

# Circumcision of the Spirit in the Soteriology of Cyril of Alexandria

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CIRCUMCISION OF THE SPIRIT IN THE SOTERIOLOGY OF  
CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

by

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ABSTRACT  
CIRCUMCISION OF THE SPIRIT IN THE SOTERIOLOGY OF  
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In this dissertation I argue that Cyril of Alexandria's interpretation of "spiritual circumcision" provides invaluable insight into his complex doctrine of salvation. Spiritual Circumcision – or Circumcision by the Spirit -- is a recurring theme throughout his extensive body of exegetical literature, which was written before the Nestorian controversy (428). When Cyril considers the meaning and scope of circumcision, he recognizes it as a type that can describe a range of salvific effects. For him, circumcision functions as a unifying concept that ties together various aspects of salvation such as purification, sanctification, participation, and freedom. Soteriology, however, can only be understood in relation to other doctrines. Thus, Cyril's discussions of circumcision often include correlative areas of theology such as hamartiology and Trinitarian thought. In this way, Cyril's discussions on circumcision convey what we are saved from, as well as the Trinitarian agency of our salvation.

Cyril's typological interpretation of circumcision also sheds light upon his biblical exegesis. In this study I demonstrate that what Cyril does with circumcision substantiates the thesis that his Scriptural interpretation was shaped, in part, by his relationship with Judaism. Throughout his biblical commentaries, Cyril goes to great lengths to demonstrate that Jewish theology and practice is founded upon the "types and shadows" of the Old Testament instead of the spiritual realities that are fulfilled in Christ and to which they point. A number of scholars have recognized this significant feature of Cyril's exegesis, and have explored the various "type-reality" relationships present in Cyril's writings. However, very little attention has been given to the way Cyril's typological exegesis of circumcision in particular clarifies this aspect of his biblical interpretation. Therefore, my aim is to demonstrate that Cyril's understanding of true circumcision functions in his exegetical literature as a spiritual symbol that unites his multi-faceted soteriology, and to further strengthen the thesis that Cyril's treatment of circumcision underscores his "type-reality" hermeneutic.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

Series or Major Works

|       |  |
|-------|--|
| ABD   | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>                         |
| ACO   | <i>Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum</i>                  |
| ACW   | <i>Ancient Christian Writers</i>                       |
| ANF   | <i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>                             |
| CCSL  | <i>Corpus Christianorum Scriptorum Latinorum</i>       |
| CSCO  | <i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i>     |
| FC    | <i>Fathers of the Church Series</i>                    |
| GSC   | <i>Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller</i>    |
| Lampe | <i>A Patristic Greek Lexicon</i>                       |
| LCL   | <i>Loeb Classical Library</i>                          |
| LSJ   | <i>Liddell, Scott, and Jones Greek English Lexicon</i> |
| LXX   | Septuagint   |
| NPNF  | <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>                  |
| PG    | <i>Patrologia Graeca</i>                               |
| SC    | <i>Sources Chrétiennes</i>                             |
| SPCK  | <i>Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge</i>       |
| TLG   | <i>Thesaurus Linguae Graeca</i>                        |

Works of Cyril of Alexandria

|                  |                               |
|------------------|-------------------------------|
| <i>Chr. Un.</i>  | <i>On the Unity of Christ</i> |
| <i>Com. Amos</i> | <i>Commentary on Amos</i>     |
| <i>Com. Hab.</i> | <i>Commentary on Habakkuk</i> |
| <i>Com. Hos.</i> | <i>Commentary on Hosea</i>    |

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>Com. Is.</i>   | <i>Commentary on Isaiah</i>                          |
| <i>Com. Joel</i>  | <i>Commentary on Joel</i>                            |
| <i>Com. Mic.</i>  | <i>Commentary on Micah</i>                           |
| <i>Com. Mal.</i>  | <i>Commentary on Malachi</i>                         |
| <i>Com. Na.</i>   | <i>Commentary on Nahum</i>                           |
| <i>Com. Zech.</i> | <i>Commentary on Zechariah</i>                       |
| <i>De ador.</i>   | <i>De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate</i> |
| <i>FL</i>         | <i>Festal Letters</i>                                |
| <i>Glaph.</i>     | <i>Glaphyra</i>                                      |
| <i>In Jo.</i>     | <i>Comentary on John</i>                             |

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## INTRODUCTION

Cyril of Alexandria has a unique reputation in Christian history. As bishop of the great Egyptian metropolis from 412 until his death in 444, he is best known as the defender of orthodox Christology against the heretic Nestorius. Students of theology recognize Cyril as the theologian whose “single-subject” doctrine of Christ would become the model *par excellence* by which all other Christologies would be judged, particularly in the Christian East.<sup>1</sup> It was Cyril’s role in the Nestorian debate that, above all else, has given him prominence in the history of Christian doctrine.<sup>2</sup> The conflict between Cyril and Nestorius (and their respective allies) led to the Council of Ephesus in 431 where Nestorius – having denied the title θεοτόκος to Mary and standing accused of espousing a “two sons” doctrine of Christ – was condemned, while Cyril’s Christology was favorably received among most of the Church, even though a general unsettledness continued to persist in the years following.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the importance Cyril would have enjoyed as the bishop of the great city of Alexandria, the reason for the celebrated status that scholars normally associate with him did not occur until 428, the year that he began to establish himself as the chief opponent of Nestorius.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lionel Wickham states unequivocally, “The patristic understanding of the Incarnation owes more to Cyril of Alexandria than to any other individual theologian,” in *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), xi.

<sup>2</sup> On Cyril’s place in theological history, Robert Wilken observes, “In the history of theology he has been viewed almost solely as a Christological thinker,” in *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (1971; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 3-4 (hereafter, *Early Christian Mind*).

<sup>3</sup> See John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 1-125 for an excellent study of the historical and theological context of the Council of Ephesus as well as its aftermath. Not everyone followed Cyril’s continuing Christological legacy. To this day, some ecclesial bodies, such as the Oriental Orthodox Church, refuse the Chalcedonian definition that Cyril’s theology was to play an instrumental role in establishing. See also Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 4, who notes that since Cyril bested Nestorius, “his ideas and language permeate the later Christological discussions.”

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Johannes Quasten, who claims, “We are better informed for the period which follows 428, when Nestorius became bishop of Constantinople. It is in the defense of orthodoxy against Nestorianism that Cyril appears as a prominent factor in ecclesiastical and dogmatic history.” See Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1960), 117.

But were it not for his role in the Christological controversy, Cyril would most likely be remembered as a prolific commentator on Scripture.<sup>5</sup> His exegetical works constitute the bulk of his massive literary output. Of the ten volumes of his writings in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca* (68-77), seven are exegetical. Through his years as a student and then bishop, he spent a great deal of his time reading and studying the Bible. Wilken describes him as "a man whose mind and soul were shaped by the rhythms of biblical narrative, and whose thinking was permeated with the Bible's language and imagery."<sup>6</sup> Yet it is Cyril's role as an interpreter of Scripture that modern scholars have often ignored or criticized.<sup>7</sup> However, important studies in recent decades have brought fresh insight into Cyril's exegesis and what he contributes to our understanding of early Christian interpretation of Scripture.<sup>8</sup> These have also brought a new sense of appreciation for Cyril as an exegete by shedding light on his biblical perspicacity and methodological eclecticism.<sup>9</sup>

This dissertation is an investigation in the theology of Cyril, not of Cyril the polemicist, but of Cyril the interpreter of Scripture before the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy. Of course, Scripture is the basis for all Cyril's writings, regardless of genre, audience, or

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<sup>5</sup> McGuckin, 4-5, maintains that during Cyril's own lifetime "he probably thought that it would be his great biblical commentaries that would earn him his immortality as a Christian thinker. Most of these works of commentary are produced in this early period, before the christological [sic] controversy diverted his energies to other pressing matters."

<sup>6</sup> Robert Wilken, "Cyril of Alexandria, Biblical Exegete," in *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2006), 840, (hereafter, *Handbook*).

<sup>7</sup> Quasten reflects this general sentiment toward Cyril's exegesis: "His (Cyril's) exegetical works form the greater but not the better part of his literary output." Quasten, 119.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Wilken, other Examples include David Cassel, "Cyril of Alexandria and the Science of the Grammarians" (PhD diss, University of Virginia, 1992); Lois Farag, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, A New Testament Exegete* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2007); Alexander Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament*. (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952); Steven McKinion, *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ*; Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, trans. John Hughes (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> For scholars who affirm the modern categories of "Alexandrian" and "Antiochene" exegesis, it is difficult to categorize Cyril as Alexandrian without wrestling with contradictions. He does not "fit" neatly. On his eclecticism, Margerie muses, "One is tempted to suggest that his (Cyril's) method represents a synthesis of the better elements of the two schools of Antioch and Alexandria." See Bertrand de Margerie, "St. Cyril of Alexandria Develops a Christological Exegesis," in *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis*, vol. 1 (Petersham: St. Bede's, 1993), 248.

circumstance. However, this dissertation will focus on Cyril's doctrine of salvation as it is conveyed through his early biblical commentaries and *Festal Letters*. The vast majority of scholars divide Cyril's writings into two main groups; those composed before the year 428, and those written after. Thus, the debate with Nestorius marks a decisive shift in Cyril's literary activity.<sup>10</sup> The majority of writings completed after 428 (the works with which most students of theology are familiar), are polemical treatises on Christology directed against Nestorius and his allies.<sup>11</sup> While Cyril continued to show concern for a range of pastoral and theological matters throughout his life,<sup>12</sup> the Christological principle that Christ is one unified person, divine and human, is the issue that consumed the majority of his literary energies after 428 – the second half of his episcopacy. By contrast, most of Cyril's writings that appear before 428 are commentaries on Scripture, in addition to his annual *Festal Letters*.<sup>13</sup> These have received less scholarly attention, and some still await translation into a modern language. The biblical commentaries

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<sup>10</sup> G. Jouassard asserts that the year 428 demarcates “deux périodes de caractère assez différent, la seconde de controverse, la première au contraire où il ne fait guère de théologie que pour sa propre satisfaction et celle de ses lecteurs, de la théologie et de l'exégèse.” See Jouassard, “L'activité littéraire de S. Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428,” in *Mélanges E. Podechard* (Lyons: Facultés Catholiques, 1945): 172. Most scholars have followed Jouassard's breakdown of Cyril's works into two divisions: those composed before and those composed during (and after) the Nestorian controversy. Jouassard's work remains the most influential study on Cyril's literary activity, including the chronology of his writings and dates of his individual works. For other helpful discussions on the dating and composition of Cyril's works, see also Kerrigan, 12-19; McGuckin, 4-5, 176; Farag, 60-67; Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 5-6, and Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne* (Lille: Facultés Catholiques, 1951). Norman Russell provides a most helpful bibliography that lists all of Cyril's extant texts including critical editions and translations into modern languages, and gives a chronological account of the collection and transmission of Cyril's texts in *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 242-245 (hereafter, *Deification*).

<sup>11</sup> This is not to suggest that Cyril was not concerned with Christology before the Nestorian controversy. However, his battle with Nestorius forced him to re-examine and articulate his Christology in a way that reveals a new level of nuance and technical sophistication. McGuckin asserts that the early writings before 428 “are largely exegetical, and his Christological ideas are more abstractly presented there than in the specific and apologetical context of the Nestorian debate.” McGuckin, 176. For a fruitful study of Cyril's Christology before the Nestorian controversy, see Liébaert, 11-16.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, one of his latest works, *Contra Iulianum* (written between 433 and 441), expresses his ongoing concerns with paganism.

<sup>13</sup> During this time he also composed two works on the Trinity in conjunction with each other against the Arians, *Thesaurus de sancta et consubstantiali Trinitate* and *De sancta et consubstantiali Trinitate*. Though dating these works is challenging, scholars conclude that they were written before 428.

from the first half of Cyril's episcopacy, in addition to selections from the *Festal Letters* of this same era, will be the focal texts for this study.

### Scripture, Salvation, and Circumcision

Brilliant minds like Cyril's are often conflicted, and difficult to assess. Plumbing the depths of his thought in order to determine his theological principles with the degree of precision moderns demand is not an easy task. The writings in his large corpus convey a temperament that swung on a broad pendulum; he knew how to conduct himself as a caring, kind-natured pastor, while his polemical adversaries experienced the full venting of his wrath and vindictiveness. His commentaries, letters, and treatises convey an erudite, sharp-witted man with encyclopedic knowledge of Scripture and the Nicene tradition. He can also be verbose and effusive. Particularly in his commentaries on Scripture, Cyril often makes lengthy digressions and pursues, almost to the point of exhaustion, details that, at first sight, appear to have little relevance to the text. Although this method often yields valuable insights into his thought, it can be difficult and wearying to plunge into Cyril's discursive writings with the goal of organizing large areas of his thought. This is certainly the case with his soteriology.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Soteriology" is a modern term and, thus, one that Cyril never used. Its basic definition is "the doctrine of salvation." However, when applied to the Church Fathers it can be misleading because the patristic period did not produce a settled definition or formulae of salvation. Rather, the Fathers, including Cyril, used a variety of images, concepts, and expressions to convey God's desire, plan, and work to redeem the cosmos. More particularly, "soteriology" refers to the doctrines and beliefs that explain God's corrective action in history to restore and transform sinful human nature, and draw mankind back to communion with himself through the person and work of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Thus, when I use the term "soteriology" (as well as the synonymous phrase "doctrine of salvation") in relation to Cyril, I am referring to his understanding of how God saves us and what effect salvation has on humanity. Cyril held to the fact of human salvation – as multi-dimensional as this is – made possible through God's proactive engagement in the world. Similarly, where I use the term "economy" (from the Greek word οἰκονομία, a term Cyril uses frequently), I am following Cyril's usage whereby he underscores the entire scope – the "panoramic sense" – of God's providential restorative activity. As I will argue below, Cyril views the divine economy in light of the totality of the biblical witness that narrates, from beginning to end, the divine plan and accomplishment of salvation. However, he particularly emphasizes the Incarnation – the self-emptying of Christ and all that Christ is and does – when speaking of the divine economy. John McGuckin provides helpful introductions to patristic ideas of salvation in his entries for "Economy" and "Soteriology" in *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster and John Knox Press, 2004), 112, 315-316. For further

Modern readers looking for an orderly, systematic account of Cyril's doctrine of salvation will be disappointed. Although his more celebrated writings specific to Christology or the doctrine of the Trinity could present his thought in a systematically organized way, Cyril, like most of the Fathers, never wrote a systematic treatise on salvation that conveys the divine program of redemption in a clear, organized fashion.<sup>15</sup> Such a project would have seemed strange to him. Aside from being a thinker of late antiquity who did not recognize modern categories of systematic theology, he identifies the entire narrative of Scripture as the unfolding story of salvation, and affirms the basic fact that Jesus Christ is the Savior who brings the narrative to its climactic fulfillment.<sup>16</sup> According to Cyril's view, the *telos* of the Bible is Christ and his advent, and the purpose of Christ's advent – the goal of the Incarnation – was to renew, restore, and transform the human race from the captivity of sin and death to newness of life and communion with God. Therefore, Cyril's commentaries on Scripture are valuable mediums of his soteriology. As the fruit of his exegetical labors, they are treatises on salvation insofar as they concentrate on Christ, who saves through his mediation and work, bringing the entire biblical narrative to completion.

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studies on patristic soteriology, see H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: Mowbray, 1952); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975); Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009); Norman Russell, *Deification*.

<sup>15</sup> See David Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), v-vi, who notes the heavy patristic interest in soteriology. All agreed on the *fact* of salvation, but offered various explanations as to the *how* of salvation. While the one "doctrine" all agreed upon was that Christ saves, many attempts were made to explain exactly how Christ accomplished our salvation, and how it is appropriated in the present. "To this extent," Winslow maintains, "the writings of the Fathers are not dissimilar from those of the New Testament in their variety and lack of systematic cohesion." Likewise, Cyril is like many of the Fathers who saw an intrinsic relationship between soteriology and orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ. Winslow points out, when speaking of Gregory of Nazianzus, Trinitarian theology and Christology have their "roots" in soteriology. In the same way, much of Cyril's soteriology is conveyed, in a scattered fashion, whenever his writings address the nature of the triune God, and the person and work of Christ.

<sup>16</sup> Winslow asserts that the lack of soteriological pronouncements from the councils of the early church signify not a lack of interest in salvation, "but to the fact that 'Jesus Christ is Savior' was the one doctrine which served as the irreducible platform for all other doctrines." See Winslow, v.

In the main, the present study aims to provide a detailed account of Cyril's interpretation and use of the biblical concept of circumcision in his early exegetical writings in order to gain a more comprehensive perspective on the doctrine of salvation as he sees it revealed in Scripture. The notion of "circumcision" expressed by a noun (περιτομή) or a verb (περιτέμνω) occurs hundreds of times throughout Cyril's corpus.<sup>17</sup> In the majority of occasions, he uses it in passing, often in quotations of Scripture or brief asides. He also employs the term on a regular basis in his polemic against Jewish practices or as a general reference to the Jewish people. However, there are a number of places in his writings where Cyril expresses a deeper theological interest in circumcision, and focuses his exegetical energies on determining its function in Scripture as well as its spiritual implications. In each case, its meaning is tied to salvation. It is not the surgical procedure of circumcision as practiced under the Mosaic law that is significant for Cyril: what is significant is the relationship of ritual circumcision as a "type" of the reality of salvation accomplished by Christ.<sup>18</sup>

When we examine the texts on circumcision in Cyril's corpus (and consider them collectively), it becomes apparent that he uses the biblical rite as a unifying concept that brings together a whole raft of soteriological emphases found throughout his writings. This is especially clear because he recognizes its transformative function in salvation history from type to spiritual reality, and attaches to it a diverse number of soteriological effects. Cyril's doctrine of salvation is many-sided, and cannot be reduced to a handful of brief formulas or truisms. He uses a rich vocabulary and a host of biblical expressions to articulate what God has done through Christ and the Spirit to save humanity. I will therefore argue that the way Cyril explains

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<sup>17</sup> This is according to searches on the *Thesaurus Linguae Graeca* (TLG).

<sup>18</sup> Given Cyril's interest, whenever I speak of "circumcision" (unless otherwise noted) I mean the dynamic and symbolic relationship between physical circumcision prescribed in Judaism and spiritual circumcision – or, circumcision of the heart – in Christianity.



“circumcision of the Spirit” and the role it plays in his exegetical and theological schema make it a concept helpful for understanding the complexity of his soteriology. Wilken notes that “all biblical commentators invest certain texts, certain terms, and certain images with an interpretive power that transcends their specific setting.”<sup>19</sup> This is the case for circumcision in Cyril’s thought: it functions as an important trope that conveys his dynamic understanding of salvation.

Within the context of salvation, circumcision also sheds light on Cyril’s pneumatology. This is an area of Cyril’s thought that has not received the scholarly attention it deserves. However, when he uses circumcision as a way to express the realities of salvation, Cyril often describes the role of the Spirit in our redemption. As I will demonstrate, Cyril is especially interested in the connection between the gift of the Spirit to humanity and the resurrection of Christ. The bestowal of the Spirit by Christ after he rose from the dead is a pivotal theological moment for Cyril, because he sees in this act a reversal of our fallen condition. Through the Spirit, we are purified, endowed with incorruptibility, transformed, and participate of the divine nature.

While circumcision is a common motif that rises to the surface throughout Cyril’s writings, he never states *why* it is an important *theologoumenon* for him. However, there are at least three possible answers to this question. First, circumcision was an important type of the new reality of salvation for the biblical authors, especially Paul. Cyril quoted Paul’s epistles liberally, and did not fail to notice important passages where Paul develops the idea.<sup>20</sup> Cyril is also aware of Old Testament passages such as Jeremiah 4:4 that indicate a spiritual dimension of circumcision beyond the physical. Second, many of Cyril’s theological predecessors gave considerable attention to circumcision, and utilized it as a way to expound upon the mysteries of

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<sup>19</sup> Wilken, *Handbook*, 856.

<sup>20</sup> As I will demonstrate throughout this study, Cyril is especially interested in Rom. 2:28-29.

the faith. As I will show in chapter two, circumcision was a significant theological concept for many of the church fathers, a number of whom directly or indirectly influenced Cyril's thought. Third, and most importantly, much of Cyril's exegesis was driven by his relationship to Judaism. Wilken, in his *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, has demonstrated convincingly that Cyril was concerned with the continuation of Jewish religious thought and practice. It was Cyril's firm belief that the Old Testament revealed God's truth in types and shadows, always pointing ahead to the time of Christ who would fulfill all things. That a large Jewish community with a strong religious identity persisted even after Christ had turned all the types into realities bewildered Cyril. Thus, his interpretation of Scripture is motivated by a desire to cast Jewish exegesis and theology in a negative light by accentuating the distinction between the "bare letter" (or, literal sense) of the Old Testament with the spiritual sense of the New Testament. For Cyril, only enemies of the truth would cling to the shadows while neglecting the light. He insists that Christ appeared as the second Adam to transform Judaism into something greater.<sup>21</sup> To remain a religious Jew is not only foolish, but blasphemous.

But it was not only Jewish theology that caused Cyril consternation. Relations between the Jewish and Christian communities who co-habited Alexandria in the first half of the fifth century were strained. Cyril displayed little charity to those he considered political and religious rivals; he had especially little patience with the Jews of the city. For example, the historian Socrates records the infamous clash between Christians and Jews in Alexandria stemming from the public beating of a Christian named Hierax, a teacher of literature and enthusiastic adherent of Cyril.<sup>22</sup> Enraged, Cyril threatened the Jews, who responded with further retaliation. One

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<sup>21</sup> See especially chapters 4-7 in Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*.

<sup>22</sup> See Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 7.13, ed. Philip Schaff, NPNF 2, vol. 2 (1890; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 159. Of course, tension between the two groups preceded these events. For helpful analyses of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in fourth and fifth century Alexandria, see Wilken, *Early*

night, some Jewish instigators sounded the alarm among the Christian populace that their church was on fire. When the startled Christians came out of their homes to put out the fire, a Jewish mob attacked, leaving a number of people dead. Cyril, however, was to strike the final blow that ended the lawlessness. At his instigation, the Jews were punished for this act by having their synagogues taken away, and were driven from the city.

Cyril's hostility toward the Jewish community and his exasperation with Jewish exegesis and practice may help explain why there is a recurrence of discussions on circumcision in many of his writings. In his day, circumcision was a conspicuous religious subject because of the strong Jewish presence in his city, even as it represented common subject matter of disagreement between Christian and Jewish exegetes. Thus, it was advantageous for Cyril to use it as an example of the "type-reality" relationship that characterizes his method of biblical interpretation. Cyril points to other Jewish rites and institutions as well, such as Sabbath observance and the sacrificial system, as types representing a spiritual reality in order to show the continuity of salvation history in Scripture and the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. But for him, circumcision – the physical mark of Jewish identity – provided a way to exploit a crucial difference between Jews and Christians by describing it as the spiritual operation that takes place in the heart by the Spirit, not the excision of foreskin. Jews continue to practice circumcision even though the command to circumcise pointed to an interior, salvific work of God. According to Cyril, circumcision in the physical sense is useless and empty. But when it is understood spiritually, circumcision expresses the complexity and power of salvation through Christ.

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*Christian Mind*, 9-68 and Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 121-127, 299-304. Various accounts of this unfortunate series of events are found in other ancient sources such as Theophanes, *Chronicle* AM 5905; Cassiodorus, *Historia Ecclesiastica Tripartita* 11.11; John of Nikiu, *Chronicle* 84.89-99.

Until now, the role that circumcision plays in Cyril's thought has not been the subject of any serious investigation. Though historical surveys on early Christian views of circumcision have given Cyril a passing nod,<sup>23</sup> there has been scant analysis of its importance in his exegesis and theology, and very little development of the relationship he construes between circumcision and salvation. To my knowledge, no one has considered Cyril's idea of circumcision as a way forward in understanding his soteriology as a whole. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to fill this lacuna in Cyrilline studies. In order to accomplish this, I will analyze pertinent texts in Cyril's commentaries on Scripture and *Festal Letters* that were written prior to the Nestorian controversy and that explore the true biblical meaning and theological implications of circumcision. Prior to this, I will provide some historical context that will help illumine the present *status quaestionis* for this dissertation. In chapter one I will provide a brief history of Cyril's modern interpreters, drawing attention to areas of Cyril's thought that have been analyzed, as well as those that have not received sufficient attention. In this chapter I will also outline the basic structure of his soteriology. As Daniel Keating has shown, Cyril understands salvation in terms of the narrative of Christ's person and work.<sup>24</sup> Everything Christ is and does

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<sup>23</sup> Of the studies dedicated to patristic notions of circumcision, two are especially worthy of note: Hervé Savon, "Le prêtre Eutrope et la 'vrai circoncision,'" *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 199 (1982): 273-302 and Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41, no. 4 (1988): 485-497. Savon's insightful article discusses the patristic struggle to interpret the Old Testament in the face of two radically opposing adversaries – the Jews and the Marcionites. Almost unanimously the fathers taught that God had given Abraham physical circumcision but that since the coming of Christ, circumcision was a matter of the heart (*secret du cœur*), not the flesh. Savon distinguishes between two grand patristic themes. First, fleshly circumcision alludes to the Passion of Christ and baptism. Second, the cutting of the foreskin represents spiritual progress and godly conduct. Savon cites a large swath of patristic authors ranging from Justin to Origen to Chrysostom, but makes no mention of Cyril. Ferguson's article revisits the assumption that the fathers consistently make a connection between circumcision and baptism. He is interested in the canonical and non-canonical literature that maintains the relationship between spiritual circumcision and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ferguson mentions Cyril once, quoting a portion of *Festal Letter* 6 where Cyril refers to the person who receives circumcision of the Spirit (here, purification of the heart) through preaching. However, if Ferguson's goal is to underscore the patristic concern to equate circumcision with the gift of the Spirit, he could have made much more use of Cyril, because, as we will see, the gift of the Spirit is one of Cyril's most fruitful contributions to circumcision's meaning.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2004). Although there are certain points of divergence, my understanding of Cyril's doctrine of salvation is in basic agreement with Keating's thesis.

has saving significance. Each of the saving effects that Cyril will identify in circumcision can be located within the salvation narrative. This basic program of redemption differs from the soteriology that comes out of his participation in the Christological controversy, where questions regarding salvation were largely contingent upon whether Christ is fully divine and fully human in one hypostasis, or *prosopon*. In chapter two I will give a brief historical sketch of early Christian interpretations of circumcision with special attention given to Cyril's Alexandrian predecessors and others who may have played an influential role in his theology.

Chapters three through five will serve as the core of this study. In the third chapter I will interact with important circumcision passages in Cyril's early *Festal Letters*; in chapter four I will explore such passages in the commentaries on the Old Testament; and in chapter five I will deal with the passages in which Cyril explores circumcision in his *Commentary on John*. Taken together, these chapters will demonstrate that spiritual circumcision can serve as a descriptive metaphor that makes sense of Cyril's complex soteriology. In chapter six, the final chapter, I will compare the soteriological findings of the circumcision passages with one of Cyril's most mature works, *On the Unity of Christ*. This comparison will demonstrate the continuity between Cyril's early and later soteriology. The conclusion will revisit the main points of each chapter and bring them into cohesion.

## CHAPTER ONE

## CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA IN CONTEXT

The mystery of salvation is foundational for Cyril's entire theological framework. However, it has not received the amount of scholarly attention it deserves, even if helpful projects completed during the past century have explored critical matters in Cyril's teaching on salvation, clarifying some issues and giving rise to relevant questions that await investigation.<sup>1</sup> Other studies contain serious flaws and stand in need of correction. The majority of studies on Cyril's doctrine of salvation take a piecemeal rather than holistic approach.<sup>2</sup> In other words, many scholars have chosen to focus on one or two particular aspects in Cyril's thought such as the Eucharist or deification. Such works have helped clarify tracks in Cyril's thinking,<sup>3</sup> but we still need studies that present the unity of all aspects of his soteriology. Further, to my knowledge, no scholarly work attempts to view Cyril's doctrine of salvation through the prism of one overarching concept that unifies his variegated soteriological emphases.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in this chapter I intend to accomplish two main objectives. First, I will provide a sketch of Cyril's

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<sup>1</sup> An example is how and to what extent the saving implications of Christ's Incarnation (understood as the Word assuming human nature) interrelate with the saving implications of Christ's atoning death. Cf. Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul Onica (1938: repr., Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002) 225; Hubert du Manoir, *Dogme et spiritualité chez saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Vrin, 1944), 169.

<sup>2</sup> Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 18 (hereafter, *Appropriation of Divine Life*).

<sup>3</sup> Some important contributions include Louis Janssens, "Notre filiation divine d'après saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie," *Ephemerides theologicae lovaniensis* 15 (1938): 233-278; Gilles Langevin, S.J., "Le thème de l'incorruptibilité dans le commentaire de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie sur l'Évangile selon saint Jean," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 8 (1956): 295-316; Oliva Blanchette, S.J. "Saint Cyril of Alexandria's Idea of the Redemption," *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 16 (1964): 455-480 ; Marie-Odile Boulnois, "Le souffle et l'Esprit," *Recherches augustiniennes* 24 (1989): 3-37; Daniel Keating, "The Baptism of Jesus in Cyril of Alexandria: The Re-creation of the Human Race," *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 2 (1999): 201-222, and "Christ's Despoiling of Hades: According to Cyril of Alexandria," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (2011): 253-270; David Maxwell, "Sin in Cyril of Alexandria's *Commentary on John*," *Concordia Journal* (Oct. 2005): 376-383.

<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that no scholar has tried to portray a panoramic view of Cyril's soteriology. Keating, in *Appropriation of Divine Life*, attempts to show that Cyril's view of salvation is one seamless narrative connected by a series of key events in the life of Christ. Keating's study is helpful and astute, but his goal does not include incorporating the multiple expressions and metaphors Cyril uses to describe the process and work of salvation.

modern interpreters that will help clarify the *status quaestionis* for the present study, as well as the general trajectory of contemporary studies of Cyril's soteriology. Second, I will explore the general scope of Cyril's doctrine of salvation as he develops it in his pre-Nestorian commentaries and *Festal Letters*.

While I interact with a range of scholars throughout this dissertation, the following outline is limited to influential monographs and other secondary sources that provide extensive treatment of Cyril's view of salvation and have had a bearing on the trajectory of Cyrilline scholarship. In addition, I will draw attention to the ways these scholars have (or have not) engaged with, and developed, Cyril's discussions on circumcision of the Spirit.

#### Cyril's Doctrine of Salvation in Modern Scholarship: A Brief History

Any account of modern scholarship in the field of historical theology must either include or begin with Adolph von Harnack, the towering historical theologian of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Harnack's primary objective in studying Cyril is to analyze his Christology and demonstrate how Cyril's doctrine of Christ came to the fore in the development of Christian dogma in the patristic period. In his celebrated *Dogmengeschichte*, he attempts no detailed analysis of Cyril's theology, but contents himself with wide generalizations characteristic of narratives on the history of dogma. Nonetheless, his judgments have had lasting consequences. Harnack insists that Cyril was a thoroughgoing representative of "Greek Christian theology" which emphasizes the "mystery" of the Incarnation – the divine nature assuming full humanity – to such an extent that it circumvents clear definitions of Christ's suffering. Though he admits that Cyril "shows most clearly the vicarious idea of the passion and death of the God-man in connection with the

whole Christological conception,”<sup>5</sup> Harnack contends that Cyril’s doctrine of salvation stems from the Greek conception of mystical mediation which posits that human nature has been purified and transformed through the Incarnation of the one *hypostasis* of Christ, the locus of union between divinity and humanity. This is often described as “physical” redemption. According to this view, Christ illuminates human nature with life and immortality in place of death and corruptibility. In a deeper sense, Christ assumes the “general concept of humanity,” whereby human nature is sanctified and deified in him, and what he has experienced in his humanity benefits each person in his or her own unique individual existence.<sup>6</sup> Christ is the second Adam who begins a new humanity because he assumed human nature and raised it into his own divine nature in the hypostatic union, and through that union “purified and transfigured human nature generally.”<sup>7</sup> Harnack’s contention that Greek soteriology, including Cyril’s, was essentially a physical redemption was influential to later historians of church dogma. Martin Werner and Friedrich Loofs continued to insist that physical soteriology was the dominant view of Cyril and the Greek fathers.<sup>8</sup>

What is surprising about Harnack’s analysis of Cyril’s thought is his methodology. He only references Cyril’s polemical Christological works that were written during the latter part of the bishop’s career. In fact, Harnack only names volumes 75-77 of Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca*

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<sup>5</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 7 vols. Trans. Neil Buchanan (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), 3:309.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3:301-302. Harnack lists Hilary, Basil, Ephraem, Apollinaris, and Cyril as adherents of physical redemption via the Incarnation.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 41:75-177.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Werner, *The Formation of Christian Dogma* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1957), 165-176. Though Werner’s history does not reach Cyril’s fifth century context, the soteriological trajectory he describes would naturally involve Cyril. See also Friedrich Loofs, *Leitfaden zum Studium der Dogmengeschichte, 1. und 2. Teil: Alte Kirche, Mittelalter und Katholizismus bis zur Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1969), 229-232. Loofs surmises that Cyril’s physical soteriology can be traced to the Cappadocians.



as containing Cyril's works when in fact his writings are included in volumes 68-77.<sup>9</sup> What is especially noteworthy is that volumes 68-74 (the volumes Harnack leaves out) contain Cyril's biblical commentaries and other writings on Christian interpretations of the Old Testament. Harnack has no use for them. Had he consulted these volumes, he might not have laid the charge of Apollinarianism at Cyril's feet<sup>10</sup> or consigned him to a "Greek" soteriological category, which is itself a sweeping generalization, without sufficient nuance. Further, adequate familiarity with and fair use of Cyril's commentaries might have spared him from making the odd claim that Cyril "had no theological interest" apart from his quest to formulate a careful Christological definition in the face of his polemical adversaries.<sup>11</sup> The fact that he only relies on some of Cyril's later Christological treatises while making broad judgments concerning his theology reveals a short-sightedness in Harnack's assessment. Cyril's later works had a specific dual purpose, namely, to subvert any influence of Nestorius and his allies and to put forth a Christology which he deemed correct in the face of their dangerous teaching. Thus, to judge Cyril on the contents of these works alone is insufficient and betrays a bias in Harnack's estimation of the sources. While there are other justifiable critiques that can be laid against Harnack's thesis about Cyril's theology, it will suffice to say that his contribution to the understanding of Cyril's soteriology is unbalanced and found wanting.<sup>12</sup> However, because of his long-standing influence, scholars of Christian history continue to contend with Harnack nearly a century later.

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<sup>9</sup> See Harnack, 4:174, n.1. Because Harnack limits his investigation to volumes 75-77, it is not at all surprising that he (mistakenly) claims that Cyril "states his faith in what was an essentially polemical form only" (IV.174). These observations are also made by Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (1971; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 222-224 (hereafter, *Early Christian Mind*).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4:176, n. 3. "Cyril's thought is that the substance (οὐσία) of the human nature in Christ does not subsist on its own account, but that it is nevertheless not imperfect since it has its subsisting element in the God-Logos. This either means nothing at all or it is Apollinarianism."

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 4:175-176, n.1.

<sup>12</sup> For further analysis of Harnack's analysis of Cyril, see Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 222-224 and Lars Koen, *The Saving Passion* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1991), 35.

The first attempt to provide a systematic account of Cyril's doctrine of salvation was Eduard Weigl's monograph *Die Heilslehre Des Hl. Cyrill Von Alexandrien* published in 1905. Weigl examines Cyril's soteriology in light of his broader theological framework, which includes the Trinity, the Fall, grace, and Christology. His goal is to demonstrate Cyril's conviction that the full sweep of Christ's Incarnation has saving significance, insisting that "the entire historical life of Christ happens from the point of view of salvation" and involves his ministry, suffering and death, resurrection, and session.<sup>13</sup> Weigl goes to great lengths to show that Cyril places importance on both the divinity and the humanity of Christ, though he admits that, in Cyril's view, Christ's saving activity is designed by the Logos and that the human nature is deified through union with the divine in the one hypostasis of Christ.<sup>14</sup> However, he disagrees with Harnack that Cyril (and the Greek fathers in general) places a predominant emphasis on the "physical" aspect of salvation at the expense of the ethical. Weigl cites important texts that stress the saving aspects of Christ's pedagogy and exemplary life. Salvation is not only derived from Christ's being, but also from his act. The emphasis on Christ's teaching and exemplary life balances the scale between the physical and ethical aspects of salvation. Ultimately, Weigl believes that Cyril's main idea concerning the Incarnation revolves around Christ as the mediator of salvation, who fosters in himself reconciliation for humanity, and that, for Cyril, every act of Christ serves to reconcile man to God.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eduard Weigl, *Die Heilslehre Des Hl. Cyril Von Alexandrien*, (1905; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2009), 105. On the death of Christ, see especially 109-113, where, among various metaphors, Weigl discusses the passion in terms of Christ's meriting and satisfying activity. Of course, as I will argue below, Weigl may be guilty of anachronistically imposing the ideas of "merit" and "satisfaction" onto Cyril from a medieval perspective.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 107-108. Concerning the tension between the saving significance of the human nature and that of the divine nature, Weigl maintains, "Wenn Cyrill auf der einen Seite den göttlichen, auf der andern den menschlichen Faktor so sehr betont, ist das keineswegs ein ungekannter Widerspruch, hervorgehend einerseits aus der Betonung der zwei Naturen, anderseits der Einheit der Person. Gerade daß Cyrill er selber beide recht wohl vereinbar hielt. Es liegt darin auch vollste Harmonie."

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 124-125.

Weigl notices Cyril's interest in the relationship between spiritual circumcision and soteriology, but does not pursue it at length. On one notable occasion, when discussing the individual characteristics of the life of salvation (Heilslebens) in Cyril's teaching, Weigl quotes from the *Commentary on John* 15:2 as an example of Cyril's conviction that the Christian life is an ongoing process where Christ continually works through the Spirit to purify us whenever sin or fleshly desires arise. Cyril associates the action of continual purifying, or pruning (Reinigung), with "circumcision" (Beschneidung). Any positive relationship with God can be characterized as an ongoing spiritual circumcision.<sup>16</sup> Aside from this instance Weigl's other allusions to circumcision in Cyril's thought are minimal.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the strengths of Weigl's overarching thesis, he weakens his position by insufficient interaction with Cyril's biblical commentaries.<sup>18</sup> He does engage the *Commentary on John* and refers to Cyril's later *Homilies on Luke*, but shows almost no interest in Cyril's early writings on the Old Testament. This is unfortunate because the Old Testament plays an important role in Cyril's theology. Without it, Cyril's doctrine of salvation ceases to be intelligible. Weigl therefore stunts his thesis by downplaying Cyril's acute interest in the Old Testament and by neglecting some of the more significant soteriological texts found in Cyril's corpus. Further, the author anachronistically uses terms and concepts such as "merit" and "satisfaction" in a way that fits a scholastic theological framework, but not so much the thought-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 260-261.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ibid., 146-147, 156, where Weigl notes Cyril's association of circumcision with baptism and the apostles' teaching.

<sup>18</sup> Koen, 34, has a similar critique: "Weigl utilizes for the most part Cyril's later christological [sic] writings in expounding the christology [sic] and soteriology of Cyril."

world of Cyril. Thus, Welch is correct when he accuses Weigl of attempting to explain Cyril by using conceptual categories that were alien to him.<sup>19</sup>

After Weigl's monograph, the next fifty to sixty years saw an explosion of studies concentrating on various features of Cyril's theology, such as his views on the spiritual life,<sup>20</sup> ecclesiology,<sup>21</sup> the Eucharist,<sup>22</sup> anthropology,<sup>23</sup> the *imago dei* in man,<sup>24</sup> exegesis of Scripture,<sup>25</sup> and not a few works investigating his Christology.<sup>26</sup> This profusion was probably due in part to the influence of scholars like Jean Daniélou and others within the *nouvelle théologie* movement who began a retrieval, or *ressourcement*, of ancient sources that encouraged patristic studies. In spite of the large volume of scholarly works, Cyril's soteriology (viewed as a whole) underwent general neglect until Robert Wilken published his *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* in 1971. Much of Wilken's aim involves expositing Cyril's exegesis of Scripture and the way his Adam-Christ typology serves as an overarching hermeneutic. But Wilken also pays substantial attention to Cyril's soteriology because he recognizes the interdependence of exegesis, Christology, and salvific themes in Cyril's thought. Previous scholars had made similar

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<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Welch, "Christology and Eucharist in the Thought of Cyril of Alexandria: A Reconsideration." (Ph.D diss. Marquette University, 1992). This is not to say that Cyril had no concept whatsoever of Christ's meritorious work, but only that Weigl may be reading Cyril through more of a medieval lens than is warranted.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, du Manoir, whose purpose is not to provide an in-depth analysis of Cyril's soteriology, though he does include helpful discussions pertaining to salvation on topics such as forgiveness of sin, baptism, the death and resurrection of Christ, and deification.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Chadwick, "Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy," *Journal of Theological Studies* no. 2 (1951): 145-164.

<sup>23</sup> See Dom H. M. Diepen, O.S.B. *Aux origines de l'anthropologie de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 1957).

<sup>24</sup> See Walter Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria* (1957; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> See Alexander Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Dominic Unger, O.F.P. "Christ Jesus the Secure Foundation According to St. Cyril of Alexandria," *Franciscan Studies* 28 (1947): 1-25, 324-343, 399-414; Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle Nestorienne*; R. V. Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies* (London: SPCK, 1954); G. M. Durand, *Deux dialogues christologiques*, SC 97 (Paris: Serf, 1964).

observations,<sup>27</sup> but Wilken's treatment of Cyril is more thorough and persuasive because he shows how Cyril's hermeneutic functioned in his exegesis of Scripture which gives rise to Cyril's fundamental principle that what was revealed in the Old Testament has been transformed into something new in Christ.

Wilken's study marks a decisive turn in Cyrilline scholarship, in part because of his extensive examination of Cyril's biblical commentaries in analyzing his theology. While criticizing previous scholars like Harnack (and those in his wake) who judged Cyril's theology from the perspective of his later dogmatic treatises, Wilken asserts that Cyril was first and foremost a biblical theologian who was profoundly shaped by the Bible's narrative of redemption.<sup>28</sup> The thousands of hours Cyril spent steeped in the study of Scripture, especially the Old Testament, lead Wilken to assert that Cyril can only interpret Christianity through its relationship to Judaism. Cyril's mind was not shaped by philosophical subtleties, according to Wilken.<sup>29</sup> What influenced his mind and theology was the biblical account of the New Adam replacing the old covenant with the new, transforming what was type and shadow into reality.

Finally, one of the most valuable contributions of Wilken's study is his skillful critique of the deficiencies of old-guard scholars like Harnack, Werner, and Loofs. He shows that their neglect of Cyril's biblical commentaries and biased reading has led them to fatal errors in their analysis and evaluation of Cyril's theology. Wilken takes specific aim at those who impose on Cyril a subordination of Christ's work to his person.<sup>30</sup> There is an assumption among some scholars that Cyril gives priority to the mediation of the Incarnation while giving second place to

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<sup>27</sup> E.g. Durand, 90 and Welch, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 222-227. Wilken makes the apt observation that spending so much time and effort writing biblical commentaries "makes a difference in the way a man thinks." This is certainly true of Cyril.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 182-189.

Christ's saving work in history such as his passion, death, and resurrection.<sup>31</sup> Wilken avoids this critical error because he knows Cyril's commentaries and thus understands better Cyril's mind. Though Christ does indeed mediate between God and man insofar as he has assumed human nature, the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ were not incidental events in the history of Christ's life. They form the very basis for the goal of the Incarnation, the renewal of mankind.<sup>32</sup>

Wilken's thesis is important because he demonstrates that any thoughtful, accurate assessment of Cyril must take into consideration his biblical commentaries, not simply his dogmatic and polemical writings. He also affirms the high importance of soteriology in Cyril's theological system, and shows the close relationships among salvation, exegesis, history, and Christology in Cyril's thought. He therefore presents a helpful paradigm through which to view and further the study of Cyril's theology. However, although Wilken is sensitive to the tension between Judaism and Christianity in Cyril's mind, he does not explore the concept of circumcision in Cyril's writings as an example of a type transformed into a new spiritual reality.

The past twenty years have seen an increase in the number of studies engaging Cyril's doctrine of salvation. In 1992 Lars Koen published *The Saving Passion*, which explores the relationship between the Incarnation and soteriology in Cyril's *Commentary on John*. Koen's thesis is that the Incarnation and soteriology form one integrative reality in Cyril's thought. He argues that John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5-11 form the two primary *loci* in Cyril's commentary and serve as the biblical foundations for his Christology and soteriology.<sup>33</sup> Following Wilken (and Weigl), Koen tries to demonstrate that Cyril's doctrine of salvation cannot be reduced to a "physical" view of redemption espoused by Harnack, but is based upon "the entire foundation of

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Liébaert, 229, who claims, "Chez saint Cyrille, la Rédemption est ainsi subordonnée rigoureusement à la méditation du Christ et celle-ci à son Incarnation."

<sup>32</sup> Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 184-187.

<sup>33</sup> Koen, 120, 132.

the history of salvation.”<sup>34</sup> He attempts to combine the death and resurrection of Christ to the Incarnation as a “soteriological synthesis,” or one saving event.<sup>35</sup> In spite of his good intentions, Koen’s results are disappointing. The book is choppy and has no clear, sustained argument. He sets out to discuss the saving implications of Christ’s Incarnation, death, and resurrection based on the *Commentary on John*, but instead of providing theological analysis of Cyril’s commentary, most of Koen’s study amounts to large block quotations from the commentary, supplemented by quotations from other patristic sources. As to the concept of circumcision of the Spirit, Koen cites an important passage in the *Commentary on John* where Cyril builds on the idea in elaborate detail with a rich soteriological discussion.<sup>36</sup> It is strange that Koen dismisses this section of the commentary, given his interest, and merely states that “Cyril seems to wander rather far from the text.”<sup>37</sup>

Two years later, John McGuckin published *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy*, an historical and theological analysis of the Christologies of Cyril and Nestorius. McGuckin’s work, like Wilken’s, demonstrates that a careful examination of Cyril’s doctrine of Christ is inseparably linked to his doctrine of salvation. This is made clear in his chapter dedicated to Cyril’s Christology. Here McGuckin recognizes that the inner logic of Cyril’s theology is founded upon the premise that the Incarnation, from beginning to end, is one dynamic salvific event best understood as deification. By using “deification” here McGuckin means that Christ in his Incarnation saves through a process of mediation whereby human nature

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 120-121. Koen tries to establish Cyril’s “soteriological synthesis” by the way the two *loci* of John 1:14 and Phil. 2:5-11 form the crux of his theology in the *Commentary on John*. Koen describes this synthesis as Cyril’s “stress on the nature of the saviour [sic] and the stress on the work of the saviour [sic] without trying to isolate either of them. He does not give either of the *loci* a specific meaning that the other does not have. In Cyril’s theology both John 1,14 and Phil 2,5-11 are taken as proof-texts for both his incarnational and soteriological theology.”

<sup>36</sup> *In Jo. 7:24*, ed. P.E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostril Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872), 1:628-644. See Koen, 119, cf. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Koen, 119.

is deified through the union with the divine. In the union of the Incarnation, the power of the divine nature heals the fallibility of human nature. When the Logos appropriated human nature, human nature was “lifted” to a glory beyond its grasp. The exalted human nature of Christ then became the means through which he continually effects the transformation of the entire human race.<sup>38</sup>

McGuckin points to the Eucharist as the connecting point, in Cyril’s teaching, between Christ’s own deified humanity and the deification of the individual. The Eucharist brings the believer into a close encounter with the Logos where he or she is deified. At root here is the idea of “proximity” in Cyril’s (and Alexandrians) theology. The intimate proximity, *henosis*, between the divine and human in the Incarnate person of Christ deified Christ’s own human nature through proximity to which the deification of all is accomplished. McGuckin claims that, according to Cyril, the goal of the Incarnation is to effect “transforming intimacy” with God. The Incarnation thus becomes the model and means by which the human race is renewed and transformed.<sup>39</sup>

Because of the focus of his study, McGuckin rarely reaches back to Cyril’s pre-Nestorian commentaries to gauge his Christology and correlative soteriology.<sup>40</sup> Thus, McGuckin puts himself dangerously close to the Harnackian idea that Cyril’s soteriology is essentially a “physical” salvation. He seems interested in exploring only Cyril’s idea of deification: the transformation of human nature that stems from the contact or union between the divine and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 184-185. It is interesting that on the point of mediation, McGuckin shows his indebtedness to Liébaert. It should be remembered that Liébaert unreservedly attributes a subordination of Christ’s work to his person in Cyril’s theology. Wilken’s convincing response to Liébaert (et al.) shows that Cyril posits no such subordination, and that the idea is an imposition on his thought.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 195. Cf. 225: “The divine Lord, deifying his flesh for the sake of the ontological rescue of the human race, became at once the universal and particular paradigm of this. He who transcended his own fragility and death thus calls out to the whole race to become greater than they know themselves to be, and in this becoming, to become alive.”

<sup>40</sup> Of course, McGuckin is much fairer and sympathetic to Cyril than is Harnack, and he provides a more thorough scholarly assessment of Cyril’s Christology than Harnack’s.



human in the Incarnation. At hardly any point does he explore the saving efficacy of Christ's passion and death, descent to hell, resurrection, or ascent – all of which are interrelated components of Cyril's soteriology.<sup>41</sup> McGuckin's study is a valuable contribution in its clear presentation of Cyril's Christology and of the technical, often confusing ontological terms bandied about in the debate with Nestorius. But his treatment of Cyril's view of salvation is one-sided. He draws special attention to deification as the immediate effect of the Incarnation, but he pays insufficient attention to the soteriological implications of Christ's life and work. As would be expected in a study concentrating on the Nestorian debate, McGuckin does not include any discussion on circumcision by the Spirit in his analysis of Cyril's soteriology.

McGuckin's study was followed several years later by that of the French scholar Bernard Meunier, who explored Cyril's Christology and its soteriological implications in light of monophysitism.<sup>42</sup> Though Meunier is concerned with the relationship between Cyril and monophysitism, the first and second parts of the book explore in some detail Cyril's theology regarding the Fall and its consequences, sin, recapitulation, participation in the divine nature, and the role of the Spirit in human renewal.<sup>43</sup> He is in agreement with the growing scholarly consensus that Christology and soteriology go hand in hand in Cyril's thought. He also draws from the entire breadth of Cyril's corpus, making solid use of his commentaries and, in particular, the festal letters.

One of the important highlights of this book for our purposes is Meunier's brief but helpful discussions on spiritual circumcision in some of Cyril's texts. Meunier calls attention to

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<sup>41</sup> On Christ's ascension see McGuckin, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Bernard Meunier, *Le Christ de Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1997).

<sup>43</sup> See *ibid.*, 122-125, where Meunier provides an insightful examination of Cyril's insistence on the re-distribution of the Spirit as the key to humanity's return to incorruptibility. Meunier skillfully rejects the temptation to tease out the physical implications of Cyril's soteriology at the expense of other aspects of it, such as the moral dimension.

circumcision near the beginning of his study, while trying to establish theological demarcations in Cyril's thought. As Wilken had argued, Meunier too affirms that the Adam-Christ typology is of great importance for Cyril. Meunier draws certain passages from the *De adoratione*, one of Cyril's earliest works, to demonstrate his concentration on the history of salvation and the "symétrie inversée" between Adam and Christ. One such passage comes from Book XV, where Cyril finds a spiritual reality in the literal instruction concerning ritual purification in Leviticus 12.<sup>44</sup> He affirms that circumcision, now no longer an operation in the flesh, is a gift given to us by the Spirit so that we might be conformed (μεμορφώμεθα) to Christ. Though death has reigned since Adam because of Adam's sin, Christ appeared on earth to reverse the situation and restore mankind to glory.<sup>45</sup>

Another important feature in Cyril's thought detected by Meunier is the "double participation" in God through the dual means of baptism and the Eucharist. According to Meunier, one example of Cyril's joining the two sacraments under the rubric of participation comes in his *Commentary on John* 7:24, where Cyril investigates the soteriological implications of circumcision. Here, he explains the connection between circumcision and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual circumcision is associated with purification from sin, victory over death, and participation in the divine nature. Meunier draws attention to allusions to the Eucharist and baptism that Cyril makes while speaking on the "true lamb" and the "mystic Jordan."<sup>46</sup> The Eucharist and baptism are somewhat ancillary themes in Cyril's comment, but the passage nonetheless serves Meunier's purpose. However, Meunier emphasizes a similar connection, this time between participation in the divine nature and baptism alone, in Cyril's comment on John

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<sup>44</sup> Meunier, 13-14. Cf. PG 68, 1008D-1009A

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>46</sup> Meunier, 168.

20:17.<sup>47</sup> Here the relationship is much more pronounced. Meunier recognizes that spiritual circumcision represents the gift of the Spirit given to us in baptism, but notes that Cyril does not always associate circumcision with baptism.<sup>48</sup> For example, Meunier highlights the connection Cyril makes in *In Jo.* 7:24 between spiritual circumcision and Christ's resurrection.<sup>49</sup>

Until Meunier's work, most scholars had failed to notice the versatile soteriological role that circumcision of the Spirit plays in Cyril's theology. Meunier points out some of the important elements Cyril ties to it, such as participation of the Spirit, the sacraments, and the resurrection. However, he only scratches the surface. His treatment of select circumcision passages is insightful but limited in scope. Meunier's work thus treads on heretofore unexplored territory and has left the door open for further development.

In 2003 Donald Fairbairn published his dissertation, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*, an historical study on the relationship between grace and Christology in the theologies of Theodore, Nestorius, Cyril, and John Cassian.<sup>50</sup> Fairbairn's treatment of Cyril is insightful because he spends considerable time examining important theological terms in Cyril's vocabulary, and Fairbairn explores well the distinction in Christological emphases between Cyril's early and later writings.<sup>51</sup> According to Fairbairn, the concept of sharing in the divine nature underlies Cyril's doctrine of grace in his early writings. Because of his battle with Nestorius, Cyril makes a subtle shift, emphasizing the Son himself as the source of grace. But

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 20:17 (Pusey, III, 119).

<sup>48</sup> Meunier, 199-200. Meunier cites Cyril's *Festal Letter* 6.7-8 as an example of Cyril explaining circumcision in terms other than baptism.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

<sup>50</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), hereafter, *Grace and Christology*. See also his article "Patristic Soteriology: Three Trajectories," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (2007): 289-310.

<sup>51</sup> Following Jouassard and others, Fairbairn identifies the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy as the demarcation between his "early" and "later" writings. The early writings are mainly comprised of his biblical commentaries, while the later writings include the majority of his Christological works. See Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 63-64.

Fairbairn argues that Cyril's Christology remains consistent throughout his life, even though the Nestorian controversy forced him to make certain refinements and changes, especially in his use of terms. Most of all, the correlation of his soteriological convictions with his Christology and doctrine of grace remains constant. In Christ we have the personal presence of the Logos, who is the source of grace, and when we receive salvation, we receive God. Grace is not simply God gifting us with things external to him; rather, grace is God giving himself to us through the Son, in whom we share through the Spirit. We are made alive, holy, and incorruptible because we partake of the one who is life, holiness, and incorruption itself.<sup>52</sup>

Fairbairn's goal is to explore the implications of our participation in God according to Cyril's Christology and doctrine of grace.<sup>53</sup> In his assessment, he notes the centrality of deification in Cyril's soteriology. He limits his focus to the way Cyril views salvation as occurring "within the person of Christ through the interplay between his deity and humanity."<sup>54</sup> In doing so, Fairbairn conveys the importance of communion and participation in the divine nature in Cyril's schema. But the idea of communion and participation derived from the divine-human interplay in the Incarnation is not the total of Cyril's doctrine of salvation. Fairbairn leaves aside crucial elements in Cyril's soteriology, such as Christ's atoning death and resurrection.<sup>55</sup> He thus takes the route of many previous scholars who have underscored the process of mediation through the Incarnation while choosing not to engage Cyril's insistence on the cross, the descent to Hades, the resurrection, and the ascension. Fairbairn's thesis is helpful, though not holistic. Because of his specific focus on the divine-human exchange in the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 129-130.

<sup>53</sup> See Ibid., 83-103, for an especially helpful discussion of the terms ἴδιος and οικειότης in Cyril's thought.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 99-100. I should note that Fairbairn does acknowledge the importance of the death and resurrection in Cyril's doctrine of salvation, even though he does not attempt to discuss them.

Incarnation and particular relational terms in Cyril's writings, Fairbairn leaves the idea of circumcision of the Spirit untouched.

The most important treatment of Cyril's soteriology that has appeared in recent years is Daniel Keating's *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria*, published in 2004. Keating dedicates the greater part of his investigation to Cyril's commentaries on the New Testament, particularly the *Commentary on John*, and he pays careful attention to the way Cyril's exegesis of Scripture shapes his doctrine of salvation. Although he gives less consideration to Cyril's Old Testament commentaries, his approach to Cyril's doctrine of salvation is comprehensive. Keating skillfully demonstrates that careful readings of Cyril's New Testament commentaries correct interpretations that exaggerate a "physicalist" strain in his theology and ignore the pneumatic and ethical aspects. He does not take a piecemeal approach to Cyril's soteriology, nor does he mine the texts in a hunt for select topics. Instead, he argues that Cyril envisages salvation as a comprehensive divine plan or "narrative of divine life."<sup>56</sup> Keating's phrase involves the passage of salvation from God to mankind. It is the movement of "life" from the Father to the Son and Spirit (who possess life by nature) and then through the Son and Spirit to the human race.<sup>57</sup>

Keating traces the logic of Cyril's linear view of the Incarnation as one saving event comprised of key "moments" that, when connected, complete the biblical narrative whereby God shares his life with us. These moments are the specific acts of Christ in history that procure salvation, from his birth to his ascent. Of particular concern for Keating is Cyril's two-fold

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<sup>56</sup> Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 16-19.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

means of the reception of divine life: baptism and the Eucharist.<sup>58</sup> Jesus' own baptism effected the return of the Spirit on the human race, the very Spirit that Adam lost in the fall. Keating rightly points out Cyril's insistence that Christ did not receive the Spirit because he stood in need of sanctification. Rather, he received the Spirit as the second Adam in solidarity with and on behalf of the human race in order to restore grace to mankind. He received as man what we required for renewal and, according to John 20:22, returned the Spirit to the disciples.<sup>59</sup> Keating identifies baptism as the first means of divine indwelling in Cyril's thought because through it we receive the gift of the Spirit and sanctification.<sup>60</sup> The Eucharist, the second means of divine indwelling, shares a close relationship with baptism. With this sacrament Cyril associates the gifts of life and incorruption, as well as the transformation of our nature. Keating is quick to note that baptism (associated with the gift of the Spirit) and the Eucharist (identified as the reception of the flesh and blood of Christ) ultimately work in tandem to accomplish the same overarching purpose, which is to grant us a share in the divine life whereby our spiritual and corporeal natures are healed and transformed.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike the majority of Cyril's interpreters, Keating shows interest in the way Cyril appropriates circumcision imagery in his soteriology. Most of his discussion centers on Cyril's comment on John 7:24 in his *Commentary on John*. He provides a brief summary of this section, but his focus is on what he sees as an intrinsic relationship between spiritual circumcision and baptism, because baptism as a mode of divine life is an important component in Keating's thesis. Keating correctly asserts that circumcision in the Spirit is a "comprehensive event," but he insists

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<sup>58</sup> See also Keating, "The Baptism of Jesus in Cyril of Alexandria: The Re-Creation of the Human Race" in *Pro Ecclesia* 13, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 201-222 and "The Twofold Manner of Divine Indwelling in Cyril of Alexandria: Redressing an Imbalance," in *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001): 543-549.

<sup>59</sup> Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 28-29.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 93-95. Keating elaborates on the identical effects of baptism and Eucharist – the two modes of divine indwelling: "Each mode is life-giving, each is sanctifying, each can be seen to affect both body and soul, and each is depicted as making us partakers of the divine nature."

that it is “essentially related to baptism” in that it includes the elements of initiation into the life of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Keating’s thesis is persuasive. His description of the “narrative of divine life” in Cyril’s thought demonstrates the comprehensive nature of his soteriology and provides a helpful prism through which to view the logic and linear movement of Cyril’s theology. Keating also corrects faulty readings of Cyril which emphasize the Eucharist, at the expense of baptism, as the means to reception of divine life. However, it is surprising how little Keating deals with the death of Christ when one considers the significance Cyril attaches to it. The passion and death of the Son play a more crucial role in Cyril’s narrative of divine life than Keating admits.<sup>63</sup> Keating does not follow the methodology of scholars such as Harnack, on the one hand, nor does he share all the same research questions as McGuckin, on the other; yet he repeats the same neglect of the death of Christ in Cyril’s theology that we find in both these scholars.<sup>64</sup> As for the concept of circumcision, Keating’s real interest is exploiting the connection he sees between circumcision and baptism. He does not provide a holistic analysis of the role circumcision by the Spirit plays in Cyril’s soteriology. He thus leaves room for further development of circumcision texts in Cyril’s New Testament commentaries.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>63</sup> For example, Keating’s entire first chapter, titled “The Divine Plan of Salvation in Cyril” (20-53) mentions the death of Christ only in passing, while questions surrounding Christ’s humanity, baptism, resurrection, and ascension receive careful attention. For some reason, Keating does not explore or develop the soteriological significance Cyril attaches to the death of Christ in his writings.

