antagonistic to them. It is highly likely they have a negative view of his teachings about circumcision, but we have no reason to think they agreed with him about what was at stake in the conflict.⁸⁸ It is simplistic to assume that they rejected what he affirmed and vice-versa with an equal level of intensity and concern. On the contrary, I believe it is far more likely that this issue had an entirely different theological significance for them. While Paul saw the demand for circumcision as a profound challenge to his mission to save the Gentiles without requiring circumcision, the Teachers' demand is prompted by other concerns, unrelated to soteriology. Their motivation is like that of other Jews who expected that those who claimed membership in a Jewish religious community live like Jews, accepting circumcision and obeying the Torah. I therefore want to highlight some of Paul's statements about the importance of the dispute, and argue that these reflect Paul's distinctive priorities, which do not similarly apply to his opponents.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 40. Barclay's valuable guidance about gleaning information about Paul's opponents from his letters is relevant here as well; see Barclay, "Mirror-Reading."

⁸⁹ Heikki Raisanen, in a creative and controversial interpretation of Paul's view of the Law, has helpfully sharpened an observation made by others, that Paul's concerns are not necessarily those of his antagonists. In particular, Paul sometimes envisions a major dispute over soteriology where his opponents might not have seen anything similar at stake. He writes, "His understanding of his opponents' position [in Antioch and Jerusalem] was probably different from theirs. The same was probably true of the Galatian situation," in Heikki Raisanen, *Paul and the Law* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1983), 260.

One cannot overstate how seriously Paul takes the threat posed by the Teachers. His highest goal, as missionary to the Gentiles, was to ensure that they be brought to and remain "in Christ" (2:17; 3:26-28; 5:6).⁹⁰ These new believers were formerly "imprisoned...under the power of sin" but have now, through faith alone, become "children of God" (3:22-26) and "children of the promise" (4:28). This was achieved through their positive responses to Paul's preaching and marks a profound soteriological shift. Gentiles who were cut off from God now "know God" and "are known by God" (4:1-9).

Furthermore, this change in status is manifest presently and immediately through membership in the church (1:2). The group of believers, metaphorically called the "family of faith" (6:10), is an actual gathering of men and women who came together to hear Paul preach (3:1-5). He uses intimate family language ("brothers and sisters" [1:11; 3:15; 5:13; 6:18]) to emphasize that he sees them as equal members of the community.⁹¹ Paul is terribly anxious over the possibility that they will not all (continue to) be welcome in the community if circumcision is obligatory.⁹² He therefore sees the Teachers' demands as a direct threat to their salvation, for he believes that the terms they propose for inclusion (circumcision) are mutually exclusive from his own (faith in Christ alone). That is, the Teachers' terms will divide the community as some accept and others reject them, so that some, even among those who believe in Christ, will get left outside the church, "membership in which provides salvation."⁹³ Putting this in starkest terms, he inverts this (perceived) threat and says that those who disagree with him and are circumcised lose the salvation offered to those who rely on faith alone (5:2-5). If they follow the Teachers, they

⁹⁰ See Sanders, *PLJP*, 143.

⁹¹ See Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 169-72.

⁹² Sanders, *PLJP*, 47-48.

⁹³ Sanders, *PPJ*, 513.

will “cut themselves off from Christ” and “fall away from grace” (5:4).

These emphases—on church unity, on faith alone, on not imperiling one’s salvation—are distinctly Pauline. He had already seen the community in Antioch be divided. Justification in Christ was put at risk (2:12-16). It caused him pain and anger even to remember it. This type of threat clashed with his entire missionary project, to lead Gentiles away from idolatry, into the church, and into a covenant with God.

Yet there is no reason to suppose that the Teachers shared the same ends and only differed with Paul on the means. Rather, their demand for circumcision reflects a much more limited goal. They directed this traditional Jewish requirement to those who were already members of the church. They do not begin at the same place as Paul, with unconverted Gentiles cut off from God and salvation, but with those who have previously come to believe in Christ. I suggest that they saw the omission of circumcision as unacceptable, but not because without it the Gentiles are cut off from salvation. While Paul thinks in either/or terms (i.e., believers must choose either circumcision or salvation), they react to a more immediate problem, the mixed composition of the community. This is the situation they face, and it likely reflects nothing about their views of Gentile salvation. That is, we have no reason to posit the converse of Paul’s either/or views, as if they thought believers must choose between *no* circumcision and salvation.

