Christophonic Experience: Possible Influence(s)  
On Paul’s View of Gentiles’ Circumcision

Daniel Berchie

ABSTRACT—In Paul’s writings and Acts’ account, Paul is said to have deviated from the normal Jewish practice of requiring Gentiles’ circumcision before entering the covenant relationship with God. Despite the suggestions of different influences on his understanding, this paper reinforces his Christophonic experience on the road of Damascus as the possible influence.

Keywords: Christophonic, circumcision, Jews, Gentiles, Palestinian, Hellenistic, Judaism, Salvation

I. Introduction

The issue of origin of Paul’s rationale for exempting Gentile converts from circumcision attracted the attention of some early believers and continues to engage the minds of Pauline scholars. In the early Christian church, there is no doubt that there was disagreement among believers (See Acts 5:1-12; 6:1-3; 10-11; 15:1-31; Rom 2:8-39; 1Cor 5:1-14:40; Gal 2:1-6:18; Col 2:1-3:25). On the issue of circumcision, while Judaizing Christians were demanding Gentiles’ circumcision to validate their salvation, Paul was preaching against the need for Gentiles’ circumcision as a condition for salvation (Acts 15:1-2; Rom 3:30; 4:9-12; 1 Cor 7:19; Gal 2:7-14; 5:7, 11; cf. Sanders, 1991, p. 21).

Over the years, commentators and scholars of Pauline writings have struggled to determine possible influences on the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision (Montefiore, 1973, pp. 12, 56-60, 93-101; Rubenstein, 1972, pp. 19, 90). For example, Alan F. Segal opines that Paul employs a liberal evangelistic approach in

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Daniel Berchie (sperger123@yahoo.com) is with the School of Theology and Missions, Valley View University, Accra, Ghana.
Judaism (1995, pp. 8-9), which required no circumcision of a Gentile convert. Segal is convinced that “Paul begs moderation and continues to argue that the Gentiles are to be added to the community of the faithful through the model of the Noachian commandments, with no specific rules of Judaism in place, especially circumcision” (Segal, 1990, pp. 187-233) (cf. Rom 2:12-16). He further argues that since some Rabbis in Palestinian Judaism were liberal on the issue of Gentiles’ circumcision, Paul could be described as a liberal Pharisee (Segal, pp. 6-7, 18-19). John J. Collins, however, believes that the possible background of the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision could be traced in his Christological world view (1985, pp. 185-186). Daniel Boyarin, like Peder Borgen (1987, 62, 220-221, 233; 1996, pp. 234-236), expresses categorically that “the congruence of Paul and Philo suggests a common background to their thought in the thought-world of the eclectic middle-platonism of Greek-speaking Judaism in the first century” (1994, p.4; see also Räisänen, 1983, pp. 251-263; Cohen, 1986, pp. 251-268). To Boyarin, Paul is a more radical interpreter of circumcision than Philo (p. 26). Francis Watson thinks that the socio-political constraints influenced Paul’s adaptation to liberalism. He is convinced that “the abandonment of parts of the law of Moses was intended to make it easier for Gentiles to become Christians; it helped to increase the success of Christian preaching” (Watson, 1986, p. 34; see also Hall, 1992, pp. 53-57; Cohen, 1987, pp. 332-333; cf. Sanders, 1983, p. 102). He further cites Paul’s statement to augment his view that “to those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... that I might win those outside the law” 1 Cor 9:21. Against this background, Watson suggests, “Paul quite frankly admits that he abandoned the Jewish law precisely in order to ensure the success of his preaching among the Gentiles” (p. 35). His argument boils down to the repulsive nature of circumcision in the Greco-Roman world. It is more of practical expediency rather than theological principle, according to Watson (p. 36). Thus, the different approaches employed by scholars from different persuasions, have, however, tended to increase diversity of opinion rather than consensus (McEleney, 1991, pp. 319-320). This paper attempts to address the questions: what were the possible influences on the development of Paul’s understanding of circumcision, a sign of the covenant, in his itinerant mission? Thus, was Paul influenced by the OT, Palestinian Judaism, Hellenistic Judaism, or was there any other possible influence on his understanding of circumcision—a sign of the covenant? It is in search of a satisfactory answer to this question that