<sup>64</sup> The downplaying and neglect of the central role of Christ’s death in Cyril’s doctrine of salvation is not uncommon. Though a number scholars, including some discussed above, explore the question in some detail, the majority of scholarship engaging Cyril’s soteriological principles, ranging from the particular to the general, are more prone to stress deification and Christ’s mediation through the ontological fact of the Incarnation. Meanwhile, the saving effects of Christ’s death often go overlooked. But a careful reading of Cyril’s texts reveal that to undervalue the death of Christ is to fail to comprehend a most necessary element in his total comprehensive doctrine of salvation. Blanchette’s insightful essay, “St. Cyril of Alexandria’s Idea of Redemption,” cited above, addresses this problem of downplaying Christ’s death in Cyril’s thought, and attempts to offer a more balanced view of Cyril’s soteriology by outlining his idea of redemption and the “juridical” component that fills out his teaching on the entire scope of salvation.

Finally, brief mention must be made of Sebastian Schurig's recently published dissertation, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes beim frühen Cyrill von Alexandria*.<sup>65</sup> Though Schurig limits the scope of his study to Cyril's *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*,<sup>66</sup> his work is noteworthy for our purposes for two reasons. First, Schurig is one of a very small group of scholars who has attempted anything resembling a systematic study of Cyril's doctrine of atonement.<sup>67</sup> Although Schurig confines himself primarily to one text, his thesis shows the importance of the cross in Cyril's interpretation of the Bible and theology early in his episcopal career. Second, Schurig analyzes a number of passages on circumcision in Cyril's work. For instance, he identifies Cyril's association of participation in the divine nature with circumcision in the Spirit.<sup>68</sup> He also discusses Cyril's connection between circumcision of the Spirit and the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection. After Christ broke the power of sin and death through his own death and reconciled us to God, he rose to newness of life. Circumcision with the Spirit takes place on the day of Resurrection. Schurig, like Keating, recognizes the importance Cyril lays on John 20:22, where the newly risen Lord breathes on his disciples, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." This "mediation of the Spirit to the disciples" signifies restoration and renewed participation in the divine life.<sup>69</sup> Cyril identifies the bestowal of participation in the Spirit as circumcision of the Spirit.<sup>70</sup>

The preceding outline has drawn attention to scholarly contributions to the study of Cyril's doctrine of salvation, and I have argued that more work needs to be done. First,

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<sup>65</sup> Sebastian Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes beim frühen Cyrill von Alexandria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Schurig also gives considerable treatment to the *Glaphyra*.

<sup>67</sup> See especially chapter 6, "Das Kreuz und die Versöhnung," and chapter 7, "Das Kreuz als Erhöhung Christi." Schurig describes the cross in terms of freedom from sin and death, ransom, reconciliation, means of participation with God, and redemption.

<sup>68</sup> Schurig, 82.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>70</sup> See Ibid., 214-216 for a more detailed discussion of pertinent texts involving circumcision and participation.



throughout the past century, too little attention has been given to Cyril's pre-Nestorian commentaries on Scripture, with the exception of the *Commentary on John*. Second, in spite of attempts by some scholars, notably Keating, to outline the comprehensive, narrative flow of Cyril's view of salvation, gaps still remain. For instance, concepts such as θεοποίησις (deification) and participation have received extensive scholarly attention,<sup>71</sup> while too little emphasis has been given to other important concepts such as the death of Christ, an event to which Cyril gives considerable attention. The failure to consider less studied though nonetheless crucial elements of Cyril's doctrine has led to an incomplete, one-sided presentation of his soteriology. Third, few scholars have given serious consideration to Cyril's use of circumcision of the Spirit in his exegesis and theology. The concept has not been ignored, but it has not been the center of scholarly investigation even though, as I will show throughout his study, that it merits attention. This dissertation will attempt to fulfill these lacunae in Cyrilline scholarship by exploring important passages in Cyril's early biblical commentaries and festal letters where he develops the idea of circumcision along soteriological lines. A careful examination of the way he interprets circumcision and allows it to function theologically will reveal the comprehensive nature of his soteriology and show that nearly every salvific element within his narrative of salvation is included in this one, all-encompassing concept of circumcision. In light of the above critiques, and in order to make an appropriate assessment of circumcision as a multivalent

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<sup>71</sup> Studies treating deification in Cyril are numerous. In most of these studies, the authors assume that Cyril is the representative *par excellence* of the Greek Christian doctrine of deification. See for example, Peter Phan, *Grace and the Human Condition* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988), 152, who asserts that "Cyril's magnificent doctrine on sanctification and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the justified souls recapitulates the whole Greek theology of *theopoiesis*, deification." In similar fashion, Irénée Dalmis claims, "On peut dire qu'avec Cyrille d'Alexandrie la théologie de la divinisation atteint son plein développement" in his article on divinization in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 3 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1957), 1386. See also Petro Bilaniuk, "The Mystery of Theosis or Divinization," in *The Heritage of the Early Church*, ed. David Neiman and Margaret Schatkin (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1973), 337-359. Bilaniuk claims that Cyril "probably represents the pinnacle of the development of teaching on *theosis*." Similar sentiments may be found in Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian in the Greek Fathers*, cited above, and Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

soteriological metaphor in Cyril's writings, it is important to outline his basic framework of salvation expressed in his commentaries and *Festal Letters* written before the Nestorian controversy.

### Cyril's Doctrine of Salvation Prior to the Nestorian Controversy

Cyril presents the saving activity of God in a variety of ways. He does not prefer one particular manner to express the mystery of salvation because the Bible itself provides multiple images and metaphors, all of which describe important dimensions of man's restoration.<sup>72</sup> Thus, Cyril mines the Scriptures in his commentaries and finds numerous expressions that articulate what salvation is and its effect on human nature. While Cyril is comfortable laying soteriological images side by side to demonstrate the mystery and profundity of God's saving work, his doctrine of salvation is not desultory. As Keating demonstrates in his *Appropriation of Divine Life*, Cyril's soteriology hangs together by the biblical narrative of God's saving action in the world through Christ and the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup> But within the single narrative of Scripture lies the binary relationship between type and fulfillment. For Cyril, the Incarnation constitutes the fulfillment of the "types and shadows" of the old covenant and establishes the spiritual reality to which all types have pointed: the renewal and transformation of human nature through communion with God made possible by the Son.<sup>74</sup>

Cyril outlines the narrative of the Incarnation and draws attention to every saving "moment" (or event) in which Christ actively works to reverse the effects of Adam's sin and

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<sup>72</sup> An exhaustive compendium is not possible here. However, as the various pieces of glass or stone form a mosaic, these diverse biblical terms and concepts constitute a multi-dimensional view of salvation: atonement (Lev. 17:11, Heb. 2:17) forgiveness (II Chr. 7:14, Ps. 130:4) justification (Rom. 4:25, Gal. 3:24), regeneration (Jn. 3:3), renewal (Ps. 51:10, II Cor. 4:16, 5:17), reconciliation (Rom. 5:10), purification from sin (Lev. 16:30, Heb. 1:3, I Jn. 1:9), deliverance (Ps. 79:9), sanctification (Rom. 15:16, I Thess. 5:23-24), freedom in Christ or the Spirit (II Cor. 3:17, Gal. 5:1), adoption (Jn. 1:12, Eph. 1:5), transformation (Rom. 12:2), redemption (Col. 1:14, Heb. 9:12), ransom (Mt. 20:28, Heb. 9:15), spiritual circumcision (Rom. 2:28-29, Col. 2:11).

<sup>73</sup> That is, from the Fall through the entire Christ event that culminates in the bestowal of the Spirit to humanity.

<sup>74</sup> This, in the main, is Wilken's thesis in *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*.

refashion human nature. This twofold action of reversal and refashioning is the *telos* of the Incarnation. Christ appeared in order to save humanity from the effects of Adam's Fall and to restore our race to glory and kinship with God. In mapping out this biblical narrative, Cyril uses Philippians 2:5-11,<sup>75</sup> the so-called *kenosis* passage, as his starting point because it gets to the heart of the salvific accomplishments of Christ's person and work, and how Christ has brought about these accomplishments through his humility and obedience. Even in places where Cyril does not make explicit reference to this passage, it is a constant presence forming the backdrop of his thought and providing avenues for Christological and soteriological development. Cyril echoes Gregory Nazianzus' maxim, ὃ γὰρ μὴ προσεῖληπται, οὐδὲ σέσωται (that which is not assumed is not healed),<sup>76</sup> and affirms the saving significance of the Word's union with human nature in the person of Jesus Christ:

Do you see how the only-begotten Word of God came to us, that we also might be as he is, so much as it is possible for our nature to attain, and as much as can be said about our renewal by grace? For he humbled himself so that he might raise up the lowly in nature to his own height; and bore the form of a servant, though by nature he was both Lord and Son, that he might transport those who by nature are servants to the glory of sonship, according to his own likeness.<sup>77</sup>

Cyril taught that Christ is the "firstfruits" of redeemed human nature because in his own person human nature was trans-elemented (μεταστοιχειόω)<sup>78</sup> into a new condition. Or, as Cyril puts it

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<sup>75</sup> Koen's insistence that John 1:14, along with Philippians 2:5-11, comprises the two Scriptural *loci* on which Cyril's soteriology is based has justification. However, the overwhelming number of citations and allusions to Phil. 2:5-11 throughout Cyril's writings and the theological development that stems from it reveal that the *kenosis* enjoys a special place of prominence in his doctrine of salvation and Christology.

<sup>76</sup> *In Jo.* 12:27-28 (Pusey, II, 318). Cf. Letter 101.32 in Gregory Nazianzus, *Lettres théologiques*, trans. Paul Gallay, SC 208 (Paris: Cerf, 1974), 50.

<sup>77</sup> *In Jo.* 20:17 (Pusey, III, 122). Cyril articulates this principle in a number of different ways throughout his commentaries, particularly in his *Commentary on John*. Cf. *In Jo.* 7:39: "But seeing that he had been made man, he had our whole nature in himself, that he might restore it all, transforming it to its ancient state" (Pusey, I, 693); *Ibid.*, 16:7: "Therefore, in order to free from corruption and death those who were condemned on account of that ancient curse, he became man, who being life by nature, even investing himself with our nature. ...And, since the divine nature is altogether free from the inclination to sin, he exalted us through his own flesh" (Pusey, II, 618).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:27-28 (Pusey, II, 316).

another way, he “re-elemented (ἀνεστοιχείωσε) what was assumed into his own glory.”<sup>79</sup>

Christ experienced natural human emotions, appetites, and weaknesses throughout his earthly life, but he overcame and redeemed them by the might of the Logos incarnate. This is why Scripture refers to Jesus as the new Adam. He experienced the agitations of fallen humanness but was not consumed. Therefore in him, our new representative, human nature is lifted to a better condition because the union of the two realities (the divine and human nature) results in a “life-giving transaction” where “the power of the one heals and transforms the fallibility of the other.”<sup>80</sup> Christ deifies the human race at large as he deifies his own flesh.<sup>81</sup>

Cyril follows the line of reasoning he inherited from Athanasius (and Irenaeus two centuries before) that the Word became what we are that we might become what he is.<sup>82</sup> He stresses the full divinity of the Son, and is anxious to protect the oneness of Christ’s person in whom the divine and human natures existed in mysterious but perfect unity.<sup>83</sup> For Cyril, the divine saving action *begins* with the union of natures in the incarnate hypostasis of Christ. Though a number of modern theologians emphasize the contact between the two natures in Christ as the defining act of union that effects re-union between God and man,<sup>84</sup> Cyril sees the

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<sup>79</sup> *Festal Letter* 8.6 in *Cyrille d’Alexandrie: Lettres Festales VII-XI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Pierre Évieux, and Robert Monier, SC 392 (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 106. It is interesting that Cyril’s *Festal Letters* have very little concerning deification through the Incarnation, focusing instead on Christ’s death, descent to hell, resurrection, and ascension. An English translation is found in *Cyril of Alexandria: Festal Letters 1-12*, ed. John O’Keefe, trans. Phillip Amadon (Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

<sup>80</sup> McGuckin, 185. Cf. Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 100.

<sup>81</sup> *In Jo.* 12:27-28 (Pusey, II, 318). Here, Cyril asserts, “For it was this way and no other that the manner of the healing passed over even to us.” See also McGuckin, 187. “For Cyril, the salvation offered universally, the ‘deification by grace’ that amounts to the restoration of mankind to union with God in and through Christ, is the cosmic gift of the metaphysical transformation effected in the act of incarnation.” Cf. du Manoir, 177, who shows how Cyril compares the insufficiency of Moses and the prophets for addressing the human condition with the Word who, by taking on our nature, *a transformé notre condition en un état meilleur que l’ancien*.

<sup>82</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 54 (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 93. On Irenaeus, see *Against Heresies* 5. Pref., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, ANF, vol. 1 (1884; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 526.

<sup>83</sup> This argument will have special relevance during his debate with Nestorius as works like *On the Unity of Christ* demonstrate. I will deal more with this mature work in the final chapter.

<sup>84</sup> Vladimir Kharlamov, “*Theosis* in Patristic Thought,” *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 165. Kharlamov claims, “As God, Christ deified his human nature at the moment of the Incarnation. Thus, he is the only one who simultaneously

Word's self-emptying and assumption of human nature as the starting point for deification. Christ does not bring about salvation primarily by virtue of the divine-human union in his hypostasis; he procures it also through his saving activity in history.<sup>85</sup> For Cyril, everything Christ does has saving significance. He often singles out anecdotes from the stories in the gospels in order to explain how even the seemingly insignificant actions of Jesus reveal part of the saving economy.<sup>86</sup> However, I will limit this discussion to the fundamental events (or moments) within the scope of the Incarnation that Cyril is most keen to highlight in the biblical narrative of salvation.

For Cyril, one of the events of the Incarnation that carries the most profound implications for salvation is the baptism of Christ. In Cyril's biblical scheme, this event serves as the fulcrum within the soteriological narrative of the initial loss and eventual recovery of the Holy Spirit that makes possible our sanctification and participation in the divine nature. Cyril locates Jesus' baptism within the sequence of interrelated events recorded in Scripture that forms the fundamental structure of his doctrine of salvation. These structural events, in chronological and theological order, include the inbreathing of God at the creation of man (Genesis 2:7), Adam's fall and loss of immortality, the baptism of Christ, and Jesus' impartation of the Spirit onto his disciples after he rose from the dead (John 20:22). For Cyril, these events form a seamless narrative that tells the story of 1) God's bestowal of original grace and glory through the gift of the Spirit, 2) man's fall into sin and corruption resulting in the loss of the Spirit, 3) Christ's

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is the deifier and the deified. This act of union brings the true reunion between God and humanity." Cf. Unger, 339: "This sanctification and reception of the Spirit and of all gifts took place in a certain sense already at and through the Incarnation, namely, by the very fact that Christ assumed our nature; we were all, in a sense, in Christ and were sanctified by Him."

<sup>85</sup> Cf. John Meyendorff, "Christ as Savior in the East," in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn and John Meyendorff (New York: Crossroads, 1985), 235, who argues that the fallen humanity of Christ was "deified through the cross and resurrection."

<sup>86</sup> Cf. *In Jo. 2:2-3* (Pusey, I, 200-201), where Cyril explains the significance of Christ's presence at the wedding in Cana. Cyril explains that through Christ's presence at the wedding he was sanctifying the birthing process, and expelling the ancient curse of sorrow and shame associated with child-bearing.

retrieval of the Spirit as the second Adam, and 4) Christ's "re-gifting" of the Spirit to the human race through his disciples. This cohesive narrative of original glory, fall, and restoration serves as the basic sequence of Cyril's doctrine of salvation. In what follows, I will explore the main plot points of this narrative in greater detail while drawing from Cyril's biblical commentaries and other early writings.

The two passages that form the bookends of the narrative of salvation, Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22, are especially important to Cyril. With these texts he underscores the relationship between the Holy Spirit and mankind. Few if any patristic thinker exploits the relationship between the events depicted in these passages as Cyril does since he locates both in the same general context of divinely granted participation in the Spirit.<sup>87</sup> What God imparted to Adam through breath (πνοή) at creation, namely the Spirit, Christ the second Adam re-imparted through breath after he regained the Spirit on behalf of the human race.

Cyril often identifies the "breath" in Genesis 2:7 as the Holy Spirit who, through indwelling, instills glory, stability, immortality, and incorruptibility in man. For example, in a beautiful passage on creation in his *Glaphyra in Genesim*, Cyril correlates the divine breath with the life-giving (ζωοποιόν) Spirit responsible for granting life and rationality to what was once a lifeless body – a mere statue (ἄγαλμα).<sup>88</sup> In his *Commentary on John*, Cyril claims that after fashioning man out of dust, God "illuminated him with the participation of his own Spirit."<sup>89</sup> Even in cases where Cyril makes no mention of the breath of God, he insists time and again that the Spirit himself was given to Adam at creation. Through his participation in the Spirit, Adam

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<sup>87</sup> Meunier, 123-125; Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 43-44.

<sup>88</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 1, β (PG 69, 20). Although this text is not entirely clear as to what Cyril means by πνεῦμα, Burghardt makes a convincing case that Cyril is referring to the Holy Spirit rather than general human spirit. See Burghardt, 52, n.6. For a clear example where Cyril identifies the "breath" in Gen. 2:7 as the Holy Spirit see *In Jo.* 1:32-33 (Pusey, I, 182).

<sup>89</sup> *In Jo* 20:22-23 (Pusey, III, 135).

was sealed with the divine Image, imbued with grace, and enjoyed a condition that was “firm and stable, and endowed with natural goods.”<sup>90</sup> As long as the Spirit remained in Adam, his progeny would enjoy the knowledge of God and share in the benefits of holiness. But through the trickery of the devil, Adam and Eve’s free will allowed them to disobey the law God had established for them. As a result their likeness to God was marred,<sup>91</sup> and human nature “went in the direction of sin, took the path to transgression, and fell into every form of impurity.”<sup>92</sup> When the progression of sin had reached a certain point, the Holy Spirit departed.

Cyril does not claim that the Spirit immediately left Adam and Eve upon their disobedience; he does not indicate the precise moment of the Spirit’s departure. He does, however, suggest that the Spirit did not fully abandon the human race until sin and impurity exceeded what the Spirit could bear.<sup>93</sup> The loss of the Spirit signified the onset of corruption, death, ignorance, impurity, and distress; a total reversal of the benefits that Adam enjoyed through participation in the Spirit.<sup>94</sup> Cyril explains that because Adam is the root of the human race, the dismal consequences of forfeiting the Spirit were passed on to his descendants.

The restoration of the Holy Spirit is essential to Cyril’s understanding of the transformation and renewal of the human race. After the Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, the baptism in the Jordan marks the first event in the Incarnation that reveals in a tangible way the divine initiative to restore the Holy Spirit to mankind and reverse the effects of the Fall. The

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<sup>90</sup> *Commentary on Joel 2:28-29*, trans. Robert Hill, FC 115 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 295.

<sup>91</sup> *In Jo.* 1:32-33 (Pusey, I, 183).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:36-37 (Pusey, I, 296).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:32-33 (Pusey, I, 183): “But since the human race had reached a multitude of greater numbers, and sin having grasped all, plundering the soul of each person in manifold ways, human nature was stripped bare of the ancient grace; the Spirit departed altogether, and the rational creature fell into the deepest folly and became ignorant of the Creator.”

<sup>94</sup> *Glaph.* (PG 69, 21-24). Cf. *De ador.* (PG 68, 144-149). For an informed discussion on Cyril’s doctrine of “original sin,” see Geoffrey Dunn, “Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, and the Pelagian Controversy,” *Augustinian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2006): 63-88.

baptism is an example of the Adam-Christ typology so evident in Cyril's understanding of the Scriptural unfolding of salvation. He explains that when the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ in the form of a dove, Christ received the Spirit as the second Adam. The new representative for humanity became a Spirit-bearer. Of course, Cyril insists, Christ did not receive the Spirit because he was without the Spirit or had need of sanctification. That would be absurd because the Spirit is eternally proper to the Son and, insofar as he is God, the Son actively sanctifies by the Spirit. Rather, Christ, insofar as he became man, received the Spirit as one of us and on our behalf so that he might recover (διασώζω) the Spirit for our nature in order to sanctify and renew it, root (ῥιζόω) us again in grace, and restore to us our ancient good (τὸ ἀρχαῖον ἀγαθόν).<sup>95</sup> Christ's reception of the Spirit as man does not signify an ontological change in his hypostasis, but portends an ontological shift in the human race because of his role as the second Adam. The cause of humanity's sinful state is the loss of the Spirit. In Christ's baptism, the Spirit returns to humanity once again.

Cyril also notes the significance of John the Baptist's testimony in John 1:32 to the effect that the Spirit *remained* on Jesus. The fact that the Spirit not only descended upon but stayed with Jesus is important for Cyril. In the same way that the Spirit departed from the human race because of sin, the one who knew no sin became one of us so that the Spirit would remain on him, having no reason to withdraw from a sinless human being. Thus, the Spirit remained on Christ so that we might be born of the Spirit, and that the Spirit might remain on us.<sup>96</sup> This too

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<sup>95</sup> *In Jo.* 1:32-33 (Pusey, I, 184-185). Cf. *In Jo.* 7:39 (Pusey, I, 693): "Therefore, the Only-Begotten does not receive the Holy Spirit for himself; for the Spirit is of him and in him and through him, as we said previously. But seeing that he had been made man, he had our whole nature in himself, that he might restore it all, transforming it to its ancient state."

<sup>96</sup> *In Jo.* 1:32-33 (Pusey, I, 184). See also *Com. Joel* 2:28-29 (FC 115, 296): "This in fact is the reason why he is also called the second Adam; it was through him that we were given an incomparably better reshaping and enjoy the great gain of rebirth in the Spirit, no longer having the first, by which I mean the birth according to the flesh, which leads to corruption and sin....Instead, it is the second birth, from on high, which is of God through the Spirit, especially if it is true that 'we are born not of blood, nor of the will of man, but of God.'"



affirms the crucial role of Christ as the new representative whereby participation in the Spirit once again becomes possible. What the first Adam lost, the second Adam recovered and retained.

Cyril sees the final step in the recovery of the Spirit for mankind in the post-resurrection meeting between Jesus and his disciples recorded in John 20:22. What Christ recovered and retained in his baptism, he now redistributes. The importance Cyril places on the baptism of Christ in conjunction with the original gift of the Spirit at creation and subsequent loss of the Spirit through Adam's disobedience and the increasing sinfulness of humanity helps us understand why John 20:22 is so crucial to Cyril's soteriological program. In this passage the evangelist reports that the newly resurrected Christ appears to his disciples and breathes on them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Cyril observes that the resurrected Christ's bestowing of the Spirit onto the disciples signifies the re-dispensing of the Spirit to humanity once again, which brings to completion the salvific narrative (initial gift – subsequent loss – retrieval – re-bestowal) of the Spirit's relationship with humanity. Christ is the second Adam, the new representative for mankind who establishes a new way of being because he is the Word truly living as man, who, on behalf of all, received the Holy Spirit in himself at the inauguration of his mission. The Spirit remained on him throughout his earthly ministry. Now at the conclusion of his ministry (after his death and resurrection), he gives the Spirit – the same Spirit who is eternally proper to him and remained with him insofar as the Word has a human life proper to himself – to the disciples as "firstfruits" of renewed human nature. In giving the Spirit to the disciples, Christ sanctifies them and prepares them for their apostleship because through them the gift of the Spirit is to be made available to all.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> See *Com. Joel* 2 (FC 115, 294-295); *In Jo.* 20:22-23 (Pusey, III, 131-135). Though space does not permit a full treatment, a pressing question Cyril considers is when, exactly, the disciples did in fact receive the Holy Spirit,

That Christ gives the Spirit to his disciples just after his resurrection and that he does so through the specific act of breathing are theologically significant details for Cyril. He points out the obvious parallel of divine breath in Genesis 2:7 and John 20:22. Cyril stresses that the Son's cooperation with the Father in giving the Spirit for man's transformation parallels the way that the Word cooperated with God the Father at man's original formation when he gave Adam the Spirit by breathing into his nostrils "the breath of life." Man was given the Spirit through divine breath at creation; he is given the Spirit again through the breath of the Son upon the crowning event of recreation when the disciples become sharers in the Holy Spirit. In the same way man was fashioned and came into being at creation, so is he refashioned and renewed by the power of the resurrection, where the recreation of human nature is brought to its fulfillment in Christ. Cyril remarks that "even as he [man] was formed (ἐμορφώθη) then in the image of the one who created him, so likewise now is he re-formed (μεταπλάττεται) into the likeness of his own Creator by the participation of the Holy Spirit."<sup>98</sup>

The fact that Christ bequeaths the Spirit after his resurrection provides Cyril the opportunity to expound upon Christ's death, descent to Hades, resurrection, and ascension within the grand narrative of salvation. The relationship between these saving actions of Christ and the gift of the Spirit can be culled from many passages of Cyril's commentaries, though, as I have said, they are not systematized. His first *Festal Letter* as bishop of Alexandria provides an

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considering the juxtaposition of John 20:22 and Acts 2. The question first comes up in his comment on John 12:16, where Cyril makes a distinction between the two separate "illuminations" of the Spirit onto or within the disciples. He is content to distinguish between the two encounters with the Spirit in terms of degrees of enlightenment. Cyril claims that after the resurrection, when Christ breathed on the disciples, they received divine knowledge and became different (ἐτέρων) from all others. At Pentecost they received a greater enlightenment and were refashioned (μεταπλάττοντο) by the power of the Spirit (see *In Jo.* 12:16, Pusey II, 306-307). However, in a longer discourse on John 20:22, Cyril insists that the disciples received the Spirit at the moment Christ breathed on them and said "Receive the Holy Spirit." If they had not received the Spirit at that moment, Cyril reasons, Christ would not have been telling the truth. Therefore, the disciples received the Spirit and, consequently, sanctification at the post-Resurrection meeting with Jesus. The story of Pentecost is the *manifestation* of what had already taken place. Acts 2 must not be read as the beginning of the Spirit's work in the disciples' lives, but as the special outpouring of the graces of the Spirit, who was already present within them (see *In Jo.* 20:22-23, Pusey, III, 137).

<sup>98</sup> *In Jo.* 20:22-23 (Pusey, III, 135).

example of the way he puts all of these Incarnational events into sequence, leading up to Christ's redistribution of the Spirit:

The Savior, then, underwent death for all of us, and descending into hell (ᾗδης), stripped the devil of his riches, saying to those in bonds, "Come out!" and to those in darkness, "Show yourselves!" as the prophet says. And raising up his three-day temple, the first-fruits of those fallen asleep, he freed nature from the bonds of death, and once victorious, taught it to say, "O death, where is your victory? Hell, where is your sting?" And having made heaven accessible to it through the economy of the Incarnation, he was taken up, presenting himself to the Father as the first-fruits of the human race. And as a sort of pledge to us of the future hope, he bestowed the Spirit, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>99</sup>

Together, Christ's death, descent, resurrection, and ascent bring about the demise of death and the restoration of the Spirit. For Cyril, the Spirit is given back to humanity after death has been abolished and the devil is stripped of his power. Thus, there is logical coherence within the order of the economy which culminates with Christ dispensing the Spirit, making participation in the Spirit possible.

Though Cyril does not put Christ's saving acts leading up to the re-gifting of the Spirit into a neat system,<sup>100</sup> he does indicate the importance of each one. Of special significance is the death of Christ. References to Christ's saving death are legion in Cyril's writings, and the explanations he gives concerning its function in salvation vary. He uses a raft of metaphors and expressions to explain its mystery and effectiveness.<sup>101</sup> In the narrative of the reception of the Spirit, the death of Christ operates in two distinct ways. First, Christ's death is restorative; it plays a role in bringing back to us what was lost in the Fall, namely, incorruption and the grace

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<sup>99</sup> *FL* 1.6, ed. John O'Keefe, trans. Philip Amidon, S.J., FC 118 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 51. The critical edition is in SC 372, 184). Cf. *Commentary on Nahum* 2:1, trans. Robert Hill, FC 116 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 2008), 307.

<sup>100</sup> Blanchette's observation is apt here: "Cyril was not one to make his distinctions explicit." Blanchette, 463.

<sup>101</sup> For example, see *In Jo.* 10:12-13 (Pusey, II, 223-224) where Cyril considers Jesus's self-description as the "Good Shepherd" who "lays down his life for the sheep." Cyril observes that in the Fall, man fell victim to death and the devil. In Christ the Shepherd's struggle against this pair of "beasts," he underwent the cross for our sakes. Cyril explains that through his own death, Christ destroyed death, granted us deliverance from the condemnation of sin, released us from our bondage, abolished the tyranny of sin by means of faith, and rescued us from the depths of hell, bringing us into heaven where we enjoy fellowship with the Father and the good things of our heavenly abode.

of sanctification. Cyril asserts that Christ “put death to death by the death of his holy flesh” and, after bequeathing the Spirit, restored humanity to incorruption.<sup>102</sup> He is the true Lamb of consecration, typified in the Law, who sanctifies men and women by “sanctification according to the truth,” making them partakers of his nature through participation in the Spirit.<sup>103</sup> In fact, the grace forfeited at the Fall can only be regained through the reception of the Spirit. For Cyril, the death of Christ is critical to the recovery of the Spirit. Second, Christ’s death, coupled with the resurrection, is revelatory. On account of the supernatural character of Christ’s death and resurrection, the human race recognizes that the same one who created and sealed them with the Spirit at creation was the same one now returning with the same Spirit.<sup>104</sup>

As I will demonstrate in later chapters, Cyril posits the death of Christ as a saving action that brings us a diversity of saving benefits. Though some scholars fail to fully appreciate and account for this important aspect of Cyril’s thought,<sup>105</sup> Christ’s death is not an ancillary part of the economy according to Cyril doctrine of salvation. The cross, within the full extent of Christ’s saving work, is central to Cyril’s teaching. For example, in keeping with the second Adam motif, Cyril maintains that, as our new representative, Christ suffers “because of us and for us” (δι’ ἡμᾶς καὶ ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν) to impart life where death ruled. Further, his death belongs within the range of *kenosis* – a concept Cyril emphasizes time and again. Christ’s suffering and death was upon him at the first instant of the Incarnation, and the entirety of his life and ministry pointed to it: his whole life was a journey to the cross. When his hour had come, his death became the culmination of his humiliation<sup>106</sup> and the basis for our salvation.<sup>107</sup> His *Commentary*

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<sup>102</sup> *In Jo.* 20:22-23 (Pusey, III, 135).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>105</sup> This is my critique of scholars such as McGuckin and Keating, in spite of their important contributions.

<sup>106</sup> Blanchette, 468. See also Dumitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, trans. Robert Barringer (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1980), 194-195, who claims that in Christ’s death “the loving *kenosis* reaches its climax.” At the same time, Cyril turns the matter on its head, claiming that Christ’s voluntary self-emptying and

on *John* 1:29 is an example of the rich imagery Cyril uses to convey the saving benefits of Christ's death:

The true lamb, the blameless sacrifice, is led to the slaughter for all, that he might drive away (ἐλάσῃ) the sin of the world, that he might overthrow the destroyer of the universe, that dying for all he might abolish death, that he might free us from the curse, that he might at length put a stop to "You are dust and to dust you will return," that he might become the second Adam, not from earth but from heaven, and might become the beginning of everything good in the nature of man, deliverance (λύσις) from the alien corruption, the one who grants eternal life, foundation of our recreation (ἀναμορφώσεως) in God, beginning of godliness and righteousness, way to the kingdom of heaven.... For since we were in many sins, being indebted to death and corruption on account of this, the Father has given the Son as a ransom (ἀντίλυτρον) for us, one for all, since all are in him, and he is greater than all. One died for all so that all might live in him.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to the soteriological effects of Christ's death, Cyril sees its function as the gateway to the next point in the narrative of salvation, the descent to Hades. Cyril locates the descent within a chain of events that begins with the cross and ends with the resurrection and ascension.<sup>109</sup> The descent to Hades is a key component in Cyril's schema of salvation, though he rarely provides an extensive discussion of its meaning and implications.<sup>110</sup> From the litany of texts in Cyril's works, however, we can gather that the descent contributes to the so-called "Christus Victor" motif present in Cyril's soteriology because in taking this action Christ strips

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subjection to torment and death is a characteristic of glory. In other words, Christ's humiliation is his glorification. Cyril even claims that the cross itself is a glory (δόξα δὲ ὁ σταυρός). See *In Jo.* 12:27-28 (Pusey, II, 319, 324)

<sup>107</sup> Cf. *FL* 7 (FC 118, 135); *Com. Hos.* 13:14 (FC 115, 245); *Com. Is.* 42:1-4 and 49:8-12, trans. Robert Hill, vol. 3 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008), 44, 205; *In Jo.* 1:29 (Pusey, I, 169-171).

<sup>108</sup> *In Jo.* 1:29 (Pusey, I, 170).

<sup>109</sup> This is especially true of Cyril's *Festal Letters*.

<sup>110</sup> Cyril may have seen no need to expound upon something so ensconced in the tradition. This, at least, appears to be his sentiment in his *Festal Letters*, most of which close with a brief narrative of Christ's death, descent, resurrection, and ascent with little explanation. (Cf. Daniel Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades: According to Cyril of Alexandria," *SVTQ* 55, no. 3 (2011): 256). His reticence to provide careful theological analysis of the descent may be a reason why it has been the subject of little scholarly investigation. Aside from Keating, the only study I am aware of that gives specific attention to the descent of Christ in Cyril's theology is Georg von Langgärtner, "Der Descensus ad Inferos in den Osterfestbriefen des Cyrill von Alexandrien," in *Wegzeichen: Festgabe zum 60. H. Budermann* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1971): 95-100. I suspect that a major reason for the dearth of studies on the descent in Cyril's thought is that the majority of texts where it plays a significant factor are found in his *Festal Letters*, which, as O'Keefe laments, have been the subject of virtually no published study to date. (See O'Keefe's "Introduction" in *Festal Letters* 1-12, FC 118, 5). Keating notes that Cyril mentions Christ's despoiling of Hades in twenty-three out of the twenty-nine *Festal Letters*, in his essay, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades," 254, n.4.

the devil of his spoils and his power by rescuing the souls held captive in the devil's stronghold.<sup>111</sup> Christ descends to the depths and experiences the lowest point of his *katabasis* in order to bring up with him in victory the souls the devil had claimed for himself.<sup>112</sup> In doing so, Christ not only leaves the devil barren, but establishes his lordship over the entire created order, even Hades itself.<sup>113</sup> Further, the descent contributes, along with the death and resurrection, to Christ's victory over death, reversing the curse brought on by Adam.<sup>114</sup> For these reasons, Cyril does not view the descent to Hades as an embarrassing doctrine or abstraction, but an actual, necessary event that occurred as part of the economy of redemption.

The resurrection rounds out the divine-human overcoming of death and corruption in the Incarnation. Like the death of Christ, references to the resurrection are scattered everywhere throughout Cyril's writings, mostly in short explanations affirming Christ's vanquishing of death and corruption, and the benefits passed on to human nature through him and the Holy Spirit.<sup>115</sup> Cyril's use of the Adam-Christ typology in the resurrection is worthy of mention because of its overarching importance in his exegesis of Scripture. Thus, Cyril claims that in the one who was first formed (τῷ πρωτοπλάστῳ), all humanity fell under the curse of death; in the one first-born (τῷ πρωτοτόκῳ) of all creation, all will rise from the dead. Because the risen Christ is our new

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. *FL* 1.6 (FC 118, 51); *FL* 2.8 (FC 118, 66-67); *FL* 5.1 (FC 118, 84); *FL* 6.12 (FC 118, 122-124); *FL* 7 (FC 118, 135); *FL* 8.6 (FC 118, 153); *FL* 10.4 (FC 118, 193); *FL* 11.8 (FC 118, 214); *FL* 13. 4 (SC 434, 116).

<sup>112</sup> This does not mean that Cyril was a universalist. See Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades," who answers those suggesting that Cyril teaches universalism or quasi-universalism. Cf. Archbishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Christ the Conqueror of Hell* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009), 77-78.

<sup>113</sup> Cyril states, "For it would not have done for this loving-kindness to be shown only to some; the manifestation of the gift had to be extended to all of nature," in *FL* 2.8 (FC 118, 66). Cf. O'Keefe's comment at n. 64.

<sup>114</sup> Langgärtner, 99-100; Keating, "Christ's Despoiling of Hades," 256-261.

<sup>115</sup> Of the many passages that illustrate Cyril's teaching on the resurrection, see for instance *In Jo.* 10:17 (Pusey, II, 239), where he considers Christ's assertion that he lays down his life only to take it up again. Cyril notes that it is at this point that we recognize the enormity of the benefits Christ has secured on our behalf. He remarks that Christ's death alone would have accomplished nothing if he had remained dead and been subject to corruption like everyone else. But, Cyril continues, "since he (Christ) laid it (his life) down in order to take it up, in this way he preserved (διέσωσεν) the whole nature, having destroyed the power of death, and he will reveal us as a new creation."

representative, all our nature has been freed (ἀπολελῦσθαι) from corruption in Christ.<sup>116</sup> After his despoiling of Hades, Christ rises back to life in glory since, Cyril reasons, the one who is life itself cannot be overcome by death.<sup>117</sup> With the removal of Adam's curse, humanity is deemed fit to receive the Spirit once again. Christ then breathes upon his disciples saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit."<sup>118</sup>

The final phase of Cyril's narrative of the saving Incarnation is Christ's ascent to the Father. Cyril does not reduce the ascent to a mere symbol of the completion of Christ's earthly ministry. Rather, it carries important soteriological implications in association with the death, descent, and resurrection. After Christ's total victory over sin, death, and the devil through his own death, descent and resurrection, he ascends to the Father as the embodiment of redeemed humanity. In the Son the Father sees human nature, once driven from his sight because of our sin and corruption, now restored to incorruption and life.<sup>119</sup> Following the author of the letter to the Hebrews, Cyril stresses that it was as our representative that Christ appeared before the presence of God.<sup>120</sup> He did not need to appear on behalf of himself since from eternity the Father had always delighted in the Son. Rather, he appeared on our behalf. Thus, the second Adam motif continues to function even after Christ no longer has a hypostatic presence on the earth. Christ did not shed his humanity like a garment upon his ascent, but he goes to the Father as the image of humanity fully transformed. Through his presentation of his own renewed

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<sup>116</sup> *In Jo.* 6:51 (Pusey, I, 520). Cf. *In Jo.* 20:15 (Pusey, III, 115-116).

<sup>117</sup> Acts 2:24; *FL* 7 (FC 118, 136).

<sup>118</sup> *In Jo.* 20:22-23 (Pusey, III, 135). Cf. *Com. Na.* 2.1 (FC 116, 306).

<sup>119</sup> *FL* 6.12 (FC 118, 124). Much like the descent to Hades, the ascent to the Father receives frequent mention in Cyril's Festal Letters. Most appearances come near the end, when Cyril sums up the narrative of Christ's death, descent, resurrection, and ascent.

<sup>120</sup> Heb. 9:24. Like most of the church fathers, Cyril believed Paul was the author of Hebrews.

humanity to the Father on our behalf, Christ makes heaven accessible to the human race, and the Father once again accepts humanity into his presence.<sup>121</sup>

For Cyril, Christ's presentation to the Father upon his ascent is an essential point that underlies the *telos* of the Incarnation. He stresses that it was not only for the purpose of our escape from corruption that the Word became man, but that he did so to raise human nature to a heavenly level, making man "a companion (ὁμοδίαιτον) and participant in celebration (συγγορευτήν) with the angels."<sup>122</sup> Christ acts, then, as the forerunner for our own ascent to the presence of God the Father. Further, Cyril stresses that Christ now sits at the right hand of the Father – while still being one of us – so that "he might pass on the glory of adoption through himself to the whole race."<sup>123</sup> Christ accomplishes all this in his ascension. After reversing Adam's curse through his death and reviving us to incorruptibility through his resurrection, Christ remains forever in the presence of the Father, ever ministering as our High Priest, comforter, and propitiation (ἱλασμός) for our sins. Cyril includes this "session" of Christ as part of the ongoing significance of the ascension.<sup>124</sup> The ascent is not so much something that happened as much as it is happening.

In addition to gaining the Father's acceptance of humanity on our behalf and making a pathway to heaven, Cyril stresses that Christ's ascent ushers in the *permanent* descent of the Holy Spirit upon the earth. Christ told his disciples that it was expedient that he depart so that the Spirit might come and dwell in them.<sup>125</sup> Christ gave the Spirit to his disciples just after his resurrection (John 20:22); with his ascent to the Father the Holy Spirit became available to all. The Spirit, who was poured out at Pentecost, came to illumine the mind of man, fashion him into

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<sup>121</sup> *FL* 7 (FC 118, 136).

<sup>122</sup> *In Jo.* 16:7 (Pusey, II, 618).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 14:2-3 (Pusey, II, 404).

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 16:7 (Pusey, II, 619).

<sup>125</sup> *Cf. Jn.* 16:7-14.



the divine image, and become the means for communion with God and participation in the divine nature.<sup>126</sup> Christ's Incarnational mission of salvation is accomplished with his ascension. Of course, he continues to be present with his Church in the Eucharist. Through the Eucharist, as well as baptism, believers appropriate the divine life made available through Christ and the Spirit.<sup>127</sup>

The narrative of the restoration of the Spirit through the Incarnation – from the first moment of union between the divine and human in the person of Jesus to the ascension – provides Cyril with the basic biblical framework of salvation. His encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible enables him to construe an impressive array of soteriological expressions derived from both testaments, in order to expand this narrative. Though his vocabulary comes chiefly from Scripture, he is comfortable with extra-biblical terminology consistent with the tradition. McNerney observes that in the *Commentary on John* alone, nearly “the entire spectrum of expressions for salvation current in the vocabulary of Cyril’s time is plentifully represented.”<sup>128</sup>

With the rich biblical and traditional vocabulary at his disposal, Cyril will string together various soteriological themes into clusters in which all the themes are bound together under one unifying concept. In such cases (which are numerous) Cyril collects soteriological metaphors, taken from Scripture, as a rhetorical device in order to intensify his presentation of the divine, multi-dimensional salvific activity and of the healing benefits appropriated by believers.<sup>129</sup> His

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<sup>126</sup> *In Jo.* 16:7, 12-13 (Pusey, II, 619-621, 626-628). See also *In Jo.* 1:13 (Pusey, I, 137): “Indeed, it is the Spirit who dwells in us and through him we believe we have the Father and the Son at the same time, even as John, again, said in his epistle, ‘By this we know that we remain in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.’”

<sup>127</sup> On the necessity of both baptism and the Eucharist for appropriating divine life, see Keating, “The Twofold Manner of Divine Indwelling in Cyril of Alexandria”; Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 21-104.

<sup>128</sup> Joseph McNerney, “Soteriological Commonplaces in Cyril of Alexandria’s Commentary on the Gospel of John,” in *Disciplina Nostra: Essays in Memory of Robert F. Evans*, ed. Donald Winslow (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), 180. Though McNerney’s essay is only concerned with the Commentary on John, the pattern of clustering soteriological themes that is so evident in the commentary is equally regular in Cyril’s other biblical commentaries.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 179-181.

usual method in constructing these clusters is to point out a soteriological theme in a text upon which he is commenting and then to supplement it with a wave of supporting biblical passages, stringing all of them together into an impressive constellation.<sup>130</sup> In this way, he conveys the profundity and fullness of God's plan of salvation.<sup>131</sup>

A good example of a "soteriological cluster" is his comment on John 16:7, where Jesus announces to his disciples that his forthcoming departure will bring the advent of the Holy Spirit. Cyril finds here an opportunity to explore the saving effects of Christ's Incarnation:

And since the divine nature is altogether free from the inclination to sin, he carried us through his own flesh. For all of us are in him, insofar as he appeared as man, in order that he might put to death "the members of the things of the earth,"<sup>132</sup> that is, the desires of the flesh, and to abolish the law of sin which has ruled in our members, and for this again, that he might sanctify our nature, and become for us an example and guide in the way of godliness, and that the full knowledge according to the knowledge of the truth and a way of life beyond wandering might be complete. All these things Christ successfully accomplished (κατώρθωκεν) when he became man.<sup>133</sup>

In his digest of multiple saving accomplishments, the unifying concept that ties them together is Christ's assumption of our nature. In this example, everything in Cyril's litany is directly or indirectly derived from Scripture. Cyril is fond of this method of clustering biblical themes in order to express the saving work of Christ (or the Holy Spirit) and the healing effects salvation has upon human nature.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> This method of clustering is not unique to Cyril. For example, Origen employs the same method when he collects and explores the various titles for Christ in his *Commentary on John*, I.123-265, trans. Ronald Heine, FC 80 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 59-88. Origen provides a much more sustained, lengthy discussion than Cyril's characteristically brief, rapid-fire assertions, but both authors share the same basic organizing principle.

<sup>131</sup> McInerney, 181-183. McInerney affirms that one can often recognize a unifying focus that ties together the various soteriological elements Cyril chooses to use. However, he also admits that the unifying focus is missing in some cases. As a result, sometimes Cyril's groupings appear disjointed with little to no theological purpose.

<sup>132</sup> Col. 3:5.

<sup>133</sup> *In Jo.* 16:7 (Pusey, II, 618).

<sup>134</sup> David Winslow, *The Dynamics of Salvation: A Study of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), vi.

There are at least two reasons why Cyril is content to let the biblical language communicate the dynamics of salvation. First, he was a prolific biblical commentator. It is worth repeating that before the Nestorian controversy broke out, the great majority of his writings were commentaries on the Bible. Thus, the language of Scripture is natural to him. Second, Cyril is reticent to place a high degree of confidence in theological language to depict the mysteries of God's transcendent glory and divine activity. He conveys his reservations explicitly in his commentary on John 13:21:

Who is there among living men who would not feel plainly convinced that our human faculties are incapable of supplying either ideas or words which may at all express, in an irreproachable and infallible manner, the attributes peculiar to that nature which is both Divine and ineffable? Therefore we depend on the words of which our faculties are capable, as a feeble medium of expressing such things as pass our understanding. For how can we speak with clear fullness on a subject that really transcends the very limits of our comprehension?<sup>135</sup>

Of course, this does not mean that Cyril believes theological language serves no purpose. Far from it. But the medium of theological language serves as an incomplete expression of divine realities. It cannot describe divine truth in its fullness. Thus, in light of the "individual inadequacy to make more than a partial assertion of Christ's work," it is easy to understand why Cyril prefers using clusters of salvific themes and multiple expressions taken from Scripture as his chief method of articulating salvation.<sup>136</sup>

### Conclusion

To conclude this chapter I will summarize some major points. First, while a number of scholars have investigated Cyril's doctrine of salvation, more work needs to be done. Of Cyril's

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<sup>135</sup> *In Jo.* 13:21. Here I am using the capable translation of T. Randell, vol. 2, *Library of the Fathers of the Church* 48 (Oxford: James Parker, 1885), 193. McInerney, 183, also cites *In Jo.* 14:20 and 14:21 as other examples of Cyril's somewhat apophatic approach to theological language. See also Steven McKinion, *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 41-42.

<sup>136</sup> McInerney, 182-183.

use and interest in circumcision of the Spirit as a way to understand his soteriology, very little has been developed. Second, Cyril's idea of salvation is comprehensive and multi-faceted. Rather than providing careful systematic analysis, he employs a large vocabulary and strings together multiple expressions to convey his soteriological principles. His understanding of God's saving activity and human appropriation is anything but a haphazard *mélange* of metaphors; rather, the narrative of the gift of divine life is an internal, linear movement running throughout his entire soteriological program that gives it cohesion, structure, and continuity. For Cyril, everything that Christ is and does is salvific. Cyril delineates the saving effects of Christ's assumption of human nature and the works of his earthly ministry including his death, descent, resurrection, and ascension. While none of these saving events are isolated from the others, each fulfills a particular need that leads to the renewing and transforming of the human situation. Third, Cyril recognizes that Christ has given the gift of the Spirit back to humanity. This is pivotal to his understanding of salvation. God's original gift of the Spirit to humankind at creation was lost on account of Adam's fall. When Christ came to restore human beings, he did so insofar as he received the Spirit in his own hypostasis at his baptism, and gave the Spirit to the human race after his victorious resurrection. Pneumatology is pivotal to Cyril's doctrine of salvation.

In light of these findings, I will demonstrate in what follows that Cyril's use of "circumcision of the Spirit" (or the heart) in his early biblical commentaries and festal letters sheds light on important principles of his soteriology. It has a significant place in the biblical narrative and serves to unify many different saving activities that Cyril often highlights throughout his writings. Further, his "spiritual" interpretation of circumcision exemplifies his

concern with Jewish exegesis of Scripture.<sup>137</sup> Like the Adam-Christ typology that is so pervasive in his account of salvation, circumcision exemplifies how the advent of Christ transforms what was once a type into a new reality. It used to be a physical ritual practiced under the guise of the Law. Now, following a number of biblical authors, Cyril recognizes circumcision as a spiritual operation that represents the salvation wrought by Christ in its many dimensions. Cyril uses this biblical concept to underscore the fullness of the divine economy of salvation. In the next chapter I will provide a brief history of early Christian interpretations of circumcision. My summary will include some of Cyril's theological predecessors and contemporaries whose own soteriological interpretations of circumcision may have influenced his thinking.

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<sup>137</sup> See Introduction, 10, where I touch on this while drawing attention to Wilken's thesis.

## CHAPTER TWO

## EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF CIRCUMCISION

For Christian theology circumcision plays an important role in salvation history. In spite of its long standing significance, scholarly inquiries into its precise meaning and purpose have resulted in little consensus. Shaye Cohen's judgment is apt: "Circumcision has been understood to mean almost anything – and its opposite."<sup>1</sup> An abundance of biblical studies explore the theological, socio-political, and cultural dimensions of circumcision in the Ancient Near East and beyond. However, the present study is an historical investigation rather than biblical foray into the original meaning (or diverse meanings) of circumcision. While an exhaustive monograph on circumcision in early Christian literature remains to be written,<sup>2</sup> this chapter is a brief survey that outlines the understanding and development of the Jewish rite in the patristic period up to the end of the fourth century. This survey will present some context for the remaining chapters as Cyril's interpretations will be put into relief against the backdrop of his theological predecessors.

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<sup>1</sup> Shaye Cohen, *Why Aren't Jewish Women Circumcised?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 7. Cohen quotes James Boon's assessment in his essay "Circumscribing Circumcision/Uncircumcision: An Essay amidst the History of Difficult Description," in *Implicit Understandings: Observing...the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Stuart Schwartz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 562: "An unwieldy array of functions, features, causes, and effects has been attributed to circumcision and associated rites: age-grade bonding and generation dividing; social exchange and rivalry; spilling blood, inflicting ordeals, remaindering prepuces, occasioning stoicism...; making boys into men, ordinary men into prophets, a people into chosen or condemned, men into women ("symbolic wounds"), phalluses into vaginas, human penises into marsupial-like ones (Australia) or rhinoceros-like ones (Borneo); to enhance or diminish virility, fertility, sacrality, holiness, or other kind of potency, either to augment or to limit population growth, and thereby curing or causing disease." This idea is also discussed by Nina Livesey, *Circumcision as a Malleable Symbol* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010). For other general discussions on the meaning and origin of circumcision see John Goldingay, "The Significance of Circumcision," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 88 (2000): 3-18; Jack Sasson, "Circumcision in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85, no 4 (1966): 473-476; Rodolph Yanne, "Feast of Circumcision of our Lord: A Biblical Patristic Study," *Coptic Church Review* 3, no. 4 (Winter: 1982): 135-141.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, 244, n. 38; Hervé Savon, "Le Prêtre Eutrope et la 'vraie circoncision,'" *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 199, no. 4 (1982): 273-302, also provides a helpful outline of the evolution of the concept of circumcision in Christian thought.

As a Christian living in the late fourth to mid fifth centuries, Cyril was a beneficiary of several hundred years of Christian (and Jewish) exegesis on biblical questions such as the proper way to understand circumcision in light of Christ's fulfillment of the Law. Informed by his biblical and historical studies, he identifies circumcision as an example of the fulfillment of all things in Christ, particularly of what relates to soteriology. From this perspective, Cyril uses the idea of circumcision as a way to describe the many dimensions of salvation. Moreover, as the subsequent chapters will suggest, Cyril's view of circumcision is more expansive and includes more aspects of salvation than what we find in his predecessors. Because space does not permit an all-inclusive survey, I will only take into account the texts of authors who most likely had an influence (directly or indirectly) on Cyril's thought. Instead of presenting these writers chronologically, I will distinguish between two groups. The first group I will consider consists of thinkers from Alexandria, spanning the first to the fourth century. I will examine this group first because, insofar as they make up Cyril's more proximate theological heritage, they likely have more immediate influence on his thought. The second group I will explore consists of non-Alexandrian writers ranging from the second to the fifth century whose writings may have played some role in shaping Cyril's interpretation of circumcision. However, before presenting these two groups, I will provide a brief outline of circumcision as it unfolds in the Old and New Testaments.

### Circumcision in the Scriptures

Circumcision, perhaps the most significant of Jewish rites, makes its first appearance in the Hebrew Scriptures in Genesis 17. Here, Yahweh establishes his covenant with Abram, promising to make him the father of many nations, changing his name to Abraham, and granting

his descendants the land of Canaan.<sup>3</sup> According to the Bible, the commandment to circumcise eight-day-old males that was first given to Abraham was passed on to succeeding generations and so became a tradition embedded in Israelite religion and culture.<sup>4</sup> Circumcision was to serve as the tangible expression of God's covenant and the identifying mark of God's chosen people. It was a sign reminding the people that they belonged to God, and that he was working on their behalf.<sup>5</sup> However, other texts within the Old Testament suggest that the concept of circumcision was more fluid. In some cases, the practice indicates an inward, spiritual response rather than a literal cutting away of foreskin. This is usually described as circumcision of the heart.<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 30:6 is a case in point. Foretelling a future time when covenant relationship would be lived out between God and his people, the Lord announces the creation of a spiritual condition based on circumcision of a non-physical nature: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."<sup>7</sup> The heart was to replace the male genitalia as the locus of the mark identifying God's people.

In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus never preaches on circumcision, nor does he discuss the value (or non-value) of his own circumcision. However, other New Testament texts

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<sup>3</sup> Most modern biblical scholars view this passage as a composite that received its extant form after years of transmission and edition. Cf. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 22. However, Christians in antiquity, along with their Jewish counterparts, believed the passage to be the product of one author, Moses, and read it as a seamless whole. Cohen, 9, provides a brief but helpful discussion on the scholarly debates surrounding Genesis 17. While scholarship such as Cohen's is speaking of the Hebrew text, my principal concern will be, as Cyril's was, the LXX. Cyril did not know Hebrew, so the LXX was, as it was for most Greek-speaking Christians of the time, his Old Testament text.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. 21:3; Lev. 12:3; Josh. 5:2-7; Jn. 7:22; Acts 7:8; and Rom. 4:11 convey the long-established tradition of circumcision in biblical history.

<sup>5</sup> "Circumcision" in *ABD*, vol. 1, ed. David Freeman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1027.

<sup>6</sup> The Old Testament also acknowledges a circumcision of the ears (Jer. 6:10) and the lips (Ex. 6:12), which, of course, were not commandments to be taken literally and most likely served to underscore the connection of the physical rite with circumcision of the heart.

<sup>7</sup> Other Old Testament passages with a similar re-interpretation of circumcision include Lev. 26:40-41; Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4, 9:25-26; Ezek. 44:9.



refer to the physical mark of circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant while continuing to interpret it along the hermeneutical trajectory initiated in Old Testament passages such as Deuteronomy 30:6 and Jeremiah 4:4. Paul, for example, makes the claim that Abraham's circumcision was a seal (σφραγῖδα) of the righteousness that comes by faith, the faith he possessed before he was circumcised.<sup>8</sup> Paul argues that Abraham's faith, not the physical act of circumcision, was responsible for his being declared righteous before God. A similar conclusion was reached by the council at Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15. Here the apostles refuse to impose circumcision (and the bulk of the Mosaic regulations) on new Gentile believers, insisting that salvation comes through the grace of Jesus Christ, not circumcision.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, such New Testament texts are in agreement. Literal circumcision has ceased to carry spiritual significance since Christ has graciously established a new covenant of salvation by his own death and resurrection. Instead, circumcision is interpreted as an inward work that deals with the sinful "flesh" of the heart rather than the flesh of the body.<sup>10</sup> Further, this inward circumcision is not carried out by man (ἀχειροποιήτος), but by the Spirit (or Christ).<sup>11</sup> With the physical act of circumcision overturned, it is not surprising that early Christian leaders like Paul were often engaged in polemics against those who wished to retain the Mosaic Law and its stipulations.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the New Testament texts treating circumcision take a negative posture toward physical circumcision, regarding the physical act as an excessive practice within

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<sup>8</sup> Rom. 4:11.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Acts 15:5-11, particularly verse 11: ἀλλὰ διὰ τῆς χάριτος τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ πιστεύομεν σωθῆναι καθ' ὃν τρόπον κάκεῖνοι.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Radical Jew* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 26-27, who compares Philo's allegorization of circumcision with Paul's reinterpretation. For Philo the excision of the foreskin symbolizes and effects the cutting off of the passions, for Paul, the removal of the desires of the flesh results from the death of Christ. See also *ABD*, 1029-1031, on the various early Christian views on circumcision.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rom. 2:28-29; Col. 2:11.

<sup>12</sup> Though a detailed description of the Pauline interpretation of circumcision goes beyond the aims of this study, it is worth noting Andrew Jacobs' assertion that Paul's resistance to physical circumcision is not simply a soteriological argument, but also a possible means of resisting Roman power. See Andrew Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 23-24.

an outdated covenant and thus ineffective for attaining righteousness.<sup>13</sup> Jacobs' observation is especially pertinent for the New Testament doctrine of circumcision: "Whether Christ's circumcision is baptism or crucifixion or both, it is no longer a sign of the covenant of Abraham or the legible symbols of Roman imperial subjection. It is Christianized, and totally open to multiple new meanings."<sup>14</sup>

Within the confines of the Old and New Testaments, two basic interpretations of circumcision seem to be in play. The first involves cutting away the foreskin of an eight-day-old male as an identifying mark and sign of God's covenant. The second refers to an inward, spiritual work that involves the transformation of the heart. The precise nature of this inward work, however, is not clear. While both viewpoints are represented in the Old Testament, the New Testament interpretation creates a tension between them, rejecting (especially in Pauline theology) the first while embracing the second.<sup>15</sup>

### Circumcision in Christian Antiquity

Circumcision continued to play an important religious and cultural role for Jews in the early centuries of the common era.<sup>16</sup> Beyond its theological dimensions, it had a variety of meanings that carried physical, practical, and even political implications.<sup>17</sup> For example, it continued to serve as a distinguishing mark within the diverse population of the Roman

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<sup>13</sup> Other passages in the New Testament that either downplay the significance of the physical circumcision according to the law or interpret circumcision as an inward, subjective work of God in the heart include Rom. 3:30; I Cor. 7:19; and Gal. 5:2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobs, 28, makes this observation after an exegetical exploration of Col. 2:9-13.

<sup>15</sup> The "circumcision of the heart" motif continued in Jewish usage, for example, at Qumran (1QpHab. xi. 13; cf. 1QS v. 4f) "for cutting off evil inclinations and disobedience." See Everett Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4, no. 4 (1988): 486.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* 20.2-4 and *Contra Apion* 2.13 in ed. Benedictus Niese, *Flavii Iosephi Opera*, vols. IV-V (Berlin: August Raabe, 1955). See also my discussion on Philo below.

<sup>17</sup> Livesey, *Circumcision*, 155-156.

Empire.<sup>18</sup> For rabbis of the midrash, circumcision was a sign of sanctification of the body insofar as it was the inscription of God's name on the flesh.<sup>19</sup> But scholars have noticed a shift in the attitudes of rabbinic sages toward circumcision between the last few centuries B.C. and the second century A.D. We observe a growing sensitivity to circumcision and an increasing concern to properly identify the particularities of the entire process.<sup>20</sup> One possible reason for this heightened interest is a tacit resistance to the increasing influence of Christianity which seized upon the Pauline interpretation of circumcision. Another plausible reason for this development centers on intra-Jewish conflict between traditionalists and "hellenizers."<sup>21</sup> For the most part, the rabbis attempted to carry on traditional "Jewish" interpretations of circumcision while those influenced by Hellenism suggested alternative meanings without necessarily sacrificing all facets of Jewish circumcision traditions.<sup>22</sup>

### *Philo of Alexandria*

The tensions, though not bifurcations, between many Hellenists and non-Hellenistic Jews, and between the two biblical viewpoints of circumcision are clearly exemplified in Philo of Alexandria.<sup>23</sup> As a Jew living just prior to the burgeoning of Christianity, Philo authored on

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<sup>18</sup> Jacobs, 15-19.

<sup>19</sup> Boyarin, 37, gives the example of Tanhuma Tsav 14: "All Israelites who are circumcised will come into Paradise, for the Holy Blessed One placed His name on Israel, in order that they might come into Paradise, and what is the name on the seal which He placed on them? It is ShaDaY. The Shin [the first letter of the root], he placed in the nose, the Dalet, He placed in the hand, and the Yod in the circumcision." On the basis of this passage, Boyarin maintains, "The midrash speaks of circumcision as a transformation of the body into a holy object."

<sup>20</sup> Cf. David Instone-Brewer, *Traditions of the Rabbis from the Era of the New Testament: Feasts and Sabbaths*, vol. 2a (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004) on rabbinic debates over circumcision and other important issues related to Judaism.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, 20-21.