To put this in terms of Torah observance, Paul sees the commandment of circumcision and belief in Christ as mutually exclusive ways of belonging to the community. The believer must choose one or the other. By admitting unconverted Gentiles, Paul has “redraw[n] the group boundary; the primary boundary is no longer drawn in relation to the covenant with

Moses, but in relation to being ‘in Christ’.”⁹⁴ The Teachers may also hope that Gentiles remain in Christ, but their concern was not put in either/or terms. Rather, it is limited in scope and a direct response to Paul’s preaching against circumcision. They aim to establish the group’s boundaries according to the commands of “the covenant of Moses” as they understand them.

Paul’s statement of the Teachers’ supposed threat in 4:17—“they want to exclude you”—can be used to illustrate two interpretations of the conflict: as Paul saw it and as they saw it. In the first and less likely interpretation, we could imagine that the Teachers were offering a positive option, missionizing to Gentiles in hopes of bringing them to salvation, only on their nomistic terms. Their concern would then be, like Paul’s, Gentile salvation.⁹⁵ They therefore insist on circumcision, and, as Paul puts it negatively, threaten to “exclude” Gentiles who refuse from the church and from salvation. In short, they offer an exclusivist soteriology.

The second and more likely interpretation need not reflect this dichotomous concern with Gentile salvation at all. Even if Paul is correct, that they threatened to “exclude” uncircumcised Gentiles from the community, or, put positively, offered Gentiles a way of remaining in the community through circumcision, it does not follow that they were motivated by a desire to save Gentiles. Rather, they had requirements for membership they thought all believers should follow that align precisely with those of other Jews. Addressing a group of unconverted Gentiles who were told by Paul to see themselves as full-fledged members of the community (“brothers and sisters”), they responded with this requirement (in order to delineate the traditional boundaries of a Jewish community, namely, circumcision and Torah observance. Their threats of exclusion

⁹⁴ Sumney, “Paul,” (69).

⁹⁵ See Martyn, *Galatians*, 124, 423.

were therefore motivated by a concern to see that these continue to be honored. In simplest terms, the Pauline link between circumcision and *salvation* is different from the Teachers' link between circumcision and *membership/inclusion*. Just because Paul worries about how Gentiles can or cannot be saved does not mean that the Teachers did as well. And if they did not, we should not then assign them any broader goal than seeing to it that those who claimed membership in an originally all-Jewish movement are or become Jews.

Similarly, the language of necessity in 6:12—the Teachers “compel you to be circumcised”—might be read according to two interpretations. The first is through a Pauline lens: seeing circumcision as necessary for salvation, the Teachers zealously brought their nomistic message to Gentiles.⁹⁶ While Paul, in this verse, impugns their motives by suggesting they do this out of fear or vainglory, we know, from similar uses of the same term *anagkazo* (to compel) in 2:3 and 2:14, that it can refer to broader theological motivations beyond these base motivations. That is, as a direct contrast to Paul's claims, Jewish Christians, the logic goes, insist that a person is “justified” (to use Paul's standard in 2:16) through circumcision. It is another, equally obligatory route to the same goal that Paul seeks, and, the argument goes, furnishes a motivation for proselytism.⁹⁷

On the other hand, I believe that their insistence on the necessity of circumcision in 6:12 does not at all prove that they were focused on bringing Gentiles to salvation through belief in Christ and observance of the Torah. Their concern was likely limited to an insistence that those who were presently in the community and hoped to remain so undergo this membership ritual. This may have been a stern demand, without a hint of

compromise, but nonetheless it was not necessarily related to the missionary motivations Paul offers for making his demands.⁹⁸ In fact, we do not know what they thought about the salvation of the Gentiles; perhaps they even believed that some could be saved regardless of their observance of the Torah.⁹⁹ All we know is that they said that membership in the community depends on circumcision, and we should not thereby blur the categories of membership and salvation.

