

REVIEW

Matthew Thiessen

Contesting Conversion: Genealogy, Circumcision, and Identity in Ancient Judaism and Christianity

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This dense but carefully argued monograph posits that a strictly genealogical definition of Israelite and later Jewish identity persisted in some streams of Jewish thinking longer than commonly recognized, and that this should change our view of certain New Testament texts. The first section of the book is focused on precisely how circumcision acts as a distinguishing mark to separate Israelites from non-Israelites in various passages throughout the Hebrew Bible. Thiessen's major contention here is that it is not circumcision *per se*, but rather circumcision conducted exactly on the eighth day that brings Israelites into the covenant. In the second part of the book, he turns to Jubilees' strong statements about eighth day circumcision and also examines various Hellenistic Jewish texts that take up the issue of whether circumcised Idumeans like Herod were universally recognized as being Jewish. Finally, he turns to the New Testament, most particularly Luke-Acts, to show how the claim that one can become a Jew only by circumcision on the eighth day allows us to grasp why this author treats the circumcision of certain Jews like Jesus and John the Baptist rather positively, but Gentile circumcision negatively.

While Thiessen convincingly shows how the issue of eighth day circumcision, which is central to texts like Jubilees, explains the differing treatment of Jewish and Gentile circumcision in Luke-Acts, he is on shakier ground when he tries to argue that eighth day circumcision sits at the heart of the Hebrew Bible's attempt to distinguish Israelites from circumcised non-Israelites. Thiessen is correct that Genesis 17 (a text attributed to the Priestly [P] source) presents an enigma in that Ishmael who is explicitly excluded from the covenant is circumcised along with all the foreign slaves in Abraham's household, people also not likely included in Israel's special covenant. But Thiessen's attempt to solve this enigma by arguing that only those descendants fathered by Abraham and circumcised on the eighth day are included in God's covenant with Israel fails to explain how Abraham, who is ninety-nine years old when he undergoes circumcision, manages to become the first Israelite. Furthermore, if the text wanted to be sure to distinguish Israelites from non-Israelites by eighth day circumcision, why does Genesis 17 not include a clause prohibiting the circumcision of household slaves on the eighth day? In fact, Genesis 17:12 implies that future foreign slaves born in Israelite households should be circumcised on the eighth day, thus undermining substantial portions of Thiessen's analysis of the Hebrew Bible texts he examines.

Here it appears that Thiessen is reading some of the binary dualism found in texts like Jubilees back into Genesis. While it is true that Abraham's foreign slaves in Genesis are not actually turned into Israelites through the act of circumcision, this need not mean these circumcised slaves are total outsiders, as, say, Jubilees would suggest. These circumcised slaves might occupy some middle position between outsiders and born Israelites. It seems quite possible that they have a similar status to resident aliens who wish to partake of the Passover sacrifice in

Exodus 12:48. Contrary to the Solomon Zeitlin quote Thiessen approvingly cites several times, which claims that within the Torah and Prophets anyone who was not a genealogical descendant of the patriarchs *could not* worship YHWH, these circumcised slaves and resident aliens are able to participate in Israel's cultic worship of God while remaining non-Israelites (a point Thiessen acknowledges but minimizes). In other words, certain non-Israelites, through the act of circumcision, seem to be functionally joined to the community of Israel in the Priestly author's mindset. And over time, this fact, along with the recognition that even Abraham was not circumcised exactly on the eighth day, likely contributed to the acceptance of Gentile conversion to Judaism. While Jubilees grounds its strict genealogical definition of Israelite identity in Genesis 17, that does not mean that P holds the same view as Jubilees concerning who can participate in Israel's cultic life. In short, both P and the larger canon of the Hebrew Bible may have more categories of identity and more flexible categories of identity than Thiessen allows.

The above criticisms should not obscure the fact that Thiessen has written an important monograph that should be read by anyone interested in questions surrounding Israelite and Jewish identity in antiquity. He has demonstrated how persistent a strict genealogical definition of Judaism was, how this view was grounded in various biblical passages, and how in certain strands of Hellenistic Jewish thinking this meant not only being born to Jewish parents but being circumcised precisely on the eighth day. Furthermore, he has offered a fresh and insightful way to make sense of apparent tensions surrounding the question of circumcision in Luke-Acts. Thiessen argues that "Luke does not collapse the categories of Jew and Gentile into each other." "Jewish believers in Jesus continue to show their piety through rituals such as circumcision." However, "Gentile believers do not need to become Jews, and in fact cannot do so" (p. 148). Perhaps most provocatively, Thiessen suggests that those Jewish members of the early church who were concerned that Jewish law was being abrogated may well have held a more inclusive understanding of Judaism than did the author of Luke-Acts, who subscribed to a rigid genealogical definition of Judaism. In summary, Thiessen's attempt to draw strong connections between the views of Jubilees and Luke-Acts is cogent and illuminating, but his attempt to argue that Jubilees is itself an extension of P's thinking is built on a host of tenuous readings and presuppositions that leave this reader ultimately unconvinced.