<sup>22</sup> For helpful studies that deal with circumcision in Judaism, in addition to the works already cited, see Abraham Finkel, *In My Flesh I See God* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995), 205-216; Lawrence Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Elizabeth Mark, ed., *The Covenant of Circumcision* (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Of course, Philo is not the lone exemplar. For instance, *Jubilees*, a pseudepigraphical work dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C., follows the Old Testament template of affirming both interpretations of circumcision. The first chapter explores the concept of circumcision of the heart, or spiritual circumcision. At the outset, God commissions

exegesis about circumcision that was to have lasting implications for Christian thinkers. Philo was deeply influenced by the Alexandrian Platonism of his day<sup>24</sup> and employed an allegorical hermeneutic to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures.<sup>25</sup> He held a high view of biblical inspiration that implied the presence of a deeper, though intended, spiritual sense of the text that the interpreter must uncover through allegory.<sup>26</sup> Allegorical interpretation was not Philo's innovation, nor was it the most popular Jewish hermeneutic, but he used it to elucidate "hidden" or "inner" meanings of Scriptural passages, especially from texts with literal meanings that appeared nonsensical, embarrassing, or ran in unhelpful directions.<sup>27</sup> The exegetical method Philo employs throughout

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Moses to write what God commands him. Early on in the exchange between God and Moses, Moses prays that God would "create a pure heart and a holy spirit" for the people (1:21). God gives a reassuring response: "I shall cut off the foreskin of their heart and the foreskin of the heart of their descendants. And I shall create for them a holy spirit, and I shall purify them so that they will not turn away from following me from that day and forever" (1:23). By contrast, the fifteenth chapter stresses the importance of physical circumcision and recasts the narrative found in Genesis 17 of Yahweh making his covenant with Abraham. Here the author(s) record(s) God establishing laws concerning circumcision with a particular emphasis on the eighth-day requirement. In addition, God forewarns Abraham that his descendants will eventually neglect the command to circumcise and suffer divine judgment (see 15:33-34). For the translated text see *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. II. Edited by James Charlesworth. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1985): 52-142.

<sup>24</sup> John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 139-183, provides an excellent discussion of Philo's influences and philosophy. Dillon suggests that Philo adapted "Alexandrian Platonism" – a brand of Platonism deeply influenced by Stoicism and Pythagoreanism – to his own exegetical purposes.

<sup>25</sup> A thorough discussion of allegorical interpretation and many of its corollaries (for instance, typological and literal interpretation) is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, the importance of allegorical interpretation in a large number of patristic authors cannot be overstated. Though Philo himself did not invent this method of interpretation, his influence is profound in figures such as Clement and Origen. Not even Cyril, who lived four centuries later, could elude his influence. According to the standard meta-narratives in Christian historical scholarship, the so-called "Alexandrian" method of exegesis can be traced back to Philo. While I am not convinced that grouping certain patristic exegetes into "schools" of exegesis (for instance, of Antioch or Alexandria) is wise or helpful, there can be no doubt that Philo helped map out a trajectory that many early Christian interpreters would follow. For important studies that treat early Christian exegesis and the role of allegory, see the following: Karlfried Froehlich, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Robert Grant, *Heresy and Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Peter Martens, "Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16, no. 3 (Fall: 2009), 283-317; Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis, vol. I: The Greek Fathers*. (Petersham: St. Bede's Publications, 1994); John O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1994); Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Froehlich, 6.

<sup>27</sup> Allegory was a frequent practice in literary criticism in antiquity. It is well known that Neoplatonic philosophers often applied allegorical techniques when interpreting Homer. Some of Homer's depictions of the gods ran counter to Neoplatonic presuppositions. Allegory in these cases preserved the cultural authority of the texts

his writings profoundly shaped many early Christian exegetes. Thus, it is not surprising to find commonalities between Philo's interpretation of circumcision and interpretations found in later Christian texts.

Philo affirms the tradition of physical circumcision<sup>28</sup> but teases out more subtle meanings embedded in biblical texts that treat it.<sup>29</sup> It is interesting that Philo does not treat circumcision as a primary symbol of religious or ethnic identity, although he is aware of that interpretation.<sup>30</sup> In particular, his *De Specialibus Legibus* (*Spec. Leg.*) 1.1-11, 304-306 and *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesin* (*Quaest. in Gn.*) III convey the originality of his understanding of circumcision.<sup>31</sup> As one scholar notes, these discussions are "more thoughtful...than can hitherto be found."<sup>32</sup>

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while pointing away from embarrassing literal applications and toward more acceptable philosophical morals. O'Keefe and Reno note that allegory was often used to make sense of nonsense and add to the literal sense of a text. In this second instance, both a literal and an allegorical meaning are present. The allegorical interpretation flows outward from the literal meaning of the text. See O'Keefe and Reno, 93-103.

<sup>28</sup> Boyarin characterizes Philo's attitude toward literal circumcision as "disquietude." See Boyarin, 25-27.

<sup>29</sup> Philo, unlike later Christian interpreters, insists on maintaining the law of physical circumcision even though the practice points to great spiritual implications. In the Scriptural passages treating circumcision, he asserts the presence of both realities, the literal and spiritual. He makes this clear in his *De Migratione Abrahami* 92, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, LCL, vol. 4 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 185, when he asserts, "It is true that receiving circumcision does indeed portray the excision of pleasure and all passions, and the putting away of the impious conceit, under which the mind supposed that it was capable of begetting by its own power: but let us not on this account repeal the law laid down for circumcision. Why, we shall be ignoring the sanctity of the Temple and a thousand other things if we are going to pay heed to nothing except what is shewn us by the inner meaning (ὑπονοιῶν) of things." Barclay sums up Philo's general attitude: "Allegory explains circumcision, but does not explain it away." See John M. G. Barclay, "Paul and Philo on Circumcision: Romans 2.25-29 in Social and Cultural Context," *New Testament Studies* 44, no. 4 (1998): 540; and Savon, "Vraie circoncision," 273-302.

<sup>30</sup> John Collins, "A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century," in *To See Ourselves as Others See Us*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest Frerichs (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 172-173.

<sup>31</sup> For both works I am consulting the Loeb translations. See *Spec. Leg.*, trans. F.H. Colson, LCL 7 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); *Quaest. in Gn.*, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL Supp. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

<sup>32</sup> Maren R. Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity: Philo, Origen and the Rabbis on Gen. 17:1-14," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 10 (2003): 92. For another scholarly treatment of Philo's view of circumcision, see Livesey, 41-74.

In *Spec. Leg.* and *Quaest. in Gn.*, Philo consistently emphasizes four spiritual themes.<sup>33</sup>

In each case, allegory is the tool by which he uncovers the hidden meanings of circumcision.

First, he asserts that circumcision is a symbol (σύμβολον) of the cutting off of the pleasures (ἡδονῶν ἐκτομῆς) that torment the mind. His explicit referent is the sexual impulse, particularly of males, which is the most powerful of all the pleasures. As the dominant pleasure, it stands as the representative of all other inward motions that lead to vice and impurity. Thus, circumcision functions spiritually as an inner “check” on sexual desire. When the sexual impulse has been brought under control, the other pleasures lose their pungency as well.<sup>34</sup>

Second, circumcision, understood in a spiritual sense, implies the banishment of arrogance from the soul. Because men are easily given to pride due to their role in procreation, circumcising the penis – the organ responsible for physical generation – reminds them that God is the true artificer of life.<sup>35</sup> Third, Philo recalls an old tradition that associates the male genitalia with the heart – the two generative organs, one of the body and the other of the soul. The two organs are related because the penis, responsible for physical generation, resembles thought, “the most generative (force) of the heart.”<sup>36</sup> The idea here is that the principle of generation of physical things is assimilated to the generation of invisible things.<sup>37</sup> Fourth, the act of cutting involved in circumcision symbolizes the eradication of the superfluities (αἱ ἄμετροι) of the mind that cause

hard-heartedness, ignorance, and impurity. Philo derives this meaning from Deuteronomy

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<sup>33</sup> Only *Spec. Leg.* is preserved in the original Greek. In these two works, Philo notes that, physically speaking, circumcision protects from infection, promotes cleanliness, and aids in fertility. He notes these are traditional answers given by those who study the law of Moses. See *Spec. Leg.* 1.8, 105-107. When we compare his various discussions on circumcision, Philo does not put the “symbolic” meanings in consistent order. Thus, my delineation does not correspond to any particular delineation in Philo’s works.

<sup>34</sup> *Spec. Leg.* 1.9, 105; *Quaest. in Gn.* III.48, 242-247, and III. 61, 263-264. Savon, “Vraie circoncision,” 278, remarks, *La mutilation que lui est imposée symbolise donc le renoncement à tout excès dans la jouissance amoureuse, comme dans les autres plaisirs.*

<sup>35</sup> *Spec. Leg.* 1.10, 105-106; *Quaest. in Gn.* III.46-47, 240-242.

<sup>36</sup> *Quaest. in Gn.* III.48, 245. Cf. *Spec. Leg.* 1.3, 101-103. In these texts Philo appears to regard the heart as the seat of the mind. See the appendix to *Spec. Leg.*, 615.

<sup>37</sup> Cristina Termini, “Philo’s Thought with the Context of Middle Judaism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, ed. Adam Kamesar (Cambridge: University Press, 2009), 116. (Hereafter, *CCP*).

10:16-17, where the Israelites are commanded to circumcise their hard hearts (περιτέμνεσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν). To circumcise the heart means to cut off the “superfluous growths” of the mind “that it may become pure and naked of every evil and passion, and be a priest of God”<sup>38</sup> and to change from being stubborn (δύσκολος) to submissive (εὐκόλος), “ready to obey the laws of nature.”<sup>39</sup> Circumcision of the heart makes the mind, which according to Philo’s anthropology is the ruling part of man, free and unshackled.<sup>40</sup>

The spiritual meanings Philo derives from circumcision – overcoming the passions, casting out arrogance in favor of humility, linking the physical and spiritual generative organs, and purifying the mind from excesses leading to stubbornness and ignorance – had a dramatic effect on the interpretations of early Christian exegetes, particularly those in Alexandria.<sup>41</sup> Cyril himself, though never mentioning Philo by name,<sup>42</sup> displays close similarities with Philo in his interpretation of circumcision and his exegesis of Scripture in general. For example, like Philo, Cyril often interprets circumcision in an allegorical sense. He also associates circumcision with the cutting off of the passions. The fact that the knife is applied to the penis signifies that the heart must be purified from base lusts and desires.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Quaest. in Gn.* III.46, 241.

<sup>39</sup> *Spec. Leg.* 1.306, 276-277.

<sup>40</sup> *Quaest. in Gn.* III.46, 241. For Philo, circumcision is understood as “a law-obedient disposition of mind,” according to Fokker Siebert, “Philo and the New Testament,” in *CCP*, 184.

<sup>41</sup> Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity,” 91, asserts that in addition to Philo’s originality and richness on circumcision, his interpretation was “influential for the subsequent discourse, particularly in Christian circles.” For a concise essay on Philo’s influence in early Christian thought in general, see David Runia, “Philo and the Early Christian Fathers,” in *CCP*, 210-230. For a more detailed account, see his *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Assen: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>42</sup> Runia asserts that although Cyril is squarely in the Alexandrian tradition, it is likely that his strong anti-Jewish stance, common by the fifth century, kept him back. However, Runia claims that many Christian authors after the fourth century are influenced by Philo’s exegesis and theology without knowing him directly because he had been absorbed into the tradition and earlier authors from which they drew. Philo had “gained a modest foothold in the Christian tradition” by the fourth century. See Runia, “Philo and the Early Christian Fathers,” 221, 225.

<sup>43</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24, ed. P.E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostri Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872), 631. Of course, Cyril differs from Philo in that the “purifying” work of the heart is accomplished through the circumcising work of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

*Circumcision in the Christian Alexandrian Tradition*

As bishop of Alexandria from the early to mid-fifth century, Cyril inherited an established and distinguished exegetical and theological tradition.<sup>44</sup> To understand his debt to that tradition, it is helpful to examine texts where his Alexandrian predecessors deal with circumcision. Cyril had access to or was at least aware of much of the work of his theological forerunners. While it is not always easy to determine what texts Cyril had in front of him when composing his own commentaries or treatises, it is clear that a number of early Alexandrians played a formative role in his thought.

One of the earliest Alexandrian (and non-canonical) texts to explore circumcision within a Christian hermeneutic is the *Epistle of Barnabas*.<sup>45</sup> While the author of this work is unknown, he follows the allegorical hermeneutical tradition congenial to Philo. One of the author's chief concerns is to prove that Jewish religious life is obsolete because Christ has ushered in the new covenant as was foretold by the prophets. Concerning circumcision, the author has two interesting perspectives; the first would mostly fall by the wayside in the later tradition of Christian interpretation, while the second perspective would become commonplace. According to the first perspective, the author takes the extreme position that circumcision was never meant

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<sup>44</sup> When speaking of an "Alexandrian" exegetical and theological tradition, I am referring to the local particularities and habits that undergird many thinkers from the area. All regions carry idiosyncrasies that help characterize them, and one cannot deny the characteristics peculiar to Alexandria. However, I reject the modern thesis that an exegetical "school" existed in Alexandria that operated in opposition to another "school" in Antioch. These modern categories may appear convenient, but in the end are unhelpful since they force exegetical labels upon individual exegetes rather than considering each one on their own terms.

<sup>45</sup> Though I take it that the *Epistle of Barnabas* is of Alexandrian provenance, the matter is far from settled among scholars. On this and other questions regarding this work, see the brief but helpful introduction in Michael Holmes, "The Epistle of Barnabas," in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 370-376 (hereafter, Holmes). For more detailed studies see L. W. Barnard, "The 'Epistle of Barnabas' and Its Contemporary Setting," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 2.27.1 (1993): 159-207; J. N. B. Carleton Paget, "The Epistle of Barnabas," *Expository Times* 117 (2006): 441-446; *The Epistle of Barnabas: Outlook and Background* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1994); Reidar Hvalvik, *The Struggle for Scripture and Covenant: The Purpose of the Epistle of Barnabas and Jewish-Christian Competition in the Second Century* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1996). The Greek text with the English translation on opposing pages comes from *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael Holmes, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 380-441. Hereafter, I will refer to the *Epistle of Barnabas* as *Barn*.



to be a matter of the flesh (περιτομήν γὰρ εἴρηκεν οὐ σαρκὸς γεννηθῆναι).<sup>46</sup> In other words, physical circumcision never had any validity in the eyes of God. Instead, an “evil angel” tricked the Jews to practice what amounts to self-mutilation.<sup>47</sup> Thus, circumcision as an external operation has no positive role in salvation history.<sup>48</sup> Any significance is due to the spiritual sense which involves the heart, not the penis.

According to the second perspective, *Barnabas* links circumcision to the death of Christ. In a creative, arithmological interpretation of Genesis 14:14, he considers the number of men in Abraham’s household who underwent circumcision, 318, and breaks this number down into three smaller units of ten, eight, and three hundred.<sup>49</sup> The author proposes that these numbers correspond to Greek letters. The ten corresponds to I (*iota*) and the eight to H (*eta*) – the first two letters and common abbreviation of Jesus’ name in Greek. The T (*tau*) represents three hundred. The T shape, the author notes, is the cross, the very instrument that was to bring grace.<sup>50</sup> For the author of *Barnabas*, circumcision of the heart and the death of Christ go hand in hand. Jacobs observes that in this symbolic interpretation, circumcision “is not just reinterpreted *through* Jesus, it is actually equated with Jesus, and the crucifixion, and the entire scheme of

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<sup>46</sup> *Barn.* 9:4. The verse reads: “But even the circumcision, upon which they trusted, has been nullified. For he has said that circumcision did not transpire because of the flesh; but they cast aside (the law), because an evil angel tricked (ἐσόφριζεν) them.”

<sup>47</sup> See J. N. B. Carleton Paget, “Barnabas 9:4: A Peculiar Verse on Circumcision,” *Vigilae Christianae* 45 (1991): 246, who maintains that this interpretation of circumcision is not original with this epistle, but comes from earlier sources both Christian and Jewish.

<sup>48</sup> On this and similar interpretations, Cohen claims, “These explanations, which stripped circumcision of its positive place in Christian sacred history, were too radical to be adopted by emergent Christian orthodoxy, and these suggestions went nowhere.” Cohen, *Jewish Women*, 83.

<sup>49</sup> Numerological exegesis, which seems to have been influenced by Pythagoreanism (or Neo-Pythagoreanism), is not uncommon among Alexandrian interpreters of Scripture. One finds passages in Philo, Clement, Didymus, and Cyril. I deal specifically with this issue in chapter five, p. 179, n. 56.

<sup>50</sup> *Barn.* 9:8. Cf. Clement of Alexandria’s *Stromateis* 6.11, where he takes a similar arithmological, Pythagorean approach to the number of Abraham’s servants (hereafter, *Strom.*). Like *Barnabas*, Clement derives from this number the sign of the cross (from the Greek letter T, *tau*) and the name of Jesus (from the Greek letter H, *eta*), claiming that Abraham’s servants enjoyed the grace of salvation (ANF 2:499).

Christian messianic redemption.”<sup>51</sup> A further soteriological effect of circumcision involves the ears. The author quotes a litany of Old Testament passages linking circumcision to the ears as a way to express the necessity of faith.<sup>52</sup> While he does not make a clear connection between the death of Christ and faith through hearing, these ideas are basic to his understanding. Applying allegory to Scripture, the author suggests that circumcision is of the heart, an inward work of God made possible through the cross of Christ and faith.<sup>53</sup> The author of this epistle is able to repudiate the Jewish practice of circumcision while at the same time re-appropriating it as a spiritual identifying mark made real by Jesus.<sup>54</sup>

The allegorical interpretation of circumcision utilized by Philo and perpetuated in *Barnabas* finds its culmination in Origen, whose interpretations gained authority far outside his immediate sphere of influence.<sup>55</sup> Similar to Philo and *Barnabas*, Origen’s liberal use of allegory as a hermeneutical tool for mining the Old Testament texts compels him to provide several creative interpretations of circumcision. He acknowledges that others before him have explored the hidden meanings of the rite,<sup>56</sup> but he places greater emphasis on the idea and develops it more than any Christian (or Jewish) writer before him. Clement, Origen’s older Alexandrian contemporary, describes circumcision in terms similar to that of Philo but only on a few

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<sup>51</sup> Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 36 (emphasis his).

<sup>52</sup> Some passages include Ps. 18:44(LXX); Is. 33:13; 50:10; Jer. 7:2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Hunt observes that many early Christian writers understood the inner effects of circumcision. In early Christian tradition, “circumcision is primarily a figure for a person’s response to the Gospel.” See J. P. T. Hunt, “Colossians 2:11-12, The Circumcision / Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no. 2 (1990): 235.

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> Niehoff, “Circumcision as a Marker of Identity,” 104.

<sup>56</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols, trans. Thomas Scheck, FC 103-104 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001-2002), 2.13.19 (FC 103,154). Hereafter *Com. Rom.* Thomas Scheck, translator of this commentary, mentions Philo and Clement of Alexandria as the possible figures Origen is referring to when he acknowledges that others have taken up the theme of circumcision with the help of allegory. This is likely since both authors treat the subject (although Clement less so) and were available to Origen.

occasions.<sup>57</sup> Origen's references to circumcision (or Scriptural passages that allude to it) are scattered throughout his writings with a modest degree of frequency, but he provides the most detailed treatments in his commentaries, particularly his *Commentary on Romans* 2.13.8-33 and *Homily on Genesis* 3.4-7.<sup>58</sup>

Origen establishes two overarching principles regarding circumcision. First, following Paul, he is convinced that physical circumcision no longer has use because it was a type pointing to a future reality. That future reality is spiritual circumcision, the only circumcision worthy of God's character.<sup>59</sup> The rite was performed by those under the law to foreshadow the type of redemption Christ would provide. The blood resulting from physical circumcision served to redeem those undergoing it, albeit with a temporary, inefficacious redemption. However, since Christ has appeared, circumcision no longer has value. The blood of male infants shed through circumcision may have played a role in salvation, but does so no longer for at least two reasons. First, Origen asserts that Christ's own circumcision was a representative act that brings an end to the requirement. In the same way that Christians died with Christ and rose with Christ, they also are circumcised with Christ, an action that is tantamount to purification. Origen claims that

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<sup>57</sup> For Clement, circumcision understood in the Christian sense (i.e., circumcision of the heart) means cutting off the passions which lead to ignorance of God and the giving in to bodily desires. This interpretation is especially close to that of Philo. See *Stromateis* III.5.43, trans. John Ferguson FC 85 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 282-283, and especially his *Eclogae ex Scripturis Prophetis* 31.3 (PG 9, 716): τοῦ γὰρ ἐμπαθοῦς παντὸς περιτμηθέντος καὶ περιαιρεθέντος ἀπάσης τῆς ψυχῆς τῷ κρατίστῳ, καθαρῷ γενομένῳ καὶ ἡλευθερωμένῳ εἰς υἱοθεσίαν, τοῦ λοιποῦ σύνεστιν τε καὶ βιοῦ. According to Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision," 486, Clement's interpretation of circumcision also involves the ability to understand correctly.

<sup>58</sup> Another noteworthy text where Origen provides an allegorical interpretation of circumcision is his *Homilies on Joshua* 5.5-6, ed. Cynthia White, trans. Barbara Bruce, FC 105 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 63-66 (hereafter, *Hom. Josh.*). Here Origen makes the direct correlation between circumcision and baptism, maintaining that the circumcision at Gilgal was a "second circumcision" that points to the baptism of regeneration brought by Christ. On Origen's commentary on the Israelite crossing of the Jordan, see Jean Daniélou, S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy*, rev. ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 104. See also Hunt, "The Circumcision/Baptism Analogy," 229-230, 235-236, on the relationship in Origen between circumcision and baptism.

<sup>59</sup> *Homilies on Genesis* 3.4, trans. Ronald Heine, FC 71 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of American Press, 1982), 94 (hereafter, *Hom. Gen.*). See Niehoff, "Circumcision as a Marker of Identity," 110: "While Origen acknowledges here the historicity of Jewish circumcision, he portrays it as a bygone stage, which is now superseded by a truly worthy circumcision."

those who have participated in Christ's circumcision do not need their own circumcision in the flesh because Christ was circumcised "on our account."<sup>60</sup> Second, Christ's own blood poured out through his death on the cross pays the ransom required for the redemption of humanity, thereby making null and void the requirement of shedding blood through circumcision.<sup>61</sup> Blood still affords salvation, but only Christ's is efficacious.

The second overarching principle Origen establishes is that true circumcision cleanses the mind from sinful passions and desires. He refers to this purifying work as the "second circumcision," taking his cue from the Israelite circumcision at Gilgal (Joshua 5:1-9).<sup>62</sup> According to Origen, this event indicates the move from the law to Gospel faith where the "reproach of Egypt" is taken away. He identifies the "reproach of Egypt" with the passions, or fleshly vices.<sup>63</sup> Without question, Origen's primary understanding of circumcision of the heart is the cutting off of the passions, particularly sexual desire. The one who lustfully "burns with obscene desires and shameful passions" is truly uncircumcised.<sup>64</sup> Like Philo, Origen recognizes the correlation between the male genitalia and the heart. The divine command to cut the foreskin from the penis indicates the need to "cut off" from the soul any uncleanness through its association with the flesh. Further, the fact that the reproductive organ, rather than any other part

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<sup>60</sup> *Homilies on Luke* 14.1, trans. Joseph Lienhard, FC 94 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 56 (hereafter, *Hom. Lk*). Origen continues that "his [Christ's] death, his resurrection, and his circumcision took place for our sake." In his *Commentary on Romans* he further claims that as there were many baptisms, purifications, and sacrifices before Christ, "so also there was need of many circumcisions until the one circumcision in Christ was imparted to all." *Com. Rom.* 2.13.32 (FC 103, 162-163). Cf. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 122-124.

<sup>61</sup> *Com. Rom.* 2.13.29 (FC 103, 161-162). In *Contra Celsum* 1.22, SC 132 (Paris: Cerf, 1967), 130-132, Origen observes that circumcision began with Abraham but was halted by Jesus who did not want his disciples to continue its practice. In *De principiis* IV.3.3, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1973), 293, he goes so far as to call circumcision a disgrace.

<sup>62</sup> Origen is not unlike other patristic interpreters who employ a lengthy lexicon of terms depicting inward circumcision of the heart. Some of the most common include "new circumcision," "second circumcision," "circumcision of the faith," "true circumcision," "the circumcision of Christ," and "the circumcision of the Spirit." For a discussion on the patristic terminology for spiritual circumcision see Savon, "Vraie circoncision," 298.

<sup>63</sup> *Com. Rom.* 2.13.26 (FC 103, 158). In *Hom. Josh.* 5.5 (FC 105, 63-64), Origen gives a similar interpretation of circumcision of the heart based on Joshua's circumcision of the Israelites at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan.

<sup>64</sup> *Homily Gen.* 3.6 (FC 71, 98).

of the body, receives circumcision shows that sensual pleasures are not proper to the essence of the soul, but come about, at least in part, by “the incentive of the flesh.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, Origen claims that spiritual circumcised means “to cut off and throw away from the heart every unclean thought and all impure passions.”<sup>66</sup>

He likens the circumcised in heart to chaste virgins who are purified from lustful desires. And because the spiritually circumcised have been “circumcised” on the “eighth day,”<sup>67</sup> which for Origen refers to the new era that comes after this present age, they live for the eternal rather than for the temporal.<sup>68</sup> Origen adds that the circumcised in heart guard well the faith while casting out base or silly opinions, and conduct themselves in work and action in the manner of holiness.<sup>69</sup> For him, circumcision understood in an allegorical sense denotes the purification of sinful passions from the soul and the complete devotion of the entire person to God. He sometimes relates circumcision to Christian baptism, but this motif does not seem to be his primary concern.<sup>70</sup>

From the time of Origen’s death until the late fourth century, there is little exegetical or theological development among Alexandrian thinkers regarding circumcision. Athanasius rarely

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<sup>65</sup> *Com. Rom.* 2.13.20 (FC 103, 155).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.13.22 (FC 103, 155). In 2.13.18 Origen states, “For it is not that circumcision which is outward in the flesh that purifies the soul, but the circumcision of the heart, which is in secret, purifies the mind and cuts away the stains of the vices.”

<sup>67</sup> *Gen.* 17:12

<sup>68</sup> *Com. Rom.* 2.13.21 (FC 103, 155). Origen gives the same interpretation in *Homilies on Leviticus* 8.4, trans. Gary Barkley, FC 83 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 159.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 2.13.23 (FC 103, 156), and see *Hom. Gen.* 3.6 (FC 71, 98-99), where Origen notes the Old Testament commandments to circumcise the ears (i.e., truly hearing and believing the word) and lips (i.e., putting away all sinful, frivolous talk). As a result, we should also “circumcise” our hands, feet, sight, sense of smell, and touch to purify them from all sinful uses and to be “devoted to the service of God’s commands.” Cf. Ferguson, “Spiritual Circumcision,” 486.

<sup>70</sup> For example, Origen suggests the connection between circumcision and baptism in *Hom. Lk.* 14.5 (FC 94, 58-59).

gives the concept substantial treatment.<sup>71</sup> Up until the fourth century, most early Christian writings treating circumcision are of certain genres – biblical commentaries, homilies on passages where circumcision is an issue, and polemical treatises against the Jews. Athanasius does not devote his literary energies to commentaries on Scripture, but to theological works that engaged the pressing matters of his day, most of which are Christological. He does not employ the traditional “circumcision” texts in his debates against the Arians, nor does he point to circumcision as an example of Jewish misunderstanding since they do not suit his immediate purposes.

However, circumcision of the heart finds fresh expression in Didymus the Blind, an ardent follower of Origen and the last head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. While Didymus is best known for his writings on the Trinity, he left behind several biblical commentaries. As in the case of Origen, Didymus reserves his most detailed treatment on circumcision for his commentaries.<sup>72</sup> His allegorical style of exegesis, consistent with those of Philo and Origen, allows him a degree of creativity when fleshing out its meaning. Didymus is consistent with Scripture and many early Christian thinkers when he insists that physical circumcision was a type of the new, complete salvation accomplished by Christ, and that a Jew *par excellence* is one in spirit, having been circumcised in the heart rather than the flesh.<sup>73</sup> But unlike Philo and Origen, Didymus says little relating circumcision with the passions. He is more

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<sup>71</sup> The short treatise *De sabbatis et circumcissione* found in Athanasius’ writings in Migne (PG 28 133-141) is likely spurious. An example where Athanasius does mention circumcision, however briefly, is in his *Expositiones in Psalmos* (PG 27, 468). Athanasius is aware of the Christian view of true circumcision, but does not develop it.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *De trinitate*, 2 vols., ed. J. Hönscheid, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 44, 52 (Verlag: Anton Hain, 1975). Hereafter, *De trin.* Didymus utilizes some key texts referring to circumcision of the heart (e.g., Rom. 2:28-30; Col. 2:11), but only within a long litany of other passages he uses as proof texts to argue for the divinity of the Holy Spirit. See *De trin.* 5.23. For other places where Didymus discusses circumcision see *Frag. Ps.* 31-32 in *Psalmenkommentare aus der Katenenüberlieferung, I*, ed. Ekkehard Mühlenbert (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975), 135-136.

<sup>73</sup> Rom. 2:28-29. Cf. *De trin.* 7.15 ; *Sur Zacharie* 3.56, 3 vols., ed. Louis Doutreleau, SC 83-85 (Paris: Cerf, 1962). 3.56. Hereafter, *On Zech.*

interested in viewing it as a constructive and transformative process in the work of salvation rather than an operation which “removes” something from the soul.

Let us take one example. He portrays circumcision’s constructive nature in his commentary on Zechariah 13:9b-11, where he investigates the prophet’s prediction of a time when the Lord will reign supreme and exalt Jerusalem, from the Gate of Benjamin to the Corner Gate to the Tower of Hananel (or Hanamael).<sup>74</sup> According to Didymus, these major points in the city represent divine activity. The Gate of Benjamin signifies entrance into the divine mysteries; the Corner Gate suggests that Christ is the cornerstone that gives support to the walls; the Tower of Hananel is the circumcision by grace (χάριτι περιτομή) wrought by the Holy Spirit in the heart.<sup>75</sup> Those who have received this grace wisely build their lives on virtue analogous to the way a wise builder constructs a strong tower.

In a similar way, Didymus suggests the transformative nature of circumcision in his reading of Zechariah 11:1-2, where the Lord proclaims judgment on Lebanon.<sup>76</sup> Through the lens of allegory, Lebanon signifies idolatry (εἰδωλολατρείαν), arrogance (ὑπεροψίαν), and haughtiness (ὑπερηφανίαν). Didymus sees an association here with the call of the lover from the Cantic of Canticles (whom he identifies as Christ) to his bride, exhorting her to come out of Lebanon on the basis of faith.<sup>77</sup> The one who leaves Lebanon is invited to cross over from wickedness to virtue, from ignorance and unbelief to divine knowledge and perfect faith (πίστιν ὑπερβάλλουσιν διὰ τελειότητα). Didymus links this transformation with circumcision of the Spirit by alluding to Isaiah 29:17. Here he sees Lebanon resembling Mt. Carmel. The word

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<sup>74</sup> *On Zech.* 5.91-115.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.111.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.17-19.

<sup>77</sup> *Cf. Cant.* 4:8.

“Carmel” (Χελμέλ) signifies the knowledge of circumcision (ἐπίγνωσις περιτομῆς).<sup>78</sup> The one who comes to this new knowledge leaves selfish and arrogant ways behind and assumes the way of humility. For, Didymus explains, from Jesus one learns to be humble in heart and spirit.<sup>79</sup>

The pattern of the interpretation of circumcision among the Alexandrian writers I have noted is clear. Through an allegorical approach to Scripture, they uncover the hidden meanings underneath the external act of cutting the foreskin. Philo affirms both the physical and spiritual realities of circumcision. But for the Christian writers, only the spiritual meanings apply. With the coming of Christ, all types in the old covenant have been fulfilled; thus the very meaning of circumcision is irreversibly changed. From the precedents set even in the Old Testament, where the command to undergo the physical operation is given, circumcision is understood as an inward work of God that transforms the person. The Alexandrian writers remain consistent, alluding to this work in Scriptural terms as circumcision of the heart or Spirit, a spiritual work with negative and positive aspects. Circumcision is negative in that it involves the “cutting off” of wickedness, usually in the form of sexual desire and like passions.<sup>80</sup> It is positive in that it involves a reception of grace and knowledge of God, leading to new conduct and devotion. Circumcision as an ancient physical rite no longer has application; now it is understood as a spiritual operation that purifies, renews, and perfects.

#### *Circumcision in 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century Patristic Sources*

The interpretation of circumcision underwent creative theological development in Alexandria, particularly as exegetes of Scripture – both Jewish and Christian – employed an

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<sup>78</sup> On *Zech.* 4.18.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.19.

<sup>80</sup> It must be admitted, of course, that the Alexandrians were not the only thinkers who envisioned spiritual circumcision as the abnegation of the passions. For example, Methodius, the third century bishop of Olympus, refers to the “Circumcision of the spiritual Eighth Day” that brings about remission of sins, the resurrection of the body, and effects “the *circumcision of man’s passions* and his corruptibility.” *Symposium* 7.6, ACW 27, trans. Herbert Musurillo, S.J. (New York: Newman Press, 1958), 102 (*italics added*).



allegorical framework in which to uncover the spiritual meaning(s) of the practice beyond the physical. Most interpretations were deeply soteriological. However, there were important exegetical and theological developments on circumcision occurring elsewhere that would have a bearing on many Christian circles, including Alexandria. The teaching of a number of these thinkers – Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian – would step, in one way or another, into the broader Christian tradition beyond their particular geographical settings.<sup>81</sup>

The earliest Christian thinkers held to basic Scriptural categories, noting that circumcision was a means of identification and difference. For instance, Ignatius of Antioch distinguishes Jews as “the circumcision” from Christians as “the uncircumcised.”<sup>82</sup> Justin takes the mark of distinction further in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, claiming that circumcision was given to the Jews to distinguish them from other peoples, not so much as God’s chosen race, but that they might suffer various diseases and afflictions due to their wickedness (ἀνομίας) and hard-heartedness (σκληροκαρδίαν).<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Justin argues, external circumcision had no role in bringing salvation; it was instituted for punishment. If salvation were contingent upon circumcision, Adam would have been created without a foreskin, Abel’s sacrifice would not have been accepted, and Enoch would not have found favor with God.<sup>84</sup> Circumcision, in

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<sup>81</sup> In particular, Niehoff observes that Justin’s interpretations “gained public authority far beyond the confines” of his own community. See Niehoff, 104. The same can be said of Irenaeus and Tertullian.

<sup>82</sup> *Epistle to the Philippians* 6, ANF, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 82, and see Niehoff, 104. Cf. Gal. 2:12

<sup>83</sup> *Dialogue* 18.2 in *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997), hereafter *Dial.* Cf. *Dial.* 16.2; 19.2. For this work I have also consulted the English translation: *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. Michael Slusser, trans. Robert Falls, rev. Thomas Halton (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003). The afflictions Justin describes are most likely a reference to Hadrian’s punishment of the Jews for the Bar Kochba revolt. For a brief discussion on the socio-historical factors that may have influenced Justin’s interpretation, see Rodney Werline, “The Transformation of Pauline Arguments in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 1 (1999), 89-90.

<sup>84</sup> *Dial.* 19.3. Cf. 43.2

Justin's view, only serves as an identity marker. As Paul had made clear, it is not responsible for justification, and Justin believes that God never had a soteriological design for it.<sup>85</sup>

Beyond its function as an identity marker, Justin singles out circumcision to subvert Jewish biblical interpretation and practice. One of his main concerns in the *Dialogue* is to show that Christians interpret the Bible correctly, whereas Jews who follow the Law but deny Christ do not.<sup>86</sup> With Christ, circumcision takes on new meaning; it is no longer seen as a physical sign of the covenant but as something that carries inward, soteriological significance. For Justin, who may be drawing from the same tradition as *Barnabas*, true circumcision is a spiritual work that represents freedom from error, wickedness, idolatry, and deceit.<sup>87</sup>

Out of the litany of Old Testament texts dealing with circumcision, Justin pays special attention to Joshua 5, where Joshua circumcises the Israelites at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan. Justin sees this "second circumcision" with stone knives as the spiritual work of the new Circumciser, Jesus Christ. The stone knives signify the message of Christ, the true Stone, proclaimed through the apostles. The divine message circumcises the believing hearers from their sinful, illicit ways.<sup>88</sup> Justin informs Trypho, "Indeed, our hearts have been so circumcised from sin that we even rejoice as we die for the name of that noble Rock, whence gushes forth living water for the hearts of those who through him love the Father of all, and who proffers the water of life to those desiring it."<sup>89</sup> Christians receive this spiritual (πνευματικήν) circumcision, Justin maintains, through baptism: "Since we had become sinners, we received this [spiritual circumcision] through the mercy of God by means of baptism, and all men should

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<sup>85</sup> *Dial.* 23.4-5, 28.4. See also Nina Livesey, "Theological Identity Making: Justin's Use of Circumcision to Create Jews and Christians," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18, no. 1 (2010): 70.

<sup>86</sup> Cohen, *Jewish Women*, 75.

<sup>87</sup> *Dial.* 41.4; 113.6. Cf. Hunt, 235-236. Many of the same passages disputed between Christians and Jews are cited by Barnabas. Cf. Robert Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (1971; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 12-14.

<sup>88</sup> *Dial.* 113.6-7; 114.4.

<sup>89</sup> *Dial.* 114.4 (trans. Falls, 171.)

likewise receive it.”<sup>90</sup> In fact, Daniélou notes that Justin is the first to show explicitly that circumcision is accomplished in baptism.<sup>91</sup>

Finally, he connects the prescribed day of circumcision with the resurrection day. The eighth day on which Jewish male infants were commanded to be circumcised signifies the true circumcision received through Christ, who rose from the dead on the “eighth day.” Christ’s resurrection and spiritual circumcision go hand in hand.<sup>92</sup> Though Justin does not employ allegory to the same degree as Philo or Origen, he nonetheless defines “a highly allegorical circumcision” to be appropriated by Christians.<sup>93</sup> Jewish and Christian circumcisions designate two completely different realities. Justin, like *Barnabas*, disparages the physical procedure, indicating that those who continue its practice remain sinful, heard-hearted, and in error. However, those who are circumcised not by iron knives but by the knives of stone, indeed the Stone himself, receive new life and freedom from sin and idolatry.<sup>94</sup> This spiritual circumcision marks out a new people of God in the way that circumcision did in the former covenant: “Jesus Christ circumcises with stone knives all who desire it, just as was proclaimed above, so that they may be a righteous nation, a people keeping faith, holding fast (ἀντιλαμβάνόμενος) to truth and keeping peace.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> *Dial.* 43.2. Ferguson rightly points out that baptism is not identical to spiritual circumcision, but is the means by which the new circumcision is procured. See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 243 (hereafter, *Baptism*).

<sup>91</sup> Jean Daniélou, “Baptême et circoncision chez les Pères de l’Eglise,” in *Theologie in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Johann Auer and Hermann Volk (Munich: Karl Zink Verlag, 1957), 763.

<sup>92</sup> *Dial.* 41.4. See also Daniélou, “Baptême et circoncision,” 764. Cyprian makes this same connection in the third century in his *Epistula* 64.4-5. Cf. Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 39, for a brief discussion on the historical circumstances prompting Cyprian’s letter. The association of the “eighth day” with the resurrection will be a very important motif for Cyril, as I will show.

<sup>93</sup> Livesey, “Theological Identity Making,” 71.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. Jacobs notes that similar to the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Justin attributes the moral purification of spiritual circumcision to the work of Christ. See Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 37.

<sup>95</sup> *Dial.* 2.24. Justin is alluding to Jos. 5:2-3 and Is. 25:2-3.

Irenaeus and Tertullian continue the general trajectory of Justin's thought on circumcision. Both maintain the association between physical and spiritual circumcision.<sup>96</sup> They both follow the Pauline argument, claiming that circumcision by itself has no power to make one righteous. For biblical evidence, Irenaeus and Tertullian follow the exegetical tradition Justin followed (or perhaps Justin himself) by pointing to righteous figures in the Old Testament who were accepted by God without being circumcised.<sup>97</sup> Circumcision does not take effective action against sin. No one is justified as a result of receiving it, nor is anyone saved by adherence to the Sabbath or other tenets of the Law. Since the advent of Christ, circumcision as a physical rite is superseded by a spiritual circumcision of the heart. For Tertullian, circumcision consists of an ethical change and transformation of one's life expressed as the abandonment of idolatry, obedience to God, modesty, and love.<sup>98</sup> Irenaeus does not explain the mechanics or the effects of spiritual circumcision in detail, but allows Deuteronomy 10:16 and Colossians 2:11 to suffice. The implication is that there are two circumcisions; one is fleshly that represents Israel's covenant, while the other, properly understood, is a spiritual operation whereby the heart is changed from a stubborn to a submissive condition.

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<sup>96</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.16.1 (ANF 1:480-481), hereafter, *Adv. Haer.* Ferguson cites this passage in Irenaeus as an example of the trajectory in early Christian literature associating circumcision with the activity of the Holy Spirit. Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision," 492. One of the earliest non-canonical works associating circumcision with the Spirit's work is the anonymous *Odes of Solomon* 11:2-3: "For the Most High circumcised me by his Holy Spirit, then he uncovered my inward being toward him, and filled me with his love. And his circumcising became my salvation, and I ran in the Way in his peace, in the Way of truth." In Tertullian, see *Ad Uxor* 1.2.3. SC 273, trans. Charles Munier. (Paris: Cerf, 1980). Tertullian claims the divine Word came to replace the law by introducing spiritual circumcision (*circumcisionem spiritalem*).

<sup>97</sup> Irenaeus cites Abraham (as Paul does in Rom. 4:10-11), Lot, Noah, Enoch, and "all the rest of the multitude of those righteous men who lived before Abraham, and of those patriarchs who preceded Moses" who were justified independent of circumcision and the law. See *Adv. Haer.* 3.16.2 (ANF 1:481). Tertullian produces an almost identical list in *Against the Jews (Adversus Iudeos)* 2.11-14, *The Early Church Fathers*, trans. Geoffrey Dunn. (London: Routledge, 2004), 71-72 (hereafter, *Adv. Iud.*).

<sup>98</sup> Hunt, "The Circumcision/Baptism Analogy," 237. Cf. *Adv. Iud.* 3.12. Tertullian alludes to prophecies decrying the stubbornness and disobedience of the Jews and other prophecies that point to a time when other nations who do not know God would seek him (e.g. Ps. 18:43-44). The new law and new circumcision of the Spirit have been offered to the Gentiles who now enjoy fellowship with God rather in place of the Jews.

Irenaeus and Tertullian alike were familiar with the *Dialogue with Trypho*, and both engage the issue of circumcision as a polemic against the Jews. In his *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus affirms circumcision as the mark of identity for Abraham's descendants and the symbol of God's covenant. He deviates from Justin's idea that it was given in order to single out the Jews for affliction. Instead, he has a more positive view of circumcision's role in salvation history. On the other hand, Tertullian follows the same argument as Justin does, almost verbatim. In his *Against the Jews*, Tertullian alludes to prophecies decrying Israel's wickedness and rebellion in juxtaposition to "more recent times" when the Jews were prohibited from entering Jerusalem as punishment for the Bar Kokhba revolt, the same historical situation to which Justin seems to be alluding. Like Justin, Tertullian surmises that God, foreseeing the sinfulness of the Jews, gave them circumcision as a sign that would eventually mark them out for punishment.<sup>99</sup> In order to deny the Jews entry into the holy city, the Romans were able to identify them based on the mark of circumcision. In spite of the apparent biblical connection to this event in history, the critical line on circumcision espoused by Justin and perpetuated by Tertullian in this case was followed by few. Perhaps like *Barnabas'* account of the evil angel, this interpretation was too extreme for most Christian thinkers to accept. More followed the line of reasoning espoused by Irenaeus who recognized that circumcision (indeed the entire Law) served the divine purpose for a time, but was displaced upon the advent of Christ.<sup>100</sup>

The interpretive trajectories of circumcision found in Justin and perpetuated, more or less, by Irenaeus and Tertullian may have been woven into the diverse tapestry of the

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<sup>99</sup> *Adv. Iud.* 3.6. Cf. *Dial.* 18.2.

<sup>100</sup> It is likely that Irenaeus' difference with Justin about the role of circumcision in God's unfolding plan of salvation is due to his attack against Marcion and a number of Gnostic writers such as Valentinus and Basilides. Against their attempts to distinguish between the God (or demiurge) of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, Irenaeus emphasizes the continuity between both Testaments to show that there is one true God rather than two. The God who gave circumcision is the same God who sent the Son. Therefore, it's not surprising that Irenaeus takes a more positive stance toward circumcision in its Old Testament context.

Alexandrian tradition, though this is far from certain. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* was transmitted to Alexandria at astonishing speed. An increasing number of scholars are recognizing that Clement himself read and used Irenaeus' work, and it is likely Origen did as well.<sup>101</sup> This suggests that as early as the beginning of the third century, Alexandria was already a healthy cross-section of various streams of Christian thought. And while Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian do not associate circumcision of the heart with the passions as do some of their Alexandrian counterparts, shared ideas such as the exegesis of Joshua 5, the spiritual significance of the "eighth day," and other soteriological implications of circumcision may have played an influential role in the Alexandrian understanding of circumcision. At the very least, the similar ways in which circumcision was developed by these Christian exegetes who hailed from different regions shows the emergence of common traditions associated with circumcision in the early church, and, in a broader sense, a tradition of exegesis that spiritualized ancient Jewish rites and practices.<sup>102</sup> This tradition was well established in Alexandria by the time Cyril became bishop in the early fifth century.

#### *Circumcision in 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century Patristic Sources*

Cyril's commentaries indicate that he profited from a number of his contemporaries or near-contemporaries outside of Alexandria.<sup>103</sup> For example, his commentaries on Isaiah and the

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<sup>101</sup> Studies concerning the various uses of Irenaeus by Clement or Origen include A. Le Boulluec, "La réflexion d'Origène sur le discours hérésiologique," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 116 (1984): 297-308; W. A. Löhr, "Gnostic Determinism Reconsidered," *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992): 381-390; L. G. Patterson, "The Divine Became Human: Irenaeus Themes in Clement of Alexandria," *Studia Patristica* 31 (1997): 497-516. Patterson, 499, claims that according to recent research, "Gaul and Egypt may not have been quite so distant from one another as we have assumed." For a more comprehensive study of the reception and transmission of influential texts that shaped the early church in Alexandria, see Colin Roberts, *Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 53-54, who notes that archaeological evidence indicates that Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* was in Alexandria by 186.

<sup>102</sup> Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, 33.

<sup>103</sup> See a helpful discussion of Cyril's eclecticism and use of various sources in Alexander Kerigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreted of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952), 246-250.

Minor Prophets seem to be influenced by Jerome. Kerrigan has observed acute similarities between the two writers, suggesting that Cyril was not simply drawing from a tradition shared with Jerome, but enjoyed direct access to his commentaries on Isaiah and the Minor Prophets, along with others. Cyril also had access to Jerome through the mediation of figures like Didymus and Eusebius of Caesarea. Jerome knew Didymus personally and had great admiration for him.<sup>104</sup> Because of Jerome's influence on Cyril's exegesis, it is advantageous to consider Jerome's interpretation of circumcision, which was likely informed by a wide range of influences that included not only Origen, but interpreters from the West.

Like other Christian interpreters before him, many of Jerome's discussions on circumcision stress its uselessness since Christ's advent. The straightforward method of exegesis Jerome often employs<sup>105</sup> follows the well-known biblical narrative: circumcision was given by God to Abraham as a sign. After Abraham it became a major component of the Mosaic law. Since Christ came to fulfill and abolish the old law, circumcision no longer has significance. At the same time, Jerome is open to interpreting circumcision in a spiritual sense. In doing so, he shows his exegetical consistency with earlier Christian interpretations. Two examples from his commentaries are noteworthy.

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 435-439. On the connection between Jerome and Cyril, Kerrigan claims to be following Abel, who argues for Jerome's influence. See F.-M. Abel, "Parallélisme exégétique entre s. Jérôme et s. Cyrille d'Alexandrie," *Vivre et penser* 1 (1941): 94-199, 212-230. Norman Russell, following other scholars such as Fernández Lois, suggests that the young Cyril probably had access to Jerome through his uncle Theophilus' collaboration with Jerome during the Origenist controversy. Upon his succession to the episcopate, he may have found copies of some of Jerome's commentaries in his uncle's library. There is no scholarly consensus as to Cyril's knowledge of Latin as no objective evidence exists. One can only speculate. However, there were translators in Alexandria who would have made Jerome's work accessible to readers of Greek. See Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2000), 16, 70-71. Cf. Lois Farag, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, A New Testament Exegete* (Gorgias Press, 2007), 52-53.

<sup>105</sup> This is not to say that Jerome was a "literalist." See his *Commentary on Galatians* Bk. 2, 4.2.42, trans. Andre Cain, FC 121 (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 186ff. (Hereafter, *Com. Gal.*).

First, Jerome is aware of the significance of the “eighth day” motif, noting its reference to the day of resurrection, and he associates circumcision with the resurrection of Christ.<sup>106</sup> Second, like Origen he notices the Old Testament commandments to circumcise the heart along with various parts of the body such as the ears and lips.<sup>107</sup> When the ears and lips are circumcised, one is enabled to hear and understand the revelation of God and speak the divine message. Jerome makes a further observation: “Circumcision also provides much benefit in terms of lust because impurity is cut off through chastity.”<sup>108</sup> This insistence that true circumcision has to do with cutting off the passions is consistent with the Alexandrian tradition in particular. Jerome offers no further explanation here on circumcision and sexual relations, but he expounds on the association in detail in his *Adversus Jovinium* 1.20-21. In this polemical work he asserts that virginity is superior to marriage, and that in all cases it is best to avoid sexual relations. He even goes so far to say that circumcision signifies the excision of marriage itself.<sup>109</sup> As a biblical precedent he considers the cases of Moses and Joshua. Moses was spared from the angel of death when Zipporah took a stone knife and circumcised their son. Jerome maintains that this stone knife symbolized the Gospel, and the foreskin the bond of marriage. The Gospel cleanses one from all sexual relations, even those within marriage.

Likewise, Joshua circumcised the Israelites at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan. The Jordan, ever flowing until it dried up before the Israelites, signifies marriage. The circumcision by stone knives – again symbolizing the Gospel – shows that the Israelites were no longer held by sense. Jerome calls this “second circumcision” of the Israelites the “Gospel circumcision.” After circumcision, the people ate the food of the land in celebration of the Passover, after which

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<sup>106</sup> See his comment on Eccl. 11.2 in *Commentaire de l'Ecclésiaste*, trans. Gérard Fry. Les Pères dans la foi. (Paris: Migne, 2001), 285. Cf. Daniélou, *Bible and the Liturgy*, 268.

<sup>107</sup> Cf. Ex. 6:12; Is. 6:5; Jer. 4:4, 6:10; Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 3:6.

<sup>108</sup> *Com. Gal.* II.5.6.

<sup>109</sup> Savon, “Vraie circoncision,” 300.



Joshua sees the Lord Sabaoth with drawn sword. Jerome reads that as meaning either that the Lord will fight for the circumcised (or “Gospel”) people or that he will “sever the tie of marriage.”<sup>110</sup> In any case, he makes a clear association between circumcision and doing away with sexual desire and practice.

Two other thinkers who may have played some role in shaping Cyril’s exegesis were John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, writers who have been identified with the so-called “Antiochene exegetical tradition” modeled by Diodore of Tarsus. Jacobs notes that John’s and Theodore’s views on circumcision differ not in substance but in scope.<sup>111</sup> Chrysostom, commenting on Colossians 2:11, declares that Christ, not the knife, is the agent of circumcision. Christ does not circumcise a part of the body, but the whole man (ὅλον ἄνθρωπον) in order to put off sins rather than a portion of skin. Moreover, one must be baptized in order to be spiritually circumcised (πνευματικῶς περιτέμνεται).<sup>112</sup> Circumcision is a type of burial after which rebirth takes place in the baptismal font.<sup>113</sup>

Theodore, commenting on the same passage, shares a similar view as Chrysostom’s that Christ is the agent of circumcision. But for him, it takes on a cosmic, eschatological dimension. He claims that circumcision is the removal of mortality (*mortalitatis ablationem*) and that baptism is the type and guarantee of the full realization of the promise of immortality.<sup>114</sup> “Uncircumcision” (ἀκροβυστία / *praeputium*)<sup>115</sup> designates the condition of mortality and sin.

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<sup>110</sup> *Against Jovinian* 1.20-2, ed. Phillip Schaff, NPNF 2, vol. 6 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 361-362. Jerome’s interpretation of the Israelite circumcision at Gilgal is also important because it shows his consistency and familiarity with earlier Christian traditions casting Joshua as a type of Christ and the circumcision on the other side of the Jordan as an inner, spiritual work. Cf. *Homily* 10 on Psalm 76 (77) in FC, vol. 48, trans. Marie Ewald. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964) and *Letter to Abigous*, (NPNF 2, 6:157).

<sup>111</sup> Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 144.

<sup>112</sup> *Homilia VI In Epist. Ad Col.* (PG 62:340).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* See also Jacobs, *Christ Circumcised*, 144.

<sup>114</sup> *Commentarius in epistula ad Colossenses* 2:11-12. *Theodore of Mopsuestia: The Commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul*, ed. and tr. Rowan Greer (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 407 (hereafter, *Ad Col*).

<sup>115</sup> In this case a Greek fragment survives along with the Latin translation.

Circumcision, understood in the present tense, implies that we draw near to immortality and no longer sin to the extent we once did. But at the general resurrection we will “exist immortal in nature” (*postquam immortales natura extiterimus*) and no longer be able to sin.<sup>116</sup> Thus, circumcision for Theodore constitutes a present, regenerative condition signified by baptism, as well as the eschatological state of final immortality, where sin is forever abolished. As we will see throughout this study, the eschatological vision inherent in spiritual circumcision appears often in Cyril’s treatment.

A final figure we must consider is the fourth-century bishop and heresiologist Epiphanius of Salamis. Epiphanius’ major literary achievement, the *Panarion*, is a work with which Cyril may have been familiar.<sup>117</sup> In it, Epiphanius takes up the question of circumcision on multiple occasions. He acknowledges its divinely ordained place in the history of Israel, but notes its temporary function. It has been superseded by the “great circumcision,” namely baptism, that “cuts us off from our sins and has marked (σφραγισάντος) us in the name of God.”<sup>118</sup> Circumcision, indeed the whole Law, pointed us to Christ, but now Christ has brought us his more perfect circumcision (τὴν ἐντελεστέραν αὐτοῦ περιτομήν) within the law of freedom.<sup>119</sup>

Epiphanius’ most sustained treatment of circumcision appears in his scathing critique of the Ebionites in *Pan.* 30. Apparently, this group instructed their followers to be circumcised on the basis that Christ himself was circumcised. A disciple must be like his master; if Christ was

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<sup>116</sup> *Ad Col.* 2:13, 409.

<sup>117</sup> See *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Book I*, trans. Frank Williams (Leiden: Brill, 1997), hereafter, *Pan.* The Greek text is edited by Karl Holl, rev. Jürgen Dummer, in *Epiphanius, Bände 103: Ancoratus und Panarion. Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte*, vols. 25, 31, 37 (J.C. Hinrichs’sche Buchhandlung, 1915), hereafter GCS. On Cyril’s possible familiarity and use of Epiphanius see Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique*, 62-63. The question of Cyril’s connection with Epiphanius’ writings is one that requires more research.

<sup>118</sup> *Pan.* 8.6.7, 26 (GCS 25: 192), and see also *Pan.* 28.4.1, 29. Epiphanius interprets the Sabbath in similar fashion, noting its role enforcing restraint until the “great Sabbath” – the rest given in Christ – which is a rest from sin. Cf. *Pan.* 30.32.8, 149 (GCS 25: 378-379)

<sup>119</sup> *Pan.* 42.12.1, 330-331 (GCS 31: 159).

circumcised, so too must his disciple.<sup>120</sup> Epiphanius begins his attack from a Christological perspective, proving the folly of Ebion's position from the fact that the Ebionites claimed that Jesus was born a mere man from Joseph's seed rather than from the Virgin. In that case, Jesus' circumcision would mean nothing since he would not be responsible for it. In other words, Jesus would have received circumcision as a helpless infant, having no volition of his own or awareness of the procedure. Thus, following Jesus in this regard makes no sense and reaps no spiritual benefit.<sup>121</sup> Epiphanius further makes a Christological case for Christ's circumcision; he was circumcised to prove that his humanity was authentic (contra the Manicheans) and that his humanity was not of the same substance as the Godhead (contra Apollinarius).<sup>122</sup> The fact that Christ received circumcision as a human in accordance with the law gets at one of Epiphanius' underlying concerns: Christ was circumcised as a human to fulfill the entirety of the law – the law that he, as God, originally gave – and to bring circumcision to its spiritual fulfillment.<sup>123</sup>

Further, Epiphanius asserts that circumcision was originally given to Abraham as a temporary sign to reprove him for his doubts and to serve as a constant physical reminder to him and his progeny of God.<sup>124</sup> As a symbol of both rebuke and remembrance, circumcision was never efficacious for sanctification. If it were, Epiphanius opines, then no female, no matter how virtuous, could have entered the kingdom of heaven.<sup>125</sup> Rather, Christ brought about sanctification when he made circumcision obsolete by fulfilling it, giving us the perfect circumcision of his mysteries (τὴν τελείαν περιτομὴν τῶν αὐτοῦ μυστηρίων). “Perfect circumcision” seals the body and cuts it off from sin. It applies not to a part of the body, but to

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<sup>120</sup> *Pan.* 30.26.1, 141 (GCS 25:380). Cf. Matt. 10:25.

<sup>121</sup> *Pan.* 30.26.8, 142 (GCS 25: 369-370).

<sup>122</sup> *Pan.* 30.28.1, 143 (GCS 25:371).

<sup>123</sup> *Pan.* 30.27.1, 142 (GCS 25:370).

<sup>124</sup> *Pan.* 30.28.5, 143-144 (GCS 25:371-372). Cf. Gen. 15:8; 17:17-18.

<sup>125</sup> *Pan.* 30.33.1, 149-150 (GCS 25:379). Epiphanius lists Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, Jochabed, and Miriam as examples of holy women who would forfeit the kingdom of God, having been deprived of circumcision.

the whole person. It is given not to one class only, but to an entire people, consisting of both males and females.<sup>126</sup> Epiphanius does not cite common texts such as Jeremiah 4:4; Romans 2:28-29; or Colossians 2:11 to support his view. Instead, he uses the Ebionite fixation on the circumcision of Christ in Luke 2:21-24 to discuss Christ's fulfillment and abolishment of types in bringing about a spiritual reality to the human race. For him, complete circumcision is cleansing of sin and regeneration through baptism, the new sign of the people of God.

### Conclusion

This brief survey has demonstrated that circumcision was an important concept to a significant number of influential thinkers in the early church. The many discussions of circumcision hinged on concerns over salvation and appropriate Christian behavior, as well as on debates with the Jews over proper exegesis of Scripture and religious practice. Early Christian interpretations of circumcision established an inseparable relationship between the ancient Jewish rite and the soteriological effects of the new covenant. What was once an outward sign of God's covenant with his chosen people had become an inward reality by virtue of the Incarnation. The physical operation, now void of theological significance, typified the spiritual, transformative work of the heart. For some, this salvific activity was actualized in baptism, the sign for the new people of God (that is, the new circumcision), though this position is not unanimous among the fathers.<sup>127</sup> The Church Fathers are not uniform in their interpretations of spiritual circumcision, but all agree that it played an important part in the narrative of God's saving activity in the world. Though some views vary and reflect the idiosyncrasies of

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<sup>126</sup> *Pan.* 30.34.1, 150-151 (GCS 25: 381).

<sup>127</sup> Jean Daniélou asserts, "Ainsi les Pères affirment-ils, à la suite du Nouveau Testament, que de même que la circoncision agréait les individus au pacte d'alliance conclu par Iahweh avec la race d'Abraham, de même le baptême introduit à la participation de la nouvelle alliance, scellée par la résurrection du Christ au huitième jour. Ceci leur donne le droit de montrer que ce qui était vrai de la circoncision se vérifiera aussi de baptême." See Daniélou, "Circoncision et baptême." For a helpful summary on the relationship between baptism and circumcision in the fathers, see pp. 763-770.

individual writers, this survey has shown a great deal of overlap among diverse theological circles, and continuity of interpretation spanning several centuries. Many of these interpretations had become commonplace by the turn of the fifth century.

## CHAPTER THREE

CIRCUMCISION OF THE SPIRIT IN CYRIL'S EARLY *FESTAL LETTERS*<sup>1</sup>

Beginning with Demetrius' episcopacy in 188, it became customary for the bishop of Alexandria to deliver an annual letter to the Egyptian diocese announcing the dates of Easter and the preceding Lenten season. These letters were addressed to clerics and other important ecclesiastical figures, and were to be read in every church and (eventually) monastery. Over time, the purpose of the festal letters expanded to include spiritual exhortations to fasting and practicing the virtues, along with a kerygmatic summary of the work of Christ in salvation.<sup>2</sup> Over time the bishops came to use them to engage in polemics. With bishop Peter (300-311), we have a record of the letters being used to attack Jewish calculations of Passover celebration, an event which could overlap with Christian celebrations of Easter.<sup>3</sup> When Cyril ascended to the episcopal chair in 412, he continued the tradition of sending out festal letters, incorporating the traditional form and content from his predecessors into his own letters, particularly following the patterns set by Athanasius and Cyril's uncle Theophilus.

The extant festal material from the Alexandrian bishops before Cyril ranges from fragments recorded in second-hand sources to collections of letters in their entirety. Cyril is the first church leader of whom we have almost the complete set of festal letters written during his

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<sup>1</sup> I am consulting the critical Greek text found in *Cyrille d'Alexandrie: Lettres Festales I-VI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Marie-Odile Boulnois, Pierre Évieux, Marguerite Forrat, and Bernard Meunier, SC 372 (Paris: Cerf, 1991) and *Cyrille d'Alexandrie: Lettres Festales VII-XI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Pierre Évieux, and Robert Monier, SC 392 (Paris: Cerf, 1993). I am also referring to the English translation found in *Cyril of Alexandria: Festal Letters 1-12*, ed. John O'Keefe, trans. Philip Amidon, S.J., FC 118 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Évieux's introduction in SC 372, 94-112, provides a helpful history of the lineage of Alexandrian bishops whose festal letters, or fragments of letters, have been preserved.