Paul's references to the necessity to observe all the biblical commandments if one undergoes circumcision (at 5:3) reinforce the point that the Teachers demanded not just circumcision but faithfulness to Torah generally. Circumcision was an entry ritual to Judaism, and a step on the path to complete integration into the community. It therefore receives the bulk of his and presumably their attention, with observance of the rest of the commandments to follow. We should expect nothing else from those who sought to shore up the traditional boundaries of the Jewish community. That Paul presents the linkage between circumcision and the “entire law” as if the Galatians were not yet aware of what else was expected of them is not proof that the Teachers demanded circumcision alone or assigned this commandment a higher status than any other.¹⁰⁰ Rather, Paul, with his language of obligation (the *be-*

⁹⁶ For this view, see Bruce, *Galatians*, 269; Witherington, *Acts*, 450.

⁹⁷ Martyn, *Galatians*, 561. See also Jewett, “The Agitators,” (200).

⁹⁸ It is difficult to reconstruct the circumstances behind Paul's enigmatic statement at 6:12 that they also demanded circumcision out of fear of persecution, though this is obviously meant to undermine their sincerity. Perhaps Paul has in mind pressure from other Jews who looked unfavorably on acceptance of uncircumcised Gentiles as full members of an all-Jewish movement, as Jewett among others suggests.

⁹⁹ Their views would then be similar to the views of many other (non-Christian) Jews, who, as noted above, did not insist that Gentiles become Jews to be saved.

¹⁰⁰ The questionable claim that the Teachers emphasized circumcision but not Torah observance generally is defended by Jewett, “The Agitators,” (207-08); Walter Schmithals, *Paul and the Gnostics*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 13.

liever “is obliged to obey”), here reveals his own opposition to observance by telling the Galatians that the Teachers’ demands are onerous.¹⁰¹ This is a plank in his broader opposition to Torah observance as a threat to salvation. The tone of surprise hints at his own disbelief that others would consider it, not only because of the difficulty (actually, this is a peripheral issue) but, of course, because it threatens salvation as Paul understands it. However, the Teachers’ demand is entirely predictable and neatly fits our expectations of late Second Temple Jews.

6. Conclusion

We are fortunate to possess extensive sources about Jewish life in the late Second Temple period, especially in the Diaspora. I have emphasized the importance of correctly situating the Teachers in their Jewish context, and hope to have shown that, despite the scanty information about them provided by Paul, we can responsibly reconstruct their motives. While some scholars have considered this data, often there has been a lack of nuance in establishing the ways that the Teachers are similar to and different from both Paul and other (especially non-Christian) Jews. The dominant trend, which I have challenged, has been to see them as zealous missionaries to the Gentiles like Paul, but with the added requirement of Torah observance. Scholars’ arguments from Jewish parallels are, however, often murky and even irrelevant. Some emphasize continuity, focusing on other Jews’ supposed interest in missionary activity, while others emphasize discontinuity, focusing on the Teachers’ supposed distinctly Christian zeal for Gentile conversion.

In analyzing their concerns and motivations, I have largely stressed the continuities between the Teachers and

¹⁰¹ Cf. Acts 15:10, which, in contrast to Paul, does say that the commandments are impossible.

other (non-Christian) Jews in arguing that they were not zealous missionaries, eager to bring salvation to the Gentiles. This should not obscure what may have been distinctive about them. Judging from Paul’s letter, they seem to have been especially vocal about the necessity of circumcision, perhaps more than other non-Christian Jews. The latter seem to have been largely content to permit non-Jews to attend their religious gatherings, and yet refrained from issuing any demands to these visitors beyond, say, not bringing in non-kosher food. By contrast, we might imagine that a young church or group of churches, increasingly filled with Gentiles, was marked by a high level of closeness and intimacy, so that fellow Jewish Christians such as the Teachers did not simply see Gentile believers as outsiders, but as partial insiders already. Paul had undoubtedly fostered a sense of cohesion and belonging, and the Teachers then responded not with indifference but with the demand that membership in a Jewish movement requires circumcision (for men) and observance of the Torah. This does not, however, make them Paul-like missionaries, for as founder of the community he, not they, had taken the first, dramatic step in preaching about Christ to them. In this regard, as in so many others, Paul may have been unique, and he should not therefore be the model for reconstructing the motives of other Jewish Christians.¹⁰²

¹⁰² On his remarkable missionary zeal, cf. 1 Cor 9:16-23. See also Samuel Sandmel, *The First Christian Century in Judaism and Christianity: Certainties and Uncertainties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 21-22.