<sup>3</sup> The dating of Easter was notoriously complicated in the early Church, and exacerbated by a general desire to avoid conforming with Jewish calculations. See Évieux, SC 372, 74-80.

years as bishop. In all there are twenty-nine.<sup>4</sup> Though the letters are not uniform and contain material peculiar to Cyril's immediate context for any given year, they all convey his overarching theological convictions expressed in a pastoral manner. The two objectives that remain consistent throughout his letters include helping his readers understand God's saving action in Christ and instructing them on how to read and understand the Bible. Near the conclusion of almost every letter, just preceding the announcement of the date of Easter, Cyril provides a standard, almost creedal confessions that Meunier calls "summaries of the faith" (*résumés de foi*), which outline the gift of salvation accomplished for us through the Incarnation, death, resurrection, descent, and ascent of Christ.<sup>5</sup> But Cyril does not reserve soteriological teaching for the conclusion of his letters; rather, the primary content of these homily-like addresses explores the dynamics of the economy of salvation. A careful reading of Cyril's texts shows that he often uses the term "economy" (οἰκονομία)<sup>6</sup> to underscore the entirety of God's plan to redeem the world, placing special emphasis on the Incarnation, that is, everything Christ is and does in order to save us.<sup>7</sup> For Cyril, the economy is the "subject of the Bible."<sup>8</sup>

The *Festal Letters* display key characteristics of Cyril's exegesis of Scripture (primarily of the Old Testament) by which he elevates the spiritual meaning of the text over the literal or historical through allegory and *theoria*. His desire for proper understanding of the Law and covenant by means of spiritual interpretation gives rise to his negative assessment of Jewish exegesis and practice, sentiments that run throughout these letters. Cyril frequently accuses the

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<sup>4</sup> A. Davids, "Cyril of Alexandria's First Episcopal Years," in *The Impact of Scripture in Early Christianity*, eds. J. Den Boeft and Van de Lisdank (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 193. It should be noted that the traditional enumeration of Cyril's festal letters is 1-30, though due to a copyist error there is no letter 3 in the series. See Éveïux, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Éveïux, SC 372, 115 and Bernard Meunier, *Le Christ de Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1997), 17, 20-21.

<sup>6</sup> This term appears over 550 times in Cyril's corpus (according to the TLG).

<sup>7</sup> The economy forms the backdrop for much of Cyril's teaching on salvation throughout his writings. Some of the early *Festal Letters*, where he often puts Christ's saving activity in summary (almost bullet-point) form, provide some of the clearest examples. Cf. *FL* 1.6; 5.7; 8.4, 6; 11.8. See also O'Keefe, "Introduction," in *FC* 118, 10-11, 32.

<sup>8</sup> O'Keefe, "Introduction," 10.

Jews of hard-heartedness and a spiritual blindness that prevents them from understanding Scripture properly. In fact, he charges, their stubborn refusal to acknowledge truth led the Jews (in collusion with the devil) to deliver Christ to his executioners.<sup>9</sup>

Though Cyril seldom uses these letters as occasions to refer to events going on in his Alexandrian milieu, the tension between Jews and Christian during his first few years as bishop (414-418) explains why some of his fiercest anti-Jewish invectives are found in his earliest letters.<sup>10</sup> Sometime between 414 and 415, the large Jewish population was expelled from Alexandria, due, at least in part, to Cyril's scheming in retaliation for Jewish attacks on Christians.<sup>11</sup> The volatile relationship with the Jewish population only exacerbated Cyril's anti-Jewish sentiment that pre-existed his becoming bishop. As his *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra*, two of his earliest writings, demonstrate,<sup>12</sup> Cyril was concerned with Jewish spiritual customs and exegesis of Scripture at a very early stage in his career. His opposition toward Judaism propelled him to warn his readers, on many occasions, against Jewish errors, and to read the Bible through the lens of Christ. Reading through a Christological lens would help his readers make sense of Jewish institutions such as circumcision.

In his early *Festal Letters* Cyril brings up circumcision on three distinct occasions. On the first two occasions, in letters one and six (dated to 414 and 418, respectively), his purpose is twofold. First, he wants to point out Jewish misunderstanding as a foil for proper understanding

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *FL* 6.12 (SC 372, 395); 8.6 (SC 392, 111); 10.4 (SC 392, 239).

<sup>10</sup> To take but one example, see *FL* 1.5 (SC 372, 172): "For the mind of the Jews is filled with every impurity, and there is no wickedness which they have not honored."

<sup>11</sup> Tensions reached their boiling point when Cyril retaliated against the Jews for their complicity in the public flogging of Hierax, one of his associates, and the ambush and murder of many Christians after the Jews raised a false alarm of a church burning in the middle of the night, waited for the Christians to come out into the streets, and waylaid them. I treat this issue briefly in my Introduction, 7-8. On Cyril's anti-Jewish sentiments in the festal letters, see O'Keefe, "Introduction," 20-24 and Davids, "First Episcopal Years," 193-199.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428," in *Mélanges E. Podechard* (Lyons: Facultés catholiques, 1954), 170-171, believes these were written in the early 410s. However, most scholars concede that precise dating is difficult. See Lee Blackburn, "The Mystery of the Synagogue: Cyril of Alexandria and the Law of Moses," Ph.D Dissertation (Notre Dame), 2009, 28.



of Scripture through spiritual interpretation. Correct interpretation of Scripture proves that circumcision of the flesh, contrary to Jewish belief, has no benefit. Second, he re-interprets circumcision along soteriological lines, showing that on account of Christ what was a type has now been transformed into a new saving reality. On the third occasion, a section from his ninth letter, the meaning of circumcision is determined by a rule of exegesis according to which every main character or object in a given biblical passage acquires a spiritual meaning through allegory. Cyril's "spiritual" treatment of circumcision corresponds to what Meunier sees as the general structure of the *Festal Letters*; the comparison of the state of humanity and impossibility of salvation in the time of Adam with the promise of salvation in the time of Christ.<sup>13</sup> In what follows I will explore in greater detail the three texts where Cyril attempts to uncover the true meaning of circumcision.

#### Festal Letters One and Six

*Festal Letters* one and six were written in 414 and 418, respectively. Both announce the dates of Lent and Easter, encourage Christians to fast and do good works, and provide a brief outline of the major principles of the Christian faith. But each letter also contains its own historical and doctrinal particularities. *FL* 1 is Cyril's first festal letter to his diocese. The letter portrays a humble, young bishop who is taking his turn at carrying on the great tradition of sending Easter letters from Alexandria.<sup>14</sup> But the humility in tone is more than matched by the visceral language directed against the Jews. Throughout Cyril's life he maintained a critical attitude toward the Jews, but the early *Festal Letters* are especially vicious. Both *Festal Letters* one and six, having been written during those turbulent years in Alexandria when Christian and

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<sup>13</sup> Meunier, *Le Christ*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> It is probably not a coincidence that Cyril's first letter mimics, on several accounts, the first *Festal Letter* of Athanasius for whom he has profound admiration. See Éviéux, SC 372, 139.

Jewish tensions were high, contain sharp diatribes against Jewish “misunderstanding” of Scripture and “empty” religious practice. The criticism of Jewish interpretation that pervades these letters throws into relief Cyril’s interpretation of circumcision.

In the letters, one of Cyril’s tactics is to prove what circumcision is *not* before advancing his own explanation based on a spiritual method of interpretation. In doing so, he draws a stark contrast between Christian and Jewish views. In *FL* 1 he begins almost immediately to lay out a dichotomy between the spiritual and the corporeal by proclaiming to his hearers that the holy festival invites them to ascend to the “spiritual Jerusalem” and perpetuates the desire for a life of godliness. Cyril often identifies the “spiritual Jerusalem” as heaven or the Church,<sup>15</sup> but in this instance the phrase connotes an inward spiritual reality. He makes this clear through his use of Jeremiah 28:50 (LXX) (“You who are saved, go out from the land, remember the Lord from afar, and let Jerusalem arise in your heart”) and I Corinthians 9:24 (“Run so as to win the prize”) in conjunction with a call to cast off laziness and idleness, and pursue virtue in light of the approaching paschal feast.<sup>16</sup> The “spiritual Jerusalem” Cyril describes is an attitude of the heart that stands ready to cast off all darkness, put on holiness, and receive the illumination of the holy feast. He contrasts this new spiritual condition of the heart with the stubbornness and ignorance of the Jews who hold fast to worshipping God according to type (τύπον) and corporeality (σωματικῆς). Cyril uses Isaiah 1:11-12 (LXX) (“‘What is the multitude of your sacrifices to me?’ says the Lord. ‘I have had my fill of sacrifices of holocausts of rams, and I do not desire the fat of lambs and the blood of bulls and goats; not even if you come to appear before me.’”)

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. *FL* 5.3 (SC 372, 292-300), 6.11 (SC 372, 384-392), 9.2 (SC 392, 126-138).

<sup>16</sup> *FL* 1.1 (SC 372, 145).

as biblical evidence that Jewish worship customs and the sacrificial system are tied to what is corporeal. The Jews do not accept the reality established through Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Next, he intimates the close relationship between the empty forms of worship and physical circumcision, an operation he deems meaningless. Cyril expands his dichotomy between the spiritual and corporeal to include worship and circumcision in order to demonstrate that Jewish traditions and rites have been transformed. He correlates the move from figurative worship to worship in the Spirit with “the true circumcision of the heart.”<sup>18</sup> Those who have been spiritually circumcised reveal their new heart condition through worship that is carried out in the Spirit. Cyril’s point is that physical circumcision, like the historical city of Jerusalem and Old Testament worship structures, was a type pointing to something spiritual. The religious ritual itself cannot save. Rather, its very meaning has been changed since the advent of Jesus Christ.

The futility of physical circumcision is expressed in an even more pronounced manner in *FL* 6. Cyril writes the bulk of this letter in fierce a polemical tone. At first he spends considerable energy admonishing idolaters, astrologers, and those who adhere to notions of fatalism which claim that humans have no free will, and that the outcome of every life depends on one’s natal situation.<sup>19</sup> After his blistering screed against the pagans, he turns his attention to the Jews. As in his first festal letter, Cyril’s attack centers on Jewish interpretations of Scripture and their continued devotion to “types and shadows.” He begins his address crying out, “How long, O Jew, will you pass by the power of the truth, hanging on to the types from the letter? When will the end of your ignorance be seen? When will you detach your mind from the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> *FL* 6.3-5 (SC 372, 344-362). *Festal Letter 6* is evidence that Cyril continued to be concerned with pagan thought even though its influence was ebbing in Alexandria at the dawn of the fifth century.

shadow of the Law (τῆς ἐν νόμῳ σκιᾶς)?”<sup>20</sup> He accuses the Jews of failing to worship “in spirit and in truth”<sup>21</sup> and sets out to contrast type with reality by exploring the nature of circumcision and Sabbath observance.

Cyril insists throughout his writings that physical circumcision is spiritually empty. Romans 2:28-29 is his preferred text for contrasting the circumcision of the flesh with the circumcision of the heart. It is common for him to quote or allude to this passage when the meaning of circumcision is in question. However, in *FL* 6.7 he takes an extreme position we find nowhere else in his corpus. He is not content to question the benefits of circumcision or dismiss it as a meaningless operation pertaining to the flesh as he does elsewhere. Instead, he eschews it as “ridiculous” (γέλοιος) and contrary to nature.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Cyril wonders why cutting should apply to the part of the body responsible for procreation. He finds no logical explanation for taking a knife to the penis, especially since nature does not require circumcision for conjugal relations. To him, cutting off one’s foreskin goes against the natural order of things.<sup>23</sup>

Further, circumcision calls into question God’s skill and planning in creation. When one takes an infant and cuts off part of the body at such a young age, it suggests that God has weighed the body down with superfluous parts (εἰκαίοις τισὶ περιττώμασι).<sup>24</sup> If this is the case, it follows that what God created is imperfect and unfitting in some way. Cyril’s argument

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<sup>20</sup> *FL* 6.6 (SC 372, 364).

<sup>21</sup> Jn 4:24. This is a favorite Scriptural phrase for Cyril when engaged in polemics with the Jews. It also forms the basis for the title of his first work on the Old Testament, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*. See also Robert Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (1971; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 69-92.

<sup>22</sup> *FL* 6.7 (SC 372, 366). See also Davids, “First Episcopal Years,” 198.

<sup>23</sup> Cyril’s sentiment here is contrary to what he will later espouse in his *Commentary on John* 7:24, where he agrees with earlier thinkers like Philo and Origen, stressing that circumcision symbolized the cutting off of the passions, thus showing the fittingness of applying a knife to the penis. Although Cyril’s position seems extreme in *FL* 6.7, he never goes as far as the *Epistle of Barnabas* 9:4, which claims that circumcision came about when an evil angel tricked the Jews into self-mutilation. See Chapter Two, pp. 61-62.

<sup>24</sup> *FL* 6.7 (SC 372, 366). Both the SC and FC translators have “vain excrescences” for this phrase. See FC 118, 113.

here derives from an important anthropological principle. Man was made in the image of God and is superior to the rest of creation.<sup>25</sup> How, then, could that which reflects the divine image contain excesses in need of correction? In addition, he observes that God, the all-knowing artisan, fashioned the irrational beasts. But in no case are animals circumcised. Does this mean that what God created as the highest (i.e. humanity) lacks the beauty and wholeness of what is lesser (i.e. animals)? Cyril asks (with a hint of sarcasm) how God in his foreknowledge created the animals with precision but erred in some way when it came to humans who are created in his image.<sup>26</sup> If circumcision was needed to correct where God had erred, it would have been applied to Adam in the garden. Cyril declares that the God who fashioned all things, created man in his own image, and fixed the laws of nature reveals nothing advantageous about circumcision. The only reason circumcision continues to be a matter of importance to the Jews, Cyril claims, is because of their ignorance and inability to comprehend the transcendent wisdom of God. Instead, they settle for what is grasped by the senses.<sup>27</sup>

After demonstrating that circumcision is both unnecessary and unnatural, Cyril switches from a prosecutorial to an instructional tone. Setting aside his polemics (at least for the moment), he takes an honest assessment of important questions about circumcision. The divine Lawgiver (νομοθέτης)<sup>28</sup> did command through Moses that a male infant must be circumcised on the eighth day and presented to the Lord after the sacrifice had been offered on his behalf. Cyril sets out to determine why the Law prescribed circumcision, but he does so in order to lay out the

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<sup>25</sup> For an excellent overview of the *imago dei* according to Cyril, see Walter Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man According to Cyril of Alexandria* (1957; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> See FL 6.7 (SC 372, 367, n.1): “Puisque la nature humaine est le sommet de la création et qu’elle est à l’image de Dieu, Dieu ne peut l’avoir créée moins parfaite que les animaux qui, eux, n’ont rien de superflu.”

<sup>27</sup> FL 6.7 (SC 372, 364-368).

<sup>28</sup> Cyril uses this term for God a number of times in this section of the letter, something he did not do in his earlier attack against the pagans, preferring instead names such as Ποιητής (Creator or Artificer). It is possible that this is a strategic move on Cyril’s part since he is trying to demonstrate the meaning hidden in the law with its types and shadows through examining the character and will of the Lawgiver himself.

higher meanings it represents. We now come full circle. In *Festal Letters* 1 and 6 Cyril insists that the Jewish understanding of circumcision is stuck in the types and shadows of the law, runs contrary to a Christian anthropology, and serves no redeeming purpose from the perspective of nature. But, as I will show in the following paragraphs, both letters also convey Cyril's positive, soteriological vision of circumcision when it is understood spiritually.

In *FL* 1, Cyril examines circumcision's higher meaning within the context of worship. He implies that true circumcision is a commitment to leave behind useless forms of worship and engage in spiritual worship. Those who worship God "in the Spirit" reveal "the true circumcision of the heart"<sup>29</sup> – a heart that has abandoned the ungodliness of worship according to corporeality and committed to spiritual realities. In other words, circumcision of the heart indicates repentance; a turn from pursuing the type to the reality. But repentance is more than a simple change of mind or shift in preference. Cyril warns that those invited to the divine festival of the Resurrection must present themselves in purity. He reminds his readers that since Christ descended and became man, they too must forsake the "old man" and put on the new one.<sup>30</sup> Then he recalls God's exhortation to the inhabitants of Judah to repent, wherein the prophet Jeremiah cries out, "Plough fallow ground for yourselves and do not sow among thorns. Be circumcised to God and circumcise your hard hearts."<sup>31</sup> Cyril correlates the thorny soil and hardness of heart expressed by Jeremiah with a mind (διάνοια) that is overcome and made barren with ungodliness. This ungodliness consists of maintaining the corporeal forms of worship rather than worship in the Spirit. Cyril insists that the actualization of repentance involves a two-fold process.

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<sup>29</sup> *FL* 1.1 (SC 372, 144).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Col. 3:10.

<sup>31</sup> Jer. 4:3-4 (LXX).

First, the mind must be purified. Here Cyril views circumcision as a metaphor for cutting away all vice from the heart. Physically the operation removes skin; spiritually it symbolizes the removal of sin and opens us up to contemplate God according to truth rather than shadow. Second, when the heart is purified through spiritual circumcision we can receive the “good seed”<sup>32</sup> of Christ whose teachings draw us away from corporeal worship and renew us for salvation. Cyril, alluding to Romans 2:28-29, proclaims that this purification process shows God the “Jew who is hidden” and the “circumcision that is hidden.”<sup>33</sup> The one in whom this is true can celebrate the feast with divine sanction. Thus, circumcision of the heart indicates repentance – a turn to what is real and good – and a symbol of purification according to Cyril’s first *Festal Letter*.

Cyril’s discourse on circumcision in *FL* 6 is similar to *FL* 1 insofar as an anti-Jewish polemic forms the backdrop. The discussion in *FL* 1 concerns Jewish commitment to the Old Testament forms of worship and ignorance of worship in the Spirit. Cyril names circumcision as an example of Jewish ignorance, and tries to demonstrate how much more valuable is the “hidden” spiritual circumcision than the literal one. *FL* 6, on the other hand, goes into much greater detail. After Cyril ridicules the Jews for holding to something so foolish and contrary to nature, he attempts to explain why circumcision was ever commanded in the first place, and what spiritual truths may be derived from it. He attempts to show the Jews that the all-wise God only intended circumcision to serve as a temporary sign pointing to a greater, spiritual reality.

Cyril begins to unpack the true meaning of circumcision in *FL* 6.8 by placing it within a traditional Greek Christian anthropology.<sup>34</sup> His idea of human nature derives from his reading of

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<sup>32</sup> Cyril is alluding to Jesus’ parable of the sower. Cf. Mt. 13:1-9; Mk. 4:1-8; Lk. 8:5-11

<sup>33</sup> *FL* 1.1 (SC 372, 146).

<sup>34</sup> Davids, “First Episcopal Years,” 196. Though Cyril was probably not aware of it, the important work *De natura hominis*, written in the late fourth or early fifth century by Nemesis of Emesa, sheds light on Christian

Scripture through a theological lens influenced by his Alexandrian predecessors such as Philo, Clement, Origen, and Athanasius. Other non-Alexandrian sources, such as Gregory of Nyssa, likely influenced him as well.<sup>35</sup> There are at least three basic ideas shared among most Greek Christians thinkers which comprise the theological anthropology that Cyril follows here. First, man is a composite being made up of earthly body and rational (λογικός) soul.<sup>36</sup> Second, as a rational creature man bears the image of God in the mind (νοῦς).<sup>37</sup> Third, the mind contains the

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views of anthropology informed by classical sources such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Galen and possibly Posidonius of Apamea. See *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesis of Emesa*, trans. William Telfer (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955), 203-453. Nemesis explores the intricacies of human being such as the body-soul relationship, the physical senses, the faculties of intellect, memory, thought and expression, and the passions. His work ends with inquiries into the human will and divine providence.

<sup>35</sup> On Gregory's possible influence on Cyril, we observe close parallels between the two writers. Since Cyril does not appear to quote Gregory in his writings, the influence is more suggested than empirically proven. Some of the close parallels are treated in Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul Onica (1938; repr., Anaheim: A & C Press, 2002), 228; Daniel Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 153-155; and Marie-Odile Boulnois, *Le paradoxe Trinitaire chez Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1994), 516, n. 300. McGuckin lists Gregory's *Oratione 1: De Beatitudine* as a text Cyril used in the Christological discussions at Ephesus. See his *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 86. On Gregory's anthropology and its relation to Cyril's, see Gregory's *De hominis opificio* 11 and 16, hereafter, *De hom. op.* Runia observes that Philo's *De opificio mundi* is particularly influential on Gregory's understanding of man imaging God through his rational part. See *Philo of Alexandria: On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*, commentary and trans. David T. Runia (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 235. Cyril is drawing from the same tradition. See also Burghardt, 30-31.

<sup>36</sup> R. A. Norris, *Manhood and Christ* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), 21, claims that the idea of man as a composite being is "a commonplace of all Greek anthropology."

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Philo, *De opificio mundi* XXIII.69, trans. G.H. Whitaker, LCL 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929), 55, where he reflects on man as the image of God in Genesis 1:26, observing that "nothing earth-born is more like God than man. Let no one represent the likeness as one to a bodily form; for neither is God in human form, nor is the human body God-like. No, it is in respect of the Mind (νοῦς), the sovereign element of the soul, that the word 'image' (εἰκών) is used; for after the pattern of the single Mind, even the Mind of the Universe as an archetype, the mind in each of those who successively came into being was moulded." On Clement of Alexandria see *Stromateis* 5.14 (hereafter, *Strom.*) where he distinguishes between the image of God as the Logos and the "image of the image," which is the human mind. See ANF vol. 2. ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 466. See also *Strom.* 2.19.102, where Clement insists that "the words 'after the image and likeness,' as we have said before, are not directed to physical matters – it is not right to compare mortal and immortal – but to intellect and reason, whereby the Lord can stamp his seal appropriately on the likeness related to his beneficence and his authority," in *Clement of Alexandria, Stromateis Books 1-3*, trans. John Ferguson, FC 85 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 225. On Origen see *On First Principles* IV.4.10, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Goucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 327-328 (hereafter *De Prin.*), and *Contra Celsum* VII.66, trans. Marcel Borret, SC 150 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 166-168. For helpful studies on Origen's theological anthropology, see J. José Pamplona, "A Second Look at Origen's Notion of 'Rationality,'" *Studia Patristica* 46 (2010): 195-199, Jean Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: Association André Robert, 1986), 251-258; Jacques Dupuis, *L'esprit de l'homme: Étude sur l'anthropologie religieuse d'Origène* (Paris: Bruges, 1967); Henri Crouzel, *Origène et la 'connaissance mystique'* (Paris: Aubier, 1956). On Athanasius see *De Incarnatione* 13 (trans. Thompson, 164-166) and *Contra gentes* 31 (trans. Thompson, 84-86).



potential for virtue as well as vice.<sup>38</sup> Philo's assessment on this final point serves as a helpful representative of Alexandrian anthropology. He observes that the mind contains both virtue and vice, and that man is of a "mixed nature" (τῆς μικτῆς φύσεως) who is "liable to contraries, wisdom and folly, self-mastery and licentiousness, courage and cowardice, justice and injustice, and (in a word) to things good and evil, fair and foul, to virtue and vice."<sup>39</sup>

So how exactly does the mind image God? Some thinkers, such as Athanasius, held that the mind images God by virtue of its participation in the Logos.<sup>40</sup> Through participation in the Logos, man is properly rational (λογικοί), set apart from other creatures, and given access to knowledge of the Father.<sup>41</sup> Athanasius describes this design in man's creation as a gratuitous act of God: "He [God] bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked – namely, the impress of His own Image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God even as He does, though in limited degree, they might continue for ever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise."<sup>42</sup> The Fall occasioned the Incarnation of the Word, who sought to renew the image of God in man and restore participation.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Clement: "The real image of God is a human being who does good to others, and in so doing receives benefit, rather as a pilot in keeping others safe keeps himself safe at the same time"; see *Strom.* II.19.102 (FC 85, 225). See also *Strom.* II.19.97 (FC 221-222) and III.5.42 (FC 282-282). Origen asserts that the mind cannot exist without movement, whether good or evil, in *De Prin.* III.3.5 (trans. Butterworth, 227-228). Cf. *Contra Celsum* VII.66 (SC 150, 166-168). Burghardt, *Image of God*, 27, draws attention to Origen's *Selecta in Genesim* (PG 12, 96), where Origen claims that the rational soul has "the faculty of achieving all that is noble and good." On Athanasius, see *De Incarnatione* 3, trans. Robert Thompson, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 138-142, where he explores the freedom of man's will to do either good or evil at creation. Cf. *Contra gentes* 30, trans. Robert Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 82-84. On Athanasius' anthropology, see Thomas Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), esp. 19-21 and Peter Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 147-171.

<sup>39</sup> *De opificio mundi* XXIV.73 (LCL, 59).

<sup>40</sup> Athanasius states that "the race of men was being destroyed, and man who was rational (λογικός) and who had been made in the image was being obliterated; and the work created by God was perishing." He further insists that "it would have been improper that what had once been created rational and had partaken (μετασχόντα) of his Word, should perish and return again to non-existence through corruption." *De Inc.* 6 (trans. Thompson, 146-149).

<sup>41</sup> Burghardt, *Image of God*, 28-29.

<sup>42</sup> *De Inc.* I.3, 28. Cf. *Ibid.*, III.11.

Cyril follows the general trajectory established by his forerunners at the outset of *FL* 6.8 where he explains the nature of the mind (νοῦς). “Mind” is fundamental to Cyril’s anthropology, but it is also an important concept in his soteriology. He believes that the mind within us “is by nature the most fertile of all things, having in itself the seeds of every virtue, and furnishing continually from its own movements, as from a spring, the desires for what is best in every case.”<sup>43</sup> As Burghardt observes, Cyril believes that “the human mind is the most productive, the most fruitful possession of our nature.”<sup>44</sup> From the earliest stages of his episcopacy, Cyril understood that God created the mind with the means necessary to conform to himself. For example, in his *De adoratione*, written roughly five years prior to *FL* 6, Cyril claims that correct (ὀρθή), blameless (ἀδιάβλητος), and righteous judgment (δικαιοκρισία) have been implanted naturally in the rational faculty.<sup>45</sup> This principle of a God-implanted ability to act and judge righteously is consistent throughout his writings.<sup>46</sup> In his *Commentary on John*, written around 425, he expounds further upon the virtues divinely planted in the mind in a way reminiscent of *FL* 6.8:

But the Word of God enlightens every man coming into the world, not by means of instruction as is the case with angels and men, but rather as God in a creative way he puts in each of those who are called into being a seed of wisdom (σοφίας), or of the knowledge of God (θεογνωσίας), and implants a root of comprehension (σύνεσις), and thus renders the living being rational (λογικόν), rendering it a partaker of His [the Word’s] proper nature and, in the manner and way known to Him, implants in the mind luminous vapors (ἀτμούς φωτοειδεῖς) of the inexpressible splendor.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *FL* 6.8 (trans. Amidon, FC 118, 113).

<sup>44</sup> Burghardt, *Image of God*, 39.

<sup>45</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 740). Cf. Burghardt, 39.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Com. Is.* 24.5 (PG 70, 540): “We thus give our explanation of the thinking a general bearing by claiming that in the beginning the God of all created human beings and imprinted in them a natural law to guide them to a knowledge of good and evil. This, in my view, is what is stated in John in reference to the only Son of God, ‘He was the true light which enlightens everyone coming into the world.’” Here I am using Robert Hill’s translation in *Commentary on Isaiah: Chapters 15-29*, vol. 2 (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2009), 108-109.

<sup>47</sup> *In Jo* 1:9, ed. P. E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostril Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872), 1:111. Cf. *In Jo.* 1:14 (Pusey, I, 138), where Cyril describes man as a rational but composite being, having received incorruption from through the seal of the Spirit and participation in God. Cyril echoes this again in *In Jo.* 7:39 (Pusey, I, 691). See also *In Jo.* 13:12-15 (Pusey, II, 353).

Here Cyril integrates his main anthropological principles. The mind is illuminated with rationality, wisdom, and understanding through gracious participation in the Logos. Rationality does not derive from man's bare physical nature; rather, it is bestowed through divine participation.<sup>48</sup> Insofar as the mind receives these supernatural gifts, Cyril believes that man images God in his mind.<sup>49</sup>

However, Cyril warns that vice may spring up in the mind and become distorted through deceits, passions, appetites, and irrational movements of the flesh.<sup>50</sup> Every man receives the "luminous vapors" of the Word by which one becomes rational and able to choose the good. However, the mind is unstable and, left on its own accord, unable to remain in holiness. Only when it partakes salvifically in the Logos does the rational person enjoy stability and sanctification.<sup>51</sup> But if the mind becomes ensnared, it will be dissuaded from goodness and fall under the dominion of the devil. Therefore, Cyril often admonishes his readers to "bend the neck of the mind," a traditional metaphor used to describe one's submission either to God or to Satan,<sup>52</sup> because the mind is the locus of all desires, whether good or evil. Cyril depicts the mind as the center of God's saving activity in human beings while maintaining that salvation affects the whole person on account of the Incarnation. Commonplace soteriological motifs that Cyril relates to the mind include (but are not limited to) illumination by the Spirit, purification, enrichment with grace, and re-orientation to holiness. In his *Commentary on Micah 7.7*, Cyril describes salvation itself as "the eventual direction of the mind away from the former deceit, choosing now to adopt right attitudes instead, and believing that the Lord of all is the very source

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<sup>48</sup> On this concept in Gregory of Nyssa, see his *De hom. op.* 2 (PG 44, 133), 11 (156), and 16 (185). Cf. Norris, 38-39.

<sup>49</sup> Burghardt, *Image of God*, 34-39. Burghardt's essay is instructive because of the texts he highlights and his insightful parsing of Cyril's often elusive, ambiguous language concerning the image of God in man.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *FL* 1.3 (SC 372, 158-162); *Com. Hos.* 7:6 (Pusey, I, 157).

<sup>51</sup> *In Jo.* 17:18-19 (Pusey, II, 726).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Com. Hos.* 11.11 (Pusey, I, 239); *Com. Is.* 41:2-4 (PG 70, 829).

and governor of salvation.”<sup>53</sup> Shortly thereafter he reaffirms that spiritual revival includes a “change of mind for the better and an option to do what is useful.”<sup>54</sup> For Cyril, the mind is the focal point of God’s saving work in human nature.

Within this theological landscape Cyril warns of specific spiritual dangers that plague the mind. Although it contains the seeds of virtue and the desires for what is spiritual, something obstructs it. There is a principle at work which dampens the desire for goodness and produces new impulses antithetical to virtue. Cyril identifies this as λήθη. The word, best translated in this context as “forgetfulness,” is a term found in Greek-speaking writers (both Christian and pagan) and in the majority of contexts its function is mundane.<sup>55</sup> Its basic meaning denotes either the act of forgetting or a state of forgetfulness or oblivion.<sup>56</sup> The word appears in this basic sense many times throughout Cyril’s writings. But in *FL* 6.8 he fills the concept with a more nuanced, theological meaning that goes well beyond the common failure to remember something.<sup>57</sup> That Cyril defines “forgetfulness” theologically is important for our purposes

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<sup>53</sup> *Commentary on Micah 7.7*, trans. Robert Hill, FC 116 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 265.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> The word does have a history in ancient Greek mythology where the river “Lethe” is considered one of the rivers of the underworld as well as an inescapable chair used by Hades. See Richard Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 129, 208. Plato alludes to the “river Lethe” while retelling the myth of Er in his *Republic* XI.10.3. See *Platonis opera*, vol. 4, ed. J. Burnet (1902; repr. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 621. Cf. Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* III.13, where he refers to the goddess Leto as a type of oblivion (ληθώ) in *Eusebius Werke, Band 8: Die Praeparatio evangelica*, ed. K. Mras, GSC 43:2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1954-1956). Cyril relied on this text for access to classical sources when composing his *Contra Julian*.

<sup>56</sup> Lampe, 799; LSJ, 1044

<sup>57</sup> The way Cyril uses the term λήθη is curious, in part, because it is not a standard Scriptural term for sin. Cyril rarely deviates from using biblical language when commenting on something so fundamental. It seems that, given the whole scope of *FL* 6, he may be using “forgetfulness” in 6.8 along the same lines as “law of flesh” in 6.2 as another way to underscore human fallenness (see below). It is also possible that he is borrowing from pagan sources; something he does not often do. It is tempting to posit a partial dependence on Plotinus’ *Ennead* V.1 (a passage with which Cyril was familiar) because of the way Plotinus unpacks the lamentable effects forgetfulness of God has on the soul. We find something similar in Athanasius’ *Contra Gentes* 3-4 when he describes the effects of the Fall. It is possible that Cyril picks up the concept of forgetfulness from Athanasius, or from both Athanasius and Plotinus. He may also have been familiar with the similar concept of ἀβουλία found in Gregory of Nyssa’s *Catechetical Oration* 5-7. Overall, it is likely that his excellent education, access to pagan sources (when he needed them), and position in an intellectual milieu like Alexandria prompted him, when convenient, to make use of helpful resources outside the Bible and the established Christian tradition.

because he outlines the spiritual implications of forgetfulness on the mind against the backdrop of true circumcision. The way Cyril lays out his topics for discussion should not be overlooked: he presents the mind and forgetfulness immediately *after* he lets his readers know of his intention to seek out the hidden meaning of circumcision. The sequence reveals that whatever havoc forgetfulness may wreak upon the mind, circumcision of the Spirit is the soteriological remedy.

Cyril ascribes to forgetfulness several characteristics. First, he highlights its inherent quality, noting that it stems from an “innate root” (ἐμφύτου ῥίζης). It is not something extrinsic that imposes itself on the mind, but arises from within. Again, the mind contains the seeds of virtue, but also that which gives rise to what opposes virtue. Cyril portrays forgetfulness as a shrouding veil or a mist that covers the mind and douses any impulse for righteousness. The picture he paints resembles a wild, unruly vine. It springs up from its root and eventually smothers its surroundings, choking life from everything in its path.<sup>58</sup>

Second, and most significant, Cyril identifies forgetfulness as the source of all impurity (ἢ καὶ πάσης ἐστὶν ἀκαθαρσίας τροφός).<sup>59</sup> It gives rise to a raft of “evils” including ignorance of God. In addition, forgetfulness vitiates the power to act according to goodness. Spiritual vitality produced by the seeds of virtue is deadened and the mind regresses to an earthly mentality. Forgetfulness causes a degenerative spiritual condition, rendering us impure and therefore abhorrent before God.<sup>60</sup> This portrayal of forgetfulness is interesting because Cyril rarely identifies one cause or phenomenon as the source of “all impurity.” When he does speak of sin and its causes, he often refers to man’s inherent instability,<sup>61</sup> the passions, the deceptions of

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<sup>58</sup> For those who have lived in the southern United States, the kudzu plant comes to mind as a useful analogy.

<sup>59</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 370).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* See also Basil’s *Longer Rule* 6 (PG 31, 928) where he warns of the “deadly evil” that results when the soul gets distracted and thus grows accustomed to forgetfulness (λήθη). It is possible that Basil too is an influence on Cyril’s concept of forgetfulness, but this is not certain.

<sup>61</sup> David Maxwell, “Sin in Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on John*,” *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 4 (2005): 376-383.

the devil, or hard-heartedness caused by unbelief. He also underscores Adam's transgression through which the human race was infected with corruption and death.<sup>62</sup>

Further, there is an interesting parallel between Cyril's descriptions of forgetfulness in 6.8 and the "law of flesh" in 6.2, an idea he construes using Romans 7:22-23.<sup>63</sup> Both are innate (ἐμφύτος), both bend the mind toward what is contrary to God, and both are overcome in similar ways. Though not identical, both concepts function the same way in Cyril's doctrine of sin; they accentuate man's fallen condition and innate tendency to do what is contrary to God's will. Overall, Cyril's doctrine of sin is multi-faceted, but "forgetfulness" is not a common idea in his bank of hamartiological terms.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, we see that in Cyril's view impurity, spiritual ignorance, sinful desires, and all other evils arise from forgetfulness which acts as a poisonous spring within the mind. If unchecked, it cuts off the soul from the life of God.

The intersection of anthropology and hamartiology in *FL* 6.8 sets the stage for Cyril's soteriological interpretation of circumcision. In light of the arresting effects of forgetfulness, Cyril puts forth a two-pronged remedy that restores the mind (the image of God) to a spiritual condition rather than an earthly one. The first prong of restoration is remembrance of the good,<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> For an excellent summary on the place of corruption in Cyril's theology, see John O'Keefe, "The Persistence of Decay: Bodily Disintegration and Cyrillian Christology," in *In the Shadow of the Incarnation*, Peter Martens, ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 228-245. Cf. Burghardt, *Image of God*, 84-104.

<sup>63</sup> Cyril outlines the law of flesh in some detail in *FL* 6.2: "There is innate in the members of our flesh a certain law which is natural and, so to speak, akin, and which musters us in arms against the Creator God, and sets our own thoughts in opposition to the desires of the Spirit. Hence arise arguments in us, and a countless swarm of disorderly desires opposed to the inclinations which draw us in the better direction, as though they had ranged themselves like a crowd of enemy troops against our impulses toward what is beneficial." See FC 118, 102.

<sup>64</sup> We do see rare glimpses in other places in his corpus, notably in his *Com. Hos.* 13:5-6, where he associates forgetting with insensitivity and ingratitude towards God. When one is not mindful of God's commands and provisions, it produces "ruin" and provokes God to anger. One who shows ingratitude is guilty of blasphemy, Cyril warns. See *Com. Hos.* 13.5-6 (FC 115, 239-240). For other references, though not quite so clear, see *In Jo.* 3:28 (Pusey, I, 236), 14:28 (Pusey, II, 511-512). However, passages like this are rare.

<sup>65</sup> Cyril's idea of remembering the good is similar to the concept of *anamnesis*, or the "memory of God" (μνήμη τοῦ θεοῦ) found in ascetical and liturgical literature such as the *Life of Pachomius*, the Anaphora prayer of Basil, the Liturgy of John Chrysostom, and scattered throughout Basil's *Longer* and *Shorter Rules*. This denotes the activity of calling something to mind, while the goal for the believer is to bring the memory of God's goodness into the present and, through remembering, to become a temple of God. On the exercise of remembering in Basil and others, see Augustine Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil* (London: Darton,

which, like water poured upon a fire, extinguishes the wickedness arising from forgetfulness.<sup>66</sup>

The second prong, and the one on which Cyril elaborates most, is a multi-dimensional transformation (μεταστοιχείωσις) brought about by circumcision of the Spirit. Cyril's explanation of spiritual circumcision is complex and his sequence is sometimes difficult to follow, but throughout his discourse we can detect two overarching themes; the spiritual, soteriological value of circumcision ascertained through contemplation (θεωρία), and the role of Christ in presenting us to the Father as the fulfillment of the circumcision-sacrifice-presentation practiced in the Mosaic law.

### *The Spiritual Value of Circumcision*

In *FL* 6.8, one of Cyril's aims is to determine what circumcision symbolizes, given that, as he has shown, the physical rite has no saving benefit.<sup>67</sup> The answer is found through the interpretive practice of *theoria* (θεωρία), a term indicating spiritual contemplation or vision, by which the reader seeks to understand the deeper meaning of the biblical text (primarily in the Old Testament) beyond the bare "letter" (γράμμα).<sup>68</sup> Though Cyril would have made no academic distinction between *theoria* and "allegory" (in fact, Cyril almost never uses the terms

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Longman and Todd Ltd, 2000), 107-124. Holmes, 122, asserts that the "memory of God" motif was "a part of the general inheritance of Egyptian monastic wisdom." If, as some scholars suggest, Cyril spent several years with the desert monks as part of his education and spiritual formation, it is possible that the idea is playing out, even to a limited degree, in this *Festal Letter*. Further, the "memory of God" motif is also found in earlier Alexandrian writers such as Philo (*De Vita Contemplativa* 26) and Origen (*Fragmenta in Psalmos* 76.4), though it does not appear to loom large in their writings.

<sup>66</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 370).

<sup>67</sup> *FL* 6.7 (SC 372, 368). The term Cyril uses for the thing to be "envisioned" is τὸ θεώρημα.

<sup>68</sup> Kerrigan, *Interpreter of the Old Testament*, 190, observes that Cyril often favors the term "spiritual contemplation" (θεωρία πνευματική) to designate the spiritual sense of Scripture. For the role of *theoria* and *theoria pneumatike* in Cyril, see Alexander Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952), 116-122, 190-191, 233-239; Lois Farag, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, A New Testament Exegete* (Gorgias Press, 2007), 199-243; Steven McKinion, *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 25-39.

ἀλληγορέω or ἀλληγορία),<sup>69</sup> the latter came to be defined narrowly where a passage's literal sense – its words, characters, events – is not the true (or full) meaning. Rather, the “plain” sense points to a spiritual reality beyond itself.<sup>70</sup>

In *FL* 6.8 Cyril's use of *theoria* takes into account the historicity of physical circumcision but claims that, as a type, it points to a deeper significance.<sup>71</sup> Reading Scripture through the lens of *theoria*, Cyril attempts to get “underneath” the literal rendering of circumcision in the Old Testament, or at least adherence to its historical practice, in order to determine the deeper, spiritual meaning consonant with the *telos* of Scripture that the Spirit intended.<sup>72</sup> Cyril regards the “letter” as the representation of God's truth in shadows (σκιᾶς) that obscures the spiritual reality lying beneath it.<sup>73</sup> Hence, he believes that fleshly circumcision prescribed under the Old Testament law is historical but ineffectual for salvation because it falls under the category of shadow and type. Therefore, Cyril claims, discerning the beauty of the truth must come not through the simple reading of the law, but through contemplation of it. He reinforces here what he had asserted in *FL* 1: circumcising the flesh is a type that has been fulfilled in Christ, and no

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<sup>69</sup> Farag, *New Testament Exegete*, 242; Kerrigan, *Interpreter of the Old Testament*, 115. See also Joseph Trigg, “Origen and Cyril of Alexandria: Continuities and Discontinuities in the Approach to the *Gospel of John*,” in *Origeniana octava II* (Leuven: University Press, 2003), 955-965. One of Trigg's most helpful contributions is warning that speaking of a common, distinct “Alexandrian” tradition of biblical interpretation does more to obscure than to clarify. See Chapter Five, 165, n. 11.

<sup>70</sup> John O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 89-113. For other helpful studies, see Lewis Ayres, “‘There's Fire in the Rain': On Reading the Letter and Reading Allegorically,” *Modern Theology* 28:4 (Oct., 2012): 616-634; Peter Martens, “Origen against History? Reconsidering the Critique of Allegory,” *Modern Theology* 28:4 (Oct., 2012): 635-656; David Dawson, *Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Christian Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); R. C. P. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Source and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1959).

<sup>71</sup> Farag, *New Testament Exegete*, 242-243, explains that for Cyril, “scriptures did not describe one thing using the image of another; rather, the Old Testament was a type of the truth that is unveiled in the New Testament. It is discovering the transformation of the type to the truth. It is not an abstract image to convey another image or message, but rather the type itself holds truth, and transformation does not diminish or destroy the type.”

<sup>72</sup> Kerrigan, *Interpreter of the Old Testament*, 191. See also J. David Cassel, “Key Principles in Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis,” *Studia Patristica* 37 (2007): 413-420.

<sup>73</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 374). Cyril's language of “shadows and types” describing the old law compared to the new reality in Christ is constant throughout his writings. For a classic summary see Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, 69-92.



longer needs to be practiced. Indeed, Christ has appeared to transform it into the reality to which it always referred. Physical circumcision thus has no bearing on salvation, but when its meaning is clarified through the practice of *theoria*, it stands as a symbol of the circumcision of the Spirit which is the purification of the heart (τὸν ἐν καρδίᾳ καθαρισμόν).<sup>74</sup>

Cyril comes to this conclusion with the assistance of Romans 2:28-29, a passage that conveys the real significance of fleshly circumcision. Here Paul reaps the fruit of contemplative interpretation of the law, proposing that true circumcision is not external, but internal; spiritual, not literal. Further, Cyril admonishes the Jews because even before Paul explained circumcision's meaning in his epistle, they received the mandate of true circumcision in their own Scriptures through the prophet Jeremiah. Cyril notes that Jeremiah 4:3-4, a passage to which he turns regularly when discussing circumcision, also uncovers the mystery of circumcision. Through it, God was revealing to the Jews the reality of heart purification even before the law was fulfilled in Christ. Thus, Cyril warns, anyone who still insists on being circumcised in the flesh does not do so for God because God no longer desires the physical operation, but a new condition of the heart.<sup>75</sup>

But of what does spiritual circumcision purify the heart? Cyril does not say directly, and perhaps the answer is obvious. However, in my opinion, he connects the concept of purification of the heart to the disease of forgetfulness which he describes at the beginning of the section. Beyond the act of remembering what is best in order to counter forgetfulness, Cyril asserts that we must also “cut off (ἀποτέμνω) the errors that spring from it like vain excesses” in order to preserve the mind healthy and fertile, free from all wickedness.<sup>76</sup> Here we see a close parallel with Philo, who also describes circumcision as cutting off “superfluous growths” from the

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<sup>74</sup> *FL* 6.8 (372, 374).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, (SC 372, 370).

mind.<sup>77</sup> When this “cutting off” has been accomplished, we are transformed from the agedness (παλαιώσιν) of sin to the childhood (νηπιότητα) of innocence. No longer do we appear abhorrent to God, but we stand before him with confidence.<sup>78</sup>

The language describing the “cutting away” of sin is consistent with the image of circumcision, and Cyril often makes the connection clearer than he does here. At the beginning of 6.9, subsequent to a brief discussion on Abraham’s circumcision, Cyril exhorts, “Therefore receive, O Jew, the sword of the Spirit; do away with hard-heartedness, as it is written, “Be circumcised to God.”<sup>79</sup> Here Cyril posits the “sword of the Spirit” (a possible allusion to Eph. 6:17) as the instrument of true circumcision. It signifies the cutting away (the circumcising) of impurity from the heart. In his *Commentary on John* 15.2, he makes a similar connection between the work of the Spirit and a sharp instrument used for cutting to explain spiritual circumcision and its soteriological implications.<sup>80</sup> The act of cutting off the foreskin involved in literal circumcision symbolizes the “cutting off” of wickedness in spiritual circumcision.

Thus, the purification of the heart Cyril refers to in *FL* 6.8 is not some vague notion of sin, but a specific reference to forgetfulness (λήθη) which he describes as the source of all impurity. This is a significant point. Though Cyril does not tease out all the implications of a cleansed mind, the fact that, in the anthropological tradition he is following, the mind represents the image of God in man implies that the saving work signified by circumcision of the heart (or in this case, of the νοῦς) is intrinsic to the renewal of the image of God in man through the removal of the forgetting what is good. However, we must proceed here with caution because

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<sup>77</sup> *Quaest. in Gn.* III.46, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL Suppl. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 241. See Chapter Two, 59-60.

<sup>78</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 370).

<sup>79</sup> *FL* 6.9 (SC 372, 378). Note that Cyril once again quotes Jeremiah 4:4 as an Old Testament proof-text for circumcision of the heart.

<sup>80</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 549-550). Cf. Eduard Weigl, *Die Heilslehre des hl. Cyrill von Alexandrien* (1905; repr., Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2009), 261.

Cyril does not make this explicit in *FL* 6.8. Nonetheless, over fifty years ago, Walter Burghardt brought to light Cyril's contention that faith fashions the mind of man to the Word of God: it is through faith that "the natural image of God implanted by the Word at man's formation finds its supernatural fulfillment."<sup>81</sup> In other words, faith is the key to fulfilling what God intended for humanity at creation. Circumcision of the heart is not the same thing as faith. However, the notion of spiritual circumcision without faith would be nonsensical in Cyril's mind. The human mind was created by God to be Christian: to know God and participate in the Logos.<sup>82</sup> This is what it means for man to image God, and this is what true circumcision accomplishes. Circumcision of the Spirit essentially makes the mind Christian. It cleanses it of forgetfulness (the source of all impurity), restores its health and fertility, thereby enabling proper "imaging" of God to take place.

Lastly, the likelihood that Cyril sees forgetfulness and the law of flesh (Romans 7:22) as synonymous concepts should not be overlooked. If circumcision of the heart "cuts away" the evils arising from forgetfulness, then Cyril understands it as a remedy for the poisonous effects of the innate principle within the mind that gives birth to wickedness and ignorance of God. He does not suggest that forgetfulness (or the law of flesh) is uprooted from the mind and forever destroyed. However, it loses its power over the mind as its toxic fruit is nipped in the bud.

According to Cyril, circumcision of the Spirit involves two other spiritual values that are related to heart purification. First, by distinguishing between the letter of the law and the Gospel, he implies that circumcision is a mark of obedience to God. Circumcision is truly fulfilled, Cyril says, through the willingness to do whatever God commands, not with cutting the

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<sup>81</sup> Burghardt, *Image of God*, 39. Burghardt references *In Jo.* 11:3, 11:7, and 11:12 to show that the knowledge of God the Trinity is perfect knowledge, and that through it one comes to know the Father's perfect love.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. "In the wake of Clement and Origen, of Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril's interest in the human mind, in human reason, in human understanding, centers in its supernatural finality: it was created to be Christian."

flesh.<sup>83</sup> In other words, it signifies a mind that has been purified and brought under divine authority. Cyril claims that the person who has been circumcised in this sense is “circumcised to the Lord of all,” and has escaped the slavery of shadows.<sup>84</sup> He recalls I Corinthians 7:19 where Paul declares, “Neither is circumcision anything, nor is uncircumcision anything.” The true circumcision that is done “to” the Lord has nothing to do with skin, but everything to do with obedience to the divine will.

Second, circumcision signifies justification. After developing the relationship between true circumcision and obedience, Cyril asks the Jews why circumcision matters at all when many who are not circumcised show greater adherence to God’s commands than those who are circumcised. If the uncircumcised are better keepers of the law than the circumcised, it shows that circumcision is powerless to instill acquiescence to God’s law. Once again demonstrating his reliance on Paul, Cyril invokes Romans 4:11-12, in connection with Genesis 15:6, to stress that Abraham was justified (δεδικαίωται) through believing God *before* he received circumcision, and that he serves as an example to all believers because of his faith, not because he was circumcised. Cyril concludes his brief summary of Abraham, emphasizing that “after the faith and the righteousness that comes from it, circumcision became for him a sign of the reality (πράγματος).”<sup>85</sup> Cyril does not expound here upon the significance of Abraham’s circumcision, but his point is clear: circumcision has no power to assist one in keeping God’s law; rather it was given as a symbol of the true righteousness that comes by faith.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 374).

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. (SC 372, 376).

<sup>86</sup> Cyril develops this topic at greater length and incorporates more of Paul’s discourse in Romans 4 in his *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, β (PG 69, 112-113). Hervé Savon, “Le Prêtre Eutrope et la ‘vraie circoncision,’” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 199, no. 4 (1982), 293, observes the general patristic consensus that God had given Abraham physical circumcision but that since the coming of Christ circumcision should be fulfilled no longer in the flesh but in the heart (secret du cœur).

For Cyril, the key to a proper understanding of the role and meaning of circumcision in the Christian life rests upon a spiritual hermeneutic. Through *theoria*, one can affirm the historical reality espoused in the letter of the Old Testament text while allowing that the letter does not exhaust a passage's meaning. There is a deeper, spiritual meaning to be discovered. Cyril follows the Pauline interpretation which regards true circumcision as an inward operation brought about by the Holy Spirit best understood as purification of the heart.<sup>87</sup> This purification involves the renewal of the image of God in man (insofar as it is a cleansing of the mind), and a willingness to obey the divine will. Cyril also reminds his readers that the first circumcision was given as a sign of justification by faith. Circumcision in the flesh is only symbolic, but circumcision of the Spirit is the soteriological reality that identifies the believer as God's own.

#### *The Role of Christ in Circumcision of the Heart*

While the bulk of Cyril's discourse on circumcision in *FL* 6.8 is devoted to its spiritual value discerned through *theoria*, he also provides a brief, though significant, explanation of Christ's role in applying inward circumcision. Christ's ministry of circumcision is not to be understood apart from the concepts discussed above: purification of the heart, willful obedience, and justification by faith. There is no soteriological benefit received through spiritual circumcision that does not involve Christ. Indeed, Cyril emphatically demonstrates that Christ is the fulfillment of the entire circumcision ritual detailed in the law. We must remember that from the outset of this section of the letter, Cyril's goal is to understand *why* the Mosaic law orders that male newborns receive circumcision eighth days after their birth, then presented to God after the appropriate sacrifice has been made.<sup>88</sup> Thus, Cyril examines what it means to be "presented" acceptably before the Lord. As long as the evils arising from forgetfulness (λήθη) overshadow

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. Rom. 2:28-29; Jer. 4:3-4.

<sup>88</sup> *FL* 6.7 (SC 372, 368). Cf. Gen. 17:2 and Lev. 12:3 for the biblical mandate of circumcision on the eighth day.

the mind, we are abhorrent before God. But, when the mind has been purified, Cyril observes, we stand before God with confidence, having been transformed into the “childhood” (νηπιότητα) coming from “innocence” (ἀκακίας).<sup>89</sup>

On this occasion, and perhaps with a bit of force, Cyril invokes the term “childhood” in order to make a connection to the “infant” (βρέφος) who is circumcised and presented to the Lord on the eighth day. This use of verbal association in patristic exegesis of Scripture is common. Verbal association occurs when any given word or phrase in a biblical text immediately moves the commentator to another passage where the same word or phrase is used. Oftentimes, the interpreter creates a link between the passages, regardless of contexts.<sup>90</sup> Cyril uses the term “childhood” (or “infancy”) to describe a soteriological condition, but he also draws attention to its corollaries; helplessness and weakness. He points out that just as a newborn baby cannot present itself to God as the law prescribes, neither can we present ourselves to God as innocent without assistance. Therefore, in the same way that parents presented their child to God according to the Mosaic law, Christ is the one who presents us to God now that the law has passed. This, Cyril maintains, is Christ’s role in the figure of circumcision. For male infants eight days old, the law required a sequence of three events: circumcision, sacrifice, and presentation before God. But since Christ is the end of the law and the prophets, having fulfilled all things, the work is fulfilled in him. Cyril observes, “Christ presents us, having regenerated (ἀναγεννήσας) us through faith, offering himself as a sacrifice for us to the Father.”<sup>91</sup> Here, the legal sequence of circumcision is shown to be a type of a spiritual work accomplished by Christ. The physical act of cutting the foreskin has been replaced by regeneration through faith. The

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<sup>89</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 370).

<sup>90</sup> Cf. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 63, who note that the fathers “positively relished the way verbal associations can motivate leaps from one context to another. The same sensibility that makes us chuckle when we hear a clever pun was given much freer rein in patristic exegesis.”

<sup>91</sup> *FL* 6.8 (SC 372, 372).

sacrifice prescribed in the law has been replaced by Christ's sacrifice of himself. Though Cyril offers no further explanation, spiritual circumcision cannot be understood apart from Christ's sacrificial death. Moreover, Christ is able to present us to God the Father as acceptable on account of the sacrifice of himself through which we are regenerated through faith.

Cyril is also interested in the significance of the day on which circumcision is carried out, especially as it concerns the role of Christ. He does not believe that the "eighth day" is an arbitrary command. As we will see, the "eighth day" motif comes to the fore on several occasions in Cyril's writings.<sup>92</sup> It also has a long history of interpretation in the patristic tradition with meanings ranging from the Resurrection day to eschatological purification.<sup>93</sup> Cyril will attribute various meanings to the eighth day in other writings, but in *FL* 6.8 it refers to the time after the Sabbath observance when Christ presents us to the Father. This is the time when the authority of the law comes to an end and all things are made new in Christ.<sup>94</sup> Cyril declares:

And he [Christ] will present us on the eighth day, that is, after the Sabbath observance which is in the law. For this is the time of our Savior's visitation, since Christ is also the end of the law and the prophets. It is for this reason, I think, that the eighth day has been called the Lord's Day by us; or rather, to speak more precisely, because it brings to a close the time of the law, and introduces to us the beginning of the years of the Lord, in which everything is made new.<sup>95</sup>

An eschatological tone underlies this explanation. Similar to Origen, Cyril believes that the eighth day is more than the historical era that follows Christ's advent.<sup>96</sup> The key to

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. *De ador.* 11 (PG 68, 675-678); *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 632-634); *In Luc. in catenis* (PG 72, 497); *In Luc. hom.* 3 (PG 77, 1044).

<sup>93</sup> For a detailed and informative essay on the eighth-day motif in the fathers, see Jean Daniélou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (1956; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 262-286.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. II Cor. 5:17.

<sup>95</sup> *FL* 6.8 (FC 118, 114-115).

<sup>96</sup> On Origen's eschatological view of the eighth day see his *Commentary on Romans* II.13.21, trans. Thomas Scheck, FC 103 (Washington, D.C.; Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 155 and *Homilies on Leviticus* 8.4, trans. Gary Barkley, FC 83 (Washington, D.C.; Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 159.

understanding Cyril's eschatological vision is the intrinsic relationship he posits between the eighth day and the Sabbath.<sup>97</sup>

As he does for circumcision, Cyril views the Sabbath as a type pointing to a spiritual reality. He believes that the true Sabbath is not limited to the time of the Incarnation, but the fulfillment of all things in Christ. His position is not as clear from the quotation cited above, but we gain further insights from a lengthy treatise on the Sabbath that follows his discourse on circumcision in *FL* 6.<sup>98</sup> As he argued against literal circumcision, Cyril tries to show that Sabbath observance according to the law is unnatural and nonsensical. He insists that true Sabbath-keeping has nothing to do with ceasing from physical work or refusing to take long journeys. To practice the Sabbath this way is to be trapped by the letter. But through contemplation (θεωρήμασι) one can discern the spiritual meaning beyond the symbol.<sup>99</sup> According to Cyril, God gave his people the commandment for Sabbath rest in the Mosaic law for two main reasons. The first was to turn them from the errors of the Egyptians who worshipped created things in order to conform them to God. Through Sabbath inactivity, the people learned to distinguish between the Creator and the created. The second reason God commanded the people to "rest" from labor was to signify the final rest of the saints at the end of

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<sup>97</sup> Cyril's view is quite similar to Gregory of Nyssa's interpretation of the "eighth day" and its relationship to the "Sabbath" and circumcision in his little work *De Octava* (PG 44, 607-615). For Gregory, the eighth day represents the eschatological era ushered in subsequent to present (or septenary) time. The eighth day is the time of the "true circumcision" (ἡ ἀληθινὴ περιτομή) where human nature will undergo the "true purification from the true uncleanness" (τὸ ἀληθινὸν καθάρσιον τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ ρύπου) in the putting off of biological life. (PG 44, 609).

<sup>98</sup> The full discourse is found in 6.9-11. The Sabbath is a topic of interest for Cyril because of its place in salvation history and role in biblical interpretation. Cyril uses it to contrast Jewish exegesis and practice with Christian interpretation in order to show that the Jews are bound up in types and shadows, while Christians understand the reality of the Sabbath in the light of Christ. He speaks of the Sabbath on a number of occasions, and the way he defines it depends on the context of that particular passage. For example, sometimes a Scriptural text informs his entire discussion and shapes the definition of "Sabbath." An excellent example is his *Commentary on Isaiah* 58.13-14 (PG 70, 1300) where he explains Sabbath-keeping in the spiritual sense as surrendering all desires and conforming one's will to God. When we consider Cyril's various discourses on the true nature of the Sabbath, we do not find one uniform definition, but several concepts with varying degrees of overlap among them. Cf. *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 628-644). I will address Cyril's use of "Sabbath" in his *Commentary on John* in Chapter Five, 169-172.

<sup>99</sup> *FL* 6.9-10 (SC 372, 378-384).



all things. This is the Sabbath observance in the heavenly Jerusalem when the saints are no longer weighed down with their labors or burdens, but find eternal rest and enjoyment. All this occurs, Cyril asserts, after the resurrection of the dead.<sup>100</sup>

A final implication of Christ's ministry of presenting us before the Father, typified in the circumcision sequence, is that it complements the ascension. Cyril makes clear that our regeneration by faith through Christ's sacrificial offering is appropriated in the present life. In fact, regeneration is the initial actualization of inward, spiritual circumcision.<sup>101</sup> But as we have seen, Cyril also observes that Christ presents us to the Father on the "eighth day" which signifies the eschatological fulfillment of circumcision of the heart.<sup>102</sup> In order for us to appear before God at the eschaton, Christ prepared the way through his own ascension where, as Cyril asserts at the end of this letter, "he ascended to heaven itself to show the Father that human nature, which had been crushed by sin, revived unto incorruption by grace, presenting himself to his Parent like some first-fruits of grain."<sup>103</sup> The redeemed humanity Christ presented in himself before the Father at his ascension is the redeemed humanity we will exhibit when Christ presents us on the last day. Christ transforms us in the present age and will present us to the Father in the age to come, when we will image Christ as transformed humanity. Thus, Cyril's view of circumcision is informed by a spiritual method of exegesis that includes an eschatological dimension.

### Festal Letter Nine

The final place we find Cyril addressing circumcision and its soteriological implications in the *Festal Letters* is in his ninth letter, written in 421. Unlike in *Festal Letters* 1 and 6, Cyril

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<sup>100</sup> *FL* 6.11 (SC 372, 386-388).

<sup>101</sup> Rom. 2:28.

<sup>102</sup> O'Keefe, "Introduction," 19-20.

<sup>103</sup> *FL* 6.12 (FC 118, 124).

does not take specific aim here at Jewish misappropriation of circumcision or faulty exegesis. Rather, his concern is spiritual purity and how one becomes pure in order to be acceptable to God. After a lengthy section denouncing the errors of polytheism and its adherents, he shifts gears in the final section of the letter to demonstrate the proper way we offer ourselves to God (τὸ δὲ ὅπως ἡμᾶς ἀκόλουθον ἀνακεῖσθαι Θεῷ).<sup>104</sup> True devotion to God, Cyril stresses, begins with pure faith (εἰλικρινῇ τὴν πίστιν)<sup>105</sup> in the Trinity, a faith which engenders virtuous deeds motivated by love for God. Faith is essential, for “just as ‘faith without works is dead,’ so also works will offer no benefit to our souls if faith is not established beforehand.”<sup>106</sup> Cyril continues, remarking that a life acceptable to God is characterized by submission to divine authority, a desire for virtue, and the avoidance of impure pleasures and shameful lusts. Purity is the prerequisite for sharing in what is holy, namely, the Eucharist. When we are pure, Cyril observes, the One who is pure (ὁ καθαρὸς) will receive us, and we will fill our souls with everything good as we come to participate in the mystical blessing (οὕτω πρὸς μέθεξιν τῆς μυστικῆς εὐλογίας ἐρχόμενοι).<sup>107</sup>

After his reference to the Eucharist, Cyril quotes Exodus 12:43-45 to remind his readers of God’s commandment to Moses concerning the Passover feast: “This is the law of the Passover; any stranger (ἀλλογενής) who is a sojourner (πάροικος) must not eat of it, and a hireling (μισθωτός) must not eat of it, and anyone’s slave (οἰκέτην) or purchased servant

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<sup>104</sup> *FL* 9.5 (SC 392, 166).

<sup>105</sup> Cyril further describes Christian faith as true, lacking nothing in its understanding of God (...αληθῇ καὶ κατ’ οὐδὲν διαπίπτουσιν τὴν περὶ Θεοῦ τοῦ μόνου καὶ κατὰ φύσιν διάληψιν). SC 392, 166.

<sup>106</sup> *FL* 9.5 (SC 392, 166). “When, therefore, there is already settled in us the blameless and irreproachable faith (τῆς ἀλοιδορήτου καὶ ἀνυπαίτιου πίστεως) that has been laid down in our hearts as a foundation, it is then, then indeed, and most opportunely, that we shall do the things through which we will be illustrious (λαμπροί), and that means virtuous acts of every sort, and achievements springing from an attitude of love for God” (FC 118, 170-171).

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, (SC 392, 168-170).

(ἀργυρώνητον) you are to circumcise, then he may eat of it.”<sup>108</sup> Cyril’s exegesis of this short passage provides him the opportunity to tease out further implications of circumcision that he has heretofore left untreated in the *Festal Letters*, but it also serves to buttress the main point he had been making in this part of the letter: the holy have access to what is holy (for example, God, the Eucharist), while the unholy are barred from such access.

Though his language is somewhat enigmatic, Cyril’s *telos* in this section of the letter is eschatological. The reference to the Eucharist provides the touchstone for him to explain the eschatological implications of the holy life.<sup>109</sup> After quoting the Exodus text Cyril asks, “Do you hear how and in what way we will be with the Lord in purity and blamelessness? For he debars (ἐξείργει) the stranger and sends away (ἀποπέμπεται) both the sojourner and hireling as unholy.”<sup>110</sup> Taking up an allegorical approach, he devotes his attention to the key terms in the biblical text; “stranger,” “sojourner,” “hireling,” “slave,” and “servant.” Each term suggests something about the spiritual condition of the people it represents. He attributes particular characteristics to each type of people, noting their wicked actions and degrees of faithlessness, while at the same time bracketing two main groups out of the five types of people. The first group, comprised of the stranger, sojourner, and hireling, are rejected by God. Cyril explains that the “stranger,” as the name suggests, is altogether alien from faith in Christ while the “sojourner” is unstable in the faith.<sup>111</sup> Cyril describes sojourners as “transient” (μεταβάτην) because, spiritually speaking, they do not remain faithful, but stray back to their home country of

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<sup>108</sup> Cyril may be quoting this passage from memory. His rendering varies significantly from the LXX in structure and order. Cf. *FL* 9.6 (SC 392, 170).

<sup>109</sup> Near the end of the letter Cyril begins his final concluding remarks: “Since, then, we are to give an account of our own life, ‘let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.’” *FL* 9.6 (FC 118, 173-174). This too suggests that Cyril is not simply concerned with who can and who cannot approach the Eucharistic table, but with the final judgment when the eternal destinies of all are meted out.

<sup>110</sup> *FL* 9.6 (SC 392, 170).

<sup>111</sup> Although the biblical text identifies the “stranger” and “sojourner” as the same person, Cyril separates them to identify two different spiritual conditions in order to make a theological point.

unbelief. Though the sojourner will have the same end as the stranger, the sojourner is more abominable for – Cyril warns, citing II Peter 2:21 – it is better for those who have never believed than for those who have believed, only to reject God’s commandments later. Cyril rounds out this group of the damned by examining the “hireling.” These are rejected by God because the hirelings enter the Church to partake of the holy mysteries with self-interested motivation. The hirelings hope to take advantage of material assistance offered by those whose love is pure. Cyril brands such people as hypocrites without genuine faith.<sup>112</sup>

The group accepted by God, however, is comprised of the “slaves” and the “servants” purchased with money. Cyril notices that God welcomes both to eat the Passover, but only after they are circumcised. Circumcision is the key to access the holy meal. He asks rhetorically, “And what is this?” referring to circumcision’s spiritual meaning when applied to the allegorical meaning of “slaves” and “servants.” In his interpretation, Cyril identifies circumcision with redemption through Christ’s death and turns the concepts of “slave” and “purchased servant” on their heads:

Christ redeemed (ἐξεπρίατο), being *slaves* of the wicked demons, or of our own passions, and made us *servants bought with money*, giving his own blood as a ransom (ἀντίλυτρον) for the life of all, and the flesh through which he bore us.<sup>113</sup>

Cyril uses both slavery and servanthood as types of spiritual realities. Those who were spiritually enslaved through the power of evil forces or their own sinful passions, Christ has redeemed and made them servants bought with money (ἀργυρώνητον) through his blood. Cyril therefore uses circumcision as a symbolic term indicating the atoning, transformative work of Christ whereby, in a negative sense, we are enabled to “cut off” from ourselves the shame of ancient slavery (τῆς ἀρχαίας ἐκείνης δουλείας). In a positive sense, Christ enables the

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<sup>112</sup> FL 9.6 (SC 392, 170-172).

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 172, italics added.

redeemed to rise up to a new condition where they love God and belong to him while enjoying true freedom. Cyril continues the atonement theme, entreating all who have been “circumcised” to cling to Christ who purchased us (οὕτω τε κολλᾶσθαι τῷ πριαμένῳ Χριστῷ), for we owe him our lives. For, he reminds his readers, Paul proclaimed that “one has died for all, that those living might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised for their sake.”<sup>114</sup> Through Christ’s redeeming death, those enslaved by the demons and the powers of their own evil desires are ransomed and made servants of God.

The Pauline quotation concerning Christ’s saving death provides the segue for Cyril’s customary *résumé de foi* at the conclusion of his letter where he briefly notes the full divinity of the Logos, his Incarnation, death in the flesh, harrowing of hell, resurrection, and ascension. He gives the most attention here to Christ’s death, most likely because of the emphasis he places on redemption through Christ’s blood in the discussion just prior.<sup>115</sup> The relationship Cyril posits between circumcision and the death of Christ is important because he associates circumcision, spiritually understood, along with the saving benefits of Christ’s death which include redemption, freedom, and ransom. Unlike his other discussions on circumcision in the *Festal Letters* and elsewhere, Cyril never refers to Romans 2:28-29 or Jeremiah 4:4 in this letter. Instead, he finds in Exodus 12:43-45 an instructive way to delineate sinners from saints, and the spiritual operation included when one moves from the camp of the rejected to the accepted.<sup>116</sup> In

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., (SC 392, 172-174). Cf. II Cor. 5:14-15.

<sup>115</sup> After a brief statement on the Incarnation, Cyril explains the reason Christ took on flesh: “This was so that he might rescue everyone from death and corruption, ‘nailing to his own cross the bond which stood against us, and triumphing in it,’ as is written, ‘over principalities and powers, and the world rulers of this present darkness,’ so as to shut the mouth of all lawlessness and render us pure through faith, and thus bring us to the honor of adoption. For he underwent the cross, and death in the flesh, with the iniquitous Jews raging against him.” *FL* 9.6 (FC 118, 173). Cf. Col. 2:14-15; Eph. 6:12; Rom. 3:19.

<sup>116</sup> Among the fathers who make the connection between circumcision as it was practiced in the old law and Christian salvation, Exodus 12:43-45 is not usually among the texts cited. Other than the spurious *In sancta pascha* found in the writings of Chrysostom, Origen appears to be the only other patristic writer who uses Ex. 12:43-45 as an occasion to discuss circumcision at any length. See Origen, *Selecta in Exodum* (PG 12, 285-288).

his exegesis of the Exodus passage Cyril stresses the atonement and how Christ's death changes one's condition in order to allow one to partake of what is holy, particularly as it relates to eschatological communion with God. Circumcision helps clarify the thrust of Cyril's interpretation. Christ's death redeems us which then allows us to undergo circumcision. The redemptive death of Christ and the circumcision which frees us separates the holy from the unholy. We find a similar interpretation in Cyril's *Commentary on John* written just a few years after *FL* 9. In his comment on John 7:24, Cyril references Exodus 12:43-45 (the only other time he cites this passage in his writings) and stresses the purification from sin through circumcision which enables access to the holy table. For only the pure can partake of Christ, Cyril exhorts, as the saying goes, "Holy things to the holy" (Τὰ ἅγια τοῖς ἁγίοις).<sup>117</sup>

This discourse in Cyril's ninth *Festal Letter* is noteworthy because it is a clear example of his linking circumcision to the death of Christ, a connection often implied but not always explicit in his writings.<sup>118</sup> Christ's death (and the soteriological benefits stemming from it) embodies the spiritual reality typified by circumcision in the law. Thus, Cyril incorporates circumcision as a conceptual image to accentuate redemption through the blood of Christ. In the patristic tradition, the relationship between circumcision according to the law and the death of Christ is not as prevalent as one might expect. We see some connection, with various degrees of strength, in the *Epistle of Barnabas*,<sup>119</sup> Origen,<sup>120</sup> and few others.<sup>121</sup> Sometimes writers relate the death of Christ with circumcision indirectly by attempting to show that baptism (which is

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<sup>117</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 640). See also Meunier, 199.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. *FL* 6.8 (see above, p. 24). What Cyril implies in *FL* 6.8 concerning the relationship between circumcision and Christ's death he makes explicit in *FL* 9.6.

<sup>119</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas* 9.8 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael Holmes, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 408.

<sup>120</sup> *Com. Rom.* II.13.29 (FC 103, 161-162).

<sup>121</sup> Savon notes Ambrose, *Ep.* 72, 9, 1246A, and provides the pertinent statement: *Iam non opus est ut uiritim sanguis singulorum circumcisione fundatur, cum in sanguine Christi circumcisio uniuersorum celebrate sit.* See Savon, "Vraie circoncision," 296, n. 91.

intrinsically related to Christ's death) is the new sacrament for Christians that supersedes the rite of circumcision.<sup>122</sup> However, the primary motif drawn from circumcision in patristic circles is the cutting off of the passions.<sup>123</sup> The explicit association Cyril makes between circumcision and the death of Christ is, therefore, neither unfounded nor universal. While precedent exists, Cyril's elaboration shows that he is not reticent to go beyond popular or conventional interpretation. Though he does not say explicitly, Cyril implies that circumcision in the law appears as a type of the saving death of Christ.

### Conclusion

The references to circumcision in these three *Festal Letters*, written within the first decade of Cyril's episcopacy, reveal important aspects of his biblical exegesis and soteriology. As to his exegesis, Cyril is concerned with the spiritual meaning of the text, though not altogether dismissing the *historia*. His method of reading Scripture is informed, for the most part, by spiritual contemplation, or *theoria*. He does make use of allegory, but not to the extent shown in other Alexandrian exegetes such as Origen and Didymus. Forming the backdrop of his biblical interpretation is his awareness of (even consternation at) the continuing presence and influence of Judaism. Cyril employs his *Festal Letters*, at least in part, to teach his readers how to interpret Scripture properly even as he points out Jewish error. Within Cyril's exegetical framework, circumcision is viewed as a type or symbol mandated in the Mosaic law that points to something greater. He scoffs at Jews who continue to value and practice the physical ritual according to the letter while failing to see that circumcision symbolizes a deeper spiritual reality. That reality has everything to do with salvation through Christ.

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<sup>122</sup> Cf. Savon, "Vrai circoncision," 296, where he highlights Gregory of Elvira's *Tract.* IV.28.33 as an example.

<sup>123</sup> See Chapter Two above and Ferguson, "Spiritual Circumcision," 488, who claims that the moral interpretation of circumcision concerning the passions "was a natural extension of the biblical language and is easily the most frequent application of circumcision in patristic literature."

Cyril's spiritual interpretation of circumcision provides a window into his soteriology. The "circumcision passages" highlighted in these three *Festal Letters* alone accentuate or imply purification of the heart, renewal of the image of God in man, justification and regeneration through faith, redemption and freedom through the sacrificial death of Christ, the transformation from one spiritual condition to another, and the exercise of true worship. Cyril's treatment of circumcision also conveys his understanding of present and eschatological salvation. It is clear that in these pastoral letters, Cyril finds in circumcision a useful concept with which to present his multi-faceted doctrine of salvation.



## CHAPTER FOUR

CIRCUMCISION OF THE SPIRIT IN CYRIL'S OLD TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES<sup>1</sup>

The exegetical works in Cyril's literary corpus reveal a man deeply embedded in the conceptual world of the Old Testament. The Old Testament weighed upon Cyril's mind and strongly influenced his theology. To it, Kerrigan observes, "he consecrated most of his exegetical works; in his other writings he repeatedly quotes its precepts, counsels, prayers and examples to illustrate his doctrines."<sup>2</sup> In his commentaries on the New Testament, pastoral letters, homilies, and other treatises, Cyril makes frequent and substantial use of the Old Testament, demonstrating its continued relevance for his understanding of the scope of revelation and the history of salvation. His earliest writings show that he acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of the Old Testament early in his career: all of his commentaries on the Old Testament were written before the outbreak of the Nestorian controversy in 428. This timeline is significant because it underscores Cyril's consternation with Jewish practice and interpretation of Scripture during the first half of his episcopal career before the new Christological heresy consumed his literary attention.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I am treating Cyril's early writings on the Old Testament books where he explores circumcision and its meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952), 21. Of the seven volumes containing Cyril's exegetical works in Migne's *Patrologia*, four and a half are devoted to the Old Testament.

<sup>3</sup> Cyril's consternation over Jewish interpretation and practice (and the fact that Judaism continued as a religious group in spite of Christ's fulfillment of the law and the prophets) is the primary concern throughout his commentaries, but it should be noted that older Christological heresies and continuing problems with paganism also occupied his attention. Kerrigan, *Interpreter of the Old Testament*, 17-18, cites a number of instances, for example, where Cyril makes references to heresies such as Arianism.

Four main works that Cyril wrote on the Old Testament have survived largely intact.<sup>4</sup> These include two lengthy works on the Pentateuch called *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate* and *Glaphyra* (Elegant Sayings),<sup>5</sup> as well as a massive five-book study on Isaiah, and a large commentary covering the Minor prophets.<sup>6</sup> Dating these works with precision is difficult. Joussard believes all of them were composed by 423 with the writings on the Pentateuch, *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra*, as likely the first works to come from Cyril's pen.<sup>7</sup> These two writings complement one another, and each makes reference to the other.<sup>8</sup> Both reflect the same degree of anti-Jewish sentiment as Cyril's *Festal Letters* written between the years 412-418, a time when Jewish-Christian tensions were at an all-time high in Alexandria, which suggests

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<sup>4</sup> Also extant are fragments on the Psalms attributed to Cyril that have come down in the chains and on the testimony of Ephraem of Antioch, as well as an anthology entitled *Teaching of the Fathers on the Incarnation of the Logos*. These are recorded in Migne's PG 69. There are also catena fragments on the songs in Ex. 15 and Deut. 32, the books of Kings, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Jeremiah, Baruch, Ezekiel, and Daniel. However, it is difficult to assess the authenticity of such fragments, and many of them are not likely from Cyril's pen. See Claudio Moreschini and Enrico Norelli, *Early Christian Greek and Latin Literature*, vol. II, trans. Matthew O'Connell (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 542-543. On the efforts to produce a reliable text of Cyril's commentary on the Psalms, see Giovanni Mercati, *Osservazioni a Promei del Salterio di Origene, Ippolito, Eusebio, Cirillo Alessandrino e Altri, con Frammenti Inediti*, Studi e Testi 142 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1948), 133-139.

<sup>5</sup> There is a dearth of scholarly literature on these two important works in Cyril's corpus. No critical edition exists of either work, nor are there any translations into modern languages. On *De ador.* Sebastian Schurig's *Die Theologie des Kreuzes beim frühen Cyrill von Alexandria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005) provides a staurological perspective, while Lee Blackburn's unpublished dissertation, "The Mystery of the Synagogue: Cyril of Alexandria on the Law of Moses," PhD diss. (University of Notre Dame, 2009), investigates Cyril's exegesis and understanding of the old Law as it relates to his doctrine. Helpful summaries can be found in J. Quasten, *Patrology* vol. 3 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1960), 120-121, Robert Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind* (1971; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 69-92, and more recently, Mark W. Elliott, "What Cyril of Alexandria's *De Adoratione* is All About," *Studia Patristica* 50 (2011), 245-252. Durand discovered a lost preface to *De adoratione* which he published as "Un prologue inédit au *De adoratione* de Cyrille d'Alexandrie?" *Studia Patristica* 20 (1989), 3-7. On *Glaphyr* there is almost nothing.

<sup>6</sup> Text of *De ador.*, (PG 68, 133-1125); *Glaph.*, (PG 69, 9-678); *Com. Is.* (PG 70, 9-1450); *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, (PG 71-72, 9-364). An improved text of the *Commentary on the Minor Prophets* is found in P. E. Pusey: *Sancti patris nostri Cyrilli archiepiscopi Alexandrini in XII prophetas*, vols. 1-2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1868).

<sup>7</sup> On the dating, see Georges Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428." *Mélanges E. Podechard* (Lyons: Facultés Catholiques 1954): 160-163, 170. He places the terminus date of the commentaries on Isaiah and the Minor prophets, which were likely written in successive order, at 423. Most scholars generally follow Jouassard's timeline of Cyril's writings, though there are detractors such as Noël Charlier, "Le Thesaurus de Trinitate de S. Cyrille d'Alexandrie," *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 45 (1950), 60-63, and, more recently, Lois Farag, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, a New Testament Exegete* (Gorgias Press, 2007), 61-67.

<sup>8</sup> *De ador.* announces the composition of *Glaph.* in PG 68, 512, 605, 625, and *Glaph.* refers to *De ador.* in PG 69, 16, 537-539. See Kerrigan, *Interpreter of the Old Testament*, 13.

these works were written during same general time period. The challenge of Judaism looms over Cyril and informs the exegetical and theological framework in these writings.

*De adoratione*, the first of the two, is not technically a “commentary” in the traditional sense, but a “didactic dialogue” between Cyril and a certain Palladius. Throughout this work, the two interlocutors discuss the meaning and relevance of the Old Testament for Christians.<sup>9</sup> The title derives from John 4:23-24, (“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. For the Father seeks those who worship him in this way. God is spirit, and those worshipping him must worship in spirit and in truth”), one of the gospel passages Palladius is holding as he approaches Cyril.<sup>10</sup> The other text Palladius brings to the table is Matthew 5:17-18 (“Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy, but to fulfill. Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota or small stroke of a pen will pass away from the law until everything is fulfilled”).<sup>11</sup> The dialogue revolves around questions concerning the law and what to make of Christ’s words in the two gospel passages in question. What does it mean for Jesus to have fulfilled the law? Does the law have ongoing instructional value? To answer these queries, Cyril draws from the Pentateuch. Instead of following a chronological, verse-by-verse technique, he arranges his discourse thematically into seventeen sections, all of which discuss foundational doctrines of Christian faith and practice.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Blackburn makes a convincing case that “didactic dialogue” is a fitting genre category for *De ador.*, highlighting the asymmetry between Cyril, who knows the truth from the outset, and Palladius, who gradually receives full understanding. See Blackburn, “The Mystery of the Synagogue,” 33. See also Elliott, “*De Adoratione*,” 246-247, who notes that Cyril traces the salvation history from the Old Testament to the New Testament in a way that challenges those who suggest a “discontinuity” in Cyril’s thought between Judaism and Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 136).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-136.

<sup>12</sup> Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 69.

The *Glaphyra*, by contrast, is not a dialogue but more closely resembles a commentary that works within the structural order of the Pentateuch and addresses similar questions as *De adoratione*.<sup>13</sup> The primary goal of both works is to demonstrate the preparatory role of the Old Testament along with the types and shadows of the law and Mosaic cult reaching fulfillment in Christ.<sup>14</sup> Cyril's distinction between the soteriological insufficiency of the law and the soteriological sufficiency of Christ is an especially important and consistent emphasis throughout these writings.<sup>15</sup> The law points to Christ who alone can restore humankind to the pristine condition enjoyed before Adam's transgression which brought about sin and death.

The *Commentary on Isaiah* and the *Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, both written sometime before 423,<sup>16</sup> are stylistically in line with traditional verse-by-verse commentaries.<sup>17</sup> Both showcase Cyril's skill as an exegete in spite of his sometimes wearying verbosity. Throughout these commentaries it is clear that he is interested in the spiritual meaning of the text but unwilling to release the literal sense from a meaningful role in interpretation, even if that role is secondary. If the literal sense includes histories, narratives, chronologies, or other data that seem insignificant or strange, it matters not.<sup>18</sup> Whatever is recorded in Holy Writ has meaning and purpose, even if the meaning is restricted to *historia*.

Cyril consistently incorporates a balanced hermeneutic that weighs the importance of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture, although he considers a text's spiritual meaning most

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<sup>13</sup> Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire," 161, n.4, observes that "Les Γλαφυρά tiennent à l'inverse du commentaire, sans être commentaire dans toute l'acceptation du terme."

<sup>14</sup> Elliott, "De Adoratione," 248-251.

<sup>15</sup> Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 33; Blackburn, "The Mystery of the Synagogue," 29.

<sup>16</sup> Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire," 170.

<sup>17</sup> On these two voluminous commentaries there is surprisingly little scholarship. Chapters 1-50 of the *Commentary on Isaiah* have been translated into English by Robert Hill, vols. 1-3 (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008). A recent English translation has been completed for the *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, also by Hill, FC vols. 115, 116, and 124 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007, 2008, 2012). Aside from scholars like Kerrigan and Wilken who incorporate this commentary in larger discussions of Cyril's exegesis of the Old Testament, few published scholarly works exist at the present.

<sup>18</sup> For example, see Cyril's comment on Hosea 1 concerning the prophet's conjugal relations with Gomer. Cf. Quasten, 121-122.

valuable. On certain occasions he even offers mild rebuke to his predecessors for failing to keep a balanced perspective between the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture.<sup>19</sup> Cyril's constant emphasis throughout these commentaries, however, is the role of Christ in fulfilling the law, the prophets, and the Mosaic temple worship.<sup>20</sup> He portrays Christ's realization of the types and symbols of the Old Testament in mostly soteriological contours. Everywhere he recognizes signs of the new covenant of restoration and the new relationship between God and man forged through Christ.<sup>21</sup> For Cyril, the Jewish way has been bankrupted of its spiritual vitality and efficacy since Christ has completed what the law required and made true justification and sanctification possible.

Overall, the most significant (and obvious) characteristic of Cyril's exegesis of the Old Testament in these four works is his conviction that the old covenant sets the stage for the new. Over and over again he describes any number of people, places, events, or objects in the Old Testament as types and shadows meant to symbolize a future reality fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The literal facts of a biblical story may be useful for historical or moral purposes, but Cyril's exegetical and theological goal is to show how "everything associated with Judaism has been

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<sup>19</sup> In Cyril's Preface to the *Commentary on Hosea*, he warns against moving too quickly to the spiritual sense of a text without first seriously grappling with the historical sense, and warns against fixating on the literal sense: "People generally find it easy, in fact, to adapt the commentary they give to what seems the intention of the Holy Spirit, in some cases moving easily from the facts, or the visible events that happened and, as it were, fall within their vision, to interior and spiritual realities, and in other cases penetrating in quite an obscure fashion to the events at a physical level.... There is need, therefore, for clear discernment of each detail to the extent possible, necessarily preserving the sequence of ideas and the difference in characters, this being the way for our treatment to be completely clear, uncomplicated, and free of all difficulty" (FC115, 28). As Hill suggests, Cyril probably has Didymus and Theodore in mind.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Preface to *Com. Is.* (PG 70, 9) and *De ador.* (PG 68, 224), where Cyril explores the meaning of Mic. 6:8 in conjunction with Mt. 16:24. See Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 262ff., for helpful references and discussion on Cyril's teaching of the place of the legal cult in *De ador.*, particularly as it relates to the cross.

<sup>21</sup> References in to this general motif in Cyril's commentaries are too numerous to count. However, his comment on Hosea 5:6-7 may stand as a helpful representative. In the biblical text the author bemoans that Israel's impurity will keep it from finding the Lord through sacrifice. Cyril uses this to elaborate on the difference between the two covenants: "So even if the people of Israel made the prescribed offerings in supplication for forgiveness of their unholy crimes or in search of relationship with God, they would not attain it... nor would access be granted to those showing repentance in this way." God is found "only through life in Christ, to which the word of faith would be taken as an introduction, and also saving baptism, which is the basis of relationship with God in the Spirit." See *Com. Hos.* 5:6-7 (FC 115, 126).

transformed to a new way of life in Christ.”<sup>22</sup> This transformation has less to do with banal developments in religious customs and practices than with radical metaphysical, epistemological, and ontological change revealed in the “type – reality” relationship. Since Christ has come, the human situation has undergone a profound transfiguration because all of the divine types, promises, and foreshadowings contained in the old covenant have been fulfilled in Christ to create a new reality. To be sure, Christ is the subject of the whole Bible for Cyril. The Old Testament prefigures and points the way to Christ; the New Testament testifies to Christ fulfilling all things.<sup>23</sup> The Old Testament records the story of creation; the New Testament bears witness to Christ, who ushers in the new creation through his redemptive work. The Old Testament narrates the failure of Adam and the ruinous effects of the fall; the New Testament recounts Christ, the Second Adam, who reverses the condition through his victory over sin and death. The Old Testament promotes obeisance to the religious law with Moses as the personal representative of the covenant; the New Testament proclaims Christ who exposes the law’s deficiencies, fulfills it, and creates a new covenant. In short, the person and work of Christ has forever changed the relationship between God and man, and, in Cyril’s mind, it is the Old Testament that looks forward to and even acts as a foil for this transformation through Christ.<sup>24</sup>

Along with the creation / new creation, Adam / Second Adam, old covenant / new covenant typologies that convey the new relationship between God and humanity, Cyril is fond of using the central Jewish institutions of circumcision and the Sabbath as types that have reached fulfillment and transformation in Christ. In the previous chapter I discussed this

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<sup>22</sup> Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Wickham’s claim that “Cyril is the only theologian of genius there has ever been of whom it is true to say, almost without metaphor, that his theology was ‘Christocentric.’ He draws the mind always back to the Jesus Christ who is the point to which all the Bible’s proclamation immediately relates” in *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), xxxiv.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Wilken, *Early Christian Mind*, 161.

interpretive strategy in Cyril and gave examples of ways he understands physical circumcision as a type of the new, spiritual one. This interpretive principle is normative in his writings on the Old Testament. In the present chapter I will highlight pertinent passages in these four exegetical works where Cyril puts forth his multi-faceted teaching on circumcision as he reads it in the Old Testament. Though many casual references to circumcision abound, when the substantive texts are compared, we find four overarching themes that comprise his teaching on circumcision's role in the Old Testament and its new meaning in Christ.

First, circumcision plays an essential role in Israel's salvation history, and typifies the circumcision of the Spirit within the narrative of salvation for the new Israel, that is, the Church. Second, circumcision is a portent of justification by faith, and it is the "justified" who comprise the new Israel, or spiritual Jerusalem. Third, the act of circumcision indicates the blood of Christ and the new life accomplished through his death. Fourth, circumcision is closely associated with the resurrection and the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit Christ gave to his disciples. Each theme conveys soteriological meaning and sheds light on Cyril's doctrine of salvation as well as on his method of exegesis. While each salvific theme is particular in itself, all stand contiguous with one another. The resultant constellation of salvific motifs is a consistent feature of Cyril's narrative soteriology that undergirds his entire theological and exegetical program.

#### Circumcision within the Narrative of Salvation: Israel and the Church

The various soteriological meanings Cyril attaches to circumcision often have direct resonance with particular components of his narrative of salvation, namely the Incarnation, baptism, death, descent, resurrection and ascent of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Each of these components (or "moments") represents a particular dimension of salvation and, woven together, displays the total

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<sup>25</sup> I discuss Cyril's narrative of salvation in Chapter One, pp. 31-48.

saving work of God. Oftentimes, Cyril's interpretation of circumcision resonates with one or more of each stage of the salvation narrative. Of course, he is never explicit about this. At no point does he say, "Here is how circumcision of the Spirit relates to this or that aspect of Christ's saving work." But when the reader of Cyril recognizes his overarching narrative of salvation and the way it functions in his thought, it is not difficult to detect clear associations between his multiple views of circumcision and key salvation "moments" within his wider theological narrative.

However, in two passages in his *Commentary on Zechariah*, Cyril includes circumcision within the *Heilsgeschichte* of Israel and uses the narrative of God's deliverance of the Jewish people to typify not just one component of salvation, but the full *ordo salutis* accomplished through Christ. The two biblical texts under consideration are Zechariah 4:7 and 12:7. In both places, Cyril locates circumcision within a sequence of divine acts of deliverance for Israel. Then he explains how each of these acts symbolizes Christ's divine order of salvation for the Church. Although Cyril does not use the exact same sequence of saving events in each passage, the general idea is the same for both: God's deliverance of Israel from slavery and his establishing them in the promised land is a foreshadow of the spiritual deliverance Christ came to achieve in us. The pertinent question to address now is what role circumcision plays in this historical salvation narrative.

Zechariah 4:7 (LXX) reads: "Who are you, mighty mountain before Zerubbabel, to accomplish anything? I will bring forth the stone of the inheritance, its grace an equality of grace (ἰσότητα χάριτος χάριτα αὐτῆς)." Cyril acknowledges the difficulty of this text but, consistent with his usual method of interpretation, parses out each phrase to arrive at the most



accurate sense.<sup>26</sup> First, he employs an allegorical hermeneutic and identifies the “mighty mountain” as Satan. The prophet’s question leveled against the “mountain” is meant to belittle and rebuke as, Cyril reminds his readers, Christ triumphed over Satan without difficulty. Second, Cyril considers the “stone of inheritance” as Christ and develops a Trinitarian reading of the text. He again he considers the “mighty mountain” but switches its referent to God the Father rather than Satan. If the Father is the mountain, the Son is the stone which is cut from the mountain since the Son comes from (γεγεννημένος) the Father in a way indescribable (ἀπορήτως). Here Cyril refers to Daniel 2:45 as a supporting text to underscore the relationship of the Son to the Father. From the mountain (God the Father), the “cornerstone and chosen stone” (the Son) has been cut, through whom we have been called to sonship (υἱοθεσίαν).<sup>27</sup>

At last he comes to the final clause of the verse, “its grace an equality of grace.” According to Cyril, the overarching meaning of “equal grace” is adoption and the gift of becoming heirs of God through Christ since he is the “stone of the inheritance.”<sup>28</sup> Cyril then decides to penetrate more deeply into the exact meaning of this awkward expression. Here he begins the parallelism between the “first grace” offered to Israel and the “equal grace” given by Christ through whom we are brought into familial relationship with God. Cyril outlines the “ancient and famous grace” given to Israel:

They were ransomed (λελύτρωνται) from Egypt in a fleshly way (σαρκικῶς), they shook off (ἀπεσείσαντο) the slavery imposed on them out of greed, they passed through the middle of the sea, they ate the manna in the desert, they went through rivers on foot (for in this way they had crossed to the other side of the Jordan), they were brought into the land of promise. This, therefore, is indeed the first grace.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Com. Zech.* 4:7 (Pusey, II, 334-335).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 335-337.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 337.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

Cyril immediately juxtaposes the grace of Israel's salvation to the equal, "second grace" given by Christ. His interpretation accentuates the "type – reality" characteristic of his exegetical method. The graces being "equal", Cyril observes, in that what was done for the Jews in a fleshly or sensible way (σαρκικῶς...αἰσθητῶς), Christ performed for us both spiritually and intelligibly (πνευματικῶς τε καὶ νοητῶς):

He rescued us from the slavery of the devil as from clay and brick, he delivered from us the passions of the world and impurities of the flesh, he made us pass over as through a sea. For having outrun the flood of the present life and the bitterness of its cares, we ate the bread of heaven, the mystical Logos (μυστικὸς ὁ λόγος), we were carried over the Jordan, *we received circumcision in the Spirit* (περιτομὴν ἐσχήκαμεν τὴν ἐν Πνεύματι), we inherited the city above, the truly holy land, which Christ himself mentioned saying, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land."<sup>30</sup>

If we consider the juxtaposition of both quotations, we observe a kind of parallel structure in Cyril's interpretation of the entire Zechariah passage. Each event described spiritually in the "second grace" finds its typological antecedent listed in the first grace. The Israelites were rescued from the slavery of the Egyptians; we are ransomed from the tyranny of the devil. The Israelites shook off their slavery; we are delivered from worldly passions. The Israelites passed through the sea to escape their captors; we pass through the world's turmoil and the anxieties of life, and so on. Cyril's point here, using John 1:16-17 and Hebrews 7:22 as supporting texts, is that Christ has fulfilled all the types revealed in the Mosaic law and has established a new, superior covenant. Moses was the minister and mediator of the former grace; Christ is the source (χορηγός) of the latter which transforms us.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, Cyril's placement of the reception of circumcision of the Spirit within the sequence of the new grace does not have a clear antecedent. However, it is likely that he relates the reception of circumcision of the Spirit with the Israelites crossing the Jordan given the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 337-338, emphasis added.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 338.

context and the close grammatical proximity between the two in Cyril's remark. In the passage where Cyril recounts the grace shown to Israel – which serves as types of the new grace – he mentions the Israelite crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 5. He parallels this, when describing the realities of grace that are now given to us, by stating: “we were carried over the Jordan, we received circumcision in the Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> Though Cyril is not explicit about this connection, there is a patristic exegetical tradition of typologically pairing the Israelite crossing of the Jordan with Christian baptism.<sup>33</sup> Cyril himself suggests this association in his *Commentary on John* 7.24, written several years after his *Commentary on Zechariah*, where he identifies the “holy waters” of baptism as the “mystic Jordan” through which believers must cross. The Israelite crossing of the Jordan is seen as a type of entering the baptismal waters.<sup>34</sup> But more importantly, Cyril appears to associate baptism, of which the crossing of the Jordan is a type, with spiritual circumcision, and he has theological precedent for doing so.<sup>35</sup>

Cyril's association of circumcision in the Spirit and baptism makes sense given his sacramental vision. Just before he describes crossing the Jordan and receiving circumcision in a spiritual manner he equates the manna from heaven that was given to the Israelites with the Eucharist,<sup>36</sup> which places the Eucharist alongside baptism. As Keating has demonstrated, Cyril sees baptism and the Eucharist working cooperatively and locates them at the heart of his soteriology, especially as it pertains to the reception of the Spirit and ongoing participation in the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 337-338.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 5.6, trans. Barbara Bruce, FC 105 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 64.

<sup>34</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24, ed. P. E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostril Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium*, vols. 103 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872, 1:639. Cf. Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 61-62.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 18.2, 43.2 in *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997); Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture* 5.6, trans. A. Stephenson, FC 61 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1960), 142-143; John Chrysostom, *Homily on Col.* 2.6, ed. Philip Schaff, NPNF 1, vol. 13 (1888; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 285.

<sup>36</sup> See in *Com. Zech.* 4:7 (Pusey, II, 337-338) where Cyril parallels “they [Israel] at the manna in the desert” with “we ate the bread of heaven, the mystical logos.”

divine nature.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is likely that circumcision of the Spirit is closely related to holy baptism in Cyril's comment on Zechariah 4:7.<sup>38</sup>

However, it is not clear that Cyril understands circumcision and baptism as one and the same operation. More likely, he views them as two distinct works that occur simultaneously (though perhaps in logical sequence) that carry different spiritual implications for the believer. The fact that Cyril mentions the spiritual crossing of the Jordan and the reception of circumcision as distinct, though related, events without collapsing them into one another is significant. Not only is there a distinction in the biblical narrative itself (the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3 is distinct from the circumcision in Joshua 5), but as Fergusson has shown, for a number of church fathers, baptism is not the same thing as circumcision (spiritually understood), "but the occasion when it is received."<sup>39</sup> Although uncertainties remain, this appears to be Cyril's view given his comment on Zechariah 4:7: baptism and circumcision of the Spirit are closely intertwined, though not identical to one another. But this begs the question: What does Cyril imagine the spiritual effects of circumcision of the Spirit to be, given its intrinsic relationship to baptism? In order to address this question in more detail, we must look to similar texts within Cyril's commentary where he turns to the same imagery and content as his comment on Zechariah 4:7. We find such a parallel narrative of salvation in his exegesis of Zechariah 12:7.

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Keating makes this case throughout his *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), hereafter, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, and his essay, "The Two-fold Manner of Divine Indwelling in Cyril of Alexandria: Redressing an Imbalance," *Studia Patristica* 37 (2001), 543-549.

<sup>38</sup> Cyril will make the relationship between circumcision and baptism clear in the third homily of his commentary on Luke: "And we affirm that the spiritual circumcision takes place chiefly in the season of holy baptism, when also Christ makes us partakers of the Holy Spirit." *A Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke by S. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria*, trans. R. Payne Smith (1859; repr., New York: Studion, 1983), 57. For the critical edition see *Lukas-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984), 54-278. Hereafter, any reference to the *Commentary on Luke (In Luc.)* will be taken from Smith's translation.

<sup>39</sup> Everett Fergusson, "Spiritual Circumcision in Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41, no. 4 (1988): 494.

Consistent with his method, Cyril quotes the text before unpacking its meaning:

“Jerusalem will dwell by itself. And the Lord will save the tents of Judah as from of old so that the boasting of the house of David will not be exaggerated and the elation of those dwelling in Jerusalem over Judah.”<sup>40</sup> Cyril interprets this verse as a word of assurance to the Church. The Lord (Christ) will protect his churches from constant persecution in the same way that God protected the “tents” of Israel. Cyril then reminds his readers of the divine acts of deliverance on Israel’s behalf in sequential form, consonant with his comment on Zechariah 4:7. God brought his people out from a “house of slavery” (ἐξ οἴκου δουλείας) and an “iron furnace” (ἐκ καμίνου σιδηρᾶς) and “boundless arrogance” (ἐξ ἀφορητοῦ πλεονεξίας) when he drowned the Egyptian pursuers in the Red Sea. Cyril continues the narrative of God’s acts of deliverance for his people:

The sea covered them, and they sank like lead in raging water while those who were redeemed (λελυτρωμένοι) were brought to the other side. A pillar of fire led them by night, showing them the way, while a cloud hung over them by day. Then they ate the bread from heaven, escaped from the bites of the serpents in the desert, bested their enemies, were brought across the Jordan, were circumcised with stone knives, entered the land of the promise.<sup>41</sup>

Like his comment on Zechariah 4:7, Cyril pairs each saving act of God on behalf of the Israelites with the redeeming work of Christ. In the previous passage, “grace” was the focal point of Cyril’s examination as he compared and contrasted the ancient grace with the new. Here, the operative term for Cyril is “tents” (σκηνώματα) which he interprets typologically as the Church. The beneficial things that God did for Israel in history Christ will bestow in a no less historical, but spiritually fulfilled way on those who seek his “tent”:

He (Christ) will save them thus, by setting them free from slavery – I mean to the devil – and bringing them out of demonic arrogance, having them cross over as through a sea the distractions of the world and idle tumult, and raising himself up as a pillar and foundation

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<sup>40</sup> Zech. 12:6b-7 (LXX).

<sup>41</sup> *Com. Zech.* 12:7 (Pusey, II, 486).

that shine, giving them light in the darkness, and, like a cloud, sprinkling them with spiritual dew (ταῖς νοηταῖς κατάρδοντα δρόσοις);<sup>42</sup> and he has become for them the bread of life, rendered the bites of the spiritual serpents both ineffective and powerless, led them across the Jordan, making them pure through the circumcision in the Spirit (τῇ διὰ Πνεύματος περιτομῇ), and bringing them into the kingdom of heaven.<sup>43</sup>

Cyril crafts a slightly different soteriological sequence here than he proposed in Zechariah 4:7, but the exegetical parallels between the two passages are clear enough. As in 4:7, one cannot be certain how Cyril envisions the relationship between baptism and circumcision in Zechariah 12:7. He recalls the original crossing of the Jordan and the circumcision with stone knives as two separate works. It is possible that Cyril intends to pair the Israelite crossing of the Jordan with the spiritual crossing that is accompanied with Christ as baptism while the circumcision with stone knives symbolizes a distinct (though related) work of purification accomplished by the Holy Spirit during or subsequent to baptism. This is the approach he takes in his *Commentary on John*: baptism and circumcision of the Spirit are related, but different in effect. “For we will certainly not receive the circumcision in the heart through the Spirit if we have not yet been carried across the mystic Jordan, but are still on the other side of the holy waters.”<sup>44</sup> He goes on to say that circumcision inaugurated a new condition whereby the “reproach of Egypt” was taken from the Israelites. In any case, in the *Commentary on John* baptism is the occasion or means by which we are circumcised in the Spirit. Keating, exploring this very passage in John, wonders if Cyril understands the two acts as chronologically

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<sup>42</sup> Cyril, as is so often the case, remains ambiguous as to what he means by this clause. According to LSJ, δρόσος can mean “pure water” as well as “dew”, rendering a possible reading “sprinkling them with pure spiritual water.” Hill translates as “bedewing them with spiritual moisture” (FC 124, 239). Cyril’s enigmatic wording and lack of clear explanation means this clause may be a reference to baptism, especially given the biblical basis for such an interpretation (I Cor. 10:1-4). In fact, Cyril makes the connection between the cloud, “spiritual dew” (δρόσου πνευματικῆς), and “saving baptism” (σωτηρίου βαπτίσματος) in his *Com. Is.* 19:1 (PG 70, 452-453). However, it is possible that by “spiritual dew” Cyril is simply referring to Christ’s life-giving teaching or similar type of spiritual nourishment. In his comment on Micah 7:14-15, he calls Christ the “spiritual cloud who has irrigated that which is under the sun with Gospel preaching, just like rain” (Pusey, I, 743). Further, given the sequence, it is more likely that he is identifying the crossing of the Jordan (and the circumcision of the Spirit?) with baptism instead of the cloud.

<sup>43</sup> *Com. Zech.* 12:7 (Pusey, II, 486).

<sup>44</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, II, 639).

consecutive with circumcision possibly referring to post-baptismal anointing. This is a plausible reading, although Cyril nowhere expounds on this distinction.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless, Cyril makes clear in Zechariah 12:7 and elsewhere that circumcision in the Spirit effects purification. Is the purification of circumcision of the Spirit different than the purification accomplished in baptism? Cyril often describes baptism as the point at which we are cleansed from sin.<sup>46</sup> But on many other occasions, he also associates baptism with the reception of the Holy Spirit and the grace of sanctification.<sup>47</sup> Cyril stresses the reception of the Spirit at baptism in particular because Christ received the Spirit as man on our behalf in his own baptism in order to recreate human nature.<sup>48</sup> The fact that Cyril identifies both baptism and circumcision as multi-faceted saving actions throughout his Old Testament commentaries makes it difficult to discern what he means in Zechariah 4:7 and 12:7 with any precision. However, it is clear that Cyril sees an integral relationship between the two. As I have tried to show, when other pertinent texts are placed alongside the Zechariah passages highlighting the narrative of salvation, it seems likely that he views baptism and circumcision of the Spirit as related divine activities in which one is purified from spiritual uncleanness and given a share in the Holy Spirit. Cyril makes a distinction between the two events, but he does not develop it.

A further complication arises in Cyril's comment on the very next verse, Zechariah 12:8 (LXX): "And in that day the Lord will be a shield for those dwelling in Jerusalem, and the weak one (ὁ ἀσθενῶν) will be as the house of David among them in that day, and the house of David as the house of God, as the angel of the Lord before them." If Cyril sees baptism and spiritual

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<sup>45</sup> Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 62.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. *Com. Is.* 1:16 (PG 70, 40-41), 3:1-2 (PG 70, 96), 35:8-10 (PG 70, 753); *Com. Mic.* 7:11 (Pusey, I, 727); *Com. Mal.* 1:7 (Pusey, II, 559).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Com. Is.* 3:1-2 (PG 70, 96); 4:4 (PG 70, 132); 25:6-7 (PG 70, 560).

<sup>48</sup> *Com. Is.* 42:1-4 (PG 70, 849-852); *Com. Joel* 2:28-29 (Pusey, I, 337-338). See also Daniel Keating, "The Baptism of Jesus in Cyril of Alexandria: The Re-Creation of the Human Race," *Pro Ecclesia* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 201-222.

circumcision as two distinct but cooperative works in one unified process in the passages explored above, he implies the opposite in this passage. Employing an allegorical lens, he interprets “Jerusalem” as the Church – those who love Christ and are in his protection – while the “weak (or infirmed) one” of the city is the catechumen who is yet unbaptized and “ill,” still weighed down by sin and not yet rescued from old passions.<sup>49</sup> Cyril explains that those who are weak, the catechumens, “will be like the house of David” in that they are believers who have turned their backs on the law and taken up the way of Christ. In this respect, the catechumen, spiritually weak though he may be, is in no way inferior in understanding and wisdom to Jews who continue to hold on to the types and shadows of the law.<sup>50</sup>

Cyril then turns to Romans 2 (with much of his concentration on verses 14-15 and 25-29)<sup>51</sup> where Paul discusses the Gentile nations (τὰ ἔθνος) who act in accordance with the Mosaic law through their own instincts even though, in a historical and technical sense, they are not under its authority. According to Paul, their actions demonstrate that the requirements of the law are inscribed on their hearts. Their obedience is counted as circumcision even though they are not physically circumcised. True Jewishness does not amount to outward expressions or appearances, but an inward, spiritual condition; and true circumcision is of the heart, not of the body. Cyril attributes the Pauline understanding of heart circumcision to the person who rejects circumcision of the flesh, opts for circumcision of the spirit, and offers himself as a Jew “on the

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<sup>49</sup> *Com. Zech.* 12:8 (Pusey, II, 488). Cf. *Com. Mal.* 7:1 (Pusey, II, 559), where Cyril likens “leavened bread” to those not yet cleansed through baptism.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 489.

<sup>51</sup> Rom. 2:14-15, 25-29: “For whenever Gentiles, who do not have the law, do the things of the law by nature, they are a law to themselves while not having the law; whenever they display that the works of the law are written on their hearts....Circumcision has no benefit if you observe the law; but if you are a lawbreaker, your circumcision has become uncircumcision (ἀκροβυστία). Therefore, if the one who is uncircumcised keeps the requirements of the law, will not his uncircumcision be considered circumcision? The one who is uncircumcised by nature who has carried out the law will judge you as a lawbreaker through the letter and circumcision. For one is not a Jew outwardly (τῷ φανερό), nor is circumcision visible in the flesh, but the Jew is one on the inside (τῷ κρυπτῷ) and circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit, not the letter. The praise of such a person is not from men but from God.”



inside.” Such a person is superior to the most distinguished Jewish scholars, Cyril claims, even though still bound by infirmity (ἀσθενείας) *on account of not having been baptized*.<sup>52</sup> In other words, Cyril is suggesting that a catechumen undergoes circumcision of the Spirit by virtue of believing in Christ *before* undergoing baptism. Here, he places spiritual circumcision chronologically before baptism and views it more in terms of an initial faith commitment than a purifying or Spirit-filling act received during or subsequent to baptism.

Cyril’s interpretation of Zechariah 12:8 is different in aim and scope than his exegesis of Zechariah 4:7 and 12:7. He uses the concept of circumcision of the Spirit, particularly as it is expressed by Paul in Romans 2:25-29, to indicate a pre-baptismal faith commitment leading to a new spiritual reality. We should not be surprised when Cyril appears inconsistent in his use of terms from one biblical passage to the next, given his exegetical method. When we consider his account of the “weak” catechumen who has been spiritually circumcised though remaining unbaptized alongside the narrative passages where he weds baptism and circumcision, we must conclude that Cyril is comfortable interpreting circumcision in different ways from one passage to the next (even when they are adjacent to one another) in order to underscore various dimensions of salvation.

A final passage to consider in Cyril’s Old Testament works that highlights the place of circumcision within his narrative of salvation is his comment on Micah 7:14-15 (LXX). In this text the prophet calls on the Lord to shepherd his people who live “in the midst of Carmel.” Led by the prophet, the people will “feed on Bashan and Gilead” and see great “marvels” as in the days when God led Israel out of Egypt. Cyril invites his hearers to look up from the corporeal meaning and consider what is hidden.<sup>53</sup> In this case, Cyril’s initial spiritual interpretation is

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<sup>52</sup> *Com. Zech.* 12:8 (Pusey, II, 489).

<sup>53</sup> *Com. Mic.* 7:14-15 (Pusey, I, 733).

Christological. The one who shepherds is Christ while the people being shepherded include everyone who is “justified through faith.”<sup>54</sup> Cyril then turns his attention to the “marvels” of God’s mighty acts on Israel’s behalf and identifies them as types that find their fulfillment in the work of Christ. Just as Pharaoh drowned in the sea, so has the devil been plunged into darkness; as Israel was baptized into Moses, we are baptized into Christ; as God sent the people manna from heaven, Christ gives himself as the living bread; the people were brought into the land, we are brought into the heavenly city. It is strange that Cyril nowhere mentions the crossing of the Jordan or the subsequent circumcision with stone knives in this re-telling of Israel’s deliverance. Instead, he introduces circumcision into his discourse immediately following when he takes “another path” (ἐτέραν ὁδόν) of interpretation in order to uncover the hidden meanings of “Carmel,” “Bashan,” and “Gilead.”

To determine the spiritual meaning of these locations, Cyril relies on etymologies where each name of place refers to something spiritual.<sup>55</sup> Carmel (Κάρμηλος) means “knowledge of circumcision” (Περιτομῆς ἐπίγνωσις);<sup>56</sup> Bashan means “shame” (αἰσχύνη); and Gilead means “change of covenant” (Διαθήκης μετάθεσις). Cyril explains that those whom Christ shepherds are “in Carmel.” That is, they have received the circumcision not performed by hands, but by the Spirit – the circumcision that makes its recipients familiar to God (Θεῷ γνωρίμους). According

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 731.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Hill points out that Cyril finds these etymologies in Jerome and uses them for his own purposes (FC 116, 274, n.39). Indeed, we find Cyril’s etymologies verbatim in Jerome’s *In Michaem* Bk. 2.7: “Carmelus interpretatur scientia circumcisionis, basanitis confusio, et galaad transmigratio testimonii” (CCSL 76). However, this etymological tradition precedes Jerome, appearing in Origen, Eusebius, and Didymus – all writers with whom Cyril had some degree of familiarity. Kerrigan speaks to the likelihood that these writers were common sources for both Jerome and Cyril (Kerrigan, *Interpreter of the Old Testament*, 435). It is likely that Cyril’s main source on this occasion is Jerome since Cyril appears to be quoting him directly. At the same time, he is probably aware that these etymologies had previous use, especially in his own Alexandrian tradition. Later writers including Procopius of Gaza, Olympiodorus, and Maximus Confessor would continue to make use of these etymologies.

<sup>56</sup> In his *Commentary on Amos* 1:2, Cyril notes that “Carmel” often refers to the whole land of Israel and points to Jer. 2:7 as an example, although, as Hill observes, Jer. 2:7 speaks of Carmel not as a proper name but pertaining to a garden. As for the use of “Carmel” in Amos 1:2 (“the crest of Carmel”), Cyril believes it refers to Jerusalem (FC 116, 15).

to Cyril, this is what Paul meant when he described one who is a Jew inwardly in Romans 2:28-29.<sup>57</sup> Circumcision of the Spirit brings the recipient into a new, intimate relationship with God.

But, Cyril continues, if we are in “Carmel” on account of Christ’s leading and enjoy communion with God, we are no less in “Bashan.” The new relationship with God put into effect by circumcision of the heart is inseparable from a repentant spirit and shameful awareness of sins. The “sins” Cyril speaks of do not refer to continual, willful, rebellious acts, but to the natural sinful inclination as well as sins committed in ignorance. Cyril describes this sensitivity to sin as “the way of salvation” and contrasts it with the insensitivity of those who are “hard and shameless in heart.”<sup>58</sup> The indifferent heart is the uncircumcised heart, and is far from salvation.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, those who have knowledge of “spiritual and divine circumcision” and bear a sense of shame for their sins are also in Gilead because they live according to a new covenant. Even as we carry a sense of shame and confusion for our sins, Cyril says, we dwell as free citizens under Christ (πολιτευσόμεθα υπό Χριστῷ), no longer bound by the law, but live according to the Gospel in that we bypass the literal sense of the letter and perform spiritual worship to God. Under the new covenant, Cyril asserts, “we will exchange the type for the truth.”<sup>60</sup> In this regard, Cyril insists that literal circumcision is only a matter of the flesh while spiritual circumcision of the heart changes our relationship with God, endows us with a repentant spirit, and frees us under the new covenant of Christ. The believer is in all three “places” at once. These etymologies reveal the nature of the Christian life in Cyril’s thought.

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<sup>57</sup> *Com. Mic.* 7:14-15 (Pusey, I, 735).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Jer. 4:4.

<sup>60</sup> *Com. Mic.* 7:14-15 (Pusey, I, 736).

The above passages show that spiritual circumcision has various soteriological implications for Cyril. Many of these implications are developed within his narrative of salvation. As we have seen, he is fond of using the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt and journey to the Promised Land as a type of the saving work of Christ, though he often rehearses the narratives in slightly different forms, depending on what he wishes to emphasize. From these passages, we can deduce that circumcision of the Spirit is 1) a purifying act closely associated with baptism, 2) an initial commitment of faith, and 3) a work of the heart that brings us into close relationship with God while imparting to us a spiritual sensitivity to our sin on account of the new covenant of grace.

#### Circumcision as the Mark of the True Israel

A number of passages scattered throughout Cyril's Old Testament commentaries explain that circumcision has ceased to function as an identity marker of the people of the old covenant, and is now understood as the catalyst of a new spiritual reality which seals the people of the new covenant, namely, the Church. On many occasions Cyril follows the biblical, traditional precedent of naming the Jews as "the circumcision," a term not only implying identity, but general conformity to the old law. Thus, Cyril often relates circumcision to things pertaining to the law as well as to other realities such as the city of Jerusalem. By contrast, Cyril juxtaposes "the circumcision" with those who have circumcision of the Spirit in order to show the difference between type and truth. Those who are spiritually circumcised are Jews on the inside;<sup>61</sup> they share in a new spiritual condition; they are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem; they are the Church, the new Israel. This is Cyril's way of drawing attention to the true character of the Christian faith. Being righteous is not achieved by following the law, but through faith in

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Rom. 2:28-29.

Christ. To be sure, holy conduct matters a great deal to Cyril, but he is careful to emphasize the internal, spiritual reality the Christian enjoys through faith rather than dutiful adherence to externals.

Cyril is comfortable contrasting the ethnic Jew with the “inward” Jew and physical circumcision with spiritual circumcision because he emphasizes the typological relationship between circumcision according to the law and justification by faith.<sup>62</sup> For example, in his *Glaphya in Genesim*, Book 3α, he sets out to show that Abraham and Isaac typify the “mystery of faith” and points to the commandment of circumcision as a pattern of this mystery:

That the mystery of righteousness by faith has the older previous appearance of circumcision in the law, and that the type was written down beforehand for those of Israel of the fact that one cannot be saved by anything except through Christ alone who makes the ungodly righteous, and frees from accusation. And in addition to these things, that they are heirs of God and that they have been deemed most assuredly among legitimate children of the promise, which has been made in Isaac to the blessed Abraham, let us discuss, taking from the blessed Scriptures themselves, and go through each belief subtly and accurately.<sup>63</sup>

Cyril’s explanation of the Abraham-Isaac-circumcision typology depends upon Romans 4:1-17, where Paul recounts how Abraham was declared righteous on account of his faith, which he

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<sup>62</sup> The concept of justification through faith in Christ is everywhere in Cyril’s writings. Though he often takes the biblical phraseology for granted without explaining what “justification” entails, a clear example of his understanding is found in his *Glaph. in Gen.* Book 3α where, explaining the “mystery of righteousness by faith,” he insists that “one cannot be saved by anything except through Christ alone who makes the ungodly righteous and frees from the accusation” (PG 69, 112). But justification itself is a multivalent concept for Cyril, and the way he explains it in one place may differ from ways he uses it in other places. As with many concepts in Cyril’s writings, it takes a wide reading to piece together his idea of justification. Overall, justification according to Cyril signals a change in one’s relationship with God that involves escape from judgment, knowledge of the Father, adoption, regeneration, and communion. It is important to note, as Keating does, that Cyril does not mark off justification and sanctification as distinct “stages” in appropriating the divine life, but as part of one work in our redemption. See Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 141, 192. Further, the later debates among Catholics and some Protestants concerning the nature of justification by faith – whether one is “considered” righteous or “made” righteous – is not a question for Cyril. He uses the biblical terms λογίζομαι and δικαιώω interchangeably and makes no distinction between a so-called positional change and an ontological change. Cf. *FL* 6.8 in *Cyrille d’Alexandrie: Lettres Festales I-VI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Marie-Odile Boulnois, Pierre Évieux, Marguerite Forrat, and Bernard Meunier, SC 372 (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 376. For other examples of Cyril’s use of justification, see *Glaph. in Gen.* 1α (PG 69, 31-32); *FL* 5.5 (SC 372, 308); *Com. Hos.* 2:20 (Pusey, I, 77), 6:6 (Pusey, I, 142); *Com. Joel* 1:5 (Pusey, I, 294); *Com. Amos* 2:10 (Pusey, I, 411); *Com. Jnh* (Pusey, I, 573); *Com. Mic.* 5:7 (Pusey, I, 685); *Com. Hab.* 2:3-4 (Pusey, II, 94-95); *Com. Is.* 1:1 (PG 70, 17), 44:23 (PG 70, 936-941); *In Jo.* 6:64-65 (Pusey, I, 556), 7:24 (Pusey, I, 621).

<sup>63</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3α (PG 69, 112).

exhibited before he was circumcised. Following Paul, Cyril draws attention to circumcision according to the law and claims that it was put in place to foretell justification by faith. Since this type was carried out by the Israelites (God's covenant people), it points ahead to the reality of salvation through Christ alone.<sup>64</sup>

Cyril makes use of Romans 4:1-17 here because Paul is describing what is most essential to righteousness against those who insist that circumcision is necessary for salvation. For Cyril, Paul's rehearsal of Abraham's belief and subsequent circumcision removes any ambiguity about the true meaning of the Abraham story in Genesis 15-17. Abraham was not considered righteous because he was circumcised; he was made righteous because he believed God. Circumcision came afterward as a sign (σημεῖον) and seal (σφραγίδα) of the righteousness that comes through faith.<sup>65</sup> Since this is the case, he has become "the father of those in faith." Not everyone, Cyril warns, who comes from Abraham's biological seed are really his children. Not all who are "of Israel" are really "of Israel." Rather, Abraham's real children – his true relations – include "those who have faith and have believed while uncircumcised."<sup>66</sup> These are not just Jews, but people from everywhere. These, Cyril says, "have become of the same body of Christ and called into spiritual fellowship."<sup>67</sup> This is what it means to be a Christian (and to be really "of Israel"). It is about becoming righteous through faith in Christ and being gathered up into the holy communion of his body, the Church, where grace is received through baptism and the Eucharist. Circumcision according to the law *pointed* to this reality. Spiritual circumcision *is* the reality: it is the fulfillment of righteousness that the Old Testament proclaimed would come by faith.

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<sup>64</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, β (PG 69, 112-113).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 113. Cf. Rom. 4:11.

<sup>66</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, β (PG 69, 113).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

Circumcision of the Spirit has become the new seal for members of the true Israel inhabiting the spiritual Jerusalem. The transformation of these particular types – circumcision, Israel, Jerusalem – is a common motif throughout Cyril’s commentaries on the Old Testament. Take, for example, his interpretation of Isaiah 2:1:

We speak of the material Judah and also Jerusalem as the country where Israel dwelt and also as the community of the Jews, whereas the spiritual Jerusalem or Judah we shall take to be the Church, or those circumcised in spirit, that is, those experiencing in mind and heart a circumcision in Christ that is not done by hand.<sup>68</sup>

Those who have been circumcised in mind and heart and are part of the spiritual Israel (or Judah)<sup>69</sup> bear unique spiritual characteristics. Three examples from Cyril’s voluminous *Commentary on Zechariah* make these characteristics clear.

First, Cyril refers to the circumcised as Christ’s inheritance. In Zechariah 2:12 the prophet proclaims that the Lord will inherit Judah as his own possession and choose Jerusalem. Cyril identifies “Judah” not in a geographical sense, but as those who confess Christ. Here again he cites Romans 2:28-29, implying that not everyone from Judah (or Israel) is a Jew in the true sense; only those who have been circumcised on the inside. So, Cyril continues, we who have been “enriched (πεπλουτήκαμεν) with circumcision of the Spirit” become Christ’s portion (κληρος), and comprise the spiritual Jerusalem, that is, the Church.<sup>70</sup> To be Christ’s possession suggests the intimate sharing in the divine life that believers enjoy.

Second, the circumcised “see God” insofar as their minds have been transformed. This etymology was established in the tradition by Cyril’s time.<sup>71</sup> In this case, Cyril derives it from

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<sup>68</sup> *Com. Is.* 1:2 (PG 70, 65; trans. Hill, vol. 1, 61). For other examples of circumcision, Israel, and / or Jerusalem as types of the true ones, see *Com. Mal.* 3:3-4 (Pusey, II, 602); *Com. Is.* 44:24-26 (PG 70, 945); 46:12-13 (PG 70, 1000-1001).

<sup>69</sup> Cyril uses these terms interchangeably when it comes to spiritual purposes.

<sup>70</sup> *Com. Zech.* 2:10-12 (Pusey, II, 310-311).

<sup>71</sup> For a brief summary of where this etymology appears in other early Christian writers, see Joseph Mueller, “Christian and Jewish Tradition behind Tyconius’s Doctrine of the Church as *Corpus Bipertitum*,” in *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 303, n. 75.

his interpretation of Zechariah 10:5-6 where God promises to save the “house of Judah” and the “house of Joseph” from their enemies and establish them because of his love for them. He interprets this passage as a reference to the defeat of paganism at the hands of God’s people (Judah). But more to the spiritual point, he believes that when the text names the houses of Judah and Joseph, the deeper meaning suggests the great multitude of the saints who have been justified in Christ; those who are “Jewish” in heart, and “share in circumcision of the spirit.”<sup>72</sup> Those who bear these realities represent the true Israel and possess a mind that “sees God.”<sup>73</sup> He thus makes the soteriological connection between circumcision of the heart (along with justification and true Jewishness) and a mind illumined to see God.

Third, the circumcised are victorious in the world even though they are not of the world. When Cyril explores Zechariah 14:13-14, a passage predicting the total defeat of Judah’s enemies and its subsequent plundering of their riches, he once again interprets Judah in a spiritual sense as “those who have been justified by faith in Christ and carry on as a Jew in the hidden sense, and are enriched in the circumcision of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>74</sup> The military conquest implied in the passage suggests that true Jews – the justified and spiritually circumcised – attack their foes and prevail over their enemies. Of course, the hostile engagement described here has nothing to do with superiority of physical strength or weaponry, but the undermining of the allies of darkness. The battles are spiritual just as the spoils of war for the saints are spiritual.<sup>75</sup> Overall, Cyril’s point is clear. Those who are justified and circumcised by the Spirit are

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. Rom. 2:28-29. See also *Com. Zech.* 14:21 (Pusey, II, 542) where Cyril identifies “Judah” as those are “share in circumcision of the spirit” (τοῖς τὴν ἐν πνεύματι λαχοῦσι περιτομήν).

<sup>73</sup> *Com. Zech.* 10:5-6 (Pusey, II, 437). On Cyril’s etymology of “Israel,” see Hill’s translation, FC 124, 204 (n. 11). Cyril imposes the exact same etymology in his commentary on Isaiah 46:12-13 (PG 70, 1001).

<sup>74</sup> *Com. Zech.* 14:13-14 (Pusey, II, 532).

<sup>75</sup> See also *Com. Na.* 1:15 (Pusey, II, 34-35), where Cyril claims that the enemies of those who are spiritual Jews will be punished. “For this is what Christ has fulfilled, commanding the unclean spirits to go out into the abyss, and giving those who love him the authority to rise up and fight, to be brave against the passions, to overcome sin, and ‘to tread upon snakes and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy’” (Luke 8:31-33, 10:19).



equipped and emboldened to overcome the enemies of Christ, plunder the “strong man” (the pagan nations), and reap heavenly rewards.<sup>76</sup>

Above all, Cyril describes circumcision of the Spirit in terms of a new spiritual condition. This is not difficult to infer, since the passage he quotes most frequently concerning circumcision is Romans 2:28-29 where Paul establishes that true Jewishness is a spiritual, inward condition rather than a visible mark of national identity, and that genuine circumcision is of the heart. Sometimes Cyril is content to allow Paul’s words to make the case for him. But much of the time he goes into greater detail explaining what he believes being a Jew inwardly and receiving a spiritual circumcision imply.

Cyril lays out the characteristics of such a person in an eloquent comment on Nahum 1:15 where Judah is commanded to celebrate its festivals and pay its vows to God. The people are then assured that their enemies will not oppress them forever. After providing some historical context for the verse, Cyril interprets the prophet’s words as a directive for those who are spiritual Jews. He quotes Romans 2:28-29 to describe the concept of spiritual Jews who have received inward circumcision, and claims that they will “celebrate” as God commanded through Nahum. Then Cyril explains what a spiritual Jew is:

Such a person will celebrate with radiance, having a faith that is firm – clearly in Christ, that is – having been sanctified by the Spirit, and distinguished by the grace of adoption. He will offer up spiritual sacrifices to God, presenting himself as a sweet-smelling odor, and devoting himself to every form of virtue – moderation, self-control, fortitude, patience, love, hope, love of poverty, kindness, long-suffering – “for God is pleased with such sacrifices.”<sup>77</sup>

For Cyril, faith in Christ, with the corollaries of adoption and sanctification, leads to affective piety. He gives no hint of a private, subjective faith that does not express itself in outward

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<sup>76</sup> *Com. Zech.* 14:13-14 (Pusey, II, 532-533). Cyril’s brief mention of plundering the “strong man” is a reference to Mt. 12:29.

<sup>77</sup> *Com. Na.* 1:15 (Pusey, II, 34). Cf. Heb. 13:16.

conduct.<sup>78</sup> The inward Jew who has been circumcised in spirit lives a holy life that reflects a new spiritual condition.

Further, living according to the new condition is not done begrudgingly or out of sheer will, but with enthusiasm. In Cyril's comment on Micah 4:2-3, he compares zeal for God's new covenant in typological fashion with proselytes in the Old Testament who turned from idolatry, received circumcision according to the law, and, in great earnest, began to live according to the principles of Judaism.<sup>79</sup> Among the biblical examples of such proselytes from "the nations," Cyril includes the roughly 150,000 laborers whom Solomon conscripted to build the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>80</sup> The throng of workers setting out to build the Temple was, for Cyril, a "type of the mystery" (τύπος...μυστηρίου) of the building of the true Temple, the Church. These laborers are not Jews in the national, ethnic sense, but Jews inwardly "who have circumcision not in the flesh, but in the spirit."<sup>81</sup> Since the Incarnation, the shadows and types in the law come to an end, and those who once flocked to Judaism have now come to the true "mountain of the Lord," received circumcision in the spirit, and live the life of Christ with joy.<sup>82</sup>

### Circumcision as Christ's Victory over Death

Another specific theme in Cyril's evaluation of circumcision in his Old Testament commentaries is Christ's victory over death through his own death. Earlier writers such as Origen argued that the blood-letting of physical circumcision was a type of the redemptive blood of Christ.<sup>83</sup> Cyril follows this general line of reasoning, but observes the typological relationship

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Com. Is.* 32:14 (PG 70, 712), where Cyril warns that God will abandon the soul who bears no fruit of good works.

<sup>79</sup> *Com. Mic.* 4:2-3 (Pusey, I, 659-662).

<sup>80</sup> II Chron. 2:17-18.

<sup>81</sup> *Com. Mic.* 4:2-3 (Pusey, I, 659-660).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 660-661.

<sup>83</sup> *Homily on Luke* 14.1, trans. Joseph Lienhard, S.J., FC 94 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 56

between circumcision and Christ's death most vividly in Exodus 4:24-26. These verses record the story of an angel of the Lord who meets Moses who was on his way to Egypt. Though the angel intended to dole out judgment because Moses' son was not circumcised, he was repelled when Zipporah, Moses's wife, circumcised their son with a stone. This puzzling event in the Moses narrative gave rise to a wide variety of interpretation. On the one hand, Origen surmised that this text enforces the idea of the unique national obligation for circumcision imposed upon the Israelites. Those who remained uncircumcised were subject to divine punishment from the angel of destruction.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, Gregory of Nyssa explained that the circumcision by the hand of Zipporah (who was a non-Israelite) represents cutting away the defilements of pagan learning so that it may not corrupt those wishing to benefit from it.<sup>85</sup> Cyril found Zipporah's life-saving act of circumcision an historic but also symbolic event looking ahead to a greater soteriological fulfillment. Throughout his writings, he returns to this story on several occasions, and often spends a good deal of energy investigating the theological significance of each detail.<sup>86</sup> The story seems to figure prominently for him because it is a major biblical episode revolving around circumcision that raises a number of exegetical and theological questions about sin, judgment, salvation, and the nature of the Son and the Spirit. As is often the case, Cyril's interpretation of this text is filled with typological images that find their reality in Christ.

Cyril's *Commentary on Habakkuk* 3:6 provides a clear example of his interest in the *theoria* and typological fulfillment of Exodus 4:24-26. When the prophet cries out, "He took his place (Ἔστη), and the earth was shaken,"<sup>87</sup> Cyril points out that ἔστη is often understood in

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<sup>84</sup> Cf. *Contra Celsum* 5.48, trans. Marcel Borret, SC 147 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 138-140; *Commentary on Romans* 2.13.18, trans. Thomas Scheck, FC 103 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

<sup>85</sup> *Vita Moysis* II.37-41, trans. Jean Daniélou, SC 1 (Paris: Cerf, 1968), 126-130.

<sup>86</sup> For example, see *De ador.* (68, 257-260); *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484-485); *Comm. Hab.* 3:6 (Pusey, II, 135-136); *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 635).

<sup>87</sup> Hab. 3:6 (LXX).

Scripture to imply something that has taken place and reached fulfillment. His aptitude for word association immediately brings him to demonstrate how the word function by recalling Zipporah's declaration after she circumcised her son: "There had taken place (ἐστῆ) the blood of circumcision of my child."<sup>88</sup> According to Cyril, the very thing that was lacking which would result in divine judgment was immediately accomplished. The *fait accompli* is underscored by the word ἐστῆ. Zipporah circumcised her son with a small stone and stayed the hand of the angel.

With his linguistic point made, Cyril considers what the spiritual fulfillment of circumcision means. The most salient point of the story, Cyril suggests, is about overcoming death. The victory over corruption and death is a fundamental plank in Cyril's soteriological platform. Moses escaped death because of a flint taken to his son's genitalia, but those who are circumcised by the "spiritual flint" escape death in the true, eternal sense. Zipporah's flint is a type of Christ whom the biblical authors describe throughout Scripture as a rock or stone (or cornerstone).<sup>89</sup> In the same breath, Cyril reminds his readers that the Israelite circumcision with stone knives by the hand of Joshua on the other side of the Jordan serves as a type of circumcision in the Spirit because the Spirit is also described as a stone blade.<sup>90</sup> Thus, Cyril ties together the circumcisions administered by Zipporah and Joshua with stones and recognizes them as types of the spiritual circumcision wrought by Christ and the Spirit, respectively, which renders the recipient immune to death. Cyril recognizes an inseparable association between the Son and the Spirit within the transformative work of circumcision. At times he uses the Son and Spirit interchangeably as the divine agent of the spiritual operation, but usually does not explain

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<sup>88</sup> Ex. 4:25 (LXX).

<sup>89</sup> Cf. I Cor. 10:4; Eph. 2:20; I Pet. 2:4-8. See also Mt. 21:42; Mk. 12:10; Lk. 20:17

<sup>90</sup> *Com. Hab.* 3:6 (Pusey, II, 135-136).

what, if any, distinct roles the two Persons have in this saving work. This relationship between the Son, Spirit, and circumcision will be discussed below in more detail.<sup>91</sup>

However, Cyril's most theologically rich accounts of Zipporah's life-saving act of circumcision are recorded several years prior to his comments on Habakkuk. We find these accounts in *De ador.*, Book 2 and *Glaph. in Ex.* Book 2. Cyril is not content with simple comparisons between the physical circumcision that spared Moses' life and the spiritual circumcision that prevents final corruption and death for all who have faith in Christ. Rather, he finds a type-fulfillment relationship in nearly every detail of the story in order to fill out his dictum that Christ has reversed our condition through his own death. In addition to the circumcision itself, Cyril devotes careful attention to what the angel, Zipporah, her son, and the stone or "pebble" (ψήφος), contribute to the story.<sup>92</sup> As we will see, the various characters and objects in the narrative come together as a portrayal of Cyril's many-sided soteriology.

Cyril's doctrine of the Fall forms the backdrop of the story in both of his accounts. As Schurig notes, Cyril believes that as a result of the Fall, "man has suffered irreparable harm (Schaden) in his nature."<sup>93</sup> Death and corruption came upon the entire human race through Adam. Cyril highlights the Adamic curse in order to put into relief the superior, restorative work of Christ the second Adam. In his *De adoratione*, Cyril rhetorically inquires of his inquisitive friend Palladius, "Is it not the truth...that the nature of man is gripped by death, having been cursed from the ancient time?" He then reminds Palladius of the divine pronouncement of

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<sup>91</sup> In addition to my further examination of Cyril's interpretation of circumcision in his *De ador.* and *Glaph.*, see also my treatment of his *Commentary on John* 15:1-3 in Chapter Five, pp. 195-205.

<sup>92</sup> Cyril sets himself up to investigate the details of the text through the question of Palladius, who asks, "Then what are we to think of Zipporah? And what about the pebble and the circumcision which came about through it? And the divine angel who was persuaded to retreat (δεδυσώπηται) so that when the child had been circumcised Moses escaped what was threatening him and the death which he ought to have suffered?" *De ador.* (PG 68, 257).

<sup>93</sup> Schurig, 79. See Schurig's brief discussion of Cyril's doctrine of the Fall in *De ador.*, 74-79.

judgment leveled against Adam: “You are earth, and to earth you will return.”<sup>94</sup> Cyril explains the devastating effects of this curse upon all because Adam serves as the “firstfruit” and “root” of the human race. In a plant, anything running through the stem, leaves, and flowers – whether nutrient or toxin – is distributed by the root. In the same way, the curse of death imposed upon Adam was passed on in a hereditary manner to every succeeding generation and became a sickness that ran throughout the whole of mankind up until the time of the Mosaic law.<sup>95</sup> Neither Moses nor the law was able to expunge death; rather, they became images signifying death’s future demise in Christ.

After establishing the curse of death and corruption upon the human race, Cyril investigates the significance of Moses’ encounter with the angel who sought to kill him. In his study of the text in the *Glaphyra*, Cyril admits that the “holy letter” does not make clear why the angel was seeking to kill Moses.<sup>96</sup> Rather, he believes the intention of this part of the story is to magnify the tragic reality of the human condition.<sup>97</sup> Cyril suggests that the angel’s attempt to destroy Moses represents death, which was seeking to devour us as a race and had every right to do so. In the same way that the angel recognized Moses’ vulnerability (his son was uncircumcised), death has laid claim to us because of our vulnerability in Adam.<sup>98</sup> Adam was afflicted with death, and we are his heirs who share in that affliction.

Cyril is equally emphatic that the circumcision of Moses’ son by the stone of Zipporah typifies the blood of Christ that overcomes the Adamic curse. After Zipporah circumcised her son, the angel turned away without harming anyone. Cyril asserts that the angel was repelled on account of Christ, not because the child’s foreskin had been cut off. In the very process of

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<sup>94</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 257). Cf. Gen. 3:19.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 3, ζ (PG 69, 484).

<sup>97</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 257).

<sup>98</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 3, ζ (PG 69, 484).

circumcision, the destroyer recognized something more significant taking place. Cyril explains that when the angel saw what was happening, the angel “honored the mystery of circumcision in Christ.”<sup>99</sup> This mystery, which Cyril describes in both the *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra*, was symbolized not only by the act of circumcision itself, but by the stone with which Zipporah administered the circumcision and by the blood of her son.

The pebble is a type of Christ the true stone. Likewise, the blood of the child points ahead to the blood of Christ which saves from death. Further, in both accounts Cyril stresses that the angel’s departure from Moses and his family represents the flight of death not just from one group of people or generation, but from all generations. Christ’s death, Cyril claims, not only affects all those coming after him, but also works retroactively to save from death and corruption all those who came before. The stone used to circumcise – an image of Christ – is imparted to the “fathers” (πατράσιν) and the new people of God alike. Here, “fathers” most likely refers to the patriarchs and all those who were obedient to God before the time of the law. Cyril declares in his *De adoratione*:

For just as we all died in Adam, so also grace was brought to everyone through Christ. For he died on account of this, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Then, the life of the fathers was restored in the time of the circumcision of the new people.<sup>100</sup>

Cyril is equally emphatic concerning the relationship between the circumcision of Moses’ son and the generational range of Christ’s victory over death in his *Glaphyra*:

But again, the type clearly articulates how death has been defeated by the blood of Christ. For the holy crowd of the fathers was saved, and, even more, the whole race from far back and before him. For he died for all, and the death of all was destroyed in him. For not by the blood of the prophets, but in the most recent blood of Christ and with him we have escaped the destroyer. “For this reason,” he says, “Christ died and came back to life; that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 260).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Glaph.in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484).

The fact that the angel of death was not permitted to kill after the circumcision took place suggests to Cyril that the human race is no longer vulnerable to death because circumcision typifies the “mystery of Christ.” This mystery is no less than Christ shedding his own blood to destroy death itself and free the human race from its grasp.

At the prompting of Palladius, Cyril also considers Zipporah’s place in the story and gives careful attention to her character beyond the bare letter. Like Gregory of Nyssa, Cyril is quick to point out that Zipporah is not native to the family of Israel, but is a foreigner.<sup>102</sup> Her father, Jethro, was a priest of Midian and descended from a bloodline outside the patriarchs. Zipporah, Cyril reasons, is from “the nations.” At the same time, she is united with Moses as his wife. When Cyril puts these characteristics side by side, he suggests Zipporah is a type of the Church. On the one hand, she symbolizes the new people of God called out from among the Gentiles. On the other hand, she represents those whom God has called to “the mystery of Christ” who had been following the law and leaning upon Moses.<sup>103</sup> At one point Cyril even uses the term “the spiritual (νοητή) Zipporah” in naming the Church.<sup>104</sup> The identification of Zipporah as the Church is important to Cyril for two reasons. First, it suggests that true circumcision is done in the context of the Church. Cyril points out that the circumcision carried out by the “spiritual Zipporah” is the circumcision of the Spirit.<sup>105</sup> He does not explain the precise manner in which the Church is involved. However, the implication is that circumcision of the heart is not restricted to a private affair between God and the Christian. Rather, there is an

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<sup>102</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 257). Cf. Gregory’s account in his *Vita Moysis* II.37-41 (SC 1, 126-130). While there is very little evidence that directly connects Cyril to the influence of Gregory, there are parallels between them that suggest influence is possible. The agreement between them concerning Zipporah’s status as a foreigner may serve as one more example of Cyril’s knowledge of Gregory. See above, Chapter Three, pp. 91-92 fn. 34.

<sup>103</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 257-260).

<sup>104</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484).

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*



ecclesial relationship between the individual believer and spiritual circumcision. True circumcision takes place within the ecclesial, sacramental community.

Second, the identification of Zipporah as the Church implies something about her offspring. Cyril makes a few brief remarks in his account in the *Glaphyra* that Zipporah's son was the firstborn to her and Moses, and that his name was Gersam which means "sojourner" or "foreigner" (πάρουκος). But more importantly, if she represents those who are called out from the nations and from the law, her son is a type (τύπος) of the new people whom God has created by means of faith in Christ through the Spirit. Cyril describes the new people – Zipporah's spiritual offspring – in his *De adoratione* as childlike, regenerate, and victorious over death on account of their faith and their circumcision.<sup>106</sup> Zipporah's son escaped death when he was circumcised; the offspring of the spiritual Zipporah overcome death through spiritual circumcision and faith. Cyril does not explain the relationship between circumcision and faith, but he assumes a close relationship between them. While they are distinct, both are integral to salvation and the overcoming of death.

On the typological relationship between physical and spiritual circumcision, however, Cyril is emphatic:

For it is not through the circumcision according to the law, that is, the physical circumcision according to the flesh that death was put to flight, but the one that is in Christ through the Spirit which he carried out on the firstborn and new people and sojourner...the circumcision with which the spiritual Zipporah, that is the Church...circumcised with a small stone.<sup>107</sup>

This circumcision carries such power over death because it was performed with "the pebble of unbreakable nature."<sup>108</sup> Cyril insists that the "stone" or "pebble" in the Exodus text is a type of

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<sup>106</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 260).

<sup>107</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484).

<sup>108</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 260).

Christ. But near the end of his excursus in *Glaphyra*, he admits that the stone may also be a type of the Spirit. He makes a similar observation in his *Commentary on Habakkuk*.<sup>109</sup>

His reason for reading the Spirit into the text is twofold. First, he singles out divine attributes possessed by the Spirit that, analogously, are characteristics of a rock. For example, the Spirit, as divine, is both “almighty and unbreakable.” Second, and more importantly, the Spirit is ontologically united to Christ. Cyril asserts that the Spirit is “from the rock. For the Spirit is of Christ. ‘And the rock is Christ’ just as the wise Paul writes.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, what can be said of the being of the Son can also be said of the Spirit. Because the Spirit is “of” (ἐκ) the rock, that is, of Christ (Χριστοῦ), the Spirit shares ontologically in Christ. Cyril does not explain the intricacies of how the Son and the Spirit minister together in the one operation of spiritual circumcision except that the new circumcision is accomplished “in Christ through the Spirit” (ἐν Χριστῷ διὰ πνεύματος).<sup>111</sup> He provides no further theological analysis here about the relationship between the Son and the Spirit or the procession of the Spirit.<sup>112</sup> Cyril’s goal in dealing with the meaning of Zipporah’s pebble is not to provide a detailed synopsis of Trinitarian theology, though he is not unconcerned about the Trinitarian implications. Rather, the important

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<sup>109</sup> See above, p. 145.

<sup>110</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484).

<sup>111</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 260), italics added.

<sup>112</sup> A detailed account of Cyril’s Trinitarian theology is outside the scope of this dissertation. Statements like the one cited above became valuable proof-texts for those wanting to cite Cyril in defense of the *filioque* clause. However, Boulnois has shown that Cyril’s doctrine of the procession of the Spirit requires careful reflection. To be sure, Cyril at times affirms the dependence of the Holy Spirit on the Son. In some cases he claims that the Spirit issues from the Father and the Son. But Cyril also expresses different ways in which the Spirit relates to the Father and the Son, including his declaration that the Spirit “issues from the Father through the Son.” Boulnois concludes that these different statements Cyril makes concerning the Spirit’s procession are complementary, and that Cyril should not be thrust into a later conflict that was foreign to him. For Cyril, “the Spirit is both the Spirit of the Father, from whom he proceeds, as well as the Spirit of the Son, from whom he draws all that he has” and that “his procession comes from the Father without excluding the Son’s mediation.” See Marie-Odile Boulnois, “The Mystery of the Trinity according to Cyril of Alexandria: The Deployment of the Triad and Its Recapitulation into the Unity of Divinity,” in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria*, ed. Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 106-107. For a fuller treatment on the procession of the Spirit and the Trinitarian relations, see her *La Paradoxe Trinitaire chez Cyrille d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Institut d’études augustinienes, 1994), 492-529.

point here is that the stone – the instrument of circumcision – serves as a type of both Christ and the Spirit and the saving activity of the Persons in the new circumcision.

Finally, Cyril expands the meaning of the stone even further by bringing Joshua 5:3-9 to bear on Exodus 4:24-26. In fact, on all three occasions where Cyril discusses Zipporah circumcising her son, he allows the Joshua text to inform and enhance his interpretation.<sup>113</sup>

What Cyril has in mind is the significance of Joshua – whom many patristic thinkers viewed as a type of Christ<sup>114</sup> – and, in particular, the stone knives with which he circumcised the new generation of Israelites upon their crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land. Cyril claims that Joshua's circumcision with stone knives prefigures “the circumcision in Christ through the Spirit.”<sup>115</sup> The stone knives typify Christ in the same manner as does Zipporah's stone. Cyril repeats that the circumcision of Joshua is similar to that of Zipporah's in that it is an obscure sign of the circumcision in Christ that defeats death. Joshua came after Moses with a second circumcision to the nation of Israel; Christ comes after the law with a circumcision performed without hands.<sup>116</sup> With the inclusion of the Joshua text, Cyril rounds out circumcision's soteriological effects. His exegesis of Exodus 4 and Joshua 5 postulates, in the main, a positive theology of circumcision. Much of his discussion concerns Christ's victorious death and our appropriation of new life in Christ that emancipates us from death. Spiritual circumcision is life-giving. But toward the end of the passage in *Glaphyra*, after considering Joshua 5, Cyril adds to it a negative function. Christian circumcision is the “circumcision of wickedness (κακίας), the removal of evil (φασυλότητος) and pleasures (ἡδονῶν).”<sup>117</sup> Thus, circumcision is the work of

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<sup>113</sup> These occasions are the *Com. Hab.* 3:6, *De ador.* (PG 68, 260), and *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484-485).

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Origen, who claims that the Book of Joshua “does not so much indicate to us the deeds of the son of Nun, as it represents for us the mysteries of Jesus my Lord.” See *Homily on Joshua 1* (FC 105, 23-36). Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 75.1-2, 111.1, 112.2, 113.1-2.

<sup>115</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 260).

<sup>116</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484). Cf. Col. 2:11.

<sup>117</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 485).

Christ and the Spirit who infuse life into believers through the overcoming of death while removing sinful desires.

Cyril considers the story of Moses, Zipporah, and their son encountering the angel on the way to Egypt as having multiple types that point to a greater Christological and soteriological reality. When the details of the text are considered, the story is about the mystery of Christ. On account of his own death, Christ has circumcised us through the Spirit, thereby defeating death and removing sinfulness from human hearts.

#### Circumcision and Participation in the Holy Spirit

If Cyril relates circumcision to the death of Christ within the salvation narrative, he also ties it to Christ's resurrection. This is most evident in his earliest works on the Old Testament, *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra*. On four separate occasions, Cyril identifies circumcision as the gift of the Holy Spirit who was given by Christ after his resurrection.<sup>118</sup> In each case Cyril makes use of the "eighth day" motif common among patristic thinkers who saw in it a type of the resurrection of Jesus. In three of the four passages, Cyril refers to John 20:22 where Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection, breathes on them, and says "Receive the Holy Spirit." This text, along with John 7:39, serves as his biblical basis for demonstrating that the Spirit could not be given until death had been defeated and Hades emptied of its spoils. Jesus' bestowal of the Spirit upon the disciples after his resurrection is tantamount to circumcision of the Spirit, the gift now conferred upon all who are justified by faith. Cyril describes the gift of the Spirit in terms of participation; those who "receive" the Spirit participate in him and thus

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<sup>118</sup> Of the four passages, three are in *De ador.* (PG 68, 465, 500, 1008-1009), and one in *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, 9 (PG 69, 133).

share in the divine nature.<sup>119</sup> Cyril asserts that true circumcision *is* participation in the Spirit, a soteriological reality which was only possible after Christ's glorious resurrection.

A number of scholars have examined Cyril's idea on participation in detail, and it is not my aim to add to the discussion.<sup>120</sup> However, it is important to note that participation in the divine nature is central to Cyril's theology. This concept appears throughout his corpus as a way to describe the character and scope of Christ's saving work. Salvation is, for Cyril, not simply a matter of forgiveness, justification, or the hope of final glory, but a sharing in the Triune life through Christ and the Spirit.<sup>121</sup> The *telos* of the Incarnation is to restore the Holy Spirit to humanity whereby we partake of the divine nature. Through participation in the Spirit we are brought into communion with God and transformed. It may surprise some that Cyril does not make liberal use of *theosis* language (for example, θεοποιέω / θεοποίησις).<sup>122</sup> Rather, his usual method is to allow Scripture to express the participatory dimension of salvation. He alludes to Psalm 82:6 (ἐγὼ εἶπα θεοὶ ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου πάντες) on a number of occasions,<sup>123</sup> but his most frequently cited text in this vein is 2 Peter 1:4 (γένησθε θείας

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<sup>119</sup> Bernard Fraigneau-Julien, "L'Inhabitation de la sainte Trinité dans l'âme selon saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie," *RSR* 30 (1956), 143.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. Louis Janssens, "Notre filiation divine d'après saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie," in *Ephemerides theologicae Lovaniensis* 15 (1938): 233-78; Walter Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man* (1957; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 66-80; Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 146-162; Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 63-132; Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 191-203; Brian Daley, "The Fullness of the Saving God," in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria*, ed. Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating (Edinburgh: T & T Clarke, 2000), 128-48; Bernard Meunier, *Le Christ de Cyrille D'Alexandrie. L'humanité, le salut et la question monophysite* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1997), 163-169; Ben Blackwell, *Christosis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 71-98.

<sup>121</sup> For example, see *In Jo* 20:22 where Cyril maintains that Christ is the perfect Lamb who consecrates through sanctification, making us sharers in his own divine nature through participation in the Spirit, and strengthening our nature into a power and glory beyond what is natural for humans (Pusey, III, 133). For passages with similar themes, see *In Jo* 1:13 (Pusey, I, 136-137); 10:15 (Pusey, II, 230-235); 10:33 (Pusey, II, 260); 17:18-19 (Pusey, II, 717-728).

<sup>122</sup> Keating locates only twenty instances in Cyril's corpus where he uses the characteristic terminology of divinization. Most of them are found in his *Thesaurus*, an anti-Arian work written early in his career. See Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life* 10-11.

<sup>123</sup> Blackwell, "The Mystery of the Synagogue," 84, cites the following examples: *In Jo*. 1:3; 1:6-7; 1:9; 1:12-14; 3:33; 5:18; 6:27; 10:33-34; 15:9-10; 17:3, 4-5; 17:20; 17:26; 20:17.

κοινωνοὶ φύσεως).<sup>124</sup> He is also fond of using other biblical terms (e.g. μετέχω, μέθεξις, μεταλαμβάνω) to underscore the “sharing in” motif, whether that refers to Christ, the Spirit, the sacraments, or other spiritual goods.<sup>125</sup> He also expresses salvation in terms of intimate relationship (οἰκειότης) between God and man.<sup>126</sup> Thus, at the heart of Cyril’s doctrine of salvation is man’s intimate communion with God through the gracious gift of participation in the Spirit, whereby the believer receives new life (ἀναγέννησις),<sup>127</sup> purification (κάθαρσις),<sup>128</sup> adoption (θετός),<sup>129</sup> and sanctification (ἀγιασμός).<sup>130</sup>

In the four passages we now turn to consider in the *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra*, Cyril is consistent in his treatment of circumcision, describing what it entails and how it relates to Christ’s resurrection and participation in the Spirit. At the same time, these passages are not identical to one another. Cyril expresses himself in various ways, often adding layers to his view of circumcision from one passage to the next. This technique is common in his commentaries. He often treats a particular topic or verse of Scripture on multiple occasions and in varying contexts, and does not always give an identical explanation. He frequently adds other nuances or considerations, according to the context or specific purposes he has in mind. This should be taken not as a mark of inconsistency, but as an attempt at illumination. When Cyril’s discussions on circumcision are placed side by side, we get an enhanced picture of his thought while

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<sup>124</sup> Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 192, claims that Cyril cites this text on more occasions than any other patristic writer. Meunier, 163-164, provides a list (which he admits is not exhaustive) cataloging at least 40 occasions where Cyril refers to 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>125</sup> Some examples include *De ador.* (PG 68, 416-417, 976); *Glaph.in Lev.* 8 (PG 69, 576); *Com. Joel* 1:15-16 (Pusey, I, 309); *Com. Mic.* 7:14-15 (Pusey, I, 733); *Com. Zech.* 14:8-9 (Pusey, II, 524); *Com. Is.* 7:21-22 (PG 70, 213), 52:11-12 (PG 70, 1161-1164). See also Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 219.

<sup>126</sup> *In Jo* 10:15 and 10:26 (Pusey, II, 231, 251-252); *Com. Is.* 8:18 (PG 70, 237).

<sup>127</sup> Cf. *Com. Is.* 40:11 (PG 70, 808). See also *In Jo.* 1:12 (Pusey, I, 133), where Cyril associates participation in the Spirit with the gift of incorruption.

<sup>128</sup> *Com. Is.* 35:8-10 (PG 70, 753).

<sup>129</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 5:18 (Pusey, I, 316): “For we are adopted, ascending to the dignity above nature on account of the will of him who has honored us, and have gained the honor to be called gods and sons on account of Christ who dwells in us through the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>130</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 17:18-19 (Pusey, II, 717-728); *Com. Is.* 8:12-14 (PG 70, 233).

detecting common themes as well as particularities that fill out his understanding of circumcision.

The first passage under consideration (in chronological sequence) comes in *De adoratione*, Book 6, where Cyril and Palladius are discussing the significance of the fifth and eighth days (or eras) in light of Jesus' parable of the vineyard workers in Matthew 20:1-14. Cyril suggests that the Incarnation of Christ came about during the fifth era (πέμπτος καιρός). Palladius agrees, and incorporates this parable as a hermeneutic for understanding the meaning of the times. The vineyard owner went out to the public square to hire workers at the first, third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours – five separate “times” in all. Cyril sees this as a key to explain the advent of Christ. Jesus Christ appeared in the Incarnation at the “fifth time,” the fullness of time, the period when all other “times” indicated in the parable had passed. Cyril then makes the leap from the time of the Incarnation to the time of Christ's death. Again the “fifth day” is significant for Christ was “delivered up” on the fifth day of the week. He insists that Christ became enfleshed for this very reason; by his death we have all been saved.<sup>131</sup>

When Cyril investigates the implications of Christ's death, considerations of the resurrection are often not far behind. The close proximity between Christ's death and resurrection lead him to change numeric idioms and begin exploring the significance of the eighth day. Cyril insists that it was on the eighth day, the first day of the week, that Christ destroyed death and rose to life again after despoiling hell (ἄδην).<sup>132</sup>

However, he recognizes further significance to the eighth day that has bearing on circumcision. Under the law, male infants were to be circumcised eight days after their birth. This circumcision was given as a pattern (ὑποτύπωσιν) for the circumcision according to the

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<sup>131</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 465). See also Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 252-253.

<sup>132</sup> In addition to the passages highlighted below that demonstrate Cyril's frequent association of the “eighth day” with Christ's resurrection and victory over sin and death, see also his *Com. Micah* 5:5-6 (Pusey, I, 681).

spirit and truth that was to come. This “more excellent” circumcision is “participation in the Holy Spirit” (Πνεύματός ἐστιν ἁγίου μέθεξις).<sup>133</sup> Here Cyril is plain: *circumcision* of the Spirit is nothing less than *participation* in the Spirit.<sup>134</sup> Christ is the agent of this participation insofar as he has risen from the dead, renewed us (ἀνεκάνισεν), and given us a share in the Spirit once again. After Christ came back to life, he appeared to his disciples, breathed on them, and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Cyril claims that what was given to the disciples was also meant for us.<sup>135</sup> Christ offered himself as a sacrifice in his death. According to Cyril’s theological schema, in Christ’s death he descended to the depths to empty hell of its prisoners and, rising again, de-fanged death itself. When Christ accomplished this comprehensive work on behalf of all, the human race was ready to receive the Spirit again. This new reception of the Spirit is the new circumcision.

The second passage is found in Book 7 of the same work. At this stage of the dialogue, Cyril and Palladius are talking about the Jewish institution of the Sabbath in light of a warning from the prophet Jeremiah about keeping the Sabbath holy (Jeremiah 17:19-23).<sup>136</sup> Cyril calls to mind the words of Christ in John 7:22-23 to show how Jesus confounded the Jews when they accused him of doing what was unlawful on the Sabbath, namely, healing a crippled man. How, Jesus asks, is it unlawful to heal on the Sabbath when it is acceptable to circumcise a baby if the eighth day after its birth falls on the Sabbath?<sup>137</sup> Cyril brings Christ’s words to bear on the true nature of both the Sabbath and circumcision. On the one hand, the Sabbath according to the law

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<sup>133</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 465).

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 81-82: “Diese Teilhabe ab der göttlichen Natur ist der zentral Inhalt cyrillischer Soteriologie. Dahin führt uns die Heilsordnung Gottes – hin zu erneuter Gemeinschaft mit ihm. Teilhabe an Gottes Geist bedeutet, wesenhaft mit Gott verbunden zu sein. Dies ist die „Beschneidung im Geist“ (PG 68, 465). Wir sind mit Gott und mit Christus durch die Teilhabe an seinem Geist verbunden.”

<sup>135</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 465).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 497ff.

<sup>137</sup> In the *Commentary on John*, this passage serves as the springboard for Cyril’s lengthiest and most detailed interpretation of circumcision. This will be the primary subject of Chapter Five. See *In Jo. 7:24* (Pusey, I, 628-644).



is a type (τύπος) of the celebration of the Sabbath that is carried out “in Christ.” Those who practice the Sabbath in the spiritual sense have been made holy through faith and have put an end to sinning.<sup>138</sup> True Sabbath rest means ceasing from sin rather than labor.

On the other hand, Cyril claims, circumcision according to the law is a type of the circumcision of the Spirit according to the “eighth day,” that is, resurrection day. He goes on to provide a brief narration of Christ’s death and resurrection, recollecting the post-resurrection events of John 20:22 just as he does in Book 6. After Christ rose back to life “having demolished the power of death,” he appeared to his inner circle of disciples and conferred the Spirit onto them. Cyril observes that Christ’s breath and verbal bestowal “sealed” (κατεσφράγισεν) the disciples with the Holy Spirit. This very sealing, he claims, is the circumcision of the Spirit. He leans on Romans 2:28-29 as the basis for his interpretation, reminding Palladius of Paul’s command that circumcision is to be done “without hands,” that is, not by men with knives but by the Spirit. In this act of circumcision the Holy Spirit seals – or puts his mark of confident approval – upon those who have believed in Christ.<sup>139</sup> At this point I believe Cyril is bringing the spiritual Sabbath and circumcision into harmony. Those who have “believed in Christ” are true Sabbath keepers, and, at the same time, have received circumcision with the sealing of the Holy Spirit.

The biblical idea of “sealing” is not identical to the traditional participation language Cyril often uses when alluding to Christ’s gift of the Spirit to the disciples, but it is not unrelated.<sup>140</sup> In any case, Cyril makes no effort to distinguish between them. In all likelihood he

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<sup>138</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 500). On this interpretation of the Sabbath in Cyril, see also *Com. Is.* 58:13-14 (PG 70, 1300); *In Jo.* 7:23-24 (Pusey, I, 615-627, 641-644).

<sup>139</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 500).

<sup>140</sup> Daniélou provides an interesting theological overview of the way the idea of *sphragis* developed in the early church. He does not include Cyril of Alexandria, but points out broadly shared ideas among a number of important patristic writers such as Cyril of Jerusalem and Gregory of Nazianzus in his *The Bible and the Liturgy* (1956; repr. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 54-69.

envisions participation in the Spirit and the sealing of the Spirit either as two ways to describe the same spiritual reality, or as distinct but interrelated dimensions of his multivalent view of salvation.<sup>141</sup>

Cyril's third discussion takes us to near the end of Book 10 of *De adoratione*. Here he returns to the theme of time periods, or eras, and what each era represents in the light of Christ. In this instance Cyril differentiates between two epochs, the time leading up to the Incarnation and the time following the Incarnation. He designates the first epoch as the time when sin and death ruled. He also identifies this same era as the time of the law and the Sabbath.

Cyril calls the time after the law the "eighth day." Though he often establishes a clear association between the "eighth day" and the resurrection of Christ, in this instance he recognizes it as the time of the circumcision of the Spirit without directly referencing the resurrection.

But upon the eighth day, that is, after the time of the law and that ancient Sabbath observance, we have received a circumcision, not from the hand of man, but through the Spirit, we have been conformed (μεμορφώμεθα) to Christ and have become partakers of his divine nature. Then we have rid ourselves of the accusations, the stain has disappeared, all our defilement is gone. For we are no longer born into corruption on account of the transgression in Adam, but into life and incorruptibility on account of the righteousness in Christ, who endured death for us as the blameless and true lamb, the divine and spiritual turtledove. For we have been saved by nothing else.<sup>142</sup>

Cyril does not mention the resurrection by name, but it is implied because of his reference to the eighth day. In this one statement he ties together the death of Christ and the circumcision through the Spirit. This time, he is more descriptive about the effects of the Spirit's circumcising activity. Circumcision transforms us, purifies us, and configures us for a new life; it changes

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<sup>141</sup> Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 214-216, compares the circumcision passages found in PG 68, 465 and 500 and notes both refer to participation in the Spirit after Christ conquered death through the cross. He makes no reference to the different metaphors Cyril uses to explain what was happening to the disciples when Christ bestowed the Spirit upon them. He either fails to note the different terms or, for him, "sealing" and "participating" are identical.

<sup>142</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 1008-1009).

man to the depths of his being. The death of Christ and the work of the Spirit in salvation once again go hand in hand in Cyril's schema. Through his death and resurrection, Christ, the new Adam, overcame the corruption imposed on the human race after the first Adam's disobedience.<sup>143</sup> Here, I believe Cyril is suggesting that the saving work of Christ opened the way for the Spirit to enter and circumcise the hearts of those who have faith.

The final passage under consideration is Cyril's *Glaphyra in Genesim*, Book 3, where he considers the relationship between Sarah and her servant Hagar according to Genesis 16. Hagar ran away from Sarah after being mistreated. But, Cyril points out, an angel from heaven appeared to Hagar and commanded her to return to Sarah and "be humbled under her hands."<sup>144</sup> Cyril surmises, with support from Paul,<sup>145</sup> that Hagar, a slave girl, represents worship according to the law.<sup>146</sup> She was not given freedom, but was commanded to submit willingly to her mistress. She thus becomes a type of Israel, since they too must serve the oracles through Christ, submit to them, and step aside for them, even unwillingly.

The advent of Christ ushered in the time of Sarah; the time of freedom according to the new covenant. Cyril chooses circumcision to accentuate the transition between the old and the new covenants, a difference represented by the contrast between Hagar and Sarah. He distinguishes between the commandment of circumcision given to Abraham<sup>147</sup> and the circumcision of the Spirit. Cyril rehearses God's commandment that males be circumcised on the eighth day. If this was neglected, judgment would follow. Cyril, following his own precedent in the *De adoratione*, then turns his attention to the significance of the eighth day. The commandment to circumcise on this day of the child's life was in accordance with God's

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<sup>143</sup> Cf Meunier, *Le Christ*, 14-15.

<sup>144</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, 8 (PG 69, 132).

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Gal. 4:21-31.

<sup>146</sup> Cyril also sees in Hagar a representation of the earthly Jerusalem.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Gen. 17:10.

providential design since God knew that Christ would rise on this day of the week. The overlap was not a coincidence. The circumcision of old which served as the mark of the Abrahamic covenant was a type of the circumcision according to the spirit and truth.<sup>148</sup>

After establishing the eighth day – resurrection relationship, Cyril goes on to explain the association between the resurrection and circumcision of the Spirit. In doing so, he makes a brief allusion to John 7:39 where the evangelist explains that the disciples were to receive the Spirit *after* the glorification of Christ. Until then, the Spirit had not been given.<sup>149</sup> Everything changed when Christ rose from the dead and was glorified “according to the eighth day.”<sup>150</sup> Cyril describes the progression of the divine plan of redemption and subsequent transformation through circumcision of the Spirit offered to the human race after the resurrection:

And the time was already at hand to participate (μεταλαχῆν) in the Holy Spirit and to receive circumcision in him, not injuring the flesh, but cleansing the spirit; not removing bodily dirt, but setting us free from spiritual diseases. For when Christ rose back to life, having destroyed the power of death, then at that very point he imparted (ἐνέθηκε) a sort of firstfruit of the Holy Spirit to the holy disciples. For it says he breathed on them saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>151</sup>

For Cyril, true circumcision is participation in the Spirit, cleansing from sin, and spiritual deliverance. None of this could occur until Christ destroyed the power of death and rose to new life. And because of who Christ is and the nature of his work, the gift of his Spirit to the disciples is superior to the first imparting of the Spirit at creation.<sup>152</sup> Finally, Cyril brings

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<sup>148</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, θ (PG 69, 133).

<sup>149</sup> See Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 90, fn.86 and 245, fn.34.

<sup>150</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, θ (PG 69, 133).

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> Marie-Odile Boulnois, “Le souffle et l’Esprit: Exégèses patristiques de l’insufflation originielle de Gen.2.7 en lien avec celle de Jn. 20.22,” *Recherches augustiniennes* 24 (1989), 35. Boulnois demonstrates that Cyril is unique in that he developed his exegesis to show that Jesus’s re-bestowal of the Spirit to the disciples was not simply a restoration of what was lost in the fall, but was superior to it. She gives three reasons. First, the Spirit’s dwelling in Christ since his baptism says something about the new stability of human nature. Second, through the intimate union of the two natures in the Incarnation, Christ has brought together the creation with the Creator. Third, through his “breath” Christ communicated the Spirit of adoption to mankind which enables them to call out, “Abba, Father.”

Christ's resurrection and gift of the Spirit to bear onto the present. What the disciples received as firstfruits is appropriated by all the faithful. Now the Spirit is borne (ἡνέχθη) in us again. Now we receive circumcision not by hands or according to the letter, but of the heart by the Spirit.<sup>153</sup>

These four passages I have outlined are informative in their own right. Taken together they may seem repetitive, but they illustrate both the consistency and complexity of Cyril's view of the Spirit's role in circumcision. Above all, Cyril stresses the interdependence between spiritual circumcision and participation in the Holy Spirit. He depicts a close relationship between the gift of the Spirit and the death and resurrection of Christ. The corruption and death that plagued mankind since the Fall had to be dealt with in radical fashion. Through his death on the cross, descent to hell, and resurrection, Christ changed the human situation and, once risen, gave the Spirit back to the human race (John 20:22). This began a new era and restored the original gift of the Spirit described in Genesis 2:7. Finally, Cyril makes much of the "eighth day" motif. While he identifies it at one point with the epoch of the Incarnation, his common practice is to link the eighth day of circumcision with the day of the resurrection. On this day the Spirit was given and true circumcision became a reality for people of the new covenant.

### Conclusion

The passages we have considered in Cyril's commentaries on the Old Testament reveal the narrative structure of his doctrine of salvation. His brief but illuminating treatments outlining his Christology and pneumatology convey how salvation is given, appropriated, and lived out. We have also seen that Cyril uses circumcision of the Spirit as a way to describe the diverse realities of salvation. It plays a role in the very order of salvation; it typifies justification by faith

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<sup>153</sup> *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, 8 (PG 69, 133). Cf. Rom. 2:28-29.

and marks the beginning of a new identity; it points to the death of Christ with the promise of new life; and it is identified as the gift of the Spirit, in whom we participate, since Christ was raised from the dead.

## CHAPTER FIVE

CIRCUMCISION OF THE SPIRIT IN CYRIL'S *COMMENTARY ON JOHN*<sup>1</sup>

Several years before Cyril committed his literary energies to defeating Nestorius, he set out to compose an overwhelming, comprehensive rebuttal against the Arians. His concern was to demonstrate from Scripture that the Son is consubstantial (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father, and is therefore no less God than the Father is God. Instead of attempting a polemical treatise against them as he had done previously in his *Thesaurus* and *Dialogues on the Trinity*, Cyril framed his attack as a commentary, using John's gospel as biblical proof that the Son shares in the same being of the Father, and is in no way inferior or subordinate.<sup>2</sup> The exegetical fruit of Cyril's labors was his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, the largest exegetical work on John's Gospel from the patristic period.<sup>3</sup> The Greek text of this commentary has survived largely intact unlike his other commentaries on the New Testament which survive in fragments in the chains or later Syriac editions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Liébaert, *La Doctrine christologique de Saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne* (Lille: Facultés Catholiques, 1951), 72, notes that in none of the three works does Cyril provide a satisfactory reason for why he spent so much time engaging Arianism. Though questions remain concerning dates, the *Thesaurus* was composed as early as 412 or as late as 423-425. The *Dialogues* was composed shortly after the *Thesaurus*. Both were composed before the *Commentary on John*. See Georges Jouassard, "L'activité littéraire de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie jusqu'à 428," in *Mélanges E. Podechard* (Lyons: Facultés Catholiques, 1954), 164-166.

<sup>3</sup> Lars Koen, *The Saving Passion* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1991), 22. Cyril's commentary was preceded by other patristic commentaries or collections of homilies on John. These include works of Origen, Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Cyril's contemporary, Augustine, contributed his *Tractates on John*, which were completed around 419. Liébaert maintains that though Cyril may have been influenced by some of these works, it is difficult to affirm how with any precision. To him, it does not appear that Cyril was aware of the works by Chrysostom or Theodore. See Liébaert, *La Doctrine christologique*, 74. The exact date of the commentary has been debated for some time. Many scholars follow Jouassard who posits its composition sometime between 425 and 428. Other scholars such as Charlier and, most recently, Lois Farag suggest that the commentary is probably the earliest of Cyril's exegetical works. See her *St. Cyril of Alexandria, a New Testament Exegete* (Gorgias Press, 2007), 60-67. I find Jouassard's argument most persuasive and assume the *terminus ante quem* of the commentary to be around 428, just prior to the Nestorian controversy.

<sup>4</sup> Of the twelve books that comprise the *Commentary on John*, Books Seven and Eight, covering John 10:18-12:48, survive only in fragments in the chains. These fragments are of doubtful authenticity. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, vol. 3 (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1960), 123. Fragments of a commentary on Matthew were

The commentary is a massive literary work. It fills nearly two volumes in Migne's *Patrologia*<sup>5</sup> and includes three volumes in Pusey's critical edition. Koen notes that it is three times larger than the entire Greek New Testament.<sup>6</sup> As a work of theology, it is a masterpiece. The *Commentary on John* is both polemical and dogmatic in character.<sup>7</sup> From it we gain insight into Cyril's doctrines of the Trinity, Christ, the Holy Spirit, human nature, salvation, the sacraments, and a host of other subjects. Further, the commentary is a superb model of Cyril's style of exegesis of Scripture. Its pages put on display the various methods of interpretation Cyril employs from typology to his views on the *historia* of a passage. Thus, the *Commentary on John* is invaluable for studying Cyril's theology and biblical interpretation.<sup>8</sup> It also provides a glimpse of the theological currents swirling about in the church of Alexandria well in to the fifth century.

Near the beginning of the commentary, Cyril praises the writers of the other three Gospels who proclaim Christ with precision and exactness of speech. But he puts John's Gospel on a pedestal, observing that John does not seek to describe pragmatic matters, but attempts to "grasp those things that are above the human mind" and dares to explain "the inexpressible and

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published by J. Reuss, *Mattäus-Kommentare aus der griechischen Kirche*, Texte und Untersuchungen (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), 103-269. Additional fragments of lost commentaries on Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Hebrews are found in the third volume of Pusey, *In Jo.* 173-440. Cyril's *Commentary on Luke* survives in the Syriac and was published by J. B. Chabot, CSCO 70 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbecq, 1954). For other editions of Cyril's works on the New Testament, see Quasten, *Patrology*, 3:123-125 and Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria* (London: Routledge, 2000), 242-245.

<sup>5</sup> PG 73 and 74, 9-756.

<sup>6</sup> Koen, *Saving Passion*, 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> In addition to the Arians, Cyril takes aim at the Eunomians, Sabellians (though he never mentions this group by name), aspects of "Antiochene Christology" (in a way that almost anticipates his debate with Nestorius), and certain Origenist doctrines such as the pre-existence of souls. Most of his polemics against these positions come in Book 1 of his commentary. Of course, he also attacks Jewish interpretation on a number of occasions. On Cyril's method of argumentation against the heretics, see Farag, *New Testament Exegete*, 186-195. At the same time, Liébaert, *La Doctrine christologique*, 73, rightly points out that on many occasions throughout the commentary, Cyril is preoccupied with other exegetical and theological questions, leading him "à oublier momentanément la polémique anti-arienne."

<sup>8</sup> In the Preface to the commentary, Cyril establishes that his purpose is to consider the "more dogmatic explanation" (δογματικώτερον ἐξηγήσιν) of the biblical text in order to combat false doctors (τῶν ἐτεροδιδασκαλούντων). See *In Jo. Praefatio*, ed. P.E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostril Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872), 7.



unutterable generation of the Word of God.”<sup>9</sup> Cyril’s approach to the Gospel of John shares similarities with Origen’s, who, in his own *Commentary on John*, also praises the four gospels as the basic “elements” (στοιχείων) of the Church’s faith while simultaneously claiming that John is the “firstfruits” (ἀπαρχήν) of the Gospels because it “speaks of the one whose genealogy is traced and begins from the one without genealogy.”<sup>10</sup> Though it is not clear that Cyril looked to Origen as a precedent, he, like Origen, regards Christ as the central message of John.<sup>11</sup>

The Christological contours of John’s Gospel lead Cyril to rich soteriological metaphors and diverse expressions of redemption. The mystery of Christ’s saving activity is ubiquitous throughout the *Commentary on John*. In it, Cyril employs nearly every expression for salvation that was common during his day.<sup>12</sup> Frequently used salvific concepts include justification by faith, adoption, the restoration of life and incorruptibility, deliverance from sin and the devil, illumination through the Spirit, sanctification, and participation in the divine nature.<sup>13</sup> Also, as I

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<sup>9</sup> *In Jo.* (Pusey, I, 12).

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.21, trans. Cécile Blanc, SC 120 (Paris: Cerf, 1964), 28.

<sup>11</sup> The question of whether Cyril was aware of Origen’s *Commentary on John* and the degree to which he was influenced by it has been debated among scholars. While some thinkers such as Demenico Pazzini claim to see a link between both commentaries, particularly in their respective *Prologues*, others link Origen and Cyril by categorizing them as members of an “Alexandrian” school of exegesis as opposed to an “Antiochene” school. A growing number of scholars have questioned not only the existence of such schools, but whether such classifications of ancient writers are helpful. On these questions, Joseph Trigg has written a persuasive article arguing that such labels do more to obscure than clarify. More specifically, Trigg gives a close comparison of both commentaries and points out the lack of continuity and fundamental differences between Origen and Cyril. According to Trigg’s findings, “Cyril does not mention Origen or his commentary, much less present himself as his heir. While we would not expect Theophilus’s nephew to cite Origen as an authority, Cyril actually writes as if Origen’s commentary did not exist.” When it comes to comparing specific passages, Trigg goes on to say that “Cyril’s interpretation does not follow or respond to Origen more than we might expect in anyone interpreting the same book whether he knew Origen’s commentary or not.” See Trigg, “Origen and Cyril of Alexandria: Continuities and Discontinuities in Their Approach to the *Gospel of John*,” in *Origeniana octava* II (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), 955-965. Cf. Domenico Pazzini, *Il prologo di Giovanni in Cirillio di Alessandria* (Brescia: Paideia, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph McNerney, “Soteriological Commonplaces in Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*,” in *Disciplina Nostra: Essays in Memory of Robert F. Evans*, ed. Donald Winslow (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), 180.

<sup>13</sup> The soteriological richness of the *Commentary on John* has given rise to a number of excellent publications. Some of the more important include Gilles Langevin, “Le thème de l’incorruptibilité dans le commentaire de saint Cyrille d’Alexandrie sur l’Évangile selon saint Jean,” in *Sciences ecclésiastiques* 8 (1956): 295-316; Koen, *The Saving Passion*; McNerney, “Soteriological Commonplaces in Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.” See also David Maxwell, “Sin in Cyril of Alexandria’s *Commentary on John*,” in *Concordia Journal* 31, no. 4 (2005): 376-383.

outlined in Chapter One, Cyril stresses that everything Christ does – from the Incarnation itself to the ascension – has saving significance.<sup>14</sup> His notion of the Incarnation is not limited to the moment when the Word assumed humanity, but includes the totality of Christ's person and work.

### Circumcision and Cyril's Multivalent Doctrine of Salvation

At various times throughout the commentary, Cyril uses the concept of circumcision as a way to illustrate the multilayered reality of salvation. He spends more time exploring the exegetical foundations and theological implications of circumcision in this commentary than in any other work in his corpus. Admittedly, many of the ways he explains circumcision are similar to his statements in previous works. However, as I will show, his treatment of spiritual circumcision in the commentary contains multiple layers and includes additional details not found in his earlier discussions.

In what follows, I will investigate the important circumcision passages in Cyril's *Commentary on John*. Rather than treating each one in sequential order, I have organized them according to two major themes. The first theme is Cyril's use of circumcision to express the numerous realities present in salvation. In developing this idea I take as my primary text his lengthy account of spiritual circumcision in his comment on John 7:23-24. In this discourse he treats circumcision as a single concept that incorporates a number of salvific motifs that are important to his theology as a whole. Similar or supporting texts elsewhere in the commentary will supplement my interpretation of this major excursus in order to clarify particular aspects of his argument. The second theme is the relationship between spiritual circumcision and the ongoing Trinitarian activity in salvation. The main passage I will consider to illustrate this theme is his comment on John 15:2-3. Cyril makes clear that circumcision of the Spirit is a

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<sup>14</sup> See Chapter One above, especially pp. 31-48. Cf. Koen, *Saving Passion*, 49, 120; Daniel Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 20-53.

process that continues throughout one's life. In one sense, it is an "accomplished work" insofar as it represents an initial, definite saving act (for example, purification can be understood in a punctiliar sense). But in another sense, the divine activity never ceases or reaches its limit in the life of the believer. For Cyril, the human heart stands in need of continual purification, a process that takes a lifetime.

Before I explore these two main themes in detail, however, it is important to highlight brief passages in the *Commentary on John* where Cyril ascribes exegetical and theological significance to circumcision, albeit in passing. These texts are congruent with other major motifs he develops in earlier works. For instance, he continues to highlight circumcision as a model of the type-reality relationship which holds the two Testaments together. While commenting on the first chapter of John, Cyril asserts that circumcision in the flesh was a type of the circumcision in the Spirit; the invitation to sonship through the mediation of Moses was a type of true sonship with God through the mediation of Christ; the Israelite "baptism" in the "cloud and sea"<sup>15</sup> was a type of the baptism into the Holy Trinity.<sup>16</sup>

Consistent with what he does in previous writings, Cyril continues to make use of key biblical texts such as Jeremiah 4:4 and Romans 2:28-29 to interpret the meaning of circumcision. Even within the Old Testament, Cyril notices, circumcision is not always perceived corporeally. On one occasion, he makes an analogy between a concerned person who takes a sick friend to a physician to be healed and God the Father who brings all those worthy of salvation to the Son. Those "unworthy" of salvation are the heard-hearted. The prophet Jeremiah urges such people to circumcise the hardness of their hearts. Cyril maintains that this refers to the inward circumcision of the Spirit (later espoused by Paul in Romans 2:28-29 and elsewhere) that

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor. 10:2.

<sup>16</sup> *In Jo.* 1:13 (Pusey, I, 135-136). Cyril maintains that every spiritual benefit believers enjoy through Christ was typified by Israel. On circumcision as an important type, see also *In Jo.* 1:17 (Pusey, I, 152).

banishes the callousness from our hearts and gives us a better disposition in order to spare us from destruction.<sup>17</sup> While the law prescribed circumcision, Paul maintains that the physical operation represents something spiritual. True circumcision is received “in the heart.” Cyril points to the Romans passage, noting that Christ himself effects inward circumcision and baptizes with the Spirit and fire.<sup>18</sup> What the law prescribed in types, Christ carries out in reality. This is a scarlet thread running throughout Cyril’s exegetical writings.

Overall, in the *Commentary on John*, Cyril uses the idea of circumcision in ways that encompass the basic architecture of his soteriology. His interpretation of John 7:23-24 serves as the best example. Here, he attaches to circumcision a cluster of his most important and oft-repeated soteriological expressions. These various expressions, I believe, can be grouped into three overlapping motifs that are essential to Cyril’s doctrine of salvation: purification, freedom, and participation. While each motif bears its own distinct characteristics, none can be separated from the others. They share a kind of perichoretic relationship in which each mutually inheres in the others, affecting and helping to actualize the others. For example, freedom from death and participation in the Spirit are impossible without purification. Freedom from corruption and purification from sin are empty without a sharing in the Spirit. Further, each motif incorporates a number of sub-themes that are important to Cyril’s theology. Below I will explore Cyril’s understanding of each motif and how it relates to his idea of circumcision. In doing so I will also demonstrate that circumcision helps Cyril to address other theological questions related to salvation.

### The Sabbath and its Spiritual Implications

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<sup>17</sup> *In Jo.* 6:37 (Pusey, I, 479).

<sup>18</sup> *In Jo.* 1:17 (Pusey, I, 152).

Before investigating the major salvific motifs in Cyril's discourse on circumcision in connection with John 7:23-24, we must explore his lengthy discussion on the Sabbath which immediately precedes it. Cyril addresses the context of these verses and allows his interpretation of circumcision to develop from his understanding of the Sabbath; the two go hand in hand. In fact, it is not unprecedented for Cyril to treat circumcision and the Sabbath within the same literary context.<sup>19</sup> In John 7:23-24, Jesus mentions a specific case where both Jewish institutions are held in tension and compared. John records Jesus responding to his accusers after he healed a man on the Sabbath day. Jesus queries, "If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses will not be broken, why are all of you angry at me because I made the entire man well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but make a righteous judgment." Cyril takes full advantage of this as an opportunity to elaborate upon both topics. As we have seen, his method of biblical interpretation often involves singling out key words or phrases of a verse, and, after a brief investigation of the historical and grammatical sense, unpacking every possible nuance and meaning when considering the spiritual sense of the text. At the outset, Cyril admits that the pericope is confusing in structure, and the meaning very difficult to understand. After engaging in some re-wording to clarify Jesus' intent,<sup>20</sup> Cyril sets out to rise above the opaqueness (τὰ παχύτερον) of the ancient commandments in order to determine the spiritual interpretation (πνευματικὴν θεωρίαν) of the Sabbath and

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *FL* 6.7-11, *Cyrille d'Alexandrie: Lettres Festales I-VI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Marie-Odile Boulnois, Pierre Évieux, Marguerite Forrat, and Bernard Meunier, SC 372 (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 364-392; *Comm. Is.* 58:13-14 (PG 70, 1300-1301).

<sup>20</sup> Cyril takes the clause "that the Law of Moses should not be broken" and places it just after Jesus begins asking "why are all of you angry at me..." His new rendering reads: "If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, why are you angry at me, so that the Law of Moses will not be broken, because I made a whole man well on the Sabbath?"

circumcision.<sup>21</sup> As he begins, Cyril states his interest in the significance of the seventh day followed by the eighth day, and why circumcision is permitted on the day of rest.<sup>22</sup>

Though Cyril's interpretation of the Sabbath is not the central concern of this study, a brief summary of his discussion is helpful since, as Cyril himself notes, the Sabbath has "flowed into" the explanation of circumcision.<sup>23</sup> The interpretation of the one Old Testament institution has bearing on the other. His exegetical presupposition is that the commandments for Sabbath observance given to the Israelites throughout the Old Testament were types promising divine blessings in the future. Exodus 20:8-11 serves as Cyril's base text here. Within the context of the Decalogue, he argues that God's order to "rest" is of an eschatological nature. Cyril moves with ease throughout the Scriptures, gathering texts from the prophets, Psalms, and other historical books, coupled with pertinent passages from the New Testament<sup>24</sup> to demonstrate that the Jewish Sabbath is an earthly type representing an eschatological promise.<sup>25</sup> It signifies the end of the ages when the saints will cease from their toils and earthly labors and enter into their eternal rest, in which Christ bestows his good rewards. In this way, believers imitate the Creator who "rested" on the seventh day.<sup>26</sup>

Cyril highlights the fact that this commandment begins with a poignant admonition: Remember (Μνήσθητι). Remembering has significance for the past and the future. The time for Israel to not worship other gods had arrived (as implied in the first commandment), which called for diligence to remain faithful to God. But, Cyril asserts, one also gains perspective on

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<sup>21</sup> *In Jo.* 7:23-24 (Pusey, I, 615-618).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 618.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> E.g., Heb. 4:6-10.

<sup>25</sup> Cyril is following an established tradition here. See Jean Daniélou's chapter "The Mystery of the Sabbath" in *The Bible and the Liturgy*, rev. ed. (1956; repr., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 222-241.

<sup>26</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 618-621). Cyril maintains, "Therefore, the rest (ἀργία) according to the Sabbath represents the lives of the saints in rest (ἀναπαύσει) and holiness when they, having cast off distressful things and ceased from all labor, revel in the good things from God."

the future by means of the memory. Through our mind's reflections (ταῖς ἐννοίαις), we can see ahead from what has been foreshadowed in types. The commandment to remember the Sabbath is a promise of the good things to come at the end of the age. Moses puts the other commandments after the call to faith implied in the Sabbath promise so that "we may not think we are justified by works," nor expect God's generous gifts as if we earned them through our own toiling, but that "we should think that we have it by faith."<sup>27</sup>

Cyril also underscores the significance of the order in which the commandments were given. The promise of eschatological bliss was given in the latter commandment. This means that God did not intend eternal life to be gained through obedience to instructions or admonitions, nor through good works. Rather, eternal life has come by the grace of God. Cyril remarks that *before* the laws of godly living, "immediately grace has entered in as a neighbor (γείτων) with faith of the good things of hope."<sup>28</sup> At the same time, just as the Israelites were proactive in gathering up manna before the Sabbath, so the saints are encouraged to store up whatever labors are profitable and nourishing. Here the Psalmist's words come to bear in an eschatological sense: "You will eat the fruit of your labors."<sup>29</sup> Eternal life is given by grace, as is implied in the commandment to remember the Sabbath, and acquired through faith rather than works. Nonetheless, works are indispensable to the Christian life since they spur us on and guide us toward our eternal goal.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 621.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. See also Ibid., 627, where Cyril recounts the seventh year release as prescribed by the Law. This too points to the true Sabbath rest which is given by grace and comes as a result of faith in Christ. Cyril states, "For those of us who of old had been slaves of sin, and in a certain way had sold ourselves to the devil by the pleasures of wickedness, being justified in Christ through faith, we will go up to the true and holy Sabbath observance, being clothed in freedom through grace, being illumined with the good things of God."

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ps. 127:2 (LXX).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 624. Near the end of his discourse, Cyril recalls the "many mansions" Jesus promised to his disciples, and Cyril asserts that each person will be rewarded in proportion to his or her righteous works. See *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 626).

For Cyril, the Sabbath day according to the law was a type pointing to the eschatological rest where the saints will be fully delivered from sin, cease from their labors, and enjoy the good things of Christ. In this life, Sabbath observance means refraining from sin and being proactive in good works, even as we wait for the consummation of every promise at the eschaton. Thus, the seventh day signifies the fulfillment of all things; it is the age of perfect holiness when the soul is renewed in perfect love of virtue, and the burden of sin is abolished once and for all.<sup>31</sup>

### Circumcision as a Symbol Purification, Freedom, and Participation

After completing his discourse on the Sabbath, Cyril moves to his treatment of circumcision, using the same interpretive method to uncover the spiritual sense. Like the Sabbath, Cyril finds the details surrounding circumcision to be clues to its spiritual meaning. He conveys a sense of urgency to discover the hidden meaning embedded in the admonition to circumcise, remarking that anyone would willingly exert everything to gain this knowledge and understand its true usefulness. Therefore, he impresses upon his readers his desire to consider the old commandments spiritually (πνευματικῶς) so that what is buried in darkness may be brought to light.<sup>32</sup> Cyril holds up Paul as his model exegete, for Paul considered the original commandment of circumcision given to Abraham as a “sign” and “seal” of the faith Abraham already had in God when he was still uncircumcised.<sup>33</sup> Circumcision was not only a physical mark of God’s covenant, but a symbol of living faith. Here, according to Cyril, Paul was inquiring into “another kind (ἑτερόν τινα) of circumcision,” one according to the Spirit rather

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 626. In the discourse, Cyril says little concerning the ramifications of the Sabbath for the saints living in the present age. However, at the end of his discourse on circumcision, when he compares the spiritual merits of both Old Testament institutions, he only presents the Sabbath in terms of its “this-worldly” implications. He says nothing about eschatological fulfillment in his final analysis.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 628. Farag, *New Testament Exegete*, 243-245 points out that Cyril’s discourse on circumcision is one of five such excursuses in the *Commentary on John* (along with those on the Sabbath, Moses, manna, and the Tabernacle) where he attempts to prove that these types in the Old Testament were transformed into truth by Christ in the New Testament. See also Liébaert, *La Doctrine christologique*, 73.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Gen. 17:9-14; Rom 4.



than the flesh. He quotes Romans 2:28-29, his favorite text on circumcision, to prove that what was done in the flesh was only a symbol (σύμβολον).<sup>34</sup> From its inception the practice bore greater significance than the mere cutting of skin. After establishing his axiom that the type has given way to the spiritual reality, Cyril goes on to describe circumcision in a spiritual manner, showing its relationship to the primary soteriological themes in his theology.

### *Purification*

The first soteriological motif Cyril attributes to circumcision is purification. Purification is central to his doctrine of salvation. According to Cyril, if the goal (σκόπος) of salvation is communion with God through Christ,<sup>35</sup> purification is the initial means of getting there. He posits that circumcision was given by God in the Old Testament as a “type of purification” (σύμβολον ἁγνισμού) signifying the necessary cleansing that precedes our becoming intimately united with God.<sup>36</sup> Cyril considers axiomatic that what is unclean can have no share in what is holy. God is a holy God, and if anyone desires relationship with him, that person must become pure. This principle finds tangible expression in the churches, Cyril points out, when those who have not yet been purified by the Holy Spirit and are still bound in sin are forbidden to approach the holy table. Only the purified are allowed to partake of the holy flesh. That is why the Church abides by the rule, “Holy things to those who are holy.”<sup>37</sup> Even in the Old Testament, God commanded Moses and Aaron not to allow strangers to eat of the Passover, but only purchased servants who had been circumcised. This enjoinder was given as a type. In the

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<sup>34</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 629-631). Cf. Farag, *New Testament Exegete*, 230-231 on Cyril’s discourse on circumcision and his spiritual exegesis.

<sup>35</sup> In two succeeding passages, Cyril describes salvation in terms of union with God through Christ (συνδεῖσθαι τῷ Θεῷ διὰ μεσίου Χριστοῦ) and intimate relationship with God (οἰκειότητα τῷ ἁγίῳ Θεῷ). See *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 630-631).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 631.

<sup>37</sup> Τὰ ἅγια τοῖς ἁγίοις. *Ibid.*, 640.

spiritual sense, those who are “strangers” to Christ must first be “circumcised and purified” before they can receive the holy Eucharistic meal.<sup>38</sup> In the same manner, those seeking communion with God must be cleansed in every way,<sup>39</sup> lest spiritual pollution bar them from his holy presence.

After Cyril establishes the necessity for purification, he devotes his attention to what stands in need of cleansing. Rather than listing sinful activities that are common to human nature, he puts his finger on the *cause* of wickedness, namely, pleasure (ἡδονή). For Cyril, pleasure is a manifestation of the corruptibility that fell upon humanity when Adam disobeyed God. When sin entered the picture, human desire was perverted and no longer inclined toward the divine will.<sup>40</sup> Cyril thus believes that pleasure (or “lust” [ἐπιθυμία], a term which he uses interchangeably with “pleasure”) is the root from which all unrighteous actions spring:

When carefully investigating the nature of things around us, we will find pleasure (ἡδονήν) leading the way of all sin; and a kind of hot lust (ἐπιθυμία θερμή), never ceasing its activity, calls us to do what is wrong, and, taking captive the wisdom of the understanding, finally persuades us to come through a smooth way to carry out what is desired....Therefore, do you see how the beginning of evil is initially formed in lusts (ἐν ἐπιθυμίαις) toward something, and the seed of sin is birthed in improper pleasures (ἐκτόποις ἡδοναῖς)?<sup>41</sup>

Cyril bases this hamartiological principle – the relationship between lust and sinful acts – on James 1:13-15. Much of what he says mirrors the explanation in this passage noting that the genesis of sinful deeds is inordinate desires. At the same time, Cyril’s understanding of the pleasures owes something to his theological heritage and context. The concept of sinful passions

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. Cf. Ex. 12:43-44, and see *FL* 9.6, *Cyrille d’Alexandrie: Lettres Festales VII-XI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Pierre Éviéux, and Robert Monier, SC 392 (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 170-74 where Cyril interprets the Exodus passage and points out the saving role of circumcision.

<sup>39</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 630). Cyril uses here the verbs προκαθαίρεσθαι and προαγνίζεσθαι.

<sup>40</sup> See Walter Burghardt, *The Image of God in Man according to Cyril of Alexandria* (1957; repr., Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 97-100 for a helpful examination of Cyril’s conception of the passions and corruption in human nature.

<sup>41</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 631).

loomed large in the broad patristic doctrine of sin.<sup>42</sup> For example, in his *Contra gentes* Athanasius describes the self-interested turn of mankind away from God whereby human beings “imprisoned their souls with the pleasures (ἡδοναῖς) of the body, becoming confused and defiled with all kinds of lusts (ἐπιθυμίαις),” and lost sight of the power God had given them at creation. As a result, the soul began to consider pleasure the highest good and, always being in motion, attempted to experience it in a variety of ways to satiate itself.<sup>43</sup> Well before Athanasius, Clement of Alexandria expressed a similar sentiment when discussing the struggle against pleasures (ἡδοναῖς) and passion (παθός), and how the Christian Gnostic must separate them from the soul.<sup>44</sup> Pleasures compete with God for mastery over every human being. Therefore, through knowledge and rigorous training, the Christian despises that which would drive him or her from God, and abstains from all evil. For, Clement warns, “the one who does not want to destroy the passion (πάθος) of the soul makes an end of himself.”<sup>45</sup>

For Cyril, salvation must deal with the problem of sinful pleasures since they are the cause of wicked behavior. A radical work of purification is required, and Cyril believes circumcision typifies such a work. Here, he follows the general idea found in Philo and Origen that circumcision of the male sexual organ was given by God to designate the nature of required purification from sin. Similar to both of his Alexandrian predecessors, he locates the origin of

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<sup>42</sup> Even a casual perusal in Lampe of the entries for ἡδονή (524-525) and ἐπιθυμία (601-602) serve as evidence of the pervasiveness and widespread use of these concepts in patristic literature.

<sup>43</sup> *Contra gentes* 3-4, trans. Robert Thompson (Clarendon: Oxford, 1971), 8-12. Cf. *On the Incarnation* 5 (ibid.), 144-146, where Athanasius outlines the worsening condition of man after the Fall. With continuing degradation, Athanasius claims, people became “insatiable in sinning.” See also his *Festal Letter* 19.6 where Athanasius details the spiritual wreckage that results from fleshly pleasures in ed. Philip Schaff, NPNF 2, vol. 4 (1890; repr., Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), 547. Thomas Weinandy, *Athanasius: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 15, provides a helpful summary of Athanasius’ view of sin and its relationship to pleasures: “Sin, for Athanasius, is the turning away from God and all that pertains to him and a lustful self-centered turning inward to what pertains to man and his earthly bodily life with all its sensual pleasures.”

<sup>44</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* VII.12.71-72, SC 428 (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 222-228, (hereafter *Strom.*). In this section Clement also uses ἐπιθυμήσας to describe the person who feels desire.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., VII.12.72.4 (SC 428, 226).

sinful pleasures in the penis, emphasizing the intrinsic sexual character of the passions.<sup>46</sup> Cyril insists that God commanded the Israelites to apply the “circumcising iron” to that part of the body as a type of inward purification. Circumcising the male sexual organ with a knife was meant to teach us that we can only be made pure by accepting the “cutting activity of the divine Word into our heart” and receiving “the sword of the Spirit into our mind.”<sup>47</sup>

Cyril identifies two effects, one positive and one negative, of the circumcision work of the Word and the Spirit. First, we drive away from ourselves (ἀποπεμψόμεθα) the lusts of every shameful pursuit, no matter how tempting they may be, and cease giving in to our own wills (ἰδίους θελήμασι). When we draw near to God through the circumcision of the Spirit, whatever is impure in us is wiped away and, as a result, we become “dead to the world.”<sup>48</sup> Second, we become conformed to the will of God, thus oriented away from our own. Cyril insists that the purification of spiritual circumcision does not simply remove evil from us, but endows us with the power to do God’s will and to enjoy doing it. We do not merely die to the world’s pleasures; we live a virtuous life (τὴν ἀρίστην ζωὴν) for God’s sake because

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<sup>46</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 631). On Philo see *De specialibus legibus* 1.9, trans. F. H. Colson, LCL 7 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950) and *Quaestiones et solutiones in Genesin* III.46-47, trans. Ralph Marcus, LCL Suppl. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), hereafter *Quaest. in Gn.* Philo believed that the sexual impulse was the dominant pleasure in man, and that circumcision, in a symbolic sense, was given to counteract it. For Origen see especially his *Commentary on Romans* 2.13.22-26, trans. Thomas Scheck, FC 103 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 155-158. See my summaries of Philo’s and Origen’s view of circumcision in Chapter Two, pp. 55-60, 63-65, respectively.

<sup>47</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 631). Cyril’s depiction of the work of inward purification involving both the Word and the Spirit demonstrates his Trinitarian commitment to the inseparable operations of the three Persons. Even though he does not provide any explanation of his Trinitarian theology in this immediate context, it is clear from his statement that the Son’s purifying activity is inseparable from that of the Spirit, and vice versa. However, later on in his comments on this pericope (638), Cyril briefly returns to the motif of purification, noting that the Word enters our hearts and purifies us “through his own Spirit” (διὰ τοῦ ἰδίου Πνεύματος). The preposition “through” implies unity of action while ἰδίου indicates the consubstantiality of the Son and the Spirit. For a more detailed account of this important theological principle in Cyril’s thought, see my discussion on *In Jo.* 15:1-3 below, pp. 197-206. Keating has also observed that for Cyril, the divine agency of circumcision in the Spirit is always attributed to Christ or the Holy Spirit or to Christ by the Spirit. See Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 62.

<sup>48</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 631-632). Here Cyril cites Col. 3:3-4 and Gal. 4:14 to emphasize the dual activity of dying to pleasure and living to righteousness.

circumcision instills something good in us, namely, the Holy Spirit.<sup>49</sup> Cyril thus sees circumcision as both cleansing and life-giving. For this reason, it was given on the eighth day, which is the day of the Lord's resurrection.<sup>50</sup> After Jesus rose from the dead he bestowed the Spirit on his disciples. It is on account of the resurrection of the crucified that we receive the Spirit who "circumcises all impurity" from our hearts.<sup>51</sup> Cyril asserts that the cleansing work of the Spirit has "banished all defilement from our souls and, through faith, has brought forth perfection in the splendor of godliness."<sup>52</sup> Because the work of purification has both a negative effect (taking something away) and a positive effect (implanting something new), accomplishing the will of God is not an arduous chore, but a delight.

Furthermore, Cyril points out that Christ died for us and cleansed us "with his own blood."<sup>53</sup> Therefore, it is fitting that those whom Christ has purified should give up living for themselves and be devoted entirely to him, consecrating themselves to holiness. This is a just payment, since the debt incurred through Christ's offering requires the sacrifice of our own lives.<sup>54</sup> Through Christ's death and gift of the Spirit upon his resurrection, Cyril makes clear the purifying act of circumcision is carried out concurrently by Christ and the Holy Spirit.

The "perfection in godliness" Cyril mentions appears to be a fruit of spiritual circumcision. In other words, he views perfection as logically subsequent to circumcision in the order of salvation. He demonstrates this principle through his interpretation of the story of

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<sup>49</sup> See Bernard Meunier, *Le Christ de Cyrille d'Alexandrie. L'humanité, le salut et la question monophysite*. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1997), 202, who notes that for Cyril, spiritual circumcision is the means by which man receives "l'Esprit sanctificateur et purificateur."

<sup>50</sup> Cyril sees the eighth day, which is the resurrection day, as a sign that "circumcision of the Spirit is the producer (πρόξενον) of life" in *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 632). Cf. Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 60-61, who notes that the dual emphasis of cleansing and giving new life is "the decisive element in Cyril's understanding of spiritual circumcision."

<sup>51</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 631-633). Cyril returns to the "eighth day" motif later in his discourse. I will discuss this below in more detail.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 633.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 640.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Abraham in Genesis 17 in conjunction with numerical symbolism.<sup>55</sup> Cyril, ever perceptive in matters of detail, points out that Abraham was ninety-nine years of age when the Lord appeared to him and gave him the commandment of circumcision. His age of ninety-nine was significant because it precedes one hundred. The number one hundred is key because it is the symbol of perfection.<sup>56</sup> In the same way, circumcision precedes spiritual perfection. In Cyril's mind, God providentially arranged the encounter with Abraham at the appropriate age because it was meant to serve as a sign indicating that circumcision is the entry point (πρόθυρον) and introduction (προεισαγωγή) to perfection in goodness. Thus, perfection is attainable only after the purification (that is, circumcision) of the heart. Cyril promises that if circumcision has been carried out – when all uncleanness has been purified – it brings us to perfection without difficulty.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The author of the *Epistle of Barnabas* also utilizes a creative arithmology in the Abraham narrative to make a theological point about the spiritual significance of circumcision (see esp. 9:8) in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Michael Holmes, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 408. The degree of Cyril's familiarity with this work is unclear.

<sup>56</sup> It is not common for Cyril to venture into such arithmological interpretations of Scripture. Further, it is not clear where he gets the idea that the number 100 is the symbol of perfection. While a popular neo-Pythagoreanism may have persisted in his Alexandrian milieu, it is most likely that the idea comes from either direct or mediated contact with Philo. Philo identifies the number 100 as "the symbol of perfection" (ἐκατοντάς δὲ τελειότητος σύμβολον) in his *De mutatione nominum* 1.2, trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, *LCL* 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1934), 142, hereafter *De mut. nom.* He investigates the Genesis 17 passage in several places throughout his works, though going into much greater detail about numbers than Cyril. In *Quaest. in Gn.* III.56, he lists and describes nine virtues of the number 100 in the manner of Pythagorean number-mysticism. For example, the fourth virtue of 100 Philo lists is that "it consists of thirty and of six and of sixty and of four, which is a cube and a square at the same time." He proceeds to extol the number ninety-nine, noting that it is second only to 100. See also *Quaest. Gen.* III.39, where, commenting on Abraham's age at the time the Lord appeared to him, Philo explains the importance of both numbers. Here, he goes so far as to identify 100 with "the holy of holies" because it is a power of ten, which, according to his *De mut. nom.* 1.2, represents the Levitical tithe. (*LCL* Suppl. 1, 226-227, 256-259). Clement of Alexandria, who was also familiar with Pythagorean number theory, posits that ten is the number of perfection because it is represented by the letter I (*iota*), which signifies the name of Jesus. See *Strom.* 6.16 and cf. *Strom.* 6.11. This is also in the *Didascalia apostolorum* and is picked up in the *Apostolic Constitutions* in the fourth century. The *Didascalia* is a Christian Jewish document. Further, Didymus the Blind seems to be aware of the Philonic tradition of equating 100 with perfection. He approaches this in his own interpretation of Genesis 17:1 in his fragmentary commentary, *In Genesim*, trans. Pierre Nautin, SC 244 (Paris: Cerf, 1976), 236-237. In it he claims that "the number one hundred is brought about (συντελεῖται) from ten times ten (δέκα τῶν δέκα)." Though the passage is incomplete, he seems to equate the numbers mentioned with squares, noting that the square is "firmly established" (βέβαιον). Though Didymus does not explicitly identify 100 as the "symbol of perfection" as Philo does, the similarities between the two are evident.

<sup>57</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 633).

In his account of circumcision, Cyril establishes four important ideas concerning purification. First, purification is necessary in order to have fellowship with God. Second, God gave circumcision as a type of the inward purification required to cleanse us from sin. This is the circumcision of the heart. Third, inward purification is carried out by the Son and the Holy Spirit. Fourth, spiritual circumcision leads to perfection in godliness. In sum, the purifying grace of circumcision involves both cleansing the heart and bestowing new life.

### *Freedom*

The second salvific motif that Cyril relates to circumcision is spiritual freedom, namely, that of those who are “free in Christ.” Cyril portrays this freedom as similar to purification in that it carries both negative and positive connotations:

To be sure, the man who is altogether free in Christ has shaken off from himself the slavery of the devil and the yoke of sin, and has “broken apart their chains,”<sup>58</sup> as it is written, and has bound himself with the radiant and non-tyrannical (ἀτυράννευτον) boast of righteousness, I mean, the righteousness of Christ by faith.<sup>59</sup>

Negatively, spiritual freedom implies the deliverance from spiritual bondage. Positively, it indicates taking on a new status of righteousness. The slave to sin is unshackled and becomes a bond-servant of Christ. This two-fold freedom, Cyril maintains, is one of the benefits of circumcision of the Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

One of the ways Cyril expresses the transforming freedom wrought by circumcision is his regular recourse to typological readings of the Old Testament narrative. As we have seen, this method of interpretation is common throughout Cyril’s writings as it is in many of the church fathers. In his circumcision discourse on John 7:24, Cyril points to the stories of Ishmael and Isaac, Zipporah, and Joshua to underscore the true meaning of circumcision. Each of these

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<sup>58</sup> Ps. 2:3 (LXX).

<sup>59</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 633).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

characters appropriates circumcision in unique ways, all of which point to the freedom circumcision bequeaths.

First, Cyril highlights the dichotomy between spiritual slavery and freedom by comparing Ishmael and Isaac.<sup>61</sup> He identifies Ishmael as a servant (οἰκέτης) who represents the spiritual bondage not of the pagan nations, but of Israel (that is, the earthly Jerusalem). Cyril's interpretive basis for this identification is the fact that Abraham circumcised Ishmael when the latter was thirteen years old.<sup>62</sup> According to Cyril, the number thirteen symbolizes Israel's fall from "eight" and "twelve." Both numbers symbolize the kerygma of salvation. Cyril equates the number eight with "the saving proclamation of the resurrection" insofar as Christ rose from the dead on the eighth day of the week.<sup>63</sup> Though the Jews reject the message of Christ's resurrection, all who receive it by faith are circumcised in heart. In the same way, Cyril asserts that the number twelve is a figure of the teaching of the apostles. Because of their hard hearts and unbelief, the Jews likewise cast aside the apostles' proclamation.

By contrast, Isaac, the free son of the free woman, received circumcision on the eighth day as God had commanded.<sup>64</sup> Isaac typifies those who are of the spiritual Jerusalem, all the "free children of the free," who identify with the "eighth day." These accept in faith the resurrection of Christ and are "enriched" (πεπλουτήκασιν) with the circumcision of the Spirit which "has freed them from all sin and delivered them from death (since death springs from, and exists on account of, sin), and brought them into the life of Christ."<sup>65</sup> Cyril depicts circumcision

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, θ (PG 69, 133).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Gen. 17:25-26.

<sup>63</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 634).

<sup>64</sup> Gen. 21:4.

<sup>65</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 634). The verb Cyril uses for "brought" (my translation) is μεθορμίζω. According to LSJ, this word implies the movement of a ship from one anchorage to another. This nuance is important because Cyril is trying to convey the sense that spiritual circumcision moves the believer from a former condition marked by sin and death to a new condition characterized by the incorruptible life of Christ. In other words, circumcision implies a change of spiritual position, a shift from one spiritual state to another.



as a profound change in that it releases us from sin, death, and corruption in order to bring us into a new state of holiness and incorruptibility. As we see again, Cyril's discussion of the freedom wrought by spiritual circumcision highlights the negative and positive connotations in this transformation.

Second, Cyril turns his attention to Zipporah, the wife of Moses, who stayed the hand of the angel of destruction by taking a stone and circumcising her son on the road to Egypt.<sup>66</sup> Cyril insists that the biblical text makes little sense without the mystical (μυστικός) meaning hidden beneath the surface. It would be foolish to assume that an angel bent on destruction could be turned away at the sight of blood. Therefore, the circumcision Zipporah performed possessed a profound efficacy. Her act of obedience involved spiritual implications that far outweighed adherence to a requirement. She demonstrated that circumcision according to the law was, in itself, not able to save. If the physical operation was salvific, then Moses's own circumcision would have saved him. Something else was going on in the narrative. Cyril brings out the deeper meaning of the circumcision performed by resorting to symbolism. He fixes his attention on Moses and Zipporah, and what their characters signify. According to Cyril, Moses symbolizes the impotence of legal circumcision since he was in danger of death. On the other hand, Zipporah represents the Church, the new people of God that has believed in Christ. This people receives the circumcision of the heart which, performed in type by Zipporah, repels and overthrows death so that it flees from us.<sup>67</sup> In this case, circumcision represents freedom from the insatiable ravages of death.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> See Ex. 4:24-26. For parallel passages in Cyril, cf. *De ador.* (PG 68, 257-260); *Glaph.in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484-485); *Com. Hab.* 3:6 (Pusey, II, 135-136).

<sup>67</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 635).

<sup>68</sup> The story of Zipporah circumcising her son has a function here in *In Jo.* 7:24 similar to that which it has in *De ador.* (PG 68, 257-260); *Glaph.in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484-485); and *Comm. Hab.* 3:6 (Pusey, II, 135-136). I explored the three passages from Cyril's Old Testament works in chapter four, above. In all four places, Cyril accentuates what he believes is the central premise of the story: circumcision is a type of the demise of death itself.

From here Cyril connects freedom from death with the resurrection of Christ. He explains that all nature participates in some way in the resurrection life, the new life accomplished on the eighth day, which circumcision of the Spirit brings. The resurrection even includes those who have rejected Christ, scoffed at the message of his victory over death, and lived wicked lives. The reason that every creature – both good and bad – shares in the resurrection lies in the will of God. Cyril maintains that God has willed to sustain creation and, on account of his love and goodness, completely abolish death. However, God does not grant life to unbelievers directly. Rather, God uses the faithful – those who are circumcised in spirit – as the means for imparting life to all creation, including the unfaithful.<sup>69</sup> On account of the Christians, Cyril claims, “the grace of the resurrection was transferred (διέβη) to the whole of nature, extending, in some way, to the whole through the circumcision in the Spirit.”<sup>70</sup> Although the divine benefits are due to those who are circumcised in heart, it is proper that grace should be bestowed upon the entirety of nature through them.<sup>71</sup>

However, Cyril is quick to point out the distinction in the way the resurrection is appropriated. Those who believe in Christ participate in the resurrection in a salvific way, while those who have not believed participate only in terms of preservation against annihilation. The wicked will receive the resurrection to “live again,” but only to face damnation. Those justified by Christ will rise up to receive the rewards of grace. Cyril points to I Corinthians 15:23 to

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Through Christ, death has been put to flight. However, unlike his treatment of the story in *De adoratione* and *Glaphyra* especially, Cyril’s interpretation in the John commentary is more brief and restricted to a few crucial elements of the story. He does not consider as many details of the text in order to trace their spiritual meaning. For instance, the hidden meaning of the stone which Zipporah used to circumcise her son goes unquestioned in *In Jo.* 7:24, whereas the stone (with its Trinitarian implications) occupies his attention in the *Comm. Hab.*, *De ador.*, and *Glaph.* In addition, unlike his comments on the three Old Testament passages, Cyril does not incorporate Joshua 5:3-9 (when the Israelites were circumcised in Gilgal) into his interpretation of Ex. 4:24-26 in his comments on John 7:24.

<sup>69</sup> When speaking of the “unfaithful,” Cyril usually has in mind the Jews who reject Christianity even though he continues to refer to the “whole nature.”

<sup>70</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I., 636).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

highlight the “order” of the resurrection. Before everyone else, he insists, Christ will raise all those who were intimately united with him (τοὺς οἰκειωθέντας αὐτῷ) to prove that even though all share in the resurrection to some degree, it properly belongs to the faithful.<sup>72</sup> The circumcision of the Spirit brings indestructible life to all creatures, but bestows divine rewards only to the faithful.

Third, Cyril reminds his readers of Joshua and the flint knives he used to circumcise the Israelites in Gilgal after they crossed the Jordan. Cyril transitions from discussing Zipporah to Joshua by pointing to their common circumcising instruments. It is no frivolous detail that Zipporah circumcised her son with a stone rather than iron. Iron is becoming of punishment and is therefore fitting to those under the law. But stone represents something else. Zipporah’s stone was a type of Christ because it symbolizes the “indestructible and firm nature of the Only-begotten” which nothing can oppose, not even death itself.<sup>73</sup> In the same way, Joshua applied stone knives to the Israelites when they were on the verge of war with the peoples of Canaan to “arm them in some way by circumcision,” making them superior to death.<sup>74</sup> In both stories, the circumcising stone is a type of Christ. Christ is the agent of the true circumcision, freeing us from death and corruption since his very nature is life and incorruptibility.

Cyril further illustrates this freedom in Christ by examining God’s instruction to Joshua. After the people crossed the Jordan, the Lord commanded Joshua, “Make for yourselves stone knives of sharp rock, and after taking your place, circumcise the sons of Israel.”<sup>75</sup> For Cyril, the details regarding the knives have special meaning. The hardness of the rock from which the knives are made represents the indestructible nature of the Word, but the text also describes it as

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 636-637.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 637.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Josh. 5:2 (LXX).

“sharp.” Cyril takes this as another attribute of Christ. In a spiritual sense, sharpness suggests the Word’s ability to penetrate into the inmost places, just as the writer of Hebrews explains.<sup>76</sup>

Christ is indestructible by nature and able to reach into the deep recesses of the human person.

Cyril associates the circumcision at Gilgal with the activity of the “sharp” Word:

And thus the subtle and cutting [Word], penetrating our hearts through his own Spirit, rids (ἀπαλλάττει) us of all uncleanness, and, in a way impossible to express, circumcises the abominable things of which we are full, and makes us holy and blameless.<sup>77</sup>

Through the Spirit, Christ circumcises us, cutting away every impurity and imparting holiness.

Cyril continues that those whom Christ circumcises in this way are as “young children” who “do not know good from evil.”<sup>78</sup> According to the biblical narrative, the generation born from the Israelites who fell in the wilderness inherited the land. These, Cyril claims, were “free from unbelief” and are types of the new people of God who have received the circumcision of the Spirit through Christ.<sup>79</sup> The fact that the “new” generation received Joshua’s circumcision on the other side of the Jordan is also a significant detail. Cyril insists that we cannot receive “circumcision in the heart through the Spirit” unless we too cross over the “mystic Jordan” (μυστικόν Ἰορδάνην).<sup>80</sup> He does not collapse baptism and circumcision into one saving work since the Israelites’ crossing of the Jordan is not identical with their subsequent circumcision. Thus, Cyril distinguishes the two and puts them in logical (if not chronological) sequence. When the events are interpreted spiritually, we see that baptism comes first, followed by the purifying,

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<sup>76</sup> Heb. 4:12. Cyril refers to Paul as the author of Hebrews.

<sup>77</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 638).

<sup>78</sup> Dt. 1:39.

<sup>79</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 638).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 639.

liberating grace of circumcision by the Spirit. Cyril is not always clear on the association between baptism and circumcision, but he indicates that they are distinct yet closely related.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, Cyril highlights the spiritual result of Joshua's circumcision of the Israelites. At issue is the meaning of "the reproach of Egypt" the Lord took away from them.<sup>82</sup> In addressing this question, Cyril launches into a detailed description of circumcision, compiling a litany of its saving effects.

In what ways, therefore, shall we grant that Israel benefited from circumcision? Or what sort of reproach, shall we say, was taken away? Clearly, it was the slavery and readiness to be taken advantage of due to weakness, and, still more, the hard labor with clay and brick. Do you see how great are the evils from which the power of the circumcision in spirit delivers? For it drags away the soul of man from the hand of the devil, renders it free and unconstrained from the sin which tyrannizes within us, and puts it on display as stronger than all the greed of evil demons. But it also frees from both clay and brick, for no longer is one being defiled with the pleasures of the flesh, nor does it allow one to be defiled with the toils of the earth, but it frees from both death and corruption.<sup>83</sup>

For Cyril, circumcision of the heart entails freedom from a host of evils. But this freedom also involves "adding" a quality to us, not just taking something away. As Cyril's explanation shows, circumcision delivers us from the power of the devil, sin, death, and corruption, while simultaneously bringing us into a new condition of strength, holiness, and incorruption.

### *Participation*

The third major salvific motif Cyril associates with circumcision is participation in the divine nature. At the end of his summary listing the manifold freedoms that circumcision brings

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<sup>81</sup> I deal with the relationship between baptism and circumcision in greater detail in Chapter Four, pp. 126-28. On the baptism - circumcision distinction in *In Jo. 7:24*, see Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 61-63. Keating's insights are instructive, though he might make too much of Cyril's treatment of baptism in this particular passage because Keating is interested in the connection between baptism and the gift of the Spirit in Cyril's thought. In reality, Cyril says little concerning baptism in his comments on John 7:24, the "mystic Jordan" statement notwithstanding. Keating later admits that Cyril's emphasis on baptism is "surprisingly light" since his concern is centered on the theological content of rebirth through the Spirit. Nevertheless, Keating insists, the link between the sacrament and reception of divine life is present.

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Josh. 5:9.

<sup>83</sup> *In Jo. 7:24* (Pusey, I, 639).

(the text cited immediately above), he makes an important addendum: “And these things are not the only results of circumcision, but it also makes us sharers in the divine nature through participation with Christ our Savior.”<sup>84</sup> Participation is a common theme in Cyril, and is foundational to his soteriology. Therefore, it is no surprise that he includes it among the soteriological benefits of circumcision. Cyril identifies the means of our participation in the divine life as the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments, primarily the Eucharist.

While Cyril describes the goal of salvation as union with God through Christ (συνδεῖσθαι τῷ Θεῷ διὰ μεσίου Χριστοῦ) and intimate communion (or kinship) with God (οἰκειότητα τῷ ἁγίῳ Θεῷ),<sup>85</sup> he maintains that circumcision of the Spirit is what actualizes this relationship. Put differently, we become partakers (μέτοχοι) of God through the Spirit who circumcises our hearts. Cyril further identifies circumcision of the Spirit as “a producer of life.”<sup>86</sup> Participation includes the gift of new life and the intimacy with God that the Holy Spirit effects. As Cyril declares later in his *Commentary on John* when describing sanctification, it is the Holy Spirit who, through the Son, unites us with God and makes us sharers in the divine nature. To have fellowship with the Spirit is to have fellowship with God: to be indwelt by the Spirit is to be indwelt by God.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. καὶ οὐκ ἐν τούτοις ὅλα τὰ ἐκ τῆς περιτομῆς, ἀλλὰ καὶ θείας φύσεως ἀποτελεῖ κοινωνοῦς διὰ μετοχῆς τοῦ Σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Χριστοῦ.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 630-631.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 632.

<sup>87</sup> *In Jo.* 17:18-19 (Pusey, II, 722-723). On a number of occasions, Cyril discusses participation and sanctification in the same context, often using them interchangeably. For Cyril, sanctification implies participation in the divine nature and vice versa. For instance, in *In Jo.* 10:36 Cyril lists and describes the various Scriptural senses of “sanctification,” one of which is participation in the Spirit. While it may be objected that this passage in the commentary is fragmentary and contains dubious material, Cyril gives a similar description of sanctification in his *Dialogues on the Trinity* 6, which suggests that the teaching in *In Jo.* 10:36 is not spurious. In both instances, he acknowledges the varied meanings of sanctification, but emphasizes its integral relationship with participation in the Spirit. For an insightful discussion of Cyril’s doctrine of sanctification, see Burghardt, 65-83. See also Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 86-89, on sanctification and participation in Cyril.

As we have seen, Cyril often associates the “eighth day” of circumcision with the resurrection, and the resurrection is intrinsic to Christ’s bestowal of the Holy Spirit onto humanity. John records that after Jesus rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples, breathed on them, and declared, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>88</sup> Because it was carried out on the eighth day, Cyril relates circumcision with the reception of the Holy Spirit, who joins us to God and grants us a share in the divine life.<sup>89</sup> Jesus received the Spirit in his baptism and transformed the human condition in himself as the Spirit remained upon him. Now, Christ has given us his own Spirit. Through circumcision of the Spirit, what was accomplished in Christ is now effected in us.<sup>90</sup>

Cyril also stresses the sacraments as the agents of participation with God. Of course, his teaching on the gift of the Holy Spirit is not separate from his doctrine of the sacraments. Indeed, he describes the sacraments as the means by which the Spirit is received. For our purposes, there are two pertinent places in the commentary – his comments on 6:35 and 7:24 – where Cyril discusses the sacraments in relation to circumcision of the Spirit. Once again I highlight Cyril’s interpretation of the Joshua narrative and the circumcision of the Israelites, a story he turns to on several occasions, as a type of the sacraments and true circumcision.

It is in a Eucharistic sense that Cyril interprets John 6:35, where Jesus declares, “I am the bread of life.” In characteristic fashion, he stresses the typological relationship between the manna the Israelites ate in the dessert and the true “bread from heaven,” which is Christ. The one kept God’s people from hunger and physical death, while the other fashions the new people of God (the Church) for eternal life, rendering them stronger than death insofar as they will rise

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<sup>88</sup> Jn. 20:22.

<sup>89</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 632-633).

<sup>90</sup> Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 61. On the relationship between Christ’s reception of the Spirit and bestowal of the Spirit through spiritual circumcision, Keating states, “That Cyril explicitly identifies circumcision of the Spirit with Christ breathing the Spirit on the disciples (John 20:22), as the fulfillment of what was inaugurated there on Easter day, confirms this connection.”

to newness of life in Christ. Since Christ is life by nature, those who partake of his body share in his imperishability.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, Joshua, who led the Israelites after Moses, was a type of Jesus.<sup>92</sup> Under Moses' leadership, the people ate manna while remaining under the types and shadows of the law. But after the time of Moses, Joshua brought the people over the Jordan, circumcised them with stone knives, and made provision for them to eat the bread of the Promised Land. The crossing of the Jordan suggests baptism, while the circumcision performed represents the spiritual circumcision we receive by faith.

Further, Cyril maintains that the twelve stones the people erected as a memorial at Gilgal symbolize the teaching of the disciples. Cyril claims that through their message we believe and thereby receive circumcision of the Spirit. After the people crossed the Jordan and received circumcision, they no longer ate manna but enjoyed the produce of the land. In the same way, Cyril claims that we no longer require the manna that was given under the law, but enjoy "the bread that comes from heaven, that is Christ, who nourishes us unto immortal life through both the help of the Holy Spirit and participation (μεθέξει) in his own flesh, putting into us the participation of God, and removing the deadness of the ancient curse."<sup>93</sup> Though Cyril does not provide further explanation, he implies that baptism and circumcision are the necessary predecessors of the Eucharist. Baptism brings us into Christ's kingdom; circumcision purifies us through the work of the Spirit; the Eucharist continually supplies us with the body of Christ and the Spirit, and thus participation in the divine nature.

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<sup>91</sup> *In Jo.* 6:35 (Pusey, I, 472).

<sup>92</sup> Other early Christian writers make this same exegetical move. Cf. for example, Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 113-114 in *Iustini Martyris Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Miroslav Marcovich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1997); Origen, *Homily on Joshua* 1, trans. Barbara Bruce, FC 105 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

<sup>93</sup> *In Jo.* 6:35 (Pusey, I, 473).



The typological relationships between Joshua and Jesus, the Jordan and baptism, circumcision with stone knives and circumcision of the Spirit, the produce of the land and the Eucharistic body of Christ, find further support in Cyril's discourse on John 7:24. Cyril is concerned to point out the sequence that leads to life-giving communion with God. From the Joshua story, he observes that baptism and circumcision comprise the "steps" that lead to sharing in the divine nature. Cyril stresses that no one can partake of the life-giving body of Christ unless that person has "crossed over the mystic Jordan, received circumcision from the living Word,"<sup>94</sup> and, in some manner, scrubbed away (προαποτριψαμένους) the stain of the soul," which he recognizes as "the reproach of Egypt."<sup>95</sup> In this passage, Cyril identifies the act of participation in the divine nature as sharing in the Eucharistic meal. In this case, circumcision of the Spirit is not identical to participation, but an inseparable precursor that leads to it.

Cyril further emphasizes the role of circumcision as the means to union with God in a final detail from the Joshua narrative that comes at Joshua's death. The LXX text records that after the people buried him in the land of his inheritance, "there in the tomb in which he was buried, they placed with him the stone knives with which he circumcised the sons of Israel at

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<sup>94</sup> Though Cyril usually ascribes the spiritual work of circumcision to the Spirit, and sometimes to both the Son and the Spirit, he does, on rarer occasions, attribute it to the Son (the Word). However, he is not being inconsistent. His concept of the inseparable operations of the Trinity prevents him from isolating particular activities to any one of the Persons of the Godhead. In other words, the Spirit does not circumcise apart from the Son. The Son does not circumcise apart from the Spirit. I deal with this issue below.

<sup>95</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 639-640). See also *In Jo.* 17:20 (Pusey, III, 116-119), where Cyril interprets Jesus' admonition to Mary not to touch him immediately after his resurrection as a demonstration that no one can approach the Eucharistic table and receive Christ's holy flesh unless he or she has first been baptized and received the Holy Spirit. Cyril compares this to Exodus 12:48 where God commands that no uncircumcised person may eat of the Passover feast. In his comments on John 17:20, Cyril notes the cosmological shift that had just occurred in salvation history. When Jesus walked the earth, he welcomed people to himself. Unclean people of all kinds touched him and were healed. But after his death and resurrection, when Christ fulfilled the divine plan of salvation and showed himself superior to death, he could not allow himself to be touched by impure people, that is, those in whom the Spirit did not dwell. When Mary met Jesus, he had not yet bestowed the Spirit onto his disciples. After his ascension, he sent the Spirit to all his followers. Thus, she was not allowed to grasp him at that moment. In the same way, Cyril says, we can only partake of the flesh of Christ after we have received the Spirit through baptism, and have been purified through circumcision of the heart. Here again, the salvific sequence Cyril gives is baptism – circumcision – Eucharist.

Gilgal,” having led them to the new land.<sup>96</sup> Cyril recognizes not only a type of the new circumcision on account of the stone knives, but more importantly, the act in salvation history that makes the new circumcision possible: the death of Christ. For him, the death of Christ has multiple saving effects. He claims that the death and the blood of Christ not only cleansed us, but “preserved us from all wickedness, and became the benefactor of the circumcision in the Spirit through which we gain union with God who is over all,” and that we observe all of this in the story of Joshua’s burial.<sup>97</sup> For Cyril, the fact that Joshua was buried with the stone knives reveals that the grace of spiritual circumcision is “bound up (παραπέπηγεν) in the death of Christ our Savior.”<sup>98</sup> This is important because it conveys Cyril’s emphasis on Christ’s passion in his doctrine of salvation. As we have seen, he uses the biblical concept of circumcision to designate the multifarious dimensions of God’s salvation. He even describes circumcision as that which “woos” all heavenly goods for us (using a word which suggests a woman or match-maker who courts on behalf of another).<sup>99</sup> But it would have no meaning without the death of Christ. Indeed, there would be no such thing as circumcision without Christ’s death. Thus, Cyril underscores Christ’s saving passion as the basis for the grace of circumcision.

At the same time, Cyril stresses the role of the resurrection in our reception of spiritual circumcision. Meunier argues, rightly, that Cyril does not relate circumcision to a sacrificial effect of Christ’s death, even though spiritual circumcision cannot be understood without the Passion. Rather, circumcision “comes from the Resurrection, and is received in faith.”<sup>100</sup> Cyril makes this clear when discussing the disciples’ reception of the Spirit after Christ rose from the

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<sup>96</sup> Josh. 24:30-31 (LXX).

<sup>97</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 640).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 641.

<sup>99</sup> See *Ibid.*, where Cyril identifies the grace of spiritual circumcision as “ἡ πάντων ἡμῶν τῶν οὐρανίων ἀγαθῶν προμνήστρια.”

<sup>100</sup> Meunier, *Le Christ*, 203.

dead and appeared to them.<sup>101</sup> Further, when Cyril explains the nature and purpose of Christ's death, he often moves straight to Christ's resurrection. His overarching emphasis on the connection between circumcision and the resurrection is clear when, in summative fashion, he provides a digest of the saving effects of circumcision. His summary includes the three major soteriological themes – purification, freedom, participation – that pervade his discourse:

Therefore, giving no consideration to the Jewish sense, we will understand circumcision on the eighth day as the purification through the Spirit, in faith and in the resurrection of Christ, the casting away of all sin, the annihilation of death and corruption, that which bestows holiness and intimacy (οἰκειότητος) with Christ, the image of freedom, the way and door of fellowship (οἰκειώσεως) with God.<sup>102</sup>

*The Superiority of Circumcision over the Sabbath*

In light of the spiritual richness of circumcision, Cyril concludes his excursus on John 7:23-24 by exploring its relationship to the Sabbath. He compares the realities of each biblical institution and lays them side by side, arguing that circumcision has superiority over the Sabbath. A superficial reading of the biblical text shows this is the case, for the law made provision for circumcision to be carried out on the Sabbath day, thus allowing the Sabbath to be broken. But Cyril, not content to be bound to the “carnal type of history,” moves to “the words of the Spirit.”<sup>103</sup> In a spiritual sense, circumcision does not “break” the law of the Sabbath, but works in conjunction with it since both appear to have a common meaning or focus (σκοπόν). When they are interpreted spiritually, both the Sabbath rest and circumcision signify freedom from wickedness and the ceasing from sin. There is no contradiction between them.

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<sup>101</sup> See *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 632-633).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 641.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 642.

Taken from a different perspective, the grace of circumcision amplifies the Sabbath. Cyril takes Jesus' words in Matthew 12:5<sup>104</sup> to demonstrate that virtuous deeds are encouraged during the true Sabbath rest in the same way that the priests continued their work on the Sabbath while remaining blameless. Taken in this sense, Cyril interprets the practice of circumcision on the Sabbath – the lawful circumcision performed on the Sabbath that Jesus was referring to in John 7:23-24 – as the accomplishment of good works, activities that are always welcomed by God. The spiritual meaning of the Sabbath, therefore, is not to be understood in a narrow sense as simply staying away from sinful behavior, but it includes active righteousness.<sup>105</sup>

Leaving this interpretation behind, Cyril then switches tactics in order to demonstrate the subtle yet important distinction between circumcision and the Sabbath. God commanded that the one be carried out on the seventh day, while the other he put in place on the eighth. This distinction, Cyril observes, is not trivial. The difference he sees between them is this: the Sabbath indicates abstaining from wickedness, while circumcision suggests the complete casting away of wickedness.<sup>106</sup> These are two different things. To make this clear, Cyril considers the anthropological effects of sin. In doing so, he points to the presence of the passions (τὰ πάθη) and the human struggle to overcome them. Speaking as a man who has experienced their deleterious effects, Cyril observes that much of the time the passions are idle within us. They are present, to be sure, but through self-control and discipline, we are able to govern them as a man might control an animal with a bridle. This is what it means to “rest” from the passions. But, Cyril notes, to shake off (ἀποσείσασθαι) the passions (as much as is humanly possible) is a different matter altogether, and beyond our power to achieve.

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<sup>104</sup> “Have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath days the priests in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and are innocent?”

<sup>105</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 642).

<sup>106</sup> Cyril states, “τὸ γὰρ ἀργῆσαι φαυλότητος, οὕτω πάντως ἐστὶ καὶ φαυλότητος ἀποβολή.” See *Ibid.*, 643.

Cyril concludes by suggesting how we might attain the “greater and higher” reality which is the “absolute cutting off of the passions” (τὴν ὀλοσχερῇ...τῶν παθῶν ἀποτομήν).<sup>107</sup> The “cutting off” of the pleasures is the very meaning of circumcision. But how is this done? Cyril puts forth a synergistic formula where man and God cooperate to bring about complete freedom. First, he claims that one must stop sinning and clamp down on the disturbances within the mind. This is “resting” from sin, which, to some degree, is in man’s grasp. Similar to Clement of Alexandria, Cyril suggests that humans have the ability, through reason and the strength of the will, to carry out the true Sabbath rest by keeping a check on sinful impulses.<sup>108</sup> However, this resting from the passions is only temporary and depends upon the will. For rest to be complete, they must be utterly cast away. This leads to the second part of Cyril’s formula. Since we cannot free ourselves from the passions that lurk within our minds, we must allow Christ to destroy them. Only he is able to “cut off” the pleasures and bring full deliverance. For, Cyril asserts, Christ suffered on our behalf “that he might reorder (ἀναρρυθμίσει) all to newness of life.”<sup>109</sup> For this reason, circumcision was given on the eighth day. It signifies the renewal that Christ brought to bear on our condition through his resurrection. This also indicates why the eighth day is superior to the seventh. Not only is the casting away of the passions superior to resting from them, but the supernatural work of God is greater than the strength and will of human beings. While we take the first step in “ceasing from sin,” Christ brings renewal to completion by ridding the passions from us.<sup>110</sup>

*Summary of Cyril’s Excursus on Circumcision (In Jo. 7:23-24)*

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* VII.12.71-72 (SC 428, 222-228).

<sup>109</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 643).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 643-644.

Cyril's lengthy discussion on circumcision demonstrates his complex doctrine of salvation. Among the saving effects of circumcision, he includes purification from sinful pollution, freedom in Christ, and participation in the divine nature. We have also seen how Cyril integrates soteriological matters such as the sacraments and the events of the narrative of Christ's Incarnation, such as his death and resurrection, into these major themes. For Cyril, the concept of circumcision of the Spirit incorporates the grand motifs that comprise the glorious mystery of salvation. It is a useful metaphor for him to describe the various dimensions of God's saving, transforming activity at work in the lives of believers. The metaphor expresses that Christ cleanses us from sin, frees us from the power of death and corruption, imparts a new character of holiness, and grants us a share in his divine life through the gift of the Spirit.

#### Circumcision as an Ongoing Trinitarian Work of Salvation

Cyril uses circumcision as a helpful metaphor to describe various effects of salvation, many of which are punctiliar. In other words, the benefits of salvation "happen" in (or to) a believer at a particular point in time. For example, Cyril sometimes indicates that the appropriation of purification, freedom from sin, and participation in the divine nature occur at the moment of justifying faith and baptism. But he does not view the reception of salvation only in a punctiliar sense. The appropriation of divine life is also a life-long process. While Cyril has an optimistic view of what salvation can accomplish in human nature in this life (that is, before the eschaton), he does not believe that the Christian will cease needing the continual purifying work of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit must confront and cleanse passions, pleasures of the body, and temptations that continue to endanger the soul.<sup>111</sup> Also, Cyril is very clear that once a person has been united with Christ, there is no guarantee that the believer will remain in a state of grace. He

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<sup>111</sup> For a good expression of this principle, see *In Jo.* 6:33 (Pusey, I, 460-461).

or she must take every precaution to avoid backsliding.<sup>112</sup> Personal diligence and the persistent activity of grace in the life of the Christian are imperative. Therefore, Cyril employs circumcision to describe the progressive and ongoing activity of the Spirit in salvation.

Throughout his writings Cyril insists that the Eucharist is the primary means of our ongoing participation in Christ. The Spirit indwells initially at baptism and brings us into the kingdom of Christ, but continues to indwell as the believer shares in the consecrated meal and partakes of Christ's body. Through it our purified yet weak soul is continually strengthened and made holy.<sup>113</sup> As we saw in his exposition of John 7:23-24, Cyril is clear that both baptism and spiritual circumcision are necessary salvific preludes to receiving Christ's holy flesh and blood, of which the believer partakes on a regular basis. Thus, we are initially transformed through baptism and circumcision whereas we are continually transformed through the Eucharist. But in an extensive interpretation of John 15:1-3, where Jesus describes himself as the "vine" and the disciples as "branches," Cyril highlights the tension between completed and continual purification in a different way. Here the ongoing spiritual development in the life of the believer is not assigned to the Eucharist, but to circumcision. In this case, circumcision is not an initial, punctiliar event of cleansing or reception of grace, but a continual process of purification and formation by the Triune God.

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 15:4 (Pusey, II, 557-559).

<sup>113</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 6:35 (Pusey, I, 475-476) where Cyril stresses the importance of continual Eucharistic celebration. Commenting on Jesus's promise that those who come to him and believe will never hunger or thirst, Cyril claims that Christ promises his own flesh and blood which restores man to incorruption. He explains, "The holy body of Christ bestows life to those in whom it dwells, and maintains them to incorruption, being mixed together (ἀνακινούμενον) with our bodies." The Eucharistic bread, he stresses, is the body of Christ who is life by nature. Cyril warns that those who seldom or irregularly partake of the Eucharist "cut themselves off from eternal life." For Cyril's most substantive treatment of the Eucharist, see *In Jo.* 6:32-58 (Pusey, I, 456-546) and *In Jo.* 15:1 (Pusey, II, 541-544). See also Eduard Weigl, *Die Heilslehre des hl. Cyrill von Alexandrien* (1905; repr. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2009), 146-147, 155-157; Hubert du Manoir, *Dogme et spiritualité chez saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), 185-203; Meunier, *Le Christ*, 188-193; Keating, *Appropriation of Divine Life*, 64-74, 90-93. For helpful monographs on Cyril's doctrine of the Eucharist, see Ezra Gebremedhin, *Life-Giving Blessing: An Inquiry into the Eucharistic Doctrine of Cyril of Alexandria* (Uppsala: Borgströms, 1977) and Lawrence Welch, "Christology and the Eucharist in the Thought of Cyril of Alexandria," (PhD diss., Marquette University 1992).

The Johannine text reads, “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit; and every branch that does bear fruit he purifies (καθαῖρει) so that it might bear more fruit. You [the disciples] are already pure on account of the word which I have spoken to you.” At the outset, it is important to note that Cyril’s primary exegetical and theological concern in this passage is Trinitarian. Indeed, the chief purpose of the *Commentary on John* is to make the Scriptural case that while the Father and Son are distinct subsistences, they share the same being (οὐσία). Here too Cyril emphasizes the Son’s consubstantiality (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father against Arian claims and heretical Christologies of other groups. He sees John 15:1-3 as a window into the Trinitarian inter-workings of salvation that proves that the Son shares the same substance with the Father and that the Spirit is inseparable from the Father and Son. Though Cyril admits that it may *appear* to human minds that each Person of the Trinity carries out a distinct activity, no one Person acts apart from the Others.<sup>114</sup> There is one inseparable operation; the work of salvation is one divine act of the Triune God:

For we call God the Savior. We do not bring our thanksgiving for the mercies we receive partly to the Father, partly to the Son himself or the Holy Spirit, but we call our salvation truly the successful accomplishment (κατόρθωμα) of the one Godhead.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Mari-Odile Boulnois, *Le paradoxe trinitaire chez Cyrille d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Institut d’Etudes Augustiniennes, 1994), 282.

<sup>115</sup> *In Jo.* 15:1 (Pusey, II, 536). Cf. *In Jo.* 1:3 (Pusey, I, 69) where Cyril asks, “How at all will God be thought to exist as one (εἷς) and be identified as God if each of those indicated [the divine Persons] withdraws into complete individuality (ιδιότητα), and are completely removed in nature and essential participation with the Other?” On this point, Boulnois accurately concludes that “puisque chaque personne a les mêmes capacités d’action que les deux autres, il n’est pas possible d’attribuer exclusivement à l’une des trois une opération que ne partageraient pas les deux autres...En réalité, pour Cyrille, aucune opération n’est la propriété exclusive d’une personne, car les trois personnes de la Trinité œuvrent en commun.” See Boulnois, 281-282 and Weigl, 22. For a recent, thoughtful discussion on the inseparable operations of the Trinity in Cyril, see Matthew Crawford, “Cyril of Alexandria’s Trinitarian Theology of Scripture,” (PhD diss., University of Durham 2012), 23-34. Crawford’s thesis is that Cyril’s doctrine of revelation and biblical exegesis is informed, in large part, by his “pro-Nicene” doctrine of the Trinity, an inheritance he received from a number of fourth century thinkers. According to Lewis Ayres, one of the hallmarks of “pro-Nicene” Trinitarian theology is the belief that “the persons work inseparably.” See his *Nicea and its Legacy* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 236.



As Cyril considers this gardening allegory, he notes the distinction Jesus makes in 15:1 between the Father and the Son. Jesus describes himself as the “vine” and the Father as the “vinedresser” or gardener. Though the larger context of John 15:1-3 includes Jesus’ teaching on the Holy Spirit,<sup>116</sup> Jesus does not name the Spirit in the vine and branches passage. Nevertheless, Cyril assumes that the Spirit is no less operative here than the Father and the Son. He stresses that the “branches” who receive life from the “vine” (Christ) do so on account of the Spirit. In this context, Cyril identifies the Spirit as the “life-giving sap” (ζωοποιὸν ἰκμάδα) that the vine shares with its branches.<sup>117</sup> We participate in the divine nature by virtue of our participation in the Spirit, and are united with Christ because the Spirit brings us into union with him. Through the Spirit we are begotten of God and “produce the fruits of life.”<sup>118</sup> In fact, Cyril maintains, when we conceive of God “dwelling” in us, it is on account of the Holy Spirit who takes up residence in us.<sup>119</sup> Thus, Cyril assumes the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in Christ’s analogy of the vine and the branches. The Spirit *is* the connection between the “branches” and the “vine.” Without taking the Spirit into account, Jesus’ teaching in this passage would make little sense.

Further, Cyril locates the Spirit within the interaction between the Father (gardener) and the Son (the vine). He explains that the Father’s husbandry involves providential care and oversight, as well as general nurturing. At the same time, the Father’s work is not done in isolation, but with the Son and the Spirit. Even if the Father is specified as the “gardener,” the Son and the Spirit share in the operation of “gardening.” Cyril insists that the Father does

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<sup>116</sup> Cf. Jn 14:15-31 and 16:5-16.

<sup>117</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 549).

<sup>118</sup> *In Jo.* 15:1 (Pusey, II, 534-535). See also *In Jo.* 16:7 (Pusey, II, 620) where Cyril claims that becoming sharers in the divine nature and being transformed into newness of life is only possible through participation in the Holy Spirit.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 535. See also *In Jo.* 1:13 (Pusey, I, 137) where Cyril declares that “it is the Spirit who dwells in us, and through him we believe we have the Father and the Son” even as John declares in his first epistle (I Jn. 4:13).

everything through the Son in the Spirit. So, for example, the Father's work of "nourishing us in godliness" is accomplished "through the Son in the Spirit."<sup>120</sup> The Son and Spirit participate in what the Father is doing because there is no division in the divine operation. The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son (having begotten the Son from his own nature), and both the Father and Son bring all things to completion by the Spirit as the one Trinity.<sup>121</sup>

In addition to this, Cyril points out two *seemingly* specific tasks the Father performs as the gardener of souls in light of the two different types of branches Jesus describes. In each, he claims that the distinct action of the Father is inseparable from the work of the Son and Spirit. The first type of branch Jesus describes in 15:2 is barren and fruitless. This corresponds to the person who professes faith in Christ but is devoid of pious works that proceed from the love of God. Cyril reminds his readers of Jesus' words to his disciples, "The one who loves me will keep my commandments." Obedience is a non-negotiable "fruit" for the one who wishes to participate in God. Next, Cyril points out James' dictum that "faith without works is dead."<sup>122</sup> For Cyril, the biblical precedent is clear: without the evidence of obedience and good works there is no living, saving faith. Such branches will face "the pruning knife of the gardener" (τοῦ γεωργοῦ δρεπάνη),<sup>123</sup> being cut off from the vine and cast into the fire. This is the judgment of God upon those whose actions do not match their confession.

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<sup>120</sup> *In Jo.* 15:1 (Pusey, II, 536-537). Cyril is careful to stress the Trinitarian implications of the Father's activity as gardener. It would be a mistake, Cyril claims, to suggest that the Father's ministries of nourishment and care are isolated from the Son and the Spirit. In fact, branches are nourished by the tiller of the soil *as well as* by the vine itself. The Father and the Son share in nourishing the soul. Further, the providential oversight given by the Father cannot be separated from the life-giving functions of the Son and the Spirit. Both works are required to sustain the branches. In other words, both ministries – nourishment and superintendence – should be viewed as one divine, saving activity. For, Cyril repeats on several occasions in this passage, "everything proceeds from the Father through the Son in the Spirit" (πάντα γὰρ παρὰ Πατρός δι' Υἱοῦ ἐν Πνεύματι). This axiom will be discussed in more detail below.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>122</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 547-548). Cf. Jn 14:23, Jas. 2:26.

<sup>123</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 548).

Cyril assumes that the barren branches once possessed vitality. For many have turned from idolatry and polytheism and expressed faith in Christ. But one becomes a “barren branch” who does not exercise faith through piety and love throughout their lives. It should be understood that by “dead branches” Cyril is not describing Christians who sin or err on occasion in spite of their best efforts, but rather those whose lives are devoid of godly works. These souls have lost the Spirit, the “life-giving sap” that enlivens and sustains the branches through sharing in the vine. Once a person has been abandoned by the Spirit, he is truly “barren” and unfit for participation with the Son, and therefore doomed to the condemnation of the flames. Damnation is the effect of God’s wrath; he cuts off and forever casts away those who are devoid of the Holy Spirit, no longer having life in the Son.<sup>124</sup>

By stark contrast, the second type of branch Jesus describes is the one that bears fruit. According to Cyril, these branches symbolize those who take firm hold of active virtue and faith, excelling in good deeds and seeking perfection as God’s citizens over the course of their lives. He observes that God – the caretaker of the soil – cultivates those who choose this way of life. Once again, the “pruning knife” (δρεπάνη) of the gardener comes into play, but this time as an instrument of life rather than judgment. Before, it was used to cut off branches that no longer have the life-giving presence of the Spirit. But for the fruitful branches, Cyril identifies the “pruning knife” *as the very activity* of the Spirit that the Father employs to increase their fruitfulness. Jesus describes this process as “cleansing” (καθάρει). Cyril interprets this cleansing, “pruning” work as the circumcision of the Spirit:

For God works with those who have chosen to live the most excellent and beautiful life, and, most of all, those who have elected to do good works and go through their whole lives as friends of God. He, as it were, uses the active energy of the Spirit as a pruning knife at times to circumcise in them the pleasures which always call us to fleshly lust and

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 549-551.

bodily passions, and at other times all the temptations which trouble the souls of men, staining the mind through various kinds of evil.<sup>125</sup>

According to Cyril, this “circumcising” action of the Father by the Spirit is the circumcision without hands; the circumcision of the heart that Paul describes in Romans 2:28-29 and Colossians 2:11.<sup>126</sup>

The way Cyril accentuates the function of circumcision in this passage leads to two important implications. First, the saints, symbolized by the fruitful branches, stand in need of ongoing purification after they have received initial purification and entered new life in Christ. Cyril believes that in this life the redeemed are still plagued by the cravings of the lower nature as well as temptations that pollute the mind. Though he is not always clear that the Christian life struggles with ever-present impurities,<sup>127</sup> he does stress the reality of constant dangers within the soul elsewhere in his *Commentary on John*.<sup>128</sup> Weigl concludes that the continual battle against sin is an important part of Cyril’s doctrine of salvation. He argues that Cyril concentrates his idea of recurrent mortification of sin on the passions, and that the process continues until death.<sup>129</sup> Cyril makes this clear in *De adoratione*, his earliest writing. In Book One, he uses the metaphor of a razor cutting hair to describe the ongoing process of putting the passions to death:

...but by both the activity and power of the Holy Spirit, it [the law of sin in the members of our flesh] is vigorously cut away should it somehow spring up within us, being pruned as with a razor (ξυρός), it [the law of sin] is weakened. “Walk by the Spirit,” he says, “and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh.” But just as the razor does not completely dig up our hair completely from its root, but cuts what immediately springs up, thus the Word of God does not utterly eradicate the movement (κίνησις) of implanted lust in us as if by the root (for perfect holiness is reserved for the age to come).

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 549-550.

<sup>126</sup> Cyril quotes both texts here in support of his understanding that the gardener’s “cleansing” of the branches is the circumcision of the Spirit.

<sup>127</sup> For instance, see *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 642-644), discussed above on pp. 192-195, where Cyril appears to suggest that all wickedness is cut off through spiritual circumcision as opposed to the “Sabbath rest,” where sin is merely idle in us.

<sup>128</sup> One example is *In Jo.* 6:33 (Pusey, I, 460-461) where Cyril warns that it is possible to be drug away again to the old life of pleasures and lusts through temptation.

<sup>129</sup> Weigl, *Die Heilslehre*, 260.

Rather, he puts it to death when it springs up and appears in us, and he tames the law of the flesh, when it is wild in our members. Therefore, the cutting away of hair alludes to the purification of the mind which the razor-like divine Word of God works in us.<sup>130</sup>

Weigl regards this analogy of the life of salvation as “eine fortwährende geistige Beschneidung.”<sup>131</sup> The ongoing spiritual circumcision is the work of Christ by the Spirit which begins at the moment of justification (which is the first circumcision) and continues throughout one’s lifetime.<sup>132</sup> The grace of Christ effects genuine transformation in the life of the Christian, but the Christian continually needs to be purified from lusts and temptation.

A second important implication of the way circumcision functions in Cyril’s comments on John 15:1-3 is that the process of ongoing circumcision is painful. Cyril argues that purging cannot take place without some degree of suffering. This is the way God has designed it, for he “instructs us through pain and tribulation.”<sup>133</sup> Cyril strings together a number of biblical passages that convey the temporary pain of God’s chastening that yields greater dividends.<sup>134</sup> He draws a sharp distinction between God’s wrath and God’s judgment. On one hand, God’s wrath results in utter condemnation and destruction, such as when he severs the barren branches from the vine. On the other hand, God’s judgment and discipline result in greater fruitfulness. The small amount of pain the saints must suffer from continual “pruning” is worth the joy of producing greater works and being more fruitful. Thus, Cyril calls on his readers to unite their zeal for godly works with their confession of faith. In this way, he says, “we will be together with Christ and find the secure and steadfast power of fellowship with him while escaping the danger of being cut off.”<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 777).

<sup>131</sup> Weigl, *Die Heilslehre*, 260.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 260-261.

<sup>133</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 550).

<sup>134</sup> Cyril refers to Ps. 93:12-13; Is. 4:4, 26:16; Jer. 10:24; and Heb. 12:7.

<sup>135</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 551).

Though Cyril has gone to great lengths to make his points about the branches, the vine, judgment, and continual purification, he wishes to widen his investigation of this passage in a “spiritual manner” (πνευματικῶς) because, he believes, Christ was likely hinting at another meaning.<sup>136</sup> The deeper meaning Cyril claims to see casts the two types of branches as symbols representing two groups of people. The barren branches that the Father has severed from the vine represent the Jews. They are cut off because they hold fast to the Mosaic law rather than to Christ and are, in Cyril’s words, “not capable of being fruitful.”<sup>137</sup> By contrast, the fruitful branches whom the Father purifies by the Holy Spirit include Jews who have believed on Christ and all those from the nations who have put away their idols to serve the one true God. Among the two groups comprising the fruitful branches – believing Jews and converted Gentiles – Cyril claims that though they are purified by the same Spirit, a distinction exists in the *manner* in which they are cleansed. The Jews are “circumcised” when they throw off the law as their guide for life and are brought into union with Christ. The Gentiles are purged from their “ancient sickness” by turning from idols and worshipping the Creator rather than creation. Cyril believes that the Gentile purification is more beneficial than the Jewish one because, in some sense, the Gentiles are saved from greater wickedness.<sup>138</sup> When the Spirit cuts away deceit and other “evil things” (τῶν φαύλων) from the Gentiles, it allows a flood of godliness to fill the void, and the beauty of holiness to be all the more conspicuous. So, Cyril maintains that the contrast

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<sup>136</sup> Cyril uses the term πνευματικός on a number of occasions in his writings to indicate a hidden, spiritual meaning of a text that the Spirit intended, though he does not do away with the ἱστορία. On the nature and use of πνευματικός in Cyril’s corpus, see Alexander Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Interpreter of the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1952), 190-191 and Farag, *New Testament Exegete*, 230-233.

<sup>137</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2, (Pusey, II 551).

<sup>138</sup> Cyril is following Paul and the other New Testament writers who claim that the law in itself is by no means evil, though much of it is now obsolete. Though the law was given by God and is therefore good, to continue following it instead of believing in Christ is sinful.

evidenced in the Gentiles between the old idolatry and the new virtue is greater than the contrast between the old law and new life with Christ in Jews who believe.<sup>139</sup>

Cyril then draws attention to the Trinitarian implications of circumcision. Having already made the case in his comments on John 15:1 that no one Person acts apart from the other two within the Triune Life, he returns to this basic principle at the end of his remarks on 15:2 and as he begins to examine 15:3, demonstrating that circumcision is one, inseparable, salvific operation of the Trinity. He alludes to a familiar axiom scattered throughout his writings: every divine operation in creation proceeds from the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit (παρὰ Πατρός δι' Υιοῦ ἐν Πνεύματι).<sup>140</sup> The Father is the principle of every divine act; the Son is the medium who does not work independently, but in the Spirit.<sup>141</sup> As for circumcision, Cyril identifies the purifying work of the Spirit and traces it through the Son, back to the Father:

It must be understood that it is through the Spirit that there occurs a circumcision which satisfies in us the need for complete cleansing, but the Son supplies the Spirit, “for from his fullness we have all received,”<sup>142</sup> as John says, and he is the one who says to us, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”<sup>143</sup> Thus, the Father effects purification in us through the Son by means of the circumcision that we perceive is through the Spirit.<sup>144</sup>

By stating the Trinitarian work of circumcision in this way, Cyril also makes a theologically strategic move by granting the Son the same work of husbandry as the Father. The Father prunes (that is, purifies) the branches on the vine to make them more fruitful through circumcision of the Spirit. The Son enables circumcision because he has supplied the Spirit, and in this sense shares in the operation with the Father. From here, Cyril reaches the conclusion that the Son is one in substance with the Father in the same way that gardeners share the same

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<sup>139</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 552-553).

<sup>140</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 1:3 (Pusey, I, 68); 15:1 (Pusey, II, 536).

<sup>141</sup> Weigl, 22-23. Cf. *In Jo.* 1:3 (Pusey, I, 70) where Cyril identifies the Father as the “source” (πηγή) of the ever-working Logos, naturally indwelling in the Son in the same way that fire is in the heat that proceeds from it.

<sup>142</sup> *Jn* 1:16.

<sup>143</sup> *Jn* 20:22.

<sup>144</sup> *In Jo.* 15:2 (Pusey, II, 553).

condition as each other insofar as they are men.<sup>145</sup> Circumcision as a salvific work entails the inseparable purifying operation of the divine Persons and thereby proves their consubstantiality. Though Cyril admits that Jesus does not indicate the precise manner of his consubstantial relation to the Father in his allegory of the vine and branches, his goal was to stress that the unity of operation between the Father and the Son necessitates their unity of substance.<sup>146</sup>

Cyril rounds out his discussion on the inseparable salvific Trinitarian operation when he comes to John 15:3 where Jesus says, “You are already pure on account of the word which I have spoken to you.” According to Cyril, this word (λόγος) is the “living word” described in Hebrews 4:12. The word, whom Cyril recognizes as the Son, is like a sword, dividing soul and spirit, joint and marrow, and discerning the thoughts of the heart.<sup>147</sup> Christ purifies the inmost being of man by the work of the Spirit, pruning in the manner of a gardener. The depiction of Christ as a sharp sword is comparable to his identification of the Spirit as a pruning knife in the Father’s hand. Though Christ attributes the work of purification to the Father, it is in the sense that everything springs from the Father through the instrumentality (δυνάμεως) of the Son. The Son is therefore not inferior or separate in being from the Father since they share in the same work. The Father brings about our purification through the Word who circumcises us by the Spirit.<sup>148</sup> This Trinitarian activity of circumcision continues in the believer until life’s end. Until

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid. See also *In Jo.* 1:3 (Pusey, I, 68-70) where Cyril describes the impossibility of separating the work of the Father from the Son. He gives the examples of the inseparability of a flower from its fragrance, the sun from its brightness, and fire from its heat. On this, see Farag’s discussion, *New Testament Exegete*, 92-93.

<sup>146</sup> Boulnois, 283-284. Boulnois details Cyril’s exegetical concern for this passage which accentuates his purpose for teaching the allegory of the vine and branches: “Son but n’était pas de donner un enseignement sur le plan théologique, c’est-à-dire sur son lien ontologique avec le Père, mais d’éclairer, par le biais d’une image, la position respective du Père et du Fils dans le domaine de l’économie, autrement dit, leur rôle dans les opérations divines touchant le monde créé.” She further notes the Cyrilline axiom that identity of nature necessitates identity of operation. See also *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 617) where Cyril affirms that the Son ever agrees with the mind and will of the Father and does what the Father does.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 638).

<sup>148</sup> *In Jo.* 15:3 (Pusey, II, 554-556). Cyril’s interpretation is distinct from Athanasius, who, in his *De Sententia Dionysii* 10.3, had pointed to John 15:1 as biblical evidence for the full humanity of Christ in the Incarnation rather than the inseparable operation among the Persons of the Godhead. According to Athanasius, Christ used the allegory



holiness is perfected in the eschaton, the Father continues to purify through the Son by the Spirit.

### Conclusion

Cyril's multi-layered treatment of circumcision in his *Commentary on John* is instructive for understanding his doctrine of salvation. We observe important motifs – namely, purification, freedom, and participation – that make up his comprehensive idea of redemption. Because his explanations of circumcision occur in a variety of contexts, they also give us glimpses into other important aspects of his thought. For instance, on several occasions he investigates the nature of the sacraments, particularly baptism and the Eucharist, and how they contribute to the process of sharing in the divine life. We also get a sense of Cyril's doctrine of sin. Though he never provides a full depiction of the Fall and its effects, his varied discussions of salvation force him to investigate and explain what we are saved from. In addition, we can piece together an outline of his doctrine of the Trinity. While we cannot form a complete picture, we see important Trinitarian principles, such as the inseparability of operation among the Persons, that he derives from Scripture and inherits from the pro-Nicene tradition. Finally, Cyril's interpretation of circumcision helps us understand his method of biblical exegesis. At the forefront of his hermeneutic is his typological reading of the Old Testament as figures indicating the reality of Christ in the New Testament. He makes clear that circumcision according to the law is a type of the spiritual circumcision of the heart. In sum, Cyril uses the biblical concept of circumcision in a substantive way to delineate key facets of his soteriology, as well as to address other theological matters that were important to him.

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of the vine and branches to demonstrate his consubstantiality with the human race in that a "vine" is of the same essence as its "branches." Jesus' teaching also emphasizes that the being of the Father is wholly other than that of humanity. See *De Sententia Dionysii*, trans. Uta Heil (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999), 162. A similar interpretation is found in Ps.-Basil's *Adv. Eunomium* IV.96. See *Pseudo-Basilii: Adversus Eunomium IV-V*, trans. Franz Risch (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 69. Cf. Boulnois's discussion on the history of exegesis of John 15:1 in *Le paradoxe trinitaire*, 293-285.

## CHAPTER SIX

## A LEGACY OF SALVATION THEOLOGY: CYRIL'S WRITING COMPARED

I have argued that Cyril's interpretation of circumcision illumines our understanding of his doctrine of salvation. Circumcision in the Old Testament was a type pointing to a reality that reveals the comprehensive work of God in saving us. But is the soteriology expressed in Cyril's "circumcision passages" representative of what we find in his entire corpus, especially his later writings? Only in his biblical commentaries and *Festal Letters* does Cyril explore circumcision and provide theological interpretation of it. Except for one pericope in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*, written around 430, he does not treat circumcision in any meaningful way after 428. From this point on, the majority of his works have a polemical, Christological focus due to the Nestorian controversy.<sup>1</sup> Fairbairn regards this as the time when Cyril's "attention has shifted from more general soteriological concerns to the specific question of technical christology [sic]: the relation between Jesus' deity and humanity."<sup>2</sup> This focal shift meant that he would discuss salvation through the specific lens of the ontological implications for Christ's person. The fact that his later Christological writings are polemical also indicates a change in the way he uses Scripture. While all of Cyril's writings are "biblical" in the sense that he is concerned with proper interpretation for belief and practice, his later writings incorporate Scripture for the purpose of proving his Christological vision against differing viewpoints,

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril was also concerned with the challenges of paganism until the end of his life, as his *Contra Iulianum* demonstrates.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: University Press, 2003), 105.

whereas his commentaries are investigations – verse by verse – of Scripture’s meaning without a specific polemical agenda.<sup>3</sup>

However, are the salvation themes embedded in his discussions on circumcision consistent with the salvation themes in his polemical writings against Nestorius and his allies? This chapter will explore this question by outlining the primary soteriological themes of one of Cyril’s latest writings, *On the Unity of Christ*, and comparing some of these themes with the findings of the preceding chapters of this dissertation.<sup>4</sup> I have chosen this work because it reveals Cyril’s theology at its most mature stage.<sup>5</sup> Cyril wrote *On the Unity of Christ* near the end of his life, when, as McGuckin observes, “he was able to look back on the course of the whole Nestorian controversy”<sup>6</sup> – the volley of letters, the polemical sermons, the pamphleteering, the Council of Ephesus, the Formula of Reunion – and articulate his most deeply held theological convictions about the person of Christ and his saving work. Before exploring the basic themes of salvation found in this work, it is necessary to recall the basic Christological argument between Cyril and Nestorius.

### The Core of the Christological Debate

*On the Unity of Christ* is written as a dialogue in which the two interlocutors discuss the teachings of Nestorius (and others in the Antiochene tradition) who deny Mary the title

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<sup>3</sup> The notable exception is Cyril’s *Commentary on John*, much of which (particularly his interpretation of John’s prologue) is directed against the Arians and other Christologies he deems heretical. Also, it must be admitted that Cyril’s commentaries often exhibit terse words directed at the Jews.

<sup>4</sup> The most recent critical edition of ΟΤΙ ΕΙΣ Ο ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ (*Quod Unus Sit Christus*) is found in *Cyrille d’Alexandrie. Deux dialogues Christologiques*, trans. G. M. Durand, SC 97 (Cerf: Paris, 1964), 302-515. An English translation with an introduction is found in *St. Cyril of Alexandria: On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John McGuckin (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995). The standard critical edition for most of Cyril’s literature regarding the Christological controversy is found in E. Schwartz, *ACO. Concilium Universale Ephesinum*, Bk. 1, vols. 1-5 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1927-1930). Hereafter, I will refer to this work as *Chr. Un.* While consulting McGuckin’s work, the translations of this work are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>5</sup> Though a precise date is difficult to determine, it was probably written between 435 and 437. See Durand, “Introduction,” in SC 97, 69-80.

<sup>6</sup> McGuckin, “Introduction,” 30.

*Theotokos*, or Mother of God, out of the conviction that the divine Word could not have been “begotten” of a woman. Cyril charges that this denial necessitates dangerous views of the Incarnation.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the dialogue, his repeated line of attack is against the so-called “two sons” theory that he detects in Nestorius’ Christology. This is the idea that the Word took to himself a separate human man who was born of the virgin, and bestowed the dignity of grace and sonship on him through conjunction (συνάφεια)<sup>8</sup> or intimate fellowship (οἰκειότης).<sup>9</sup> In the conjunction which “results” in the person of Christ, the Word retained its properties of divinity and the human person assumed retained full humanity. As a result, when the Son performed miracles, it was the manifestation of the divine Word. But when he was tired, hungry, or wept, that was the manifestation of the human Jesus. To Cyril, this was unacceptable because it meant that the Son had not truly “emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7) and *become* man (John 1:14). It meant that Christ was a composite being of two subjects rather than a single subject in one person.<sup>10</sup> Thus, he accused Nestorius of introducing a division into Christ’s person between the Word and the human man – the Son of God and Son of David – rather than understanding that the Son who is born of the Father *is* the Son of David “according to the flesh” (κατὰ σάρκα).<sup>11</sup> Cyril was

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<sup>7</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 306-310).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 380: “They say that the Son according to nature, the Word of God the Father, is one; but the man who is assumed (ληφθεὶς) by nature is the son of David, and is son of God through the assumption by the Word of God. And he has come to this dignity, and has the grace of sonship on account of the Word of God who dwells in him.” Cf. *Ibid.*, 400. Cyril uses the term συνάφεια nearly 20 times in *Chr. Un.*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Nestorius’ second letter to Cyril (Letter 5.8) in *St. Cyril of Alexandria: Letters 1-50*, trans. John McEnerney, FC 76 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 47. On Nestorius’ use, and Cyril’s subsequent rejection, of the term οἰκειότης to account for the union of the natures in Christ, see Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 106-112.

<sup>10</sup> Steven McKinnion, *Words, Imagery, and the Mystery of Christ* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 103, observes that Cyril interpreted the Christ that Nestorius was proposing as “the result of a process by which two things have been glued together.”

<sup>11</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 388). The phrase “according to the flesh” (κατὰ σάρκα) is one of Cyril’s most repeated expressions when describing the mystery of the economy, that is, how the Word is able to suffer and live out genuine human experiences while fully divine.

adamant that the Son came to live *as* man – the union of the divine and human in one entity (ἐν τῷ)<sup>12</sup> – not *in conjunction with* or *alongside* a man.<sup>13</sup>

Cyril warned that such a view of the Incarnation carried deleterious implications for salvation. If Nestorius was correct, then the humanity of Christ was not owned by the Word, but by the human assumed by the Word.<sup>14</sup> The reason that Christ can give us intimate fellowship with himself is that, having become man, he has first imparted the fullness of God to his own humanity.<sup>15</sup> The reason that we can be called “sons” of the Father is that the true Son made our humanity his own.<sup>16</sup> If Christ was only a graced man, and not the Word himself, then these ways of sharing in the divine life would not be possible for us.<sup>17</sup> The Word alone is Life and life-giving. According to Cyril, the only thing Nestorius’ Christ can do is point us to God; he cannot unite us with God.<sup>18</sup>

Further, Nestorius’ teaching implied that in Christ’s Passion, only the assumed human was involved. The Word had no part in the suffering and death on the cross because, Nestorius insisted, the divine nature is impassible.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, only the dignified man, not the very Word of God, died for us. If that is the case, Cyril asks, how are we saved?<sup>20</sup> If the human assumed

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 362. See also Ruth Siddals, “Oneness and Difference in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria,” *Studia Patristica* 18, pt. 1 (1985), 208.

<sup>13</sup> Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 108, maintains that even if Nestorius did not mean to imply that the Word assumed a separate human being, he did mean that the “personal subject of Christ” is the assumed man.

<sup>14</sup> McKinion, *Mystery of Christ*, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Cyril often uses the word ἵδιος to describe the relationship between the Logos and his humanity (see, for example, *Chr. Un.*, SC 97, 336). Cyril uses it to stress that the divine-human Christ was a single subject: the body of Christ was the Word’s very own, not that of another. Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 121, observes that Cyril follows Athanasius in using this term to refer to “a close relation of which the subject is a single entity.” Cyril also applies this word and concept to the relationships between the persons of the Trinity as well as that of the Word with the Eucharist. See *Ibid.*, 85-90, 121-124 for a fuller treatment of ἵδιος in Cyril’s writings.

<sup>16</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 336). See also Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 123.

<sup>17</sup> See *Letter* 17, Anathema 11 (FC 76, 92). Cf. Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 116-121.

<sup>18</sup> Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> See Nestorius’ second letter to Cyril (*Letter* 5.6) in FC 76, 45.

<sup>20</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 462). Cyril, responding to the Nestorian idea that the Word perfected the assumed man (son of David) through suffering, asserts, “Then we are no longer redeemed by God (for how could we have been?), but by the blood of another. Someone else, a substitute man or falsely-called son, has died for us.”

by the Word was merely deified through fellowship (οἰκειότης) with the Word, that person would be no different from any other believer who shares in the divine nature by grace. Could the death of such a one redeem us from sin, overthrow death, and free us from corruption?<sup>21</sup> No, the only way that Christ's death could save us is if the Word suffered in his own human body for our sakes.<sup>22</sup> For only God can save. In addition, the fact that he suffered though impassible has soteriological implications for us in that, as Warren Smith argues, "it illustrates the character of Christ's sanctification of human nature."<sup>23</sup> Christ's suffering impassibly produces the virtue of courage in us when we are suffering, and heals our own passions of fear and timidity, even when the call of God is most demanding.<sup>24</sup>

### Soteriological Themes

At this point, it is necessary to take a step back and observe the total soteriological landscape that Cyril sets up in *Chr. Un.* In what follows, I will explore his delineation of the divine plan of salvation and related themes he outlines and make some comparisons with the

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 380-383, 472-476.

<sup>22</sup> In Cyril's *Twelfth Anathema against Nestorius*, he proclaims that "If anyone does not acknowledge that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, and was crucified in the flesh, and experienced death in the flesh, and became the first-born from the dead, seeing that as God he is both Life and life-giving, let him be anathema," in *Cyril of Alexandria*, trans. Norman Russell (London: Routledge, 2000), 188. At the same time, Cyril too believed that the Word was incapable of suffering according to the divine nature, but declared that he "suffered impassibly" according to the flesh. In other words, Christ the Son of God "suffered" for us in the sense that the flesh that he assumed and made his very own was capable of suffering. However, the Word did not suffer according to his divinity. On this seeming paradox, see especially *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 466-476, 504-505); *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten* 35 (PG 75, 1409); *Second Letter to Nestorius* in *Cyril of Alexandria: Select Letters*, ed. and trans. Lionel Wickham (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 2-11; *De Recta Fide* 163 (PG 76, 1393). For studies that explore and critique the idea of impassible suffering of the Incarnate Word in Cyril's thought, see John J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997): 39-60 and "Kenosis or Impassibility: Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus on the Problem of Divine Pathos," *Studia Patristica* 32 (1997): 358-365; Joseph M. Hallman, "The Seed of Fire: Divine Suffering in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria and Nestorius of Constantinople," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5.3 (1997): 369-391; McGuckin, 202-203, 327-340.

<sup>23</sup> Warren Smith, "Suffering Impassibly: Christ's Passion in Cyril of Alexandria's Soteriology," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 463-483.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 478-479, 482.

salvific themes detailed in the circumcision passages of his other works. Then, I will determine to what degree Cyril's later soteriology is consistent with what is found in his early writings.

One of the themes Cyril stresses again and again in his writings is Christ's role in the "economy" (οἰκονομία) of salvation.<sup>25</sup> He uses the term "economy" in a number of ways.<sup>26</sup> In a broad sense, "economy" refers to the grand sweep of God's saving action in history through Christ.<sup>27</sup> However, in *Chr. Un.* in particular, Cyril is keen on accentuating the central event of the economy, the Incarnation of the Word. So closely does he associate the economy with the Incarnation that, as Boulnois points out, Cyril can use the term as a synonym for the Incarnation itself.<sup>28</sup> On most occasions, he closely associates the economy with the *kenosis* of the Word. The concept of Christ's self-emptying allows Cyril to make sense of the human, corporeal sensations that the Incarnate Word experienced. Being hungry, weary, or discouraged is not fitting for God, and it would be inappropriate to speak of these things in relation to the Word *qua* God. But because the Word emptied himself and took on human flesh, he made his own the natural shortcomings and sufferings suitable to fallen humanity. These human experiences are "economically" (οἰκονομικῶς) appropriated by Christ.<sup>29</sup> This is the heart of the mystery of the

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<sup>25</sup> According to Durand's index of Greek words in the SC edition, Cyril uses the term οἰκονομία / οἰκονομικῶς over thirty times in *Chr. Un.*

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Liébaert, *La doctrine christologique de saint Cyrille d'Alexandrie avant la querelle nestorienne*, (Lille: Facultés Catholiques, 1951), 215, highlights the diverse meanings of οἰκονομία in Cyril's usage. For instance, he can employ the word to designate a certain intention, the disposition of spiritual goods given by God (economy of salvation), or the Incarnation itself. Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 14, outlines the four stages of the divine economy that come to the fore in Cyril's thought: 1) the human condition after the Fall, 2) the Incarnation of the Word, 3) Christ's redemption through the passion and descent to hell, and 4) Christ's resurrection and ascension to the Father, followed by the gift of the Spirit.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *FL* 5.7, SC 372 (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 326. *FL* 1.6 (SC 372, 184) may also connote the general definition.

<sup>28</sup> Marie-Odile Boulnois, *Le paradoxe trinitaire chez Cyrille d'Alexandrie* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1994), 501-502. Cf. Liébaert, 215-216. For a good example of the use of "economy" as a synonym for the Incarnation, see *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 474).

<sup>29</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 320). See also *Ibid.*, 434, where Cyril is asked how to answer critics who point to passages such as Heb. 5:7-9, as well as Jesus' cry of dereliction in the Gospels, which depict him as weak, helpless, and needing to "learn obedience" through suffering. How are these shortcomings fitting for God the Word? Cyril responds, "I know very well that these things are not fitting for the Word who shines forth (φύνντι) from God the Father if one thrusts away the manner of the economy, and if we do not accept that 'he became flesh,' according to

saving economy for Cyril. The Word lived *as* man while never ceasing to be anything less than God. So great is the mystery of the Incarnation to Cyril that, at times, he can only explain it in what, by his time, had become traditional paradoxes:

For the mystery of Christ risks being disbelieved on account of the extraordinary degree of the marvel. God was in man; the one who was above all creation was in our condition; the invisible one was visible according to the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα); the one from heaven and the heights was in the image of what is earthly; the untouchable one became touchable; the one who is free in his own nature took on the form of a slave; the one who blesses all creation was accursed; the one who is all righteousness was in the company of the wicked; he who is life came in the likeness of death.<sup>30</sup>

Cyril emphasizes the centrality of the self-emptying Incarnation within the grand sweep of salvation because he recognizes, in his fight against Nestorius, that what is at stake is not mere semantics or philosophical precision, but salvation itself. The Word assumed fallen humanity in order to redeem it. On several occasions throughout *Chr. Un.*, Cyril describes the kenotic nature of the economy in terms of the Word's "lowliness in the human condition"<sup>31</sup> and his willing submission to "the limitations of humanity,"<sup>32</sup> stressing that it was all necessary for our salvation. He states in no uncertain terms that the Word humbled himself and made his own everything that we are in order to remedy our condition:

Therefore, it was necessary that the one who is, he who exists, is born of the flesh, transferring (μεταθείς) all that is ours into himself so that what is born of the flesh, that is, we who are corruptible and perishing, might abide in him. In short, he made everything that was ours his own in order that we might have what is his.<sup>33</sup>

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the Scriptures." Cyril makes a similar point in *Ibid.*, 456-458, where he insists that human qualities belong to the Word through "economic appropriation" (οἰκεῖωσιν οἰκονομικήν). See also Sebastian Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes beim frühen Cyrill von Alexandria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 149.

<sup>30</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 332).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 324 (τὸ ἐν ἀνθρωπότητι ταπεινόν). Cf. *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 396 (τοῖς τῆς ἀνθρωπότητος μέτροις). Cf. *Ibid.*, 456.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-328. Cf. *Ibid.*, 468.



Though Cyril does not use the term here, he is describing the early Christian doctrine of deification.<sup>34</sup> Other scholars have investigated this area of Cyril's thought, and I will not attempt to offer a thorough delineation here.<sup>35</sup> However, the soteriological implications embedded in much of Cyril's teaching on the Incarnation point to a new kind of humanity that Christ creates in himself, and in which he invites us to participate. Christ changed human being and allows us to appropriate this new way of being. We see this same theological principle at work in his earlier writings, even if not directly stated in his circumcision passages. In his *Commentary on John* 10:15, Cyril describes our participation in the divine nature on account of the Word who made our condition his own. Through assuming human nature, he brings us into close relationship with himself and the Father.<sup>36</sup> He describes this phenomenon succinctly in *FL* 6.12 where he explains why Christ no longer needs human mediators since he became a human being to bring about our salvation:

He was born of the holy Virgin, and exhibiting many signs and wonders together with his teachings and words, he changed (μετετίθει) everything for the better, refashioning corrupt human nature into newness of life, as though loosening it from bonds, presenting it free to the Father. And he called to himself those crushed by sin with the kindest teaching, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavily laden, and I will give you rest."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, Cyril does not often use the later standardized term θεοποίησις to denote deification. He prefers to use Scriptural passages, especially 2 Peter 1:4, in addition to various terms connoting participation. On Cyril's terminology see Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: University Press, 2004) 192-193 (hereafter, *Deification*), and Daniel Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), 10-11. Keating notes that the majority of cases where Cyril uses traditional deification language occur in his pre-Nestorian writings. On Cyril's doctrine of deification in his later writings, Russell observes that "Cyril does not lend himself to easy excerptation. His remarks on deification, at least in his later more discursive works, are always embedded within broader theological structures." See Russell, *Deification*, 193.

<sup>35</sup> For example, see Russell, *Deification*, 191-205; Keating, *The Appropriation of Divine Life* and "Divinization in Cyril: The Appropriation of Divine Life," in *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria*, ed. Thomas Weinandy and Daniel Keating (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 149-185; John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and The Christological Controversy* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 175-226.

<sup>36</sup> *In Jo.* 10:15, ed. P.E. Pusey, *Sancti patris nostril Cyrilli Archiepiscopi Alexandrini in d. Joannis Evangelium*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1872), 2:232-234.

<sup>37</sup> *Lettres Festales*, trans. Louis Arragon, Marie-Odile Bounlois, Pierre Évieux, Marguerite Forrat, and Bernard Meunier, SC 372 (Paris: Cerf, 1991), 392.

The deification motif is evident throughout *Chr. Un.* when Cyril describes the spiritual implications of Christ taking on humanity. The Incarnation brings humanity out of the condition of death and corruptibility into life and incorruptibility. While human nature was in the grip of sin, Christ came to make it superior to sin and all of its effects. He accomplished this by achieving incorruption in his own body first. With his own body no longer subject to mortality, he put a stop to the transmission of death and corruption, the result of Adam's transgression, onto us.<sup>38</sup> This is possible because Christ became the new representative, the new Adam, who transfers grace to those he represents. Though God's wrath passed to the entirety of human nature through Adam, who acted as our original "root" (ρίζης),<sup>39</sup> grace came to us through Christ, our "second root" (ρίζης δευτέρας), who established a new beginning.<sup>40</sup> We see this general principle explored by Cyril in his account of the circumcision of Zipporah's son in his *De adoratione*. Here, he describes Adam as the root of the human race through whom death and corruption passed on to everyone on account of his disobedience. However, the circumcision performed by Zipporah with the stone reveals in types that Christ undid the effects of Adam's sin on account of his divinity and death for our sakes. Her act symbolized our deliverance from death. Cyril explains, "For just as we all died in Adam, so also grace was brought to everyone through Christ."<sup>41</sup>

In various places throughout his *Chr. Un.*, Cyril attempts to explain the nature of the renewal that Christ accomplishes in human being through his Incarnation. First, he claims that Christ restores our condition to what it was "in the beginning."<sup>42</sup> This suggests the prelapsarian

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<sup>38</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 316-322).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 444.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 338. Cyril, continuing with the second Adam motif, also describes Christ as "our new beginning" who transfers his saving effects to the human race, in *Ibid.*, 446.

<sup>41</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 260).

<sup>42</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 316).

state that Adam and Eve enjoyed. Here there was no death and corruption since they had been given the Spirit who remained upon them until they disobeyed God. Cyril also describes our condition in Christ as a “better situation,” where we are no longer bound by the ramifications of Adam’s trespass, but victorious over sin, death, and corruption through Christ.<sup>43</sup> The condition of life and immortality is possible because Christ assumed everything in human nature to “honor” (κατασεμνύνη) it in himself by making it participate in his own holy and divine honors (ιερωῶν καὶ θείων ἀξιοματίων).<sup>44</sup> Because the human nature that the Word assumes shares in his own divine nature, all that binds our human nature and keeps it from life and holiness loses its power. The ancient curse comes to an end; sin is destroyed; our punishment is taken away; our abandonment is undone.<sup>45</sup> In short, Cyril proclaims, Christ condescended to our lowly condition in order to bring us up to his own divine honors.<sup>46</sup> Because Christ emptied himself and assumed human nature, we appropriate life, incorruptibility, and a new condition on account of divine fellowship.

Cyril’s emphasis on the saving implications of the Word assuming human nature is strong in *Chr. Un.* as well as his early writings. Against Nestorius, he had to show that if the Word took to himself a separately existing man, there could be no salvation. It was necessary that the Word become man himself in order to transform human nature first in himself, then, as the second Adam, on behalf of the entire human race. As I argued in chapter one, much of the scholarly emphasis on Cyril’s doctrine of deification results from considering his later

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 432. See also 494 where Cyril proclaims that Christ, who is life itself, intended to implant (ἐμφυτεύσῃ) his own holy life into human nature in the Incarnation.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 322-328, 444. Schurig, *Die Theologie des Kreuzes*, 145, claims that Christ “erlebte an sich den Fluchtod des Sünders, er wurde unter die Gesetzlosen gerechnet, er kam unter das Gesetz; der, welcher von keiner Sünde wußte, wurde für uns zur Sünde gemacht – all diese sind Bedingungen, wie sie dem Stand des gefallen Menschen eignen. Gottes Sohn hat dies οἰκονομικῶς als Inkarnierter, als Erniedrigter an sich erlebt und auf diese Weise die Macht der Sünde und des Todes gebrochen und die Gemeinschaft mit Gott wiederhergestellt.”

<sup>46</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 334).

Christological works, such as *Chr. Un.*, without giving careful consideration to the other important writings in his corpus. At the same time, Cyril does *not* limit his soteriology to the fact of the divine and human natures coming into union in the Incarnation. Throughout *Chr. Un.*, Cyril weaves together the familiar narrative of salvation that one finds throughout his early commentaries and *Festal Letters*, and that he captures in his passages on circumcision. Not only Christ's initial self-emptying and assumption of human nature, but also his death, descent, and resurrection play important roles in bringing us into a saving relationship with him.

As I stated earlier in this chapter, the death of Christ is a significant theological underpinning in Cyril's attack against Nestorius. He insists that it is the Word-as-man, not a man assumed by the Word, that dies for our sakes. Because the Word took on flesh capable of suffering, Cyril sees Christ's death as consonant with his self-emptying. When he took on the form of a slave,<sup>47</sup> he dedicated his own flesh as a "ransom (ἀντίλυτρον) for the life of all."<sup>48</sup> Christ became the perfect sacrifice in his death, and through the cross he has effected salvation by "reforming (ἀναμορφῶν) the nature of man into what it was in the beginning."<sup>49</sup> Though the divine nature cannot suffer, the Word suffered in his own body and shed his own blood, having taken on passible human nature, in order to overthrow the dominion of suffering and death.<sup>50</sup> Further, Cyril makes clear that Christ's death both purifies us from sin and reconciles us to God.<sup>51</sup> The cross, therefore, is not of secondary importance in Cyril's understanding of salvation, but lies at the very core of man's deliverance from sin and death.

The effects of Christ's death that Cyril underscores in *Chr. Un.* are consistent with those expressed in his circumcision passages. Cyril often associates everything involved in the

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<sup>47</sup> Phil. 2:7.

<sup>48</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 466).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 500.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Cyril here quotes Heb. 13:12 and Col. 1:21-22 as biblical proof-texts.

circumcision process as symbolic of Christ's saving passion. For instance, when he discusses the meaning of the Moses and Zipporah narrative in his *Glaphyra*, he makes clear that the circumcision performed was a type of the blood of Christ that abolished death.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, in his ninth *Festal Letter*, Cyril again describes circumcision as a symbol of Christ's death on the cross which served as a "ransom" (ἀντίλυτρον) that saves us from our own passions and the tyranny of the devil.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in his *Commentary on John 7:24*, Cyril explains that the stone knives whereby Joshua circumcised the Israelites signify that the benefits of salvation – our purification, union with God, freedom from sin – have their basis in the death of Christ.<sup>54</sup> Christ's suffering and death is responsible for our transformation. In short, when we compare Cyril's treatment of the death of Christ in the circumcision passages with his treatment in *Chr. Un.*, there is a remarkable degree of consistency, even if Cyril's focus shifts between his earlier and later writings.

In Cyril's mind, however, the death of Christ must not be understood in isolation from the descent to hell and subsequent resurrection. Unlike many of his *Festal Letters* where Cyril develops the notion of Christ despoiling hell, *Chr. Un.* has little to say about this. Here, Cyril is more interested in detailing the effects of the resurrection in relation to Christ's death. However, he still views the three events – the death, descent, and resurrection – as one interconnected accomplishment:

And the Son himself, when he was about to go up to the saving passion (το σωτήριον πάθος), also said, "Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in him, and God will glorify him in himself, and he will glorify him immediately." For he came back to life, having despoiled Hades, and this not after a long while, but immediately, as it were, on the heels of the suffering.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484). Cf. Ex. 4:24-26.

<sup>53</sup> See *FL* 9.6 (SC 392, 170-172).

<sup>54</sup> *In Jo.* 7:24 (Pusey, I, 641).

<sup>55</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 476).

Here the resurrection in particular is crucial for Cyril because it shows that even though the Word took on a body capable of suffering, the resurrection proves that he is nonetheless superior to death and corruption. The self-emptying and appropriation of human nature took nothing away from Christ's divinity. He moved from one condition to another without ceasing to be God.<sup>56</sup> As God he is both "life and the one who gives life" (ζωή και ζωοποιός). He proves his indestructible life by raising himself up from the dead.<sup>57</sup> His body could not experience decay, as Peter proclaimed in Acts 2:24, because he is life itself. Likewise, in some of his circumcision texts, Cyril identifies the stone or flint that serves as the instrument of circumcision with the unbreakable, indestructible power of Christ (or the Spirit). The hard, durable stone signifies that death has come to naught, and that we are given a share in the imperishable divine life.<sup>58</sup> The conquest of life in Christ's body has profound implications for the human race. He defeated death on our behalf as the second Adam. Thus, as having conquered death through his own death on the cross and resurrection, the benefit of life has transferred to the human race.<sup>59</sup> In this way, Christ transformed human nature in himself, bringing it to a newness of life in holiness and incorruption.

At the same time, Cyril stresses the role of the Holy Spirit in granting new life to believers. Our appropriation of divine life doesn't happen simply because Christ took on flesh and rose from the dead. Cyril recognizes that some form of agency is required for believers to receive what Christ made possible. In *Chr. Un.*, consistent with his earlier writings, Cyril points to the necessity of receiving the Holy Spirit in order for us to partake of salvation. He identifies the reception of the Spirit in two ways. First, he associates the presence of the Spirit with a

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<sup>56</sup> Fairbairn, 117.

<sup>57</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 476).

<sup>58</sup> See *De ador.* (PG 68, 260); *Glaph. in Ex.* 2, ζ (PG 69, 484); *Com. Hab.* 3:6 (Pusey, II, 135-136).

<sup>59</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 496).

familial relationship to God. Cyril maintains that Christ was the first human to be born of the Holy Spirit (according to the economy) in order to make a way for grace to come to us. The grace Cyril is referring to here is the grace of sonship, or adoption. Through Christ's appropriation of human nature, he "sends to us the grace of sonship (υιοθεσίας) even to us that we might be born of the Spirit since this had been first achieved for human nature in him."<sup>60</sup> On account of the regeneration by the Spirit and "spiritual conformity" (συμμορφίαν πνευματικήν) to the one who is Son of God by nature, we can become sons of God by grace. Thus, we become "children of God by the Spirit" since the plan of our adoption by grace came from (ἐκ) God through (διὰ) the Spirit and was carried out by the Incarnate Son.<sup>61</sup>

The second way Cyril mentions the reception of the Spirit in *Chr. Un.* is by emphasizing Christ's role as Sanctifier insofar as he gives the Spirit to humanity. Cyril points to John 20:22 as a proof-text demonstrating Christ's ministry of re-bestowing the Spirit onto humanity when, after he rose from the dead, he appeared to his disciples, breathed on them, and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." On several occasions in his early writings, Cyril uses this text to relate the gift of the Spirit to the circumcision of the Spirit. The circumcision commanded in the law was a type of circumcision in the Spirit. The new circumcision came about after Christ overcame death through his own death and resurrection, and distributed the Spirit to the human race once again. In this way, Christ is the one who circumcises us with the Spirit, sanctifying us and enabling our participation in the Spirit.<sup>62</sup> Of course, the polemical focus of *Chr. Un.* is the unity of Christ's person. This prevents Cyril from detailing the Christo-pneumatological relationship in great detail; however, he does affirm that Christ received the Holy Spirit at his own baptism so that he, in turn, might baptize in the Spirit. Christ proved his full divinity by breathing on the disciples

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 334-336.

<sup>62</sup> *De ador.* (PG 68, 465). Cf. Ibid., 500, 1008-1009 and *Glaph. in Gen.* 3, 9 (PG 69, 132-133).

and giving them the Holy Spirit, showing all that he is the one who sanctifies. Cyril asserts that Christ “was sanctified in that he was a man, but sanctifies as he is understood as God,” and he accomplishes his sanctifying work by giving us the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

Cyril also insists in *Chr. Un.* on the role of the Eucharist as Christ’s way of continually conveying grace and participation in divine life to the believer. Against the Nestorian claim that the one who died and rose again was the man assumed by the Word, Cyril asks how our bodies can be vivified unless we have participation in the “holy flesh and blood” of the Word himself.<sup>64</sup> The body and blood of a “graced man” cannot impart life and salvation to us. Rather, the reason that the Eucharistic bread and wine is life-giving is that it becomes the body and blood which the Word took to himself as his very own. Only the one who is life by nature is able to transmit vitality and incorruption to our mortal bodies.<sup>65</sup> Cyril’s Eucharistic theology is expressed, albeit indirectly, in a number of his circumcision passages. He posits a relationship between spiritual circumcision and the Eucharist in the sense that spiritual circumcision is a pre-requisite for partaking in the body and blood of Christ.<sup>66</sup> Circumcision is a symbol of purification, among other things, and one must undergo it before receiving the holy meal.

A final soteriological emphasis we see in *Chr. Un.* is that through the Incarnation, death, and resurrection, Christ was fulfilling the will of the Father which is the salvation of the world. In particular, Cyril explains that the divine will mandated that the Word, who is impassible by nature, should suffer in his own human body in order to bring about redemption (λύτρωσις) and

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<sup>63</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 428-430).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 506-508. On the question of the relationship between Cyril’s Christology and Eucharistic doctrine, see Henry Chadwick, “Eucharist and Christology in the Nestorian Controversy,” in *Journal of Theological Studies* no. 2 (1951): 145-164 and Ellen Concannon, “The Eucharist as Source of St. Cyril of Alexandria’s Christology,” in *Pro Ecclesia* 18, no. 3 (2009): 318-336.

<sup>66</sup> *In Jo.* 6:35 (Pusey, I, 472), 7:24 (Pusey, I, 640). Cf. *FL* 9.6, *Cyrille d’Alexandrie: Lettres Festales VII-XI*, trans. Louis Arragon, Pierre Éviéux, and Robert Monier, SC 392 (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 170-174.



recapitulation (ἀνακεφαλαίωσις).<sup>67</sup> Both terms – redemption and recapitulation – bear important nuances that contribute to our understanding of Cyril’s doctrine of salvation. Cyril locates redemption as having taken place “through the honorable cross.”<sup>68</sup> Though he does not provide further explanation here, the idea of redemption (or ransom) is important to Cyril, and he often correlates it with Christ’s death, just as he does in many of the circumcision passages in his early works.<sup>69</sup> Blanchette’s study on Cyril’s view of redemption demonstrates that, for Cyril, Christ is the Redeemer in the sense that he came to heal the human condition and “fulfill the justice of the law.” Christ has redeemed us from the curse and the penalty of death incurred by Adam through his Incarnation and death on the cross.<sup>70</sup> Cyril sees no tension, as some moderns do,<sup>71</sup> between redemption and the themes of deification and the restoration of the divine life. Rather, he understands them as “two essential aspects of the single process of *recapitulation* in Christ.”<sup>72</sup>

If, as Blanchette correctly argues, deification and redemption are two sides of the same coin, then “recapitulation” denotes what they accomplish: the overarching divine plan of restoring everything in Christ. Cyril does not use the term “recapitulation” often, but when he does, he means to emphasize the totality of Christ’s saving work. He came to renew and restore everything as it was before the Fall through taking on flesh and perfectly carrying out all of his earthly ministrations as one of us. For example, in his *Commentary on John*, Cyril declares that through the cross we are returned to our original state and recover the divine blessings: “Christ,

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<sup>67</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 484).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *FL* 9.6 (SC 392, 172); *Comm. Zech.* 4:7 (Pusey, II, 337); *In Jo.* 14:28 (Pusey, II, 515).

<sup>70</sup> Oliva Blanchette, S.J., “Saint Cyril of Alexandria’s Idea of the Redemption,” *Sciences ecclesiastiques* 16 (1964): 463. Cyril touches on these themes elsewhere. For example, see *Chr. Un.* 322-328.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul Onica (1938; repr., Anaheim: A & C Press, 2002), 225; Hubert du Manoir, *Dogme et spiritualité chez saint Cyrille d’Alexandrie*, (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), 169.

<sup>72</sup> Blanchette, 456 (italics added). See Blanchette’s discussion on the complementarity of salvation themes in Cyril’s theology, 455-457.

as it were, recapitulating (ἀνακεφαλαιουμένου) in himself the very origin of our disease for our sakes.”<sup>73</sup> In *Chr. Un.*, Cyril reiterates the role of Christ as the one who renews all things – “through him and in him” was everything recapitulated by the will of the Father.<sup>74</sup> Near the end of the treatise, Cyril defends the “great mystery of godliness” against those who deny that the Eucharistic elements are the body and blood of the Word. Here Cyril provides a brief but informative articulation of his doctrine of salvation:

For it seems reasonable that they [Nestorius and his followers] are destroying the self-emptying (κένωσις) of God the Word, who being in the form of a slave and equal with the Father, chose to take on the form of a slave for our sakes, and to appear in likeness to us, to share in flesh and blood, and to grace everything under heaven through the economy of the Incarnation. By this means the Father has carried out salvation, recapitulating (ἀνακεφαλαιουμένου) all things in him, both “things in the heavens and things on the earth,” as it is written.<sup>75</sup>

As a real human being who is ever God, Christ graced all of nature, not least human nature, with his divine presence. Through sharing in our condition, dying for us, and rising again to newness of life all things have been restored through him.

This brief summary of Cyril’s doctrine of salvation conveyed through *On the Unity of Christ* allows us to compare his mature soteriological principles expressed in controversy with the soteriological principles of his biblical commentaries and *Festal Letters* written before his debate with Nestorius. This comparison shows us that Cyril’s basic soteriological program is consistent between his early writings, as evidenced in his circumcision passages, and those

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<sup>73</sup> *In Jo.* 19:19 (Pusey, III, 85). See also *In Jo.* 18:1-2 (Pusey, III, 15) where Cyril explores the implications of Gethsemane, the place where Jesus prayed before his arrest. “But the place was a garden which fulfills the type (σχῆμα) of the ancient paradise; for it became the place of recapitulation (ἀνακεφαλαιώσις) of all places and, so to speak, the return to the ancient condition. For the beginning of our gloomy estate occurred in paradise just as Christ received the beginnings of his suffering in the garden. This brought about a better condition for all of us from what had occurred in the past.” Cf. *Glaph. in Gen.* 1, α (PG 69, 16) and *In Jo.* 20:18 (Pusey, III, 124) for other examples of “recapitulation” in Cyril’s early theology.

<sup>74</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 484). In this passage, Cyril points, as does Hebrews 10:5-7, to Psalm 40:6-8 (LXX) as biblical evidence that the Father planned to prepare a body for the Son in order that he might provide redemption through his death and recapitulate all things in himself.

<sup>75</sup> *Chr. Un.* (SC 97, 508-510), citing Eph. 1:10.

composed later in his career. While the Nestorian controversy narrowed Cyril's theological focus and forced him to express himself in a more technical sense, Fairbairn is correct when he claims that "the christological [sic] notes that Cyril sounds so emphatically during the controversy are in complete harmony with the soteriological symphony he has conducted previously," in spite of some changes in terminology.<sup>76</sup>

More important for the present study, the soteriological convictions that come through in the circumcision passages in Cyril's early works are largely the same as those found in *Chr. Un.* For example, I outlined the narrative structure of Cyril's theology in Chapter One, and I have demonstrated the ubiquity of that narrative throughout this study. When one gives Cyril a careful reading, this narrative becomes apparent. Further, I confirmed in previous chapters that all of the crucial "moments" of Christ's saving Incarnation, particularly, Christ's assumption of human nature, death, descent, resurrection, and ascent, are captured in the circumcision passages. In other words, even if we were to look only to Cyril's circumcision passages and ignore the remainder of his corpus, we could still piece together his basic narrative of salvation. As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, this same salvation narrative is represented throughout *Chr. Un.* The characteristics shared between the early circumcision passages and *Chr. Un.* help us see that Cyril's salvific interpretations of circumcision represent the soteriology

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<sup>76</sup> Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 105. See also 129-130 where Fairbairn claims that "when one considers the soteriological concerns that lie behind his [Cyril's] christology [sic], it becomes apparent that the guiding principles of his thought remained constant throughout his career." Scholars such as McGuckin, 207-210, Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, trans. J. Bowden, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 474-476, and Liébaert, 145, argue that Cyril's thought developed as a result of the Nestorian controversy. Scholars who share Fairbairn's (and my) assessment of Cyril's basic consistency include Weigl, 202, H. Chadwick, 150, and Pius Angstenberger, *Der reiche und der arme Christus: Die Rezeptionsgeschichte von 2 Kor 8,9 zwischen dem 2. Und 6. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: Borengässer, 1997), 189. See also Ben Blackwell, *Christosis* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 72, who correctly notes that most of the discontinuity in Cyril's writings is terminological, not substantial. As to Cyril's terminology, the Nestorian controversy did force Cyril to re-examine, and sometimes largely abandon, theological terms pertaining to Christ that he had previously been comfortable using. For example, Fairbairn's study shows that Cyril all but stopped using the word οἰκειότης to refer to the union of Christ's person, instead preferring ἴδιος. The reason being that οἰκειότης suggests a close relationship or communion whereas ἴδιος implies ownership or a property belonging to someone. Given the contours of the debate, it is clear why Cyril refined his strategic terms.

we find throughout his corpus, and reveals a general consistency in his basic understanding of salvation throughout his career.

Finally, it is significant that many of the salvation themes that Cyril conveys in his early circumcision passages are mirrored in *Chr. Un.* As I have shown in the preceding chapters, when Cyril explores the spiritual meaning of circumcision, some of the major motifs he associates with it include purification, freedom from death and corruption, reconciliation with God, regeneration, transformation into a new condition, and participation in the divine nature through the gift of the Spirit and the sacraments. When we explore *Chr. Un.*, we discover most of these same salvation themes, in one form or another. To be sure, Cyril has more to say in *Chr. Un.* regarding the soteriological implications of the ontological makeup of Christ than he does in his earlier discussions of circumcision. Restoration and renewal is taking place when the Word assumes human nature and becomes man; Christ begins to transform human nature in his own person. But it is natural that Cyril would not press this idea as firmly in his circumcision passages, since the biblical foci, genre, and occasions for writing differ from polemical interests. Nevertheless, the similarities in Cyril's soteriological language and principles between the circumcision passages written during the first half of his episcopacy and his most mature polemical work on Christology cannot be denied. This, too, demonstrates that circumcision is an important *theologoumenon* for Cyril in that it conveys the fundamental structure of his doctrine of salvation, one that remained consistent throughout his life. It thus serves as a helpful window into his comprehensive doctrine of salvation.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> The fact that Cyril drops circumcision as a *theologoumenon* in his later writings is a question worth considering and awaits further investigation. While it is not the purpose of the present study to give a definitive answer, I offer two possibilities. First, Judaism forms the backdrop (at least to some degree) in Cyril's earlier writings. Jewish exegesis and practice, as Wilken and others have shown, stimulated and informed much of Cyril's own exegesis and theology. Thus, circumcision may have been a more effective polemical tool against Judaism than Nestorius. It is hard to imagine Nestorius disagreeing with Cyril over an essentially New Testament view of circumcision of the Spirit. Against a fellow Christian (albeit one with suspect Christology), the interpretation of true circumcision would

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not seem to be an issue of much importance or debate. Second, in Cyril's later work where Christology is the primary focus, he may show less emphasis on pneumatology. Cyril's interpretation of circumcision in his early writings is dependent upon a robust doctrine and role of the Holy Spirit. If pneumatology is not a grave concern for him during the Nestorian debate, the idea of circumcision of the Spirit may not have been an appropriate subject to investigate.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, spiritual circumcision is an important motif among the early writings in Cyril's literary corpus. The concept functions within his exegetical and theological agenda in two major ways. First, circumcision serves to illustrate the nature of salvation. The pertinent passages I have highlighted throughout this study demonstrate the diverse ways Cyril uses the ancient Jewish rite as a helpful metaphor to convey the nature, properties, and appropriation of salvation. To spiritual circumcision he attaches a plethora of salvific effects, all of which have their roots in Scripture. These effects include purification, justification by faith, regeneration, participation in the Holy Spirit, the restoration of the image of God, the right of access to the Eucharistic meal, freedom from the tyranny of sin and the enslavement of the devil, deliverance from lustful passions, and others. In Cyril's theological schema, these saving realities, when taken together, constitute the bulk of his doctrine of redemption, as his early and later writings show. Circumcision functions as a unifying concept that brings together, under one heading, the many dimensions of Cyril's soteriology. In no other writer do we find circumcision to play such an important soteriological role. Thus, careful attention to his interpretation of circumcision gives us a comprehensive grasp of his salvation theology.

In addition, the dynamics of salvation according to Cyril are best understood in relation to the divine economy, specifically the Christ narrative as it unfolds in Scripture. The Old Testament pointed ahead to Christ in types and shadows, while the New Testament proclaims his advent and work as he fulfills all things. Overall, the narrative reveals what God has done through the Incarnation, death, descent, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the subsequent gift of the Holy Spirit. Each part, or "moment," of Christ's ministry has saving

significance. In the preceding chapters, I have shown that Cyril's use of circumcision as a way to describe the mystery of salvation has its basis in the underlying narrative structure of his soteriology. In various ways, he is able to connect the saving significance of circumcision with nearly every part of the Christ narrative, particularly the death and resurrection of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In connection with the narrative of Christ, Cyril's view of spiritual circumcision demonstrates the importance of the Holy Spirit in his soteriology. Cyril teaches that no one of the three Persons acts in isolation from the Others, but when discussing circumcision, he highlights the role of the Spirit in salvation. Though other early Christian writers associate spiritual circumcision with the gift of the Spirit, Cyril especially emphasizes that circumcision of the Spirit (that is, the gift of Spirit) is inseparable from Christ's resurrection. In a number of circumcision texts, he lays stress upon the recovery of the Spirit Christ accomplished on behalf of the human race. According to Cyril, the Spirit purifies us from sin and brings us new life and incorruptibility. Through the reception of the Spirit, we participate in the divine nature. Thus, circumcision of the Spirit sheds light on Cyril's pneumatology and the way it functions within his soteriology.

The circumcision passages in Cyril's corpus also shed light upon other doctrines correlative to soteriology. For instance, his emphasis on salvation opens the door for explaining what, in fact, we are being saved from. We thus are provided insight into his understanding of the Fall, original sin, and other important hamartiological facets of his theology. Cyril also considers the means by which we are saved. When he describes the saving effects of circumcision (for example, purification or participation), he is sometimes led to explore the saving ministry of the Son or Spirit, and can initiate exploring the Trinitarian dynamics of

salvation. Such discussions illuminate his Trinitarian theology even if Trinitarian doctrine is not his primary focus in commenting on the biblical text.

The second major way spiritual circumcision functions in Cyril's thought is by illustrating the "type-reality" relationship between the Old and New Testaments. While Cyril affirms circumcision as an historical practice established by God at an early period of salvation history, it always carried another meaning (or meanings) that, though hidden, pointed to another reality. It may have functioned for the Jews as a mark of God's covenant, but Cyril stresses that circumcision represented a more profound, spiritual condition that was actualized when Christ appeared. Since the Incarnation of Christ and the post-resurrection gift of the Holy Spirit, one can, with the apostle Paul, read back into the Old Testament narratives the fact that circumcision signifies the purification, renovation, and regeneration of the heart. Thus, as a type that has been fulfilled, it is no longer to be taken as a physical practice that carries religious connotations, but as a new spiritual reality.

By highlighting the "type-reality" relationship that circumcision signifies, I have also demonstrated that Cyril's interpretation of circumcision is consistent with his general exegetical method. In this way, I have strengthened Robert Wilken's thesis that Cyril's interpretation of Scripture is largely concerned with Jewish exegesis, theology, and religious practice. My study demonstrates that Cyril's doctrine of salvation finds expression in this concern with Judaism. One of Cyril's chief goals in interpreting Scripture is to delineate the narrative of salvation. In doing so, he demonstrates that the religion of the Old Testament has been transformed by Christ into something new and spiritual. The Old Testament conveys divine realities through types and shadows; in the New Testament, these realities are brought to their spiritual fulfillment through Christ. Cyril stresses that the literal practice of circumcision, like all types, should fall away



once the spiritual truth to which the type pointed has come to fruition. Circumcision is a spiritual reality since Christ came to fulfill what it always represented. It no longer means the removal of foreskin; now it signifies an inward transformation of the heart made possible through the Word made flesh who has given us his Spirit